

ITALY THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS:
ASPECTS OF BRITISH POLICY AND INTELLIGENCE
CONCERNING ITALY, 1939-1941

by

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This thesis examines British policy and intelligence concerning Italy between 1939 and 1941, paying particular attention to British images of Italy. In this period, British policy ran the gamut from appeasement to a pre-emptive strike, each corresponding to the prevailing image of Italy. This image was determined by the combination of net assessments, British fondness for the indirect approach and intelligence whose inability to ascertain Italian intentions gave expectations disproportionate influence over assessments. Chief among these expectations was the belief that Italian policy would further British plans to satisfy its strategic needs. After Italy joined the war on 10 June 1940, intelligence's inability to penetrate Mussolini's mind was less critical. Italy's declaration of war shattered the illusion that its policy would be compatible with Britain's strategic needs while breakthroughs in signals intelligence improved operational intelligence. In East Africa, this resulted in a policy of "raising the tribes", a plan to defeat Italy by supporting an indigenous rebellion in the Italian territories. British success in Abyssinia in May 1941 was a turning point in Anglo-Italian relations because it marked the end of Italy's ability to fight a parallel war. This thesis examines the interplay of image, intelligence and policy in Britain's relations with Italy between 1939 and 1941 in order to increase understanding of the nature and results of British policy for Italy in this period.

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INTRODUCTION

The title, "Italy Through the Looking Glass", borrowed from Lewis Carroll, describes the thinking behind the assessments underlying British policy and intelligence concerning Italy between 1939 and 1941. The basic problem was that analysts looked at Italy but saw Britain. They assumed the Italians saw the world as the British did, and that Italy's assessments and policies would mirror those Britain would adopt in Italy's place. The British assumed they were viewing Italy through a window. In reality, they were often looking into a mirror. Italy was not Britain, and the two countries' dissimilar histories, geopolitical situations and political systems produced diverse world views, resulting in very different assessments and policies. The repercussions of this delusion were felt in each stage of policy for Italy.

Crucial to an understanding of Britain's relations with Italy are four themes woven through the fabric of British intelligence and policy in this period. These themes are the significance of tradition in Anglo-Italian relations, a fondness for the indirect approach, intelligence's limited ability to shape policy and the power of expectations to influence policy. Tradition was seen in the habit of looking to Italy for the means of satisfying the aims of British policy, even after hope that the traditional Anglo-Italian friendship could be revived had faded. The precise methods employed demonstrate the strength of the indirect approach in Britain because each phase of policy saw Italy as a means of reducing the German threat. This policy culminated with "raising the tribes" which was also intended to help bring about Italy's indirect defeat. Throughout, intelligence suffered from an inability to open a window on

Mussolini's intentions. While Italy's declaration of war on 10 June 1940, breakthroughs in signals intelligence in 1940-1 and Britain's decision to take the initiative against Italy made this deficiency less critical by the time Britain launched the operational phase of "raising the tribes", the weakness of intelligence opened the door for expectations to play a role in each phase of British policy for Italy.

Key to these expectations was a widespread belief that Italy was the solution to Britain's strategic dilemma. This strategic dilemma arose because Britain's resources were inadequate to safeguard all its far-flung interests if Britain found itself at war with Germany, Italy and Japan. The danger would be reduced if one potential enemy was neutralised, diplomatically or militarily, and Italy's military and economic weakness made it the likeliest candidate.¹ Success would depend on reading Italy's intentions, because knowledge of capabilities, while valuable, did not pinpoint Italy's most probable course. The first concern of British planners and policy-makers was, therefore, to ascertain Italian intentions.

Ascertaining Italy's intentions was easier said than done, however. Secrecy, deliberate deception and Mussolini's tendency to vacillate all made Italian intentions difficult to discern, especially when much of the available information was poor, the organization of intelligence was often inadequate and analysis was coloured by the preconceptions of planners and policy-makers. Most critical of all was intelligence's lack of sources with access to the inner circle of Italian policy-making. As a result, analysts were often in the dark about Italy's intentions, and turned to expectations to "fill in the blanks" in assessments of Italy. At the heart of these expectations was the belief that fascist Italy was little different from the regimes which preceded it, regimes

with which the British felt on familiar terms. This familiarity was due to several factors. The public schools and universities engendered reverence for classical studies and for Italy's Renaissance and Baroque art and architecture among the upper, i.e ruling, classes. More importantly, Britain's support for the Risorgimento and the independent Italy which resulted, and Italy's support for Britain and France in World War I, at the expense of its allies Germany and Austria-Hungary, fixed an image of Italy as a friendly, malleable protégé firmly into the British psyche. Nor did Mussolini's early diplomacy (1922-34) dispel this image. Actions such as Italy's 1923 invasion of Corfu could be dismissed as aberrations. The delusion that Italy was, or could become, a friend held sway among planners and policy-makers until Italy invaded Albania on 7 April 1939.²

But while Britain's tendency to view Mussolini through rose-coloured glasses did not survive Italy's invasion of Albania, information on Italy's policies remained sketchy. Consequently, expectations continued to loom large in British assessments. The expectation at the heart of assessments was the belief that Mussolini's perspective was similar to that of British policy-makers. Analysts thus expected Mussolini's assessments to parallel their own and his policies to appear logical to their eyes. This led to a subconscious expectation that Italy would offer Britain a way to ease its strategic situation. During the "Mediterranean First" strategy's heyday in the spring of 1939, for example, analysts decided that Italy would join Germany in the event of war, thus making a "knock-out blow" of Italy possible. But that summer caution was again the order of the day, and analysts returned to the earlier expectation that, if war broke out, Italy could be persuaded to remain neutral. The implicit expectation that Italy's policies would mesh with Britain's plans to ease its strategic situation set

the stage for the failure of the first three phases of Britain's Italian policy between 1939 and 1941.

Beginning with Roberta Wohlstetter's Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision in 1962, the literature deals extensively with the sorts of problems which bedevilled Britain's intelligence, and thus policy, for Italy in this period. There is much discussion of the fog caused by too much unsorted information (which Wohlstetter has termed "noise"), organizational problems and the ramifications of erroneous expectations. However, the published literature tends to concentrate on relations between states of roughly equal status, most often great powers.³ As grand strategy is also influenced by a state's relations with lesser powers, the picture is incomplete without an exploration of the dynamics of intelligence and policy in these relations. This study will therefore examine a great power's relations with a lesser power, i.e. Britain's relations with Italy between 1939 and 1941, to help increase understanding of Britain's grand strategy in the last days of peace in 1939, during the Phoney War (1939-40) and in the first part of World War II.

To that end this thesis will pay particular attention to the role of intelligence, expectations, the indirect approach and tradition in British policy for Italy (the published literature emphasises tradition in relation to Italian policy) and the insistence of planners and policy-makers that Italy was the answer to Britain's strategic prayers. This thesis will ask why policies emerged when they did, why they were abandoned, how they were influenced by tradition, expectations and the indirect approach and especially what role intelligence played in British policy for Italy and why. The intent is to understand why Italy was assigned the role of linchpin

in Britain's grand strategy, what lessons Britain drew from its relations with Italy and their effect on policy, why there was so much self-deception in Britain's assessments of Italy and why British policy was able to build on its failures and succeed in 1941. At the heart of Britain's grand strategy was an urgent need to simplify its strategic situation which coloured all aspects of Britain's relations with Italy in this period.

In search of the answers to these questions, British assessments of Italy between 1939-41 and the resulting policy will be examined, beginning with Italy's invasion of Albania on 7 April 1939. The invasion heralded a change from a fixed policy of conciliating Italy. Until Albania, events such as Italy's invasion of Abyssinia in 1935 and its military involvement in Spain in 1936-9 were written off as anomalies. Events like Italy's support for Austria in 1934 when Germany threatened Austrian independence and Italy's signature on the 1937 and 1938 Gentlemen's Agreements with Britain were held to represent the true course of Italian policy. But when Albania was invaded, the British could not explain away Italy's unilateral aggression in Europe. They were thus forced to accept that their hopes of regaining Italy's friendship had been an illusion. The next two chapters discuss the policies which took Britain from the shadow of Albania to Italy's declaration of war on 10 June 1940. The first was a forward policy, the "Mediterranean First" strategy. After this policy was discredited Britain did its utmost to encourage Italy to remain non-belligerent when war broke out in September 1939. When these hopes were dashed by Italy's declaration of war on 10 June 1940, Britain returned to a forward policy in hopes of draining the Axis by despatching Italy.

The final chapter examines one aspect of that forward policy, rather than surveying Britain's war-time intelligence concerning Italy. Both surveys and case studies can illuminate the interplay of intelligence and policy and the lessons which can be derived therefrom. However, as a case study allows one to follow more closely the twists and turns of a particular policy, "raising the tribes" provides a more striking illustration of British policy's return to the indirect approach epitomised by the "Mediterranean First" strategy than would be possible in a survey. Indeed, "raising the tribes" may be the culmination of the indirect approach because it sought not only to defeat Italy by conquering its empire in East Africa but, through Italy's defeat, to weaken and eventually defeat Germany as well. The episode is also a turning point in British policy for Italy because it marked the end of Italy's ability to fight a parallel war, which was Mussolini's aim when he brought Italy into the war. While it is true that Italy began by waging a parallel war in Greece and the Western Desert, in each case it suffered setbacks which led Germany to become involved and eventually to assume control of both campaigns. As a result, neither case delineates the end of Italy's parallel war as clearly as does "raising the tribes". Nor would an examination of the war at sea between Britain and Italy serve as well because Italy's reluctance to engage the British fleet and its inability to do so for several months after Britain's successful attack on the Italian fleet at Taranto in November 1940, meant that on the high seas, Italy's parallel war was a non-starter.⁴ In addition, as the campaigns in the Western Desert and Greece and the naval campaign, have been covered more extensively than the campaign in East Africa, "raising the tribes", has more potential to add to knowledge of British policy and intelligence concerning Italy and thus to an understanding of British grand strategy in the early stages of World War II.

But before examining these topics, it is necessary to clarify the meaning of intelligence which appears to lack a standard definition. Some authorities suggest that only professional analysts are qualified to define intelligence. Roger Hilsman, Roy Godson and Winn L. Taplin, for example, agree that intelligence is information which has been evaluated by being compared with known facts, the choice of information being left to professional analysts.⁵ However, leaving intelligence's definition in the hands of governments and intelligence agencies leads to problems, as these groups tend to define intelligence through its policies, programmes and organizations.⁶ There does appear to be general agreement that intelligence's functions are "to acquire information, to analyse and interpret the available facts, and to ensure that the digested information reaches decision makers".⁷ However, on its own, a list of functions suggests that all information which is collected, analysed and used is intelligence. This would encompass such things as diplomatic despatches and weather reports which are not normally considered intelligence.⁸

Some authors attempt to define intelligence by differentiating it from information. In their introduction to The Missing Dimension, Christopher Andrew and David Dilks state that intelligence collection is one variety of information gathering.⁹ One way to distinguish intelligence from information might be to determine whether the data is secret or open. Taplin, for example, states that intelligence must be secret. Information only becomes intelligence when it is collected by "clandestine means" or when it is reported by or used in classified channels. There is thus no such thing as overt intelligence.¹⁰ Similarly in "Appeasement and Intelligence", Dilks describes intelligence as "the information gathered by clandestine means, and the

assessments based upon it".¹¹ Intelligence can, however, be based on information which was collected openly as Andrew's references to "secret intelligence" and the observations of Wesley Wark and Walter Laqueur that departments "with no intrinsic information-gathering capability" routinely collect and assess political, military and economic information suggest.¹² A very broad definition of intelligence is thus no solution for, as Wark points out,

pushed to extremes, this definition of the intelligence archive could ultimately include all manner of information of importance to government decision-making, collected by all sorts of government agencies of innocent reputation.¹³

Under this definition almost every piece of information could be considered to be intelligence. Perhaps it is not surprising that some authorities avoid the issue altogether by concentrating on aspects of intelligence or specific episodes without offering a general definition.¹⁴

The solution appears to be a definition of intelligence based on effect, as suggested by Wark and Robert R. Bowie. Wark states that information from either overt and covert sources can be deemed intelligence, so long as it helps to shape government thinking.¹⁵ Robert R. Bowie defines intelligence as "knowledge and analysis designed to assist action".¹⁶ Such a definition provides a clear, consistent and workable guide for deciding whether information qualifies as intelligence. There appears to be a case for broadening this definition to include the potential effect of information, because studies of surprise often feature data which could, and often should, have affected thinking and action but was overlooked. Intelligence would then become information which is not common knowledge or within the public domain, that has the potential to affect the thinking and/or action of the body

receiving it. This is the general definition of intelligence which will be used in this study.

The specific kinds of intelligence discussed in this thesis were determined by the intelligence available to Britain in 1939-41 which was documented in the records and is now available in the archives. This encompasses three types of intelligence: diplomatic intelligence which discusses the concerns of diplomacy, i.e. the peace-time relations of states in the international system; economic intelligence which discusses the economic situation, plans, production and activity of states and military intelligence which deals with the military capabilities and intentions of states.¹⁷ Some discussions stress the military aspect of intelligence. In The Ultimate Enemy, for example, Wark states that the need for protection from threats causes states to "place a premium on the possession of good quality intelligence so as to be able to measure the power and threat manifested by potential enemies."¹⁸ As a result, "a major task of any intelligence service is to provide its government with accurate information about the potential threats to its security from foreign powers."¹⁹

The story of both British intelligence and policy concerning Italy is revealed through a variety of primary sources. Political information from the Foreign Office and the British embassy in Rome, economic information from the Industrial Intelligence Centre (IIC) and its successor the Ministry of Economic Warfare (MEW), and military information from the Chiefs of Staff (COS), the COS' sub-committees, the War Office and the Admiralty were all integral to intelligence assessments. The Air Ministry's files were less helpful, perhaps because the Air Ministry's chief concern was

Germany. On the policy side, the deliberations of the Cabinet and the Committee of Imperial Defence (CID), plus the recommendations of the COS and their sub-committees, especially the Joint Planning Sub-committee (JPC), and of the Foreign Policy Committee (FPC) were particularly helpful. Government documents have been supplemented with private papers and diaries to provide the personal perspective of planners and policy-makers. In addition, the Documents on British Foreign Policy 1919-1939 and published memoirs and diaries, most notably The Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan 1938-1945, were consulted to complete the picture of assessments and policy-making. On the Italian side, the documents captured by the Allies when Rome fell in 1944 were useful, but limited in scope. It may be that the Italians put the time between Italy's armistice with the Allies on 8 September 1943 and the Allies' entry into Rome on 4 June 1944 to good use by weeding their files, but this is speculation. In any event, these captured documents were supplemented by the official published documents, I Documenti Diplomatici Italiani, and by the diaries of Italy's Foreign Minister, Count Galeazzo Ciano. For specific information on the most useful sources for a particular topic, please see the bibliographical summary preceding the notes for each chapter.

There were some limitations on this study. The files of the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS or MI6), MI5 and the Naval Intelligence Division (NID) remain closed. The files of the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) available when the overseas research for this study was undertaken in 1991-3, were of limited use. In addition, Ultra did not come on-stream until early 1941. As the first decrypts for the Mediterranean concentrate on ship movements in the Aegean and central Mediterranean, they were not germane to this study. F.H. Hinsley's British

Intelligence in the Second World War was thus indispensable due to its access to intelligence records closed to other researchers.²⁰ Nevertheless, enough primary material is available in the open files of the services, the Cabinet, the COS and the Foreign Office, most notably in its general political correspondence (FO 371) to permit a study of British policy and intelligence concerning Italy for the period 1939 to 1941.

But to understand Anglo-Italian relations in these years, one must turn first to Britain's relations with fascist Italy in the years preceding Italy's invasion of Albania on 7 April 1939. This is necessary because the roots of the themes which dominated British policy and intelligence concerning Italy between 1939 and 1941 are found in its relations with Italy between 1922 and 1939. In essence, this first phase of Anglo-Italian relations set the stage for the trials, tribulations and eventual success of British policy for fascist Italy.

NOTES

¹ Michael Howard. The Continental Commitment. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971.), 120-1; Lawrence Pratt. East of Malta, West of Suez. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975.), 32, 165; Wesley K. Wark. "Something Very Stern". Intelligence and National Security. 5(1990), 156; CID. "Comparison on the Strength of Great Britain with that of Certain Other Nations as at January 1938". CP 296(37)(COS 1366B), CAB 24; CID "Defence of Egypt". 14 February 1938. CP 41(38)(CID 1399B)(COS 686). CAB 24; COS Cabinet Paper. CP 199(COS765). 14 September 1938. C9776/1941/18. FO 371/21737; Minute by Newall for the COS. 23 September 1938. R7762/899/22. FO 371/22438.

² R.J.B. Bosworth. "The British Press, the Conservatives and Mussolini, 1920-1934". Contemporary History. 5(1970), 169; Ivone Kirkpatrick. Mussolini: A Study in Power. (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1964.), 204; #609 Crewe to Curzon. 27 December, 1923. Documents on British Foreign Policy. {DBFP} First Series. Vol. XXIV. (London: HMSO, 1983.); #664 Kennard to Curzon. 6 September 1923; #745 Curzon to Graham. 9 October 1923; #746 Curzon to Graham. 10 October 1923. DBFP. First Series. Vol. XXIV (London: HMSO, 1983.).

³ Roberta Wohlstetter. Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962.) See also: Barton Whaley. Operation Barbarossa. (Cambridge Mass: The MIT Press, 1973.); Wesley K. Wark. The Ultimate Enemy. (London: Tauris, 1985.); Michael Handel. "The Yom Kippur War and the Inevitability of Surprise". International Studies Quarterly. 3(1977.); Michael Handel. "The Politics of Intelligence". Intelligence and National Security. 2(1987); Wesley Wark. "Intelligence Predictions and Strategic Surprise: Reflections on the British Experience in the 1930s". {"Intelligence Predictions"} British and American Approaches to Intelligence. ed. by K.G. Robertson. (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987.); Donald Cameron Watt. "British Intelligence and the Coming of the Second World War". Knowing One's Enemies. ed. by Ernest R. May. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, (Paperback) 1986.).

⁴ E. Bauer. The History of World War II. (Toronto: Royce, 1979.), 126-7; John Keegan. The Second World War. (London: Hutchinson, 1989.), 147; Andrew Browne Cunningham. A Sailor's Odyssey. (London: Hutchinson, 1951.), 260-4; Peter Calvocoressi, Guy Wint and John Pritchard. Total War. Vol. I. (London: Penguin Books, 1989.), 154;

⁵ Roger Hilsman. Strategic Intelligence and National Decisions. (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1956.), 22, 26; Roy Godson. "Intelligence: An American View". British and American Approaches to Intelligence. ed. by K.G. Robertson. (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987.), 17; Winn L. Taplin. "Six General Principles of Intelligence". International Journal of Intelligence and Counter-Intelligence. 4(1989.), 477-8.

⁶ Godson. 1.

⁷ Wark. "Intelligence Predictions". 87; Godson. 4.

⁸ Wesley K. Wark. "In Never-Never Land? The British Archives on Intelligence". {"In Never-Never Land?"} Historical Journal. 35, 1(1992) 202.

⁹ Christopher Andrew and David Dilks. "Introduction" The Missing Dimension: Governments and Intelligence Communities in the Twentieth Century. {The Missing Dimension} (London: Macmillan, 1984.), 6.

¹⁰ Taplin. 477-8, 481.

¹¹ David Dilks. "Appeasement and Intelligence". Retreat from Power. Studies in Britain's Foreign Policy of the Twentieth Century. Vol. 1. 1906-1939. ed. by David Dilks. (London: Macmillan, 1981.), 139.

¹² Godson. 4, 17. Walter Laqueur. A World of Secrets. (New York: Basic Books, 1985.), 12; John Bruce Lockhart. "Intelligence: A British View". British and American Approaches to Intelligence. ed. by K.G. Robertson. (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987.) 22, 39; Hilsman. 22; Robert Cecil. "The Assessment and Acceptance of Intelligence: a Case-Study". British and American Approaches to Intelligence. ed. by K.G. Robertson. (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986.), 166; Robert J. Young. "French Military Intelligence and the Franco-Italian Alliance, 1933-1939". The Historical Journal. 1(1985), 145; Christopher Andrew. "Introduction: Intelligence and International Relations 1900-1945". Intelligence and International Relations. ed. by Christopher Andrew and Jeremy Noakes. (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1987.), 1; Christopher Andrew. "Churchill and Intelligence". Leaders and Intelligence. ed. by Michael Handel. (London: Cass, 1989.), 181; Wark. "In Never-Never Land?". 202; Laqueur. 12.

¹³ Wark. "In Never-Never Land? " 202.

¹⁴ Christopher Andrew. Secret Service. (London: Sceptre, 1986.) {All references to Secret Service are to the 1986 Sceptre paperback, which has different pagination from the 1985 edition entitled Her Majesty's Secret Service.}; Handel. "The Yom Kippur War and the Inevitability of Surprise"; Handel. "The Politics of Intelligence"; Watt. "British Intelligence and the Coming of the Second World War".

¹⁵ Wark. "In Never-Never Land?" 195.

¹⁶ Ernest R. May. "Introduction" Knowing One's Enemies. ed. by Ernest R. May. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986.), 3.

¹⁷ Wark. The Ultimate Enemy. 26-7; The Concise Oxford Dictionary 6th ed., 329; Hilsman. 22.

¹⁸ Wark. "Intelligence Since 1900". 501.

¹⁹ Wark. The Ultimate Enemy. 18.

²⁰ F.H. Hinsley. British Intelligence in the Second World War. Vol. 1-4 (London: HMSO, 1979-90.); Michael Howard. British Intelligence in the Second World War. Vol. 5. Strategic Deception. (London: HMSO, 1990.).

CHAPTER 1 - "THE ONCE AND FUTURE FRIEND":

A SURVEY OF BRITISH RELATIONS WITH ITALY, 1922-1939

The policies Britain adopted for Italy between 1939 and 1941 were not created in a vacuum. Their roots lay in the period from Mussolini's rise to power on 22 October 1922 to Italy's invasion of Albania on 7 April 1939. During this time tradition, expectations, the indirect approach and inadequate intelligence became fixtures of Britain's Italian policy. Of the four, perhaps the most dominant was the tradition of seeing Italy as a friend or, when circumstances precluded this, a potential friend. The spell of this habit was only broken by Italy's invasion of Albania on 7 April 1939. But until then, British policy for Italy was ruled by one over-riding principle which grew more urgent as the potential threats from Germany and Japan increased during the 1930s: Anglo-Italian relations must be friendly to allow Britain to concentrate on the security of the British Isles and the demands of imperial defence. With resources inadequate to safeguard all of Britain's far-flung interests, it was necessary to neutralise at least one potential enemy. Unlike Germany and Japan, Italy appeared amenable to overtures of friendship, and a peaceful Mediterranean would go far to ease Britain's strategic dilemma. The strategic situation thus encouraged the British to believe that the tradition of Anglo-Italian friendship could be continued, and to bend their policy to that end. This policy, in turn, contained the seeds of the indirect approach, because the British entertained hopes that a friendly Italy might provide a bridge between Britain and Germany.¹

For the British, the wish for Italian friendship became the parent to the thought. The strategic situation gave planners and policy-makers a powerful need to believe that Mussolini valued peace and friendly relations and would, consequently, facilitate a solution to Britain's strategic dilemma. This, in turn, led the British to expect Mussolini to assess the world as they did and to adopt policies which would complement plans for easing Britain's strategic situation. One reason the British were able to indulge these faulty expectations was that much of their intelligence was ambiguous and thus open to misinterpretation, while many of Mussolini's pronouncements were disingenuous. But the greatest impetus behind Britain's misreading of Mussolini was need. Believing that Italy offered the only viable solution to a strategic dilemma whose resolution was becoming increasingly urgent, planners and policy-makers convinced themselves that Italy's policies would facilitate the solution Britain desperately needed. The alternative, war, was unthinkable. There was thus a dangerous element of wishful thinking in Britain's pursuit of Italy's friendship.

There were precedents for Anglo-Italian friendship. Britain supported Italy's unification in 1860 and often acted as Italy's patron in the late 19th century, especially in colonial matters. In turn, Italy fought with Britain and France in World War I despite its Triple Alliance with Germany and Austria-Hungary. Mussolini's early years in power saw little change in the relationship since Italy's foreign policy rarely threatened the status quo. But this was to change. Italy's invasion of Abyssinia in October 1935 ushered in a period of "almost ceaseless activity and aggression", culminating with Italy's declaration of war on 10 June 1940.² However with the image of a friendly Italy ingrained into the British psyche by the traditional friendship,

Italy remained officially a "friend" until February 1937, when the CID and the Cabinet declared that "Italy cannot be counted on as a reliable friend, but in the present circumstances need not be regarded as a probable enemy."³ The CID refused to designate Italy as "a possible enemy", feeling it was enough to remove Italy from the list of states against which defensive action was unnecessary.⁴ In the 1930s, with Britain unequal to the menace of Germany and Japan, the government was unwilling to consider the possibility of a hostile Italy. Instead, it continued to seek Italy's friendship, despite mounting evidence that Italy was no friend. Indeed, the literature suggests an element of obsession, as well as wishful thinking, in Britain's search for Italian friendship after 1935.⁵

From the first, wishful thinking influenced Britain's attempts to fathom Mussolini. As the British knew only that Mussolini had advocated violence and territorial revision, and once associated with socialism, their first recourse was to stereotypes of Italian leaders. These suggested caution. Italy's leaders were generally viewed as incompetent, corrupt, unprincipled and greedy.⁶ In 1935, the COS termed Italians "complete opportunists" who would "take without scruple the course that suits them best at the moment".⁷ Three foreign secretaries, Lord Curzon (1919-24) Sir Samuel Hoare (1935) and Anthony Eden (1935-8) described Mussolini in similar terms. But the British were soon reconciled to Mussolini.⁸ They were reassured by his domestic support and the fact that most of Italy's diplomats and foreign ministry officials remained at their posts since these professionals saw close ties with Britain as a cornerstone of Italian policy.⁹ The international situation was another factor. Compared to France and Germany, Italy caused few worries, and as fascism was seen as conservative, not revolutionary, Mussolini's claims to represent a bulwark

against bolshevism were widely accepted.¹⁰ Mussolini also made a favourable impression on Britain's ambassador in Rome, Sir Ronald Graham (1922-33). He told Graham that fascism was conservative rather than militaristic or revolutionary, and not meant for export. After Mussolini promised to honour Italy's existing treaties, and declared his desire for good relations with Britain, Graham told London that perhaps one could "do business" with a fascist after all.¹¹

Even more influential was the assessment of Sir Austen Chamberlain, Foreign Secretary from 1924 to 1929. Chamberlain met Mussolini five times between December 1924 and April 1929, and the bond of "mutual pleasure and esteem" established at the first meeting, grew with subsequent meetings.¹² Chamberlain found Mussolini charming, reasonable and sincere, and felt he was often blamed for events he neither controlled nor wanted. He considered Mussolini

a strong man of singular charm and, I suspected, not a little tenderness and loneliness of heart ... a patriot and a sincere man; I trust his word when given and I think we might easily go far before finding an Italian with whom it would be as easy for the British government to work.

In December 1925, Chamberlain declared that "the more one knows the Italian prime minister, the more one appreciates and loves him". His attitude was affectionately paternalistic, echoing the traditional Anglo-Italian friendship. Chamberlain saw Mussolini as a protégé Britain could guide, and in 1931 he urged the Foreign Secretary, Sir John Simon (1931-5), to meet Mussolini and employ "a little flattery of that great man" to influence Italian policy. But while Mussolini appreciated the domestic and international value of British friendship, his pro-British leanings could vanish as quickly as spring snow because Mussolini remained, at heart, an

opportunist. As long as he saw an advantage in appearing to be Britain's friend, he would do so and, until 1935, Mussolini believed he was likelier to achieve his aims with British friendship. He was therefore at his most charming with Chamberlain.¹³

Chamberlain's evaluation placed Mussolini firmly in the tradition of friendly, malleable Italian leaders who valued peace and friendship. As a result, the British took Mussolini's declarations for peace and friendship at face value and dismissed his speeches extolling martial virtues as posturing for the Italian people.¹⁴ Necessity dictated this reading of Mussolini. In the 1920s, Britain was war-weary and preoccupied with Franco-German disputes. Encouraged by Graham and Austen Chamberlain, the British government was willing to see Mussolini as the friendly peace-loving leader it needed in Italy.

Mussolini's first actions as prime minister encouraged the British to view him through rose-coloured glasses. Mussolini pledged co-operation in settling ownership of the Dodecanese Islands, supported Britain at the 1923 Lausanne Conference and over the Ruhr, made concessions on Austrian and Hungarian reparations and abandoned plans for an economic bloc excluding Britain.¹⁵ Conservatives also applauded the restoration of order and stability in Italy, although it meant the loss of some civil liberty.¹⁶

Italy's invasion of Corfu on 31 August 1923 temporarily disturbed Britain's comfortable view of Mussolini because of Italy's blatant use of force.¹⁷ But the shock soon passed. The British deemed the episode an aberration, declared Mussolini preferable to the alternatives and dropped the matter once Italy withdrew from Corfu.

The invasion's "momentary rashness" was attributed to fascism's "bad, violent side", while "restraint, order and success" were attributed to Mussolini.¹⁸ In January 1924, Mussolini appeared to vindicate this assessment by settling the ownership of Fiume with Yugoslavia.¹⁹ Nor did the murder of the Italian socialist leader Matteotti on 10 June 1924 disturb Anglo-Italian relations. The murder was deemed a domestic matter, and states did not interfere in one another's internal politics in peacetime. (In part, this was because domestic politics did not necessarily determine foreign policy.) Instead, Mussolini's signature on the Locarno Pact in October 1925 was seen as a pledge of his future good behaviour.²⁰

But although the sky appeared clear, storm clouds were forming in the early 1930s. The first signs were subtle. At the 1930 London Naval Conference, Mussolini unsuccessfully sought naval parity with France. In 1932, he removed his Foreign Secretary, Count Dino Grandi, who championed the traditional alignment with Britain. Mussolini held the portfolio himself until June 1936, when he appointed his son-in-law Count Galeazzo Ciano as Foreign Secretary.²¹ But Italian policy did not change, enabling Simon to proclaim Italy "the real key to European peace" in September 1933.²² In the short-term, Mussolini did little to dispel this illusion. When Germany left the League of Nations in October 1933 Mussolini told Graham that Germany's action was "extremely unnecessary and foolish", and that the Germans were selfish and ungrateful.²³ On 25 July 1934 when Austria's Chancellor, Engelbert Dollfuss, was assassinated by Austrian Nazis backed by Germany, Mussolini rushed troops to the Brenner to defend Austrian independence. He ordered the Italian press to stress German responsibility for the murder and Italy's determination to stand by Austria. Hitler was, in Mussolini's opinion, "a horrible

sexual degenerate [and] a dangerous fool".²⁴ The British government was appreciative, and public opinion credited Mussolini with averting an Anschluss.²⁵

The Stresa Conference in April 1935 sustained the illusion that Mussolini was a friend. The shock of Dollfuss' murder led Italy to join Britain and France in censuring German rearmament, re-affirming the Locarno Pacts and promising to maintain peace in Europe. The resulting Stresa Front convinced the British that Mussolini was as eager to contain Germany and as devoted to peace as they had hoped.²⁶ Mussolini, too, left Stresa under a misapprehension. The conference convinced him that Britain attached little importance to Abyssinia because Stresa's discussions and final declaration were limited to Europe. On the advice of Sir Robert Vansittart, Permanent Under-Secretary of the Foreign Office (1930-8), Britain had omitted Abyssinia from the agenda, lest its inclusion dissuade Italy from condemning Germany. If Abyssinia must be sacrificed to ensure Italy's support against Germany, it was a small, though regrettable, price for peace in Europe.²⁷ Mussolini thus left Stresa certain that Britain would not oppose an invasion of Abyssinia.²⁸

Mussolini lost little time in acting on his belief. The signatures were scarcely dry on the Stresa agreement when Mussolini renewed his efforts to add Abyssinia to Italy's empire. Abyssinia had exercised "a tremendous psychological fascination" over Italian nationalists since 1896, when the Abyssinians humiliated the Italians at Adowa. Mussolini was no exception, and on 4 December 1934 he precipitated a clash between Italian and Abyssinian troops at the oasis of Walwal. Matters simmered until the autumn as Britain, France and the League sought a diplomatic solution. Then on 2 October 1935 the crisis boiled over as Italy poured troops into

Abyssinia in defiance of the League. Mussolini believed he could proceed with impunity due to British silence on Abyssinia at Stresa and the Maffey report, an inter-departmental assessment which Italian intelligence obtained in June 1934. The Maffey Report stated that as Britain had no vital interests in Abyssinia, it was not obliged to resist an Italian invasion. Mussolini assumed, therefore, that Britain would do nothing if Italy invaded Abyssinia.²⁹

The Abyssinian crisis was a turning point in Anglo-Italian relations because it marked the end of the traditional friendship. However, this was recognised only with hindsight. What was immediately apparent was that belief in the traditional friendship had prevented Britain from formulating a policy for Italian hostility. Policy was thus developed as the crisis unfolded, influenced by several factors. One was the Maffey Report which saw no inherent conflict between Italian and British interests in the region and thus no need to preserve Abyssinia if it meant alienating Italy.³⁰ The CID, the Defence Requirements Committee (DRC) and the COS concurred. The crisis should be settled quickly, before the dispute could "weaken the unity of the nations that can hold German ambitions in check". War must be avoided, even at the cost of appeasing Italy.³¹ British desire to keep in step with France was a further incentive to avoid war with Italy because France was too uneasy about possible German aggression to risk antagonising Italy.³²

Another significant factor was the British government's desire to satisfy public opinion. The Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, believed public opinion was typified by the October 1933 East Fulham by-election in which a pacifist soundly defeated a pro-armaments Conservative, and by the 1935 Peace Ballot.³³ Of the 11.5 million

respondents to the Peace Ballot, 11,090,387 supported Britain's membership in the League of Nations, and 10,027,608 favoured non-military sanctions against aggressors.³⁴ Baldwin overlooked the 6,784,368 respondents who endorsed military force as a last resort, and the fact that only 2,351,981 respondents opposed military sanctions against aggressors.³⁵ Based on this reading of public opinion, Baldwin fought the 1935 general election on promises of strong support for the League of Nations and "no great armaments".³⁶

But the British people did not simply want peace. They had great sympathy for Abyssinia and looked to the League to halt Italy. Public opinion would not take Abyssinia's sacrifice lightly, and if Italy refused to back down, the British government could find itself between Scylla and Charybdis. It could avoid war by accepting Italian aggression, thereby satisfying France, or please public opinion by standing up to Italy to protect Abyssinia, a country it considered backward and barbaric.³⁷ In hopes of satisfying all, the government decided on a dual policy. Part one was sanctions which called for League members to boycott Italian imports, refuse Italy loans and prohibit the export of arms, munitions and war material, excluding oil, to Italy.³⁸ However, effective sanctions required German and American support, and this was not forthcoming.³⁹ Nevertheless, the League proceeded with sanctions, a decision Britain accepted on 14 October 1935. The counter-productive nature of this was summed up by Winston Churchill (then a backbencher). "The Prime Minister had declared that Sanctions meant war; secondly he was resolved that there must be no war; and thirdly he decided upon Sanctions."⁴⁰

But even before sanctions were proclaimed, the COS worried that they could lead to war, with potentially disastrous results in the Pacific. Britain's Pacific strategy relied on a secure Mediterranean so ships and naval personnel could be deployed against Japan, without jeopardising Britain's position in the Mediterranean. If the Royal Navy was occupied with Italy, Japan would have a free hand in the Pacific.⁴¹ The COS were also concerned that sanctions could drive Italy to a "mad dog act" (an act of desperation resulting in a Pyrrhic victory) against the Mediterranean Fleet, which was far below strength. Steps were therefore taken to reinforce the fleet, which Hoare and Sir Eric Drummond (later Lord Perth), British ambassador to Italy 1933-9, assured Mussolini implied no hostile intentions toward Italy.⁴² By mid-September, the fleet had reached a high degree of readiness and was at its war stations.⁴³ But fears of a "mad dog act" remained, possibly because Drummond depicted Mussolini as ruthless, impulsive, excitable and easily upset.⁴⁴ In Drummond's opinion, Mussolini's policies were governed by emotion and passion, not reason.⁴⁵ He would stop at nothing and was "astonishingly untroubled by the remorse of his conscience."⁴⁶ Equally unsettling, Mussolini told Drummond that he was controlled by fate, often acting as a "pre-destined instrument". He claimed to be subject to trances and "inspired by influences outside his ordinary self". Drummond believed Mussolini saw himself as a prisoner of fate, bound to obey its dictates.⁴⁷ Drummond's warning on 11 September that, "in their present mood, however, both Signor Mussolini and the Italian people are capable of committing suicide if this seemed the only alternative to climbing down", may have helped to keep fears of a "mad dog act" alive.⁴⁸

Despite the assertions of Rosaria Quartararo, the COS did not fear defeat by Italy.⁴⁹ The Mediterranean Fleet and its commander Admiral Fisher, were supremely confident of their ability to defeat Italy, and the COS concurred. But hostilities could cost Britain up to four capital ships and delay rearmament since losses had to be recouped before new construction could proceed, Chatfield warned that naval weakness could last for years as ships could not be "replaced in a day".⁵⁰ What the COS and the Cabinet feared was not defeat at Italy's hands, but a Pyrrhic victory which left Britain too weak to survive a challenge from Japan or Germany. The COS recommended, therefore, that Britain ease tensions with Italy, which Chatfield termed a mosquito - a definite nuisance but hardly worth the bother of swatting.⁵¹

Britain supported sanctions to mollify public opinion. To avoid alienating Italy without fatally injuring Abyssinia, Britain worked with France to find a diplomatic solution to the crisis.⁵² The imperial habit of handing down decisions plus the traditional friendship led the British to expect Italy to accept an Anglo-French settlement. They did not realise that Mussolini was no longer interested in the role of protégé. Thus in September 1935 Hoare felt no hesitation in deciding that Italy's needs were economic and that the crisis could be solved by giving Italy free access to raw materials, despite Mussolini's statements to the contrary.⁵³ Vansittart also saw Africa as a convenient arena in which to satisfy Mussolini's "mania for fame and sand".⁵⁴ A forceful advocate, Vansittart exerted a strong influence over Hoare who lacked experience in foreign affairs.⁵⁵

In all, Britain sponsored three settlement proposals. The first, in June 1935, suggested giving Italy the Ogaden province and Abyssinia the port of Zeila plus a

connecting corridor. Mussolini rejected this proposal but told Hoare, only days before Italy invaded Abyssinia, that he was open to a negotiated settlement. The British did not realise that the message was intended simply to blunt reaction to the invasion and produced new settlement plans. In October the Peterson-St. Quentin plan proposed putting Abyssinia south of the eighth parallel under a commission controlled by Italy and giving Abyssinia the port of Assab. Once again, Mussolini rejected the plan. Finally in December, the Hoare-Laval plan proposed giving Italy one-third of Abyssinia and compensating Abyssinia with either Zeila or Assab.⁵⁶ When the Hoare-Laval plan's details were published, public anger "almost overwhelmed" government backbenchers who had campaigned on promises of support for the League and collective security. The backbenchers felt "swindled" by Cabinet pressure to back the plan and decided that the price of their continued support would be the plan's repudiation and Hoare's resignation. On 18 December Hoare resigned and the plan was withdrawn.⁵⁷

All that remained were sanctions which proved ineffective, and the Italo-Abyssinian war wound down to a dreary, but not unexpected, conclusion. By mid-February 1936 Italy had broken all effective resistance in the north.⁵⁸ The fall of Addis Ababa on 5 May left Italy in control of Abyssinia. Sanctions continued until July but were increasingly meaningless. Long before they were lifted, Abyssinia had been lost and Italy alienated.⁵⁹ Support of the League and collective security and the expectation that Mussolini was amenable to compromise brought Britain only the worst case scenario.

However, the British did not realise the depths of Italy's alienation and repeated the pattern of relations established in Abyssinia in the Spanish Civil War (1936-9). Once again, the aim was to keep Italy "sweet" while containing a crisis. The war in Spain began with a military revolt on 17 July 1936. Mussolini's response was rapid. On 29 July he secretly sent twelve Italian air force bombers to Spanish Morocco to ferry General Franco's troops to Spain. His initiative did not long remain secret as one plane went down in the sea off French Morocco, and two more crash-landed on French territory. The next day, newspapers around the world announced that Italy was aiding the Nationalists, as the rebels were known.⁶⁰ Mussolini intervened in part because he saw Spain as an ideal training ground for a larger war. He also saw a potential threat to Italy in a victory by the socialist Republicans (as the government forces were known), given Spain's proximity to Italy. A Nationalist victory, on the other hand, could help Italy dominate the Mediterranean.⁶¹ Initially, Italian aid was limited to arms and military advisers, but on 16 November 1936, Mussolini staked his prestige on a Nationalist victory by recognising Franco's regime and sending combat troops to Spain. By the end of 1938, Italy had 40,000-50,000 troops in Spain.⁶²

The British reaction was very different. On 24 August 1936 the COS stated that Britain's interests were to maintain Spain's territorial integrity and ensure its "benevolent neutrality" in a European war. It would therefore be best if all European powers observed non-interference in Spain. If this was impossible, Britain should persuade France to avoid giving Italy cause to intervene, and do its utmost to ensure that foreign action in Spain was "international and concerted". The COS recommended impressing on Mussolini the potential consequences of disturbing the status quo in the western Mediterranean. In short, Britain should maintain strict

neutrality in Spain without offending Italy.⁶³ To that end, Britain signed the Non-Intervention Agreement on Spain in August 1936.⁶⁴ However, the Non-Intervention Committee (NIC) thus established was as powerless to control shipments to Spain, as sanctions had been to control trade to Italy during the Italo-Abyssinian War.⁶⁵

Britain supported non-intervention for several reasons. Anti-war sentiments were strong in the government and the public, and the ultimate aim of British policy was peace. As well, valuable economic ties would be jeopardised if Britain supported the losing side, and there was no obvious victor.⁶⁶ Non-intervention would also protect the security of the Straits of Gibraltar and Britain's free passage through the Mediterranean.⁶⁷ But most important was the potential effect on Anglo-Italian relations. As Neville Chamberlain told the House of Commons on 21 December 1937, non-intervention was intended to contain the war in Spain, to allow Britain to pursue diplomatic reconciliation with Italy.⁶⁸ Italian friendship remained a paramount goal of British policy.

But rapprochement was not on Mussolini's agenda. He signed the Non-Intervention Agreement merely to avoid compromising Italy's international position and keep his options open. The shallowness of his commitment was revealed in November 1936 when he dispatched large numbers of aircraft and troops to Spain and ordered Italian submarines to attack ships trading with Republican Spain.⁶⁹ The submarine attacks increased in August 1937, after Franco requested additional patrols to keep Soviet ships from reaching Republican ports.⁷⁰ Nor did Italian submarines target only Soviet ships. In the last three weeks of August, they attacked 26 British ships, sinking five. The Admiralty identified the attacking submarines as Italian, and the

British government called the attacks intolerable.⁷¹ As little would be gained by bringing Italy before the NIC, Britain and France sponsored a conference at Nyon on 10 September to discuss the problem of pirate submarines in the Mediterranean. Italy did not attend, to avoid Soviet demands for compensation, but Britain's Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, kept Mussolini informed of the conference's conclusions.⁷² The final agreement on 14 September divided the Mediterranean into six zones, including one for Italy which signed the agreement on 29 September.⁷³

Nyon was followed by five months of relative quiet in the Mediterranean, making it appear that the conference had solved the problem of pirate submarines. But this was an illusion. Mussolini ordered the attacks scaled down on 4 September as they had already discouraged the USSR from shipping large amounts of war material to the Republic, and Mussolini did not want to risk reprisals. The calm was short-lived. In late January 1938 Italy resumed submarine attacks on Mediterranean shipping.⁷⁴ As in Abyssinia, international action had little effect on Italy's course.

But perhaps Spain's most striking parallel to Abyssinia was the expectation that Italy would be amenable to a diplomatic solution. This time, the purpose was to buy time for rearmament, which had to be gradual to avoid undue strain on the British economy.⁷⁵ Spain was central to an Anglo-Italian agreement because Britain saw it as a test of Italian good faith, and Italy saw it as a test of British resolve. The first step was an exchange of notes on 2 January 1937. Under this Gentlemen's Agreement, Britain and Italy agreed to respect the status quo in the Mediterranean.⁷⁶ Britain overlooked the Italian press' increasingly violent anti-British tone and the despatch of a large contingent of Italian troops to Spain that spring, in

hopes of concluding a more far-reaching agreement with Italy.⁷⁷ As in Abyssinia, Britain's policy in Spain was governed by the expectation that Italy's friendship was Britain's to win.

The search for an agreement with Italy intensified when Neville Chamberlain became prime minister in May 1937. Chamberlain's vision of foreign policy was marked by unshakeable faith in his mission to bring peace to Europe.⁷⁸ He was convinced that the road to peace ran through Italy, believing that discussions with Mussolini could lead to talks with the German chancellor, Adolf Hitler and thence to lasting peace. Chamberlain accepted Mussolini's assurances that he wanted better relations with Britain and had no political or territorial ambitions in Spain, perhaps convinced by belief in his mission for peace that Mussolini was sincere.⁷⁹ In any event, Chamberlain's faith remained unshaken even after a War Office report in September 1937 that Italy was increasing its armaments in Spain.⁸⁰

Chamberlain's first step was to restore Mussolini's freedom of action so that Italy could resume its "classic role" of balancer in the European political system. To shift Italy from its German orbit, Chamberlain planned to offer colonial revisions, a generous settlement in Spain and the prospect of Franco-Italian reconciliation. If Hitler responded by requesting talks with Britain to avoid international isolation, Britain and Italy could collaborate to settle German grievances and negotiate a general disarmament which would lead to peace. But Chamberlain's plan stood little chance of success. Mussolini was not interested in rapprochement with France, while Britain granted colonial concessions and accepted Italian actions in Spain without requiring a quid pro quo from Italy.⁸¹

Chamberlain expected Mussolini to accept his plans, in part because Italy had long been a British protégé. He was paternalistic toward the Italians, displaying toward Mussolini the tolerance often extended to mischievous children. Chamberlain was too insular to appreciate that Mussolini was a ruthless dictator, not a wayward child, and too self-assured to consider that he might be mistaken.⁸² According to Sir Horace Wilson, the government's chief industrial adviser and Chamberlain's closest political confidante, Chamberlain was utterly convinced that his judgements were correct. He was offended by the "drift" in Baldwin's foreign policy and burned with desire to set foreign policy on the "right" (as he defined it) course.⁸³

The COS were staunch allies of Chamberlain's plan to establish better relations with Italy. Aware of the problems a hostile Italy could cause and wanting to buy time for rearmament, the COS had recommended accommodation in November 1935.⁸⁴ In December 1937 the COS stressed that

Without overlooking the assistance which we would hope to obtain from France and possibly other allies, we cannot foresee the time when our defence forces will be strong enough to safeguard our trade, territory and vital interests against Germany, Italy and Japan at the same time ... they could not exaggerate the importance from the point of view of Imperial Defence of any political or international action which could be taken to reduce the number of our potential enemies and to gain the support of potential allies.⁸⁵

In February 1938 the COS returned to the fray, stating that the greater the tension in the Pacific, the greater the need for security in the Mediterranean and thus for accommodation with Italy. On 14 September 1938 they recommended encouraging

Italy to remain neutral in the event of war.⁸⁶ The COS reiterated the importance of keeping Italy out of an Anglo-German war on 23 September 1938.⁸⁷

Most of the Foreign Office agreed that military weakness required Britain to make every effort to resume friendly relations with Italy.⁸⁸ However, Eden was against conciliating Italy before Britain received something more tangible than assurances of future good behaviour, and his opposition convinced Chamberlain that he must bypass the Foreign Office. Their differences were only resolved by Eden's resignation on 20 February 1938.⁸⁹ Eden's successor, Lord Halifax, loyally supported Chamberlain and took a pragmatic approach to policy.⁹⁰

Backed by broad support for conciliation, Eden notwithstanding, Chamberlain pursued an agreement with Italy. Initially, Mussolini showed little interest. But in February 1938 with Germany apparently poised to move against Austria, he decided an agreement might restore Italy's freedom of action, and negotiations began in Rome on 8 March. The result was the Easter Accords, signed on 16 April, in which Britain and Italy reaffirmed their commitment to the status quo in the Mediterranean, renounced hostile propaganda against one another and agreed to exchange military information on the Middle East. Britain promised to ratify the accords and recognise Italy's conquest of Abyssinia once Italy withdrew a "substantial" number of troops from Spain.⁹¹ Anglo-Italian friendship appeared once more on the way to becoming a reality.

Next came the Munich Conference in September 1938 where, after a last minute appeal by Chamberlain, Mussolini persuaded Hitler to negotiate a settlement to the

crisis.⁹² Chamberlain's appeal stemmed from indications that Mussolini wanted to preserve peace and distance Italy from Germany. On 13 September, for example, Ciano told Sir Noel Charles, Britain's Minister in Rome, that Italy had no desire for war and was doing its best to restrain Germany. Charles felt that Mussolini would probably be receptive to a general European settlement. He could then disengage Italy "from the German leash" and might bring "benevolent pressure" on Hitler to keep the peace, if it was clear that Britain was not trying to split the Axis.⁹³ This was an optimistic reading. Mussolini answered Chamberlain's appeal because he was alarmed by Hitler's willingness to risk war. He had no intention of breaking with the Axis and had promised to stand by Hitler "in any eventuality".⁹⁴ But as this was unknown to the British, Munich caused them to shift the focus of appeasement from Germany to Italy.⁹⁵ Once again they were misled by the expectation that Italy wanted Britain's friendship.

In October the British were able to test their faith in Italy's appeasability, when Mussolini began pressing for ratification of the Easter Accords as a reward for his help at Munich. He demanded an answer before the Fascist Grand Council meeting on 6 October.⁹⁶ Ciano added that Italy might sign a military alliance with Germany if Britain did not ratify the accords. His warning galvanised Lord Perth who feared "a parting of the ways" between Britain and Italy unless the accords were ratified. Mussolini might feel compelled to sign a military alliance with Germany, although it was "against his innermost wish" and would be very unpopular.⁹⁷ Perth was instructed to tell Ciano that Chamberlain would raise the issue of ratification with the Cabinet once Italy had withdrawn 10,000 troops from Spain, as promised.⁹⁸

The Foreign Office saw several advantages in ratification. Mussolini's freedom of action would increase, the concert of Munich (Britain, France, Italy and Germany) could act to preserve peace, and Mussolini should be dissuaded from anti-British intrigues. Tension would also be reduced in the Balkans and eastern Mediterranean, and relations eased between Italian East Africa and British colonies in the region. But perhaps most importantly, the accords might represent Britain's last chance to restore good relations with Italy, given its promise to ratify the accords once Italy had withdrawn enough troops from Spain.⁹⁹ Therefore, on 26 October Chamberlain raised the issue of ratification with the Cabinet. He warned against insisting that Italy withdraw its air force from Spain. It was enough that Italy was no longer helping the more extreme Arab nationalists, that Radio Bari had toned down its anti-British broadcasts and that Italy was about to withdraw "half" its infantry from Spain. Further demands would only push Mussolini closer to Hitler.¹⁰⁰ The Cabinet agreed. With Spain no longer "a menace to the peace of Europe", ratification could be a golden opportunity to liberate Italy from German influence.¹⁰¹ By 1 November Italy had withdrawn 10,000 troops from Spain (approximately a quarter of its infantry). In response, Britain ratified the accords and recognised Italy's conquest of Abyssinia on 16 November. When Mussolini responded by sending Chamberlain "the assurance of my friendly and cordial sympathy", the future of Anglo-Italian relations appeared bright.¹⁰² But at the 30 November Fascist Grand Council meeting, Mussolini declared that Albania, Corsica and Tunisia must become Italian. On 2 December he added a share in the Suez Canal Company to the list.¹⁰³ The British had yet to realise that conciliation only sharpened Mussolini's appetite.

Instead, Chamberlain saw ratification as a success that should be built on. The upshot was an official visit to Rome in January 1939. Mussolini had suggested a visit during the Munich Conference, but nothing was done until Perth recommended an official visit on 1 November.¹⁰⁴ Mussolini was receptive and issued a formal invitation.¹⁰⁵ The visit was to be one of "courtesy and goodwill", a chance for Chamberlain to establish a personal connection with Mussolini.¹⁰⁶ But even a goodwill visit needed a goal, and the Foreign Office recommended the ultimate aim be to enlist Mussolini's active support for appeasement. To this end, the Italians should be treated as equals and their views given a serious hearing, but there must be no concessions except in response to Italian concessions.¹⁰⁷ The COS's advice was similar. They were adamant that Italy could offer no quid pro quo attractive enough to justify concessions in either Cyprus or Malta. The Foreign Office and the COS agreed that the policy in Rome should be "nothing for nothing".¹⁰⁸

But Chamberlain had a different policy in mind, based on information he received via the secret Dingli-Ball Channel which linked him to Mussolini. (Established by Grandi and Sir Horace Wilson in 1937, the channel was named for the two intermediaries, Adrian Dingli, a legal adviser to the Italian embassy in London and Sir Joseph Ball, the head of the Conservative party organization.)¹⁰⁹ The channel was dormant until mid-December, when Chamberlain received three memoranda outlining Italy's claims against France and suggesting that sensitive treatment could restore Anglo-Italian friendship. Chamberlain equated sensitivity with concessions, and the policy of "something for something" was born.¹¹⁰

It briefly appeared the matter of policy might become academic after an anti-French demonstration in the Italian Chamber of Deputies on 30 November, marked by cries for "Nice, Tunis, Djibouti and Corsica", French territories claimed by Italy. The demonstration was too brazen to ignore, especially as a "good source" told Perth it had been ordered by the Fascist party.¹¹¹ The Foreign Office took a dim view of the incident, and Cadogan, who had replaced Vansittart, wrote in his diary that Britain should "give the ice-creamers [the Italians] a crack on the head".¹¹² Next came satirical articles about Czech president Benes and Haile Selassie in Mussolini's newspaper Popolo d'Italia. The articles made Chamberlain so uneasy that Perth was instructed to tell Ciano that while Chamberlain did not want to cancel his visit, he would have no choice, unless Italy ceased its anti-French agitation.¹¹³ The warning worked. The Italian press ignored chants of "Corsica" during a speech by Mussolini on 18 December, a development the Foreign Office termed "significant and welcome".¹¹⁴ Mussolini was apparently unwilling to upset the British by forcing Chamberlain to cancel the visit.

Chamberlain's faith in Mussolini's appeasability was bolstered by a series of reports from the Rome Embassy. He was encouraged to learn that Italy's economy could not handle a major war, and that most Italians mistrusted Germany and felt they were being "dragged at the tail of the German chariot". But there were no signs of serious opposition to Mussolini. Nor did Perth envisage a break with Germany. Mussolini might fear and envy the Germans, but avarice would prevent him from jeopardising any spoils Germany might toss Italy's way.¹¹⁵

Military assessments were also encouraging. The air force's situation was simple. It could not handle even a short war. Air force efficiency and war readiness peaked in 1936. Since then, the war in Spain had steadily drained Italy's air strength, and Italy's aeronautical production had been crippled by financial constraints. According to the air attaché, Group Captain Medhurst, "Today, therefore, the Italian Air Force is in no position to enter a war of the first magnitude with any hope of pursuing it successfully once the initial blow had spent itself."¹¹⁶

The Italian army's situation was much less desperate, according to Britain's military attaché in Rome. Lt.-Colonel Brocas Burrows. Its efficiency and morale had improved greatly, making the army well-suited for limited operations. Indeed, in a European war of short duration, the Italian army was up to the standards of the first-class military powers. But economic woes had caused shortages of armaments and equipment, and Brocas Burrows suspected the Italian character would affect military performance.

Furthermore, it is a moot point whether the drive and energy imparted by the present regime will prove to have changed the Italian temperament sufficiently for the army to return to its determination to win through to victory in spite of reverses and the continuous hardships of modern warfare.

On balance, the Italian army was best suited to a war of "quick decision".

Italy's navy also appeared well-suited for a short, sharp war according to Britain's naval attaché, Captain R.H. Bevan. The navy was "well balanced and efficient ... suitable for her [Italy's] requirements ... a fine example of Fascist achievement". But while the navy displayed very high standards of seamanship, large scale manoeuvres were rare, staffs at sea had little practical strategic experience, and

crews were likely inexperienced in long operations. The navy's fighting ability was unknown, but Bevan doubted that its war plans included "prolonged and extended operations".

In summary, Perth saw no indications that Mussolini wanted hostilities with Britain. Indeed, he had heard from several sources that Mussolini desired the "most friendly relations" with Britain and had high hopes for Chamberlain's visit. However, Mussolini was only impressed by strength and likely still under the influence of his latest visit to Germany. Nor was it wise to appeal directly to the Italian people or attempt to undermine Mussolini, as this would only rally Italians to Mussolini. Instead, Perth recommended an offer of friendship with clear limits. Mussolini should be told that reasonable claims, reasonably formulated, would receive fair consideration. It was important to work with Mussolini, lest his regime collapse and Germany seize control of Italy.¹¹⁷

Chamberlain found Perth's advice congenial. Despite Italy's anti-French agitation, Chamberlain was certain that Mussolini wanted British friendship which could bring Italy economic aid, allow an honourable retreat from Spain, and decrease Italy's dependence on Germany. He would have valued all these things in Mussolini's place. Chamberlain felt that the first step to closer relations was to establish a mutual bond of trust.¹¹⁸ Confident he could do so, Chamberlain left for Rome in a sanguine mood. He was thus impervious to Cadogan's 9 January 1939 briefing minute which emphasised the importance of showing Mussolini that the democracies were "not on the run" and of not making concessions simply because Italy demanded them. Concessions would only increase Italy's demands. Chamberlain must employ

a policy of "nothing for nothing" to make the Italians understand that co-operation was essential if they wanted to develop their empire in peace.¹¹⁹ Cadogan's advice fell on deaf ears. Chamberlain had already decided on a policy of "something for something".

The visit, which began on 11 January, did little to settle the policy debate. Chamberlain left the first meeting impressed by Mussolini.¹²⁰ Subsequent meetings strengthened his favourable opinion of both Mussolini and the Italian people who greeted him with such enthusiasm. On his final evening in Rome, Chamberlain did attempt to warn Mussolini that Britain could not be pushed into concessions, but the warning was too subtle for Mussolini.¹²¹ However, Chamberlain was unaware of this. He left Rome believing he had established a "considerable community of feeling" with Mussolini, and that the visit had enhanced the prospects of peace.¹²²

Chamberlain summed up the visit in a letter to King George VI. Both he and Halifax had been "favourably impressed" with Mussolini who was "still extremely alert and vigorous both mentally and physically", despite having put on weight. It was far pleasanter to speak with Mussolini than with Hitler.

You feel you are dealing with a reasonable man, not a fanatic, and he struck us both as straightforward and sincere in what he said. Moreover, he had a sense of humour which occasionally breaks out in an attractive smile, whereas it would take a long surgical operation to get a joke into Hitler's head.

But it was the Italian people who most impressed Chamberlain. He had expected a cordial reception

but the demonstrations in the street went beyond my wildest anticipations ... These demonstrations alone

would have made the visit worthwhile, for they showed, in a way which must have been unmistakeable to the Duce, the intense desire of the people for peace.¹²³

Perth agreed that Chamberlain's reception had been exceptional. In fact, the Rome embassy could not remember "so spontaneous and happy a reception" as that given to Chamberlain.¹²⁴ While the visit did not solve all problems, Chamberlain was "... confident that the personal contacts we have established will tend to keep Mussolini on the rails and to confirm him in the belief that it is worth his while to keep the peace."¹²⁵ As Chamberlain told the Cabinet on 18 January, and Parliament on 31 January, he was impressed with Mussolini who had been "straightforward and sincere" about the need for peace, and whose loyalty to Hitler reflected well on him. But most impressive of all was the "heartfelt, spontaneous and universal" support of the Italian people.¹²⁶ The visit thus appeared to confirm Chamberlain's hopes that Britain could regain Italy's friendship.

Halifax's assessment was less rosy. While he agreed that Mussolini seemed sincere and reasonable, and that the Italian people saw Chamberlain as the "world's lifebuoy", it was unwise to expect much from public opinion, given Mussolini's complete control of Italy. Halifax was also uneasy about Mussolini's attitude toward France and doubted Mussolini would be satisfied until Franco won a military victory in Spain.¹²⁷ Halifax felt that Chamberlain was too optimistic in believing that Franco-Italian rapprochement, disarmament and colonial discussions would invariably follow a settlement in Spain.¹²⁸

Foreign Office reaction was even more muted because Chamberlain had returned without any definite assurance that Mussolini would try to restrain Hitler.¹²⁹ The

Foreign Office also had qualms about Chamberlain's sympathy for Italy at France's expense. While this sympathy was evident earlier, the visit seemed to intensify it.¹³⁰ For example, Chamberlain now told the Cabinet that French insensitivity was to blame for the problems in Franco-Italian relations, and that continued French "harping" on sensitive matters could negate any hope of successful negotiations between France and Italy.¹³¹

The Halifax-Foreign Office assessment of the visit was the more accurate. The meetings were cordial, but there was no breakthrough. In hindsight this is not surprising. Mussolini expected little from the visit, although he had hoped to persuade Britain to mediate between Italy and France.¹³² Instead, the visit had confirmed Mussolini's suspicions that Chamberlain was the decadent, bourgeois leader of a weak, cowardly people.¹³³ After the first meeting, when Ciano remarked on the gulf between Britain and Italy, Mussolini explained that the British were "the tired sons of a long line of rich men, and they will soon lose their empire". The visit, which Ciano termed "a fiasco", only strengthened Mussolini's belief that the British would do almost anything to avoid war.¹³⁴ Mussolini had confused Chamberlain's concern to preserve peace with a fear of war in any circumstances.¹³⁵ Confident that Britain would do nothing to stop him, Mussolini revived anti-French agitation almost as soon as Chamberlain's train left the station in Rome. He also reinforced Italy's garrison in Libya in defiance of the Easter Accords and resumed the secret negotiations for a German alliance begun before Chamberlain's visit.¹³⁶ Still operating under the illusion that Italy shared Britain's desire for peace and friendship, the British did not realise that their Italian policy was self-defeating.

Unfortunately for Britain, intelligence was unable to do more than support policy. There were several reasons for this. Much intelligence was vague, allowing planners and policy-makers to choose the most congenial interpretation.¹³⁷ Intelligence also suffered from organizational problems. The machinery to properly assess and co-ordinate intelligence was virtually non-existent, and intelligence agencies rarely co-ordinated their efforts or shared information. As a result, political intelligence was often duplicated and economic intelligence neglected.¹³⁸

Nor did the Foreign Office's peace-time monopoly over political intelligence and the political significance of all intelligence improve matters. The Foreign Office was not interested in sharing information or in comparing and collating its assessments with those of other agencies. Instead, the Foreign Office dismissed analyses which differed from its own and regarded itself as the source of all important information and the final arbiter in its interpretation.¹³⁹

Service intelligence was in an even worse state. For most of the 1930s, service departments considered intelligence simply an exercise in collecting facts, and were preoccupied with information of immediate operational relevance. As war began to appear more likely in 1938-9, the services became aware of the need for better intelligence, but service intelligence remained too weak to properly assess much of its information until the outbreak of war. In the 1930s, for example, the NID's Movements Section had one part-time officer who issued quarterly reports on ship locations to the fleet, sometimes months after the information was received. As a result, the services were rarely able to defend their assessments or provide a credible alternative to the Foreign Office view.¹⁴⁰

Too much information was another problem since information is only an asset when it can be assessed properly.¹⁴¹ Sometimes the flow reached flood levels, as at the Foreign Office where Cadogan was inundated daily with intelligence reports of every kind. There was no reliable means of evaluating them, and sheer volume made the reports impossible to sort. Consequently, accurate assessments tended to rely on luck.¹⁴²

But while information was plentiful, good intelligence was in short supply because Fascist Italy was a closed society.¹⁴³ Information on Italian policy-making was scarce because British ambassadors rarely saw Mussolini. They met instead with Ciano who served as intermediary. The arrangement increased the chances of misunderstanding and left Perth wondering if his messages ever reached Mussolini.¹⁴⁴ Assessments of Mussolini's intentions were thus highly speculative. During the Czech crisis in September 1938, for example, the Foreign Office attempted to determine Mussolini's likely course if war broke out by analysing his speeches. Initially, the speeches were very bellicose. On 20 September, Mussolini declared that the Fascists would be ready if war came. However, as the possibility of war grew, his tone changed. On 26 September, Mussolini stressed the urgency of settling the Czech crisis peacefully. His increasing emphasis on a peaceful solution suggested that, despite his bellicose talk and posturing, Mussolini wanted to avoid war and would have tried to keep Italy neutral.¹⁴⁵ But, as Mussolini never stated his intentions directly, this was conjecture by the Foreign Office.

These problems were brought home to the Foreign Office when The Times of 4 October 1938 carried an official announcement that Italy was releasing the men called-up to the army in September. This was the first public admission of Italian mobilisation during the Munich Crisis. The Foreign Office was unable to refute the report and asked Perth to explain how Italy could have secretly mobilised three full classes (approximately 600,000-700,000 men).¹⁴⁶ Preliminary reports in October and November indicated that neither the army nor the navy had been ready for war, although Italy's navy had apparently been closer to mobilisation than the Royal Navy.¹⁴⁷ But not until December could the Rome Embassy state categorically that there had been no general mobilisation in Italy. The Foreign Office concluded that the demobilisation announcement was intended mainly for domestic consumption.¹⁴⁸ The episode is significant because the amount of investigation needed to settle the issue of Italian mobilisation illustrates the poor quality of British intelligence on Italy.

The one bright spot in British intelligence on Italy in the 1930s was signals intelligence. (The product of this signals intelligence is not yet open for research except by official historians.) Italy's liberal use of plain language and easy-to-read low-grade codes made signals intelligence plentiful in the Middle East in the 1930s. The ciphers of Italy's military attaché, mission and intelligence services in Spain and its diplomatic and colonial ciphers were also open to British readers in the late 1930s. However, signals intelligence was limited in that it rarely revealed Italian intentions.¹⁴⁹

Italian intelligence shared many of these failings. Like British intelligence, Italian intelligence suffered from a lack of co-ordination among its intelligence agencies

which competed under Fascism. In addition, Italian intelligence was plagued by service intelligence agencies with a very narrow view of intelligence, limited resources and the absence of a reliable means of assessment. The army's intelligence department, the Servizio Informazioni Militari (SIM), for example, had no agents in Britain and fell back on agent reports of dubious reliability when it lacked decrypts or purloined documents to analyse. Finally, Mussolini, who alone saw the full range of intelligence and had the final say, insisted on relying on his "animal instincts" when making assessments.¹⁵⁰

However until June 1940, the intelligence advantage belonged to Italy because lax security gave the Italians access to the secrets of the British embassy in Rome. The embassy was an agent's delight. It had easily-breached filing cabinets and wooden presses, the combination to the safe housing the ciphers was readily accessible, as were the keys to its red boxes while doors and windows of unoccupied offices were frequently left unlocked. Chancery servants were alone in the embassy for long periods each day, giving them ample opportunity to do work for Italian intelligence, and at least one did so. Beginning in 1935, Constantini, a long time employee of the embassy, furnished Italian intelligence with documents and ciphers which were photographed, then returned to the ambassador's safe.¹⁵¹ In the spring of 1937, the regent of Yugoslavia, Prince Paul, tried to alert the British to a possible leak in their Rome embassy after Ciano gave a Yugoslav diplomat in Rome details of a conversation between Prince Paul and Sir Ronald Campbell, Britain's Minister in Belgrade. But although Prince Paul's warning came only months after the theft of a diamond necklace from Perth's safe, the Foreign Office was certain its ciphers in Rome were safe. Italian intelligence thus enjoyed the run of the British ambassador's

safe until Italy declared war in June 1940. Not until 1944 did British apprehend Constantini, who then confessed his guilt.¹⁵²

In summary, Mussolini's rise to power in 1922 did not alter the value of Italy's friendship to Britain because Italy occupied a strategic position astride British communications in the Mediterranean. Nor did it end hopes of continuing that friendship. Mussolini's domestic support, the conservative international climate after 1918, the favourable impression Mussolini made on Ambassador Graham, his cautious foreign policy and, above all, his friendship with Sir Austen Chamberlain reconciled the British to Mussolini. The upshot was that Britain was able to see Italy as the friend it needed in the Mediterranean so that British resources would not be stretched past the breaking point. British policy in the inter-war years was predicated on the basis of a friendly Italy, largely because Britain could afford nothing less.

The turning point was Italy's invasion of Abyssinia, although this was only recognised with hindsight. To retain Italy's friendship without sacrificing Abyssinia and antagonising public opinion, Britain combined public support for the League and sanctions with a sub rosa search for a diplomatic solution. This double policy ended in the wreckage of the Hoare-Laval plan in December 1935. All that remained were sanctions which saved neither Abyssinia's sovereignty nor Italy's friendship. But as few in Britain believed Anglo-Italian relations were irreparably damaged, Spain was, in many ways, a repeat of Abyssinia. Britain again pursued a double policy. Publicly, it supported an international solution, the NIC, in hopes of keeping on good terms with all sides. Privately, Britain sought an agreement to repair relations with Italy, and held fast to the belief that Italy's friendship could be regained. The habit of

seeing Italy in terms of the traditional Anglo-Italian friendship was hard to break. This habit, in turn, opened the door for the indirect approach to enter British policy for Italy since a friendly Italy might help Britain neutralise the German threat.

The search for an agreement gained momentum when Neville Chamberlain became prime minister. As Italy was crucial to his plans for peace through appeasement, he made better Anglo-Italian relations a priority. In 1938, Chamberlain was rewarded with the Easter Accords in April and Mussolini's intervention at Munich in September. Britain, in turn, ratified the Easter Accords in November 1938, despite Italy's continuing involvement in Spain. But ratification had little effect on Mussolini's increasingly revisionistic policy. Nor did Chamberlain's visit to Rome in January 1939 bridge the gulf between Britain and Italy. While Chamberlain returned with high hopes that Mussolini would prove a dove of peace, Halifax and the Foreign Office were anxious about Mussolini's intentions, and Mussolini was convinced that the British were weak and eager to avoid war at any cost.

Intelligence played only a supporting role in the process of policy-making. It was handicapped by a lack of co-ordination among the various agencies, slim resources, often ambiguous information and the lack of a systematic means to assess the reports which often inundated analysts. The situation was not improved by the Foreign Office's insularity or the services' tendency to limit themselves to operational intelligence. While signals intelligence yielded some valuable information before June 1940, British intelligence had nothing to match Italy's access to the safe of Britain's ambassador in Rome. As a result, British intelligence was rarely able to provide useful evaluations of Mussolini's likely actions. But even had intelligence

been capable of doing this, there was no guarantee it would have been heeded. Many planners and policy-makers were suspicious of intelligence, and its myriad problems only confirmed their suspicions. Intelligence was thus unable to prevent the British government from deluding itself about Italy or from pursuing a policy which stood little chance of success. The need to believe this policy could succeed over-rode any suggestion that its success was not guaranteed.

In conclusion, British policy for Italy between 1922 and 1939 is a cautionary tale. It illustrates the allure of believing that what is needed will come to pass and the folly of basing policy on wishful thinking. The conviction that Italy held the key to Britain's strategic dilemma created a powerful need to believe that accommodation could restore the traditional Anglo-Italian friendship. Planners and policy-makers were thus far more receptive to indications that conciliation could restore friendship with Italy than to assessments indicating that such hopes were illusory.

In this climate, the tradition of Anglo-Italian friendship and the expectation that Italy was willing, even eager, to resume close relations with Britain, given the right encouragement, had a disproportionate influence on assessments. Planners and policy-makers appear to have forgotten that Italian policy was not ruled by British needs and that the view from Rome was very different than the view from London. Nor do they appear to have taken into account the potential impact of fascist ideology on Italian policy. Because the British were unwilling to consider that Italy's friendship might not be available, they were quick to take Mussolini's words at face value and to cast his actions in the most favourable light. The British were unwilling to accept that the traditional Anglo-Italian friendship would never return, and that

neither peace nor close relations with Britain were among Mussolini's long-term interests. As a result, British policy was doomed to fail.¹⁵³ The British experience suggests that the more urgent the need, the more difficult it is to accept that it may not be met, and the more important it is to consider that possibility.

There was deception at the heart of Britain's belief that its friendship with Italy could be renewed, but very little of it originated in Italy. Mussolini did encourage British delusions by allowing Italy to be courted by both Britain and Germany. However, the deception was primarily self-deception, perpetrated by the British on the British. Because the strategic situation rendered Italian hostility almost unthinkable to British planners and policy-makers, they convinced themselves that Italy's friendship was there for the taking. They then pursued that friendship with a singlemindedness often verging on obsession. The British feared the consequences of adding Italy to its enemies too much to act otherwise. Consequently, as the international situation worsened, the myth of Italy as Britain's once and future friend grew. The myth only began to die when Italy's 7 April 1939 invasion of Albania, laid bare the true nature of Mussolini's foreign policy.

NOTES

As archival research for this thesis was restricted to 1939-1941, most of the references in this chapter are to published sources, although material from FO 371 was used for late 1938 and early 1939. Among the published primary sources, The Documents on British Foreign Policy were very useful, as were diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan and Galeazzo Ciano.

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¹⁹ Seton-Watson. 673-6; #746 Curzon to Graham. 10 October 1923. DBFP. First Series. Vol. XXIV. (London: HMSO, 1983.).

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⁸⁶ Pratt. 32; CID. "Defence of Egypt". 14 February 1938. CP 41(38)(CID 1399B)(COS 686) CAB 24; COS Cabinet Paper. CP 199(COS 765) 14 September 1938. C9776/1941/18. FO 371/21737.

⁸⁷ Pratt. 165; Minute by Newall for the COS. 23 September 1938. R7762/899/22. FO 371/22438.

⁸⁸ David Dilks, ed. The Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan 1938-1945. (The Cadogan Diaries.) (London: Cassell, 1971.), 114, 116-7; Donald Lammers. "From Whitehall after Munich: The Foreign Office and the Future Course of British Policy". The Historical Journal. 4(1973) 835, 837-9; 843; Coverdale. 369; Edwards. The British Government. 165; Minute by Vansittart. 14 October 1938. R8440/23/22. FO 371/22414.

⁸⁹ Edwards. The British Government. 165, 168, 173.

⁹⁰ The Earl of Birkenhead. Halifax. (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1965), 364, 372, 380, 419-23, 425.

⁹¹ Feiling. 330-1, 334, 336, 351; CID. 295th Meeting. 1 July 1937. CAB 2; Coverdale. 316, 350-3; Thomas. 857; Kirkpatrick. Mussolini. 349-50.

⁹² Watt. How War Came. (London: Heinemann, 1989.), 28.

⁹³ Charles to Halifax. 14 September 1938. C9823/1941/18. FO 371/27137; Charles to Halifax. 16 September 1938. C10066/5302/19. FO 371/21776. (See Dilks. The Cadogan Diaries. 135 for confirmation of Charles' title.)

⁹⁴ Keith Robbins. Munich 1938. (London: Cassel, 1968.), 253, 308, 311, 316; Lawrence Thompson. The Greatest Treason. (New York: Morrow, 1968.) 227-8, 235.

⁹⁵ Wesley K. Wark. "Something Very Stern". Intelligence and National Security. 5(1990), 156.

⁹⁶ Perth to Halifax. 3 October 1938. R7949/23/22. FO 371/22414.

⁹⁷ Perth to Halifax. 4 October 1938. R7941/23/22. FO 371/22414; Perth to Halifax. 4 October 1938. R7950/23/22. FO 371/22414.

⁹⁸ Perth to Halifax. 6 October 1938. R8037/23/22. FO 371/22414.

⁹⁹ Foreign Office Minute. 18 October 1938. R8357/23/22. FO 371/22414.

¹⁰⁰ CP 231. "The Anglo-Italian Agreement". October 1938. R8513/23/22. FO 371/22414. Edwards. The British Government. 178-80. In March 1934, Radio Bari began broadcasting eastern music and news in Arabic from Morocco to Palestine and the Red Sea. Initially, its broadcasts were pro-Italian not anti-British. But when sanctions were imposed against Italy in October 1935, Radio Bari began attacking British policy and encouraging anti-British violence and rebellion, especially in Egypt and Palestine. Its propaganda posed a serious problem. Britain could not jam Radio Bari's signal without revealing its activities, protests were ineffective, and the end of sanctions had no effect. Britain gained a temporary respite when the Easter Accords were signed. For the next year, Radio Bari concentrated on anti-French propaganda. However, it resumed anti-British propaganda in April 1939. Callum A. MacDonald. "Radio Bari: Italian Wireless Propaganda in the Middle East and British Countermeasures 1934-1938". Middle Eastern Studies. 13(1977.), 195-207.

¹⁰¹ Cabinet Conclusions. 26 October 1938. CAB 23/50(38); Watt. How War Came. 47.

¹⁰² Coverdale. 369, 371; Thomas. 855; Edwards. The British Government. 177-9; Mussolini to Chamberlain. 16 November 1938. R2983/23/22. FO 371/22416.

¹⁰³ Galeazzo Ciano. Ciano's Diary 1937-1938. (London: Methuen, 1952.), 201; Renzo De Felice. Mussolini il duce. Il lo stato totalitario 1936-1940. (Torino: Einaudi, 1981.), 323-5; Denis Mack Smith. Mussolini. (New York: Vintage Books, 1982.), 225.

¹⁰⁴ Neville Chamberlain to Hilda Chamberlain. 2 October 1938. The Papers of Neville Chamberlain. University of Birmingham. NC 18/1; Perth to Halifax. 1 November 1938. Halifax to Perth. 15 November 1938. R8725/725/22. FO 371/22415.

¹⁰⁵ Perth to Halifax. 16 November 1938. Halifax to Perth. 24 November 1938. R9420/23/22. FO 371/22416; P.R. Stafford. "The Chamberlain-Halifax Visit to Rome: a Reappraisal". English Historical Review. 98(1993), 69.

¹⁰⁶ Cabinet Conclusions. 30 November 1938. CAB 23/57(38); Minute by Ingram. 30 November 1938. R9567/23/22. FO 371/23417. Perth to Halifax. 3 December 1938. R9595/23/22. FO 371/22417; Stafford. 71.

¹⁰⁷ Foreign Office Memorandum. 20 December 1938. R10223/23/22. FO 371/22417.

¹⁰⁸ COS. CID 814. "Visit of British Ministers to Rome: Possible Discussions on Strategical Points." 23 December 1938. CAB 104/76.

¹⁰⁹ De Felice. 424-5 and Appendix 9. Grandi to Ciano. 12 July 1937. 907-10.

¹¹⁰ Stafford. 83-5; Watt. How War Came. 94-5; Edwards. The British Government. 179.

¹¹¹ Perth to Halifax. 1 December 1938. R9562/899/22. FO 371/22438.

¹¹² Dilks. The Cadogan Diaries. 127.

¹¹³ Cadogan to Perth. 12 December 1938. R10015/23/22. FO 371/22417.

¹¹⁴ Perth to Halifax. 18 December 1938. Minute by Nichols. 20 December 1938. R10093/281/22. FO 371/22432.

¹¹⁵ Perth to Halifax. 27 December 1938. R9/9/2. FO 371/23796.

¹¹⁶ Medhurst's views were similar to those of the Subcommittee on Industrial Intelligence in Foreign Countries. In February 1937 and February 1938 the sub-committee attributed the Italian aircraft industry's weakness to shortages of raw materials and financial constraints which it also blamed for the drop in the output of airframes and aeroengines noted in February 1939. Subcommittee on Industrial Intelligence in Foreign Countries. Minutes. February 1937, 1938, 1939. CAB 48/5.

¹¹⁷ Perth to Halifax. 27 December 1938. "The Italian Navy". by Bevan. 24 December 1938. "The Italian Army". by Brocas Burrows. undated. "The Air Force" by Medhurst. undated. Minutes by Noble. 2 January 1939. Nichols. 3 January 1939; Cadogan. 5 January 1939. R9/9/2. FO 371/23796.

¹¹⁸ Neville Chamberlain to Ida Chamberlain. 8 January 1939. Papers of Neville Chamberlain. NC 18/1.

- 119 Dilks. The Cadogan Diaries. 134-5.
- 120 Pratt. 154.
- 121 Stafford. 88, 90-1.
- 122 Neville Chamberlain to Hilda Chamberlain. 15 January 1939. Papers of Neville Chamberlain. NC 18/1; Feiling. 393.
- 123 Chamberlain to George VI. 17 January 1939. PREM 1/327.
- 124 Perth to Halifax. 14 January 1939. R356/1/22. FO 371/23784; Perth to Halifax. 19 January 1939. R546/1/22. FO 371/23784.
- 125 Chamberlain to George VI. 17 January 1939. PREM 1/327.
- 126 Cabinet meeting. 1(39) 18 January 1939. CAB 23 1(39); Great Britain. House of Commons. Parliamentary Debates. Fifth Series. Vol. 343. (London: HMSO, 1939.), 31 January 1939.
- 127 Cabinet meeting 1(39) 18 January 1939. CAB 23/1(39); Birkenhead. 429; Lord Halifax. Fulness of Days. (London: Collins, 1957.), 202; Stafford. 92; John Harvey, ed. The Diplomatic Diaries of Oliver Harvey 1937-1940. (London: Collins, 1970.), 242.
- 128 Feiling. 394. Aster. 55.
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- 131 Cabinet meeting. 1(39) 18 January 1939. CAB 23/1 (39).
- 132 De Felice. 576; Watt. How War Came. 95-6; Mack Smith. 226; Stafford. 84; Galeazzo Ciano. Ciano's Diary 1939-1943. ed. by Malcolm Muggeridge. (London: Heinemann, 1948.), 8.
- 133 Mack Smith. Mussolini. 227; Pratt. 154; Ciano. Ciano's Diary 1937-1938. 166. At Munich Mussolini told Ciano that the British love of animals was a sure sign decadence had set in.
- 134 Ciano. Ciano's Diary 1939-1943. 9-10.
- 135 De Felice. 575-5.
- 136 Ciano. Ciano's Diary 1939-1943. 8, 12; Stafford. 96; Perth to Halifax. 1 February 1939. R838/1/22. FO 371/23784; Pratt. 154.
- 137 F.H. Hinsley. British Intelligence in the Second World War. {British Intelligence} Vol. 1. (London: HMSO, 1979.), 45-7; Walter Laqueur. A World of Secrets. (New York: Basic Books, 1985.), 278-9, 340; Richard Betts. "Analysis, War and Decision: Why Intelligence Failures are Inevitable". World Politics. 31(1978.), 61, 69, 88; Michael Handel. "The Politics of Intelligence". Intelligence and National Security. 4(1987), 14-5.
- 138 David Dilks. "Appeasement and Intelligence". Retreat from Power. Studies in Britain's Foreign Policy of the Twentieth Century. Vol. One. 1906-1939. (London: Macmillan, 1981.), 140-4; Hinsley. British Intelligence. 11.
- 139 Hinsley. British Intelligence. Vol. I. 5-6, 8, 10.

¹⁴⁰ Hinsley. British Intelligence. Vol. 1. 9, 11; Geoffrey Till. "Perceptions of Naval Power Between the Wars: The British Case". Estimating Foreign Military Power. ed. by Philip Towle. (London: Croon Helm, 1982.), 174-7; Patrick Beesly. Very Special Intelligence. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1977.), 10, 12.

¹⁴¹ Betts. 61; Wark. "Intelligence Predictions and Strategic Surprise". 87-8.

¹⁴² Christopher Andrew. Secret Service. (London: Sceptre, 1986.), 591. {All references to Secret Service are to the 1986 Sceptre edition which has different pagination than the 1985 edition entitled Her Majesty's Secret Service.}; Dilks. The Cadogan Diaries. 158.

¹⁴³ Dilks. "Appeasement and Intelligence". 140.

¹⁴⁴ Perth to Halifax. 28 February 1939. R1368/7/22. FO 371/23793.

¹⁴⁵ Foreign Office Minute by Mallet. 27 September 1938. C11340/5302/18. FO 371/21778.

¹⁴⁶ Extract from The Times. 4 October 1938. Minute by Sargent. 12 October 1938. Minute by Noble. 13 October 1938. R1860/263/22. FO 371/22431.

¹⁴⁷ Perth to Cadogan. 29 October 1938. R8738/263/22. FO 371/22431; Memorandum from Brocas Burrows. "Italian precautionary measures in Sardinia during the recent crisis". 31 October 1938. R8984/899/22. FO 371/22438; Perth to Halifax. 19 November 1938. C14257/5302/18. FO 371/21779.

¹⁴⁸ Report by Bevan. 3 December 1938. Report by Brocas Burrows. 3 December 1938. R9701/899/22. FO 371/22438; Memorandum by Brocas Burrows. 9 December 1938. R10021/899/22. FO 371/22439; Perth to Halifax. 16 December 1938. R10056/899/22. FO 371/22439; Perth to Halifax. 14 December 1938. Minute by Brown. 17 December 1938. R10021/899/22. FO 371/22439.

¹⁴⁹ The Papers of A.G. Denniston. Churchill College, University of Cambridge; Papers of Patrick Beesly {Beesly Papers} 2/29. Churchill College, University of Cambridge; Hinsley. British Intelligence. Vol. I. 199-201.

¹⁵⁰ See MacGregor Knox's "Fascist Italy Assesses its Enemies". Knowing One's Enemies. ed. by Ernest R. May. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986.), 347-72 for a more comprehensive discussion of Italian intelligence.

¹⁵¹ Dilks. "Flashes of Intelligence". 117-8; Dilks. "Appeasement and Intelligence". 152-3.

¹⁵² Dilks. "Flashes of Intelligence". 115-7; Dilks. "Appeasement and Intelligence". 154; DBFP. 2nd Series. Vol. XV. (London: HMSO, 1976.), 693n.

¹⁵³ There is an alternate school of thought, led by Renzo De Felice, which states that Mussolini sought to preserve equidistance between Germany on one hand and Britain and France on the other until the spring of 1940. However, the evidence indicates that Mussolini had no long-term interest in peace or close relations with Britain, and De Felice admits (677, 680) that from September 1939, Mussolini intended to enter the war at the earliest possible moment. See Renzo de Felice. Mussolini il Duce. lo stato totalitario 1936-1940. 583-90, 607-9, 647, 765-7, 789-90.

CHAPTER 2 - "LIKE THE OCTOPUS WE MUST DARKEN THE WATERS":

BRITAIN AND THE ITALIAN INVASION OF ALBANIA

On 7 April 1939, Britain was surprised when Italy celebrated Good Friday by invading Albania. The British were taken so unaware that as the invasion unfolded, several capital ships of the Mediterranean Fleet were paying courtesy calls on Italian ports. The Mediterranean Fleet had, in the words of Winston Churchill, been caught "lolling about in Italian harbours" while the Italians helped themselves to Albania.¹ Less than a month earlier, the Foreign Office had declared that Italian designs on Albania had been "put into cold storage".² Subsequent reports which suggested otherwise did not shake this belief. Less than a fortnight before the coup the Foreign Office was sure that "the Italians have temporarily shelved their wilder schemes" for Albania.³ However, the Foreign Office was mistaken.

The invasion of Albania was a watershed in Britain's relations with Italy. In its wake, the belief that the traditional Anglo-Italian friendship could be revived vanished. It was replaced by a forward policy based on a hostile Italy in the event of war, the "Mediterranean First" strategy. While this strategy had been endorsed by the COS and Strategic Appreciations Committee (SAC) and discussed at the Anglo-French Conversations (AFCs) prior to April 1939, it took the invasion and its aftermath to make policy-makers relinquish conciliation. Albania thus marked the divide between the conciliatory policy Britain had pursued since Mussolini rose to power in 1922 in hopes of preserving friendly relations with Italy and subsequent policies. The aim of these later policies was not a renewal of the traditional Anglo-Italian friendship.

Instead, the intent was simply to neutralise Italy diplomatically or militarily, in order to simplify Britain's strategic situation.

But although the forward policy was, itself, replaced a few months later by a return to a revised version of conciliation with more modest aims, Italy's invasion of Albania left a significant legacy in Britain. For one thing, the invasion engendered intelligence reforms which laid the foundations for the centralised intelligence system that served Britain so well in World War II. Second, it led to a new reading of Italy's prime minister, Benito Mussolini. Gone was the image of Mussolini as a peace-loving statesman willing to compromise. In its place was a more realistic view of Mussolini as opportunistic and self-seeking. While this new image of Mussolini did not solve all the problems plaguing policy, it was an important step in the evolution of a more realistic policy for Italy. The Albanian episode also illustrates the crucial role played by a victim's willingness to believe in cases of deception. Italy's efforts to mask its intentions toward Albania meshed with British expectations and inability to obtain a clear warning of the invasion. The result was British surprise when the Italians landed in Albania.

The literature on intelligence identifies two major causes of failures - noise (irrelevant or misleading information which competes with the truth) and faulty expectations. Noise is significant in surprise because it distorts intelligence by making it appear uncertain and ambiguous.⁴ The first classic study of surprise, Roberta Wohlstetter's Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision, states that it is difficult for analysts and policy-makers to separate signals (clues, signs or pieces of evidence indicating a danger, action or intention) from noise because noise and

signals intertwine, making all reports ambiguous. Incorrect analyses are most often due to an excess of noise which obscures the truth.⁵

The other theme prevalent in studies of surprise is the role of erroneous expectations.⁶ Michael Handel sees the substitution of wishful thinking for fact as the greatest danger in the ambiguity often surrounding intelligence. This brings erroneous expectations into play, allowing analysts to believe what they wish to believe.⁷ Avi Schlaim takes a similar view. Facts need interpretation, and this is influenced by analysts' images, beliefs, ideological biases, wishful thinking and natural optimism or pessimism. The central role of fallible humans in assessments makes it impossible to establish an infallible advance warning system.⁸ Schlaim thus anticipates Richard Betts' contention that intelligence failures are not only natural, but inevitable.⁹ In Military Misfortunes. The Anatomy of Failure in War Eliot Cohn and John Gooch also place preconceptions and expectations at the heart of surprise. Cohen and Gooch identify two reasons for inaccurate predictions. One reason is excessive confidence in some sources and undue scepticism about others which causes information to be misassessed. The second is expectations which lead to faulty net assessments. (A net assessment is "the formal and explicit weighing of opposing military forces in the context of political objectives and conditions" which are governed by analytical assumptions.)¹⁰ The importance of expectations is summarised by Wesley Wark who states that "faulty expectations are at the heart of intelligence failures" as "every busy decision-maker, of necessity, carries such images (a predetermined framework of ideas), or 'maps of the world' in his head". The images are so pervasive that intelligence is assessed in the light of "what should happen".¹¹

But while Albania demonstrates the role of expectations in intelligence failures, few works discuss the episode in depth. Works on Mussolini and Italian policy make more of the episode, and are critical to understanding Britain's intelligence failure, but they do not address British surprise directly.¹² Some works make only brief reference to Italy's invasion of Albania; others concentrate on the coup's aftermath.¹³ An exception is P.M.H. Bell's The Origins of the Second World War which says that as the invasion came during a time of great tension in Europe, Italy helped destabilise Europe by throwing its weight into the international arena at the optimum moment.¹⁴

Three works do address British surprise directly. In 1939. The Making of the Second World War, Sidney Aster says that the SIS gave no "substantial advance warning" of the coup. Without "accurate advance intelligence", an invasion of Albania seemed too illogical to be credible.¹⁵ Christopher Andrew's Secret Service states that Italian designs on Albania were obscured by noise and the belief of analysts that Italy had shelved its plans to annex Albania.¹⁶ In Volume 1 of British Intelligence in the Second World War, F.H. Hinsley says that the British received no clear warning of Italy's invasion of Albania.¹⁷ This is not necessarily a radical departure from Andrew and Aster, since noise and expectations would have obscured all but the most irrefutable warnings.

Of course, an evaluation of British intelligence's performance in Albania depends on the extent of the warnings available and the degree to which the Italian regime deliberately masked its intentions. Italian designs on Albania were of long-standing.

According to Mack Smith and Kirkpatrick, Mussolini first considered an invasion in the spring of 1938.¹⁸ However, Watt, Fermi and De Felice state that Mussolini put a brake on the plans of his Foreign Minister Count Galeazzo Ciano. This is borne out by Ciano's diary which outlines his campaign to annex Albania after the March 1938 Anschluss.¹⁹ Ciano convinced Mussolini that Italy needed Albania to balance Germany's acquisition of Austria, and the coup was set for spring 1939. In the interim, pro-Italian propaganda was disseminated in Albania, the Albanian minister in Rome, General Zoff Sereggi, was suborned and preparations were made to subvert dissident tribes and assassinate King Zog.²⁰ In October 1938, Ciano persuaded Mussolini to order a land reclamation project to soothe King Zog, and to provide an excuse to concentrate two legions of Italian labourers in the Durazzo region to "form the bridgehead of the landing".²¹

Ciano's enthusiasm seems to have been contagious. On 30 November, Mussolini told the Grand Council that Albania was destined to become Italian.²² On 6 December, he approved Ciano's plans for Albania, although De Felice believes Ciano omitted King Zog's possible assassination for fear Mussolini would object.²³ To protect Italy against reprisals, Mussolini made overtures to Germany for an alliance in January 1939.²⁴ He wanted to seize Albania in a daring stroke, but was plagued by doubts which only German goodwill could ease.²⁵ One persistent fear was that Albania's annexation would poison relations with Yugoslavia. Therefore on 15 January 1939, Mussolini decided that Yugoslavia must agree to Italy's annexation of Albania.²⁶ For a time, this seemed likely. In June 1938 and January 1939, Yugoslavia's prime minister, Dr. Milan Stoyadinovich, endorsed a partition of Albania.²⁷ But he fell from power on 4 February, and the partition plan went with him.

Italy must act alone, and time was of the essence. The Yugoslavs already knew of Italy's interest in Albania because Ciano had sounded out Prince Paul about a change in Albania's status, a possibility the Regent did not exclude in the future. Further reflection could cause Prince Paul to figure out Italy's plans. As Yugoslavia would probably react adversely, it must not have time to strengthen its links with Britain and France, lest Italy be faced with their combined wrath. Speed was also necessary to keep the suborned Albanian chiefs from developing "cold feet" once they learned that Yugoslavia was not part of the plan. Mussolini therefore set the invasion for between 1 and 9 April.²⁸

Then on 14 February, Mussolini vacillated. He decided Albania could not be annexed until the Spanish Civil War was over and Italy had an alliance with Germany, arguments he repeated on 3 March. "In the meantime," Ciano wrote, "we must spread the most varied rumours, like the octopus, we must darken the waters."²⁹ (As Italian intelligence had penetrated Britain's Rome Embassy and knew what the ambassador, Lord Perth, knew, sometimes before he knew it, Italy's emphasis on possible hostilities with France, could have been part of this plan to "darken the waters".)³⁰ To that end, Italy's minister in Albania, General Francesco Jacomoni, must keep popular agitation alive while reassuring King Zog in order to hide Italy's true intentions.³¹

On 10 March, Mussolini's concerns were eased by two messages from Hitler. The first promised that Germany would march with Italy. The second agreed to contacts between German and Italian military staffs.³² But neither message hinted at Germany's 15 March Prague coup, the news of which struck Rome "like a series of

blows". Mussolini was upset by the lack of notice, and complained to Ciano that "every time Hitler occupies a country, he sends me a message".³³ He considered answering by invading Albania, but decided Albania was not grand enough.³⁴ More importantly, he was restrained by rumours that Germany planned to expand its influence into Croatia which Mussolini saw as part of Italy's sphere of influence.³⁵

Mussolini's concerns were short-lived. On 20 March Ribbentrop told Attolico that Germany had no interest in Croatia which was in Italy's sphere. Ribbentrop's words may have contributed to Mussolini's decision to maintain Italy's pro-German orientation, although his explanation to Ciano that "after all, we are not prostitutes", indicates that pride was also a factor. De Felice believes Mussolini's decision was based on fear of Germany and awareness of the benefits of Axis membership. The Axis reinforced Mussolini's position, made Italy more equal with Germany and could give Mussolini the leverage to press for a new Pact of Four, a new concordat and a redivision of African resources. His decision may also have been spurred by Chamberlain's 15 March letter asking Mussolini's help to preserve peace. Mussolini saw the letter as "proof of the inertia of the democracies". In any event, by 23 March, Mussolini's doubts were eased sufficiently to proceed with Albania's annexation.³⁶ But while Ciano intended the invasion as a riposte to Germany, Mussolini aimed it at France and Britain. By indicating that Italy was not "on the ropes", Mussolini believed an invasion would convince Britain and France to accept Italian claims in the Mediterranean.³⁷

After Mussolini decided on 23 March to proceed with an invasion, events moved swiftly. To minimise Yugoslav reaction, negotiations were re-opened with King Zog

on 24 March.³⁸ But unless he capitulated utterly, Italian ships would appear off Albania and present an ultimatum. If King Zog resisted, Italy would "raise the tribes in revolt", publish its declarations and begin landing troops.³⁹ By 31 March it was clear that King Zog would refuse any treaty which violated Albania's sovereignty or integrity, and that he was preparing to resist an invasion. The treaty terms were amended slightly on 1 April, in hopes that Italy could achieve its aims without aggression. However, negotiations were intended mainly to keep other states from guessing Italy's true intentions. There was no halt in the invasion preparations.⁴⁰

As the invasion neared, Mussolini and Ciano became convinced that no one would interfere. Yugoslavia was "too preoccupied" by recent events in Croatia to make trouble, and Mussolini and Ciano were confident the British would accept that civil disorder had become rebellion, especially when the coup's anti-German aspects were played up. In any event, British acceptance was academic. Mussolini was determined to invade, come what may.⁴¹ But as Mussolini apparently kept his options open until the eve of Italy's invasion of Albania, the opportunity for an accurate warning was, at best, a few days.

The likelihood of an accurate warning was further diminished by deliberate Italian deception just before the invasion. On 4 April, Ciano told Perth that Italy had no wish to disrupt the status quo in Europe. It only wanted to protect its interests in Albania. On 5 April, Guido Crolla, Italy's minister in London, told the Foreign Office that stronger Italo-Albanian ties did not imply any lessening of Albania's integrity, sovereignty or independence.⁴² With the final invasion preparations underway, these statements were clearly disingenuous. Ciano also took action on 2 April to

stop British officials in Albania from reporting the truth to London after a contact in the telegraph office in Tirana told him that long coded messages were being sent to the Foreign Office. As the messages could not be stopped, Ciano ordered that they be delayed, and that "many errors in the code groups be repeated". De Felice is silent on this point and Ciano's diary gives no further details, so the precise mechanics are unknown.⁴³ But the Italians were apparently working to keep the British from guessing their plans. Their efforts were aided because reports of military preparations which pointed to a possible invasion of Albania did not begin reaching London until 6 April.⁴⁴

While the Italians were laying smoke, British intelligence was busy trying to distinguish genuine risks from false fears, a task made difficult by noise. Between December 1938 and 6 April 1939, Whitehall received some twenty warnings of impending Axis aggression, most of them false. The German war scares were particularly distracting. Among the more striking were a 27 March NID report of a German submarine threat in the South Atlantic, a report of German submarines in the Channel and the Thames estuary and a 3 April report of a Luftwaffe attack on the anchored Home Fleet over the Easter weekend.⁴⁵ The rumours were likely German plants. The tale of the Luftwaffe's Easter escapade may have emanated from Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, the head of the Abwehr (German Military Intelligence).⁴⁶ The story of German submarines patrolling in British waters was planted on Sir Robert Vansittart, the government's Chief Diplomatic Adviser, by a German agent in Switzerland.⁴⁷ Not surprisingly, such reports diverted British attention from Albania.

The second problem was Albania's strategic insignificance for Britain. As Sir Orme Sargent, Assistant Under-Secretary of the Foreign Office, said on 6 April, Italian bullying of the Albanians, "however deplorable and disturbing this may be", was not a pressing issue, unless it spilled over Albania's borders. If Britain lost perspective, the "relatively minor question of Albania" could end any hope of weaning Italy from the Axis, Franco-Italian rapprochement and ensuring that Italy's troops left Spain on schedule. Britain simply could not afford to "stand on the Albania Front".⁴⁸ Consequently, Albania commanded a low priority in British assessments.

Nevertheless, Albania was prominent in the Foreign Office's records. By mid-March, assorted warnings were received almost daily from a variety of sources, British and foreign, civilian and military, professional and amateur.⁴⁹ For example, the Athens Chancery forwarded a report on 22 March from a British woman living in Albania. She heard that Italy, having failed to assassinate King Zog or frighten him into further concessions, would soon seize Albania. But she was an unknown source and a woman, and the Foreign Office remained certain that Italy's invasion plans were in "cold storage".⁵⁰ In mid-March and early April, there were premature press reports that Italian troops had crossed the Adriatic bound for Albania.⁵¹ On 22 March, the SIS was told by an Italian that Italy would soon move against Albania, but the SIS could not vouch for its source's accuracy. MI5 received similar information from a source in the German embassy in London.⁵² The French and Greek embassies in London, the French, Yugoslav and (former) Czech military attachés in Rome and an Italian pilot employed by Imperial Airways also warned of an imminent Italian invasion of Albania.⁵³

But while there was no shortage of warnings that Italy planned to invade Albania, these warnings were far less compelling than reports which said there was no cause for alarm. These reassuring reports tended to be from sources who were considered to be well-informed on Italian intentions. In addition, many had previously provided reliable intelligence. The three primary sources of reassuring reports were Prince Paul of Yugoslavia, the British embassy in Rome and Sir Andrew Ryan, Britain's minister in Albania.

The first of these reassuring voices, Prince Paul, was the Anglophile, anti-Italian, anti-German, Oxford-educated Regent of Yugoslavia.⁵⁴ The Foreign Office assumed that Prince Paul's reports were sound because it believed him well-informed about Italy.⁵⁵ Prince Paul's certainty that Mussolini had shelved his invasion plans underlay the Foreign Office's belief that Italy's plans for Albania were in the past, and possibly the future, but not the present.⁵⁶ Because any change in Albania's status would have repercussions in neighbouring Yugoslavia, Albania was important in Italo-Yugoslav relations. In mid-February 1939, Prince Paul told Britain's minister in Belgrade, Sir R.H. Campbell, that Yugoslavia had refused an offer to partition Albania with Italy.⁵⁷ Prince Paul also shared with Campbell the record of a 19 March meeting between the Yugoslav and Italian ministers in Tirana at which Jacomoni insisted that Italy had no desire for war.⁵⁸ Even more reassuring was the 22 March advice of a "source in which I have every confidence", but which Campbell did not name, who said the Italian minister had told the Yugoslav government that Italy planned no direct action in Albania.⁵⁹ This source, who was clearly in contact with the highest government circles, was likely Prince Paul with whom Campbell had a close relationship. Knowledge of Italy's offer to partition Albania may also have led

Prince Paul to tell the Foreign Office that the SIS's 22 March report was out-of-date since Italy no longer planned to invade Albania.⁶⁰ The Foreign Office's regard for Prince Paul was illustrated on 5 April. The situation in Albania was unclear, and the Foreign Office proposed consulting three people to clarify matters - Ryan in Tirana, Ambassador Sir Percy Loraine in Ankara and Prince Paul.⁶¹

Prince Paul's reports were accepted not only because he was privy to information unavailable to the British, but because his reports confirmed British expectations of Yugoslavia's role in Italy's plans. Italy's offer to partition Albania seemed to indicate a desire for better relations which should have precluded an invasion. The Yugoslavs made it clear to the British that, without a prior agreement, they would view an Italian invasion of Albania with alarm, and that the chances of such an agreement were slim to none. The British assumed that this information had also been communicated to the Italians, and this assumption illustrates the often casual nature of British policy-making for Italy. Of course, Italy could easily defeat Albania on its own. But its relations with Yugoslavia would be "completely upset" if an Italian army suddenly appeared in Albania, and there was no sign that Mussolini was willing to sacrifice relations with Yugoslavia for the dubious benefits of annexing Albania. So long as Italy seemed to prize good relations with Yugoslavia, and Yugoslavia was opposed to a coup in Albania, the Foreign Office was confident that Italy would not invade Albania.⁶²

The Foreign Office believed that only German support could negate Yugoslav opposition to an Italian invasion of Albania. But while Germany would probably not object if Italy annexed Albania, it was unlikely to welcome Italy's emergence as a

Balkan power.⁶³ This assessment was made in the face of a lack of evidence of Italo-German discussions on Albania.⁶⁴ Unbeknownst to the British, on 2 April Ciano informed the German ambassador, General H.G. von Mackensen, that Italy intended to invade Albania. On 5 April Ribbentrop told Italy's ambassador in Berlin, Bernardo Attolico, that Germany favoured an Italian victory in Albania as it would aggrandize the entire Axis.⁶⁵ It was British information on Yugoslavia's role, not Italy's invasion plans, which was out-of-date and caused analysts to attach undue importance to Italo-Yugoslav relations and Prince Paul's reports.

Britain's second major source was its embassy in Rome. The chief sources were the ambassador, Lord Perth, and the military attaché, Colonel Brocas Burrows (1938-40). There was little reporting on Albania from the air attaché, Group-Captain Medhurst, or the Air Ministry, perhaps because the Air Ministry's main concern was Germany, while the reports of Captain R.H. Bevan, Britain's naval attaché, tended to downplay Italian activity. In early March 1939 for example, Bevan assessed reports of preparations for "some form" of naval readiness, by stating that fleet mobilisation did not have the same implications in Italy as in Britain.⁶⁶ On 4 April Bevan received notice of potential problems in Albania. A member of the Greek Legation told him that four warships and six destroyers had arrived at Brindisi where transport ships were unloading stores and an army corps was being concentrated.⁶⁷ However, Bevan's report did not reach the Foreign Office until 13 April.⁶⁸ Nor were the Admiralty's Daily Reports particularly enlightening. The only activity of note between 24 March and 5 April came on 1 April, when a ship based in Tripoli was reported en route to Brindisi. The 3 April arrival of five cruisers and ten destroyers at Brindisi was not reported until 6 April, the eve of the invasion.⁶⁹ By late March, Admiral Sir Roger

Backhouse, Chief of the Naval Staff (CNS) could tell Admiral Sir Dudley Pound, the naval Commander-in-Chief in the Mediterranean, only that Mussolini's intentions were very obscure.⁷⁰ Pound replied that the fleet was ready "for an emergency". Albania was not mentioned.⁷¹ Albania first appeared in the Admiralty's "Albanian Crisis Telegrams" on 7 April, after the invasion was underway.⁷² Admiralty sources did note some unusual naval activity immediately prior to the invasion, but it gave few clues to Italy's ultimate purpose and thus little warning of the invasion.

Perth and Brocas Burrows provided most of the embassy's reports on Italy's policy in Albania, even though Perth was handicapped by infrequent access to Mussolini. As well, by 1939, Perth had become something of an apologist for the Italian regime.⁷³ As Ciano put it, Perth "adapted himself so as to fit and interpret our point of view".⁷⁴ The Foreign Office was not blind to Perth's shortcomings. In February 1939, Sir Andrew Noble, a clerk in the the Foreign Office's Southern Department and a former head of chancery in Rome, suggested that while Perth's faith in Italy's good intentions was "touching", he would do better to watch for "dark schemes and [be] less intent on finding new and ingenious excuses for everything the Italians do".⁷⁵ But in lieu of a better source, Perth was Britain's chief source of political intelligence on Mussolini and his regime.

Perth's assessments suggested a peaceful outcome in Albania. On 17 March, he echoed Prince Paul's assertion that Italy was unlikely to act in Albania without Yugoslavia's blessing.⁷⁶ On 24 March, he endorsed the advice of the Duke of Aosta, cousin of the King of Italy, governor-general of Italian East Africa and in the opinion of the Foreign Office a "thoroughly reliable informant", that Italy was incapable of

waging war in the foreseeable future.⁷⁷ On 4 April Perth said that continued negotiations indicated a peaceful resolution in Albania. The Foreign Office concluded that Italy had either withdrawn its more extreme demands or would bring King Zog to heel by economic means.⁷⁸ Perth's reports, like those of Prince Paul, complemented expectations about Yugoslavia's role in Italian policy and hopes that Italy would not complicate Britain's strategic situation by disturbing the Mediterranean status quo.⁷⁹

The Rome embassy and Brocas Burrows also reported on Italy's military activity, especially call-ups and reinforcements to the Libya garrison. These deflected attention from Italy's preparations for Albania by inuring analysts to Italy's military activity, and by suggesting that Italy was already fully occupied and thus too busy to contemplate drastic action in Albania. Reinforcement of Italy's garrison in Libya in early 1939 demanded attention due to the potential threat to Egypt. War Office sources reported that the Libya garrison had increased by 32,000 between 1 January and 2 March and now numbered at least 66,000.⁸⁰ The War Office estimated that by 31 March, Italy would have 73,000 troops plus 8,000 labourers of military age in Libya.⁸¹ Italy's explanation, that French reinforcements in Tunisia required Italy to take precautions in Libya, was disquieting. Perth assured Bastianini of the Italian Foreign Ministry that a French attack on Libya was "unthinkable", but Bastianini insisted that France expected Italy to attack Jibuti and would retaliate in Libya. While Italy had no plans to attack Jibuti, it must take defensive measures. Bastianini's attitude was common. Unchecked, the Foreign Office feared it could lead France and Italy to increase their garrisons until hostilities became "almost inevitable".⁸²

Italy's 1939 call-ups also excited interest and left the Foreign Office temporarily disenchanted with Brocas Burrows' reporting. The problem began in January when Brocas Burrows endorsed the explanation of Italy's Director of Military Intelligence that the call-up of the 1901 class was a normal measure to test its training. While the Foreign Office found this plausible, it questioned Italian claims that the recruits would be trained in Libya, simply to take advantage of better weather. Noble and F.D.W. Brown, who was also a clerk in the Southern Department of the Foreign Office, suspected there was more to "the Libya angle".⁸³ In February, when Italy replaced many recruits with men of later classes, Brocas Burrows merely proffered the official explanation: Italy was trying to determine the oldest class able to serve as front-line troops. The Foreign Office believed there were other, equally plausible, explanations and that Brocas Burrows was too quick to swallow the official line.⁸⁴

Matters came to a head when Bevan reported that militia officers were being asked about their willingness to serve in Abyssinia, Libya, Spain, the French frontier or in an expeditionary force for any destination. Brocas Burrows opined that officers were needed to supervise labourers in Libya and Abyssinia or fight in Spain. He was certain that if specialists of the 1902-4 classes had been called-up, it was to replace older specialists who were unfit for service. Brocas Burrows' explanation created a small furore in the Foreign Office. Noble preferred facts to "the Embassy's half-hearted efforts to cloak the Italians with spotless innocence". He was particularly concerned by reports of the formation of an expeditionary force "for any destination!". Cadogan was no more satisfied, and noted that Brocas Burrows

"always displays extreme ingenuity in finding the most innocent explanation of these really rather curious proceedings".⁸⁵

However, by late February the Foreign Office was more satisfied with Brocas Burrows' reporting. Prince Paul's advice that Italy's designs on Albania were in abeyance may have been a factor. But more importantly, Brocas Burrows began providing more thoughtful explanations for the events he reported. For example, he now suggested two reasons for Italy's call-ups. For the younger classes, he felt call-ups might be intended to ease unemployment. There was evidence that Italians who could furnish proof of employment were being excused from military duty, and talk that those who were retained would be sent to Libya as uniformed labourers. For the older classes, Brocas Burrows endorsed the official explanation. These classes, having been trained before the "Fascist Era" (i.e. before 1922), required "a political bath" to become properly indoctrinated. The Foreign Office found this more credible, and thus more satisfactory, than Brocas Burrows' earlier reports.⁸⁶

But even more, Brocas Burrows' reports gained favour because they matched expectations that Italy's military activity posed little danger. The War Office's 2 March assessment stated that, while call-ups usually improve a state's military capability, Italy's call-ups had "greatly diminished" its military efficiency for the immediate future, and perhaps longer. The call-ups might be part of a "general game of bluff and bluster" to which Britain would soon be subjected. But for the foreseeable future, Italy would be too busy training its new recruits to be capable of aggression against a power. The War Office did not mention aggression against a minor state like Albania.⁸⁷ The IIC reached the same conclusion on 5 March. Italy

could not fight a fully-armed, first-class power for any length of time, although Italy might manage a short air or naval war. Economically, industrially and militarily, Italy was a third-class power desperately trying to be first-class.⁸⁸ The Foreign Office agreed. It continued to monitor the situation, but saw no reason for alarm until Italy called-up some front-line troops.⁸⁹

Brocas Burrows shared this sanguine outlook. On 30 March, he reported no signs of war preparations or warlike intentions on Italy's part.⁹⁰ He did note increased military activity on 3 April, but believed it to be defensive precautions in the event of a crisis. Otherwise, Italy would have called-up some recently trained troops.⁹¹ Not until 6 April did Brocas Burrows suggest a move against Albania. He had received reports of more call-ups and suspected that the Bersaglieri regiment in Brindisi might be intended for action in Albania. However, this information did not reach the Foreign Office until 8 April.⁹² Once again, a report which would have given a last-minute warning of Italy's invasion of Albania, reached London only after the invasion.

But if Italy had no bellicose intentions, its military activity was puzzling. It suggested preparations for a general war, which would be suicidal, given Italy's military weakness. As not even Mussolini's most vociferous detractors considered him suicidal, the British could not believe Mussolini was planning a general war. However, it seemed equally implausible that he would turn Italy's massive army against Albania as that would "be like using an elephant to smash a flea".⁹³ The British solution for this conundrum provided them with the ultimate reassurance. They decided that if Italy believed a European war was the inevitable result if it invaded Albania, its military weakness would preclude an invasion. Nor would there

be an invasion if Italy believed it could contain a war in Albania since expansion had left Italy's army too unwieldy to wage a small war efficiently. The possibility that Italy might deploy part of its army in Albania and then rebuild its diplomatic bridges to avert a general war does not appear to have intruded into British assessments.

What apparently did intrude was the plan of the Secretary of War, Leslie Hore-Belisha, to double the Territorial Army. War Office assessments of Italy's call-ups mirrored its objections to doubling the Territorials. The War Office believed both schemes would create more problems than they solved. If the Territorials were doubled, there would be serious problems in rapidly converting a small, professional army into a mass army. General Sir James Marshall-Cornwall, Deputy Chief of the Imperial General Staff for Anti-Aircraft and Coastal Defence, termed the idea "an absurd piece of eyewash", and told Hore-Belisha that it would be a mistake. It was difficult enough to train and equip the existing units. Doubling them would only double the problems.⁹⁴ The War Office's Director of Plans, General Sir Henry Pownall, agreed. He told Hore-Belisha that finding instructors, accommodation and equipment for the new units would present "vast problems".⁹⁵ The War Office's evaluation of Hore-Belisha's scheme to double the Territorials reflected its certainty that rapid expansion wrought havoc on an army.

Turning to Italy, analysts expected expansion to reduce Italy's military capability, hence the War Office's 3 March report. This was a congenial assessment to the Foreign Office which was preoccupied with concerns about Holland's security, the imminent collapse of the Spanish Republic and the arrival of a German trade delegation in Moscow. While there was no mention of political or military contacts

between Germany and the Soviet Union, it was necessary to monitor the situation closely for signs of rapprochement.⁹⁶ It is thus not surprising that analysts were receptive when Brocas Burrows deemed Italy's military activity no cause for concern. Its intent was to ease domestic problems like unemployment while its effect was to reduce Italy's military might. Brocas Burrows' assessment was congenial to analysts because it confirmed their expectations that Italy's military might would decrease as its army expanded.

The reports of the third valued source, Britain's minister in Albania (1936-9), Sir Andrew Ryan also tended to simply confirm expectations. While Ryan detailed tense relations between Italy and Albania and advised of King Zog's concern that Italy would settle matters by force, he doubted Italy would resort to violence, although changes were clearly in the air. In mid-March, for example, the ongoing tension led Ryan to suggest that Italy might take a stronger line with Albania. If Italy remained "uncompromising" and King Zog continued unwilling to tolerate "excessive Italian pretensions", Britain must "reckon with surprises". (Ryan was unable to be more specific.)⁹⁷ Ryan expected these surprises to occur peacefully, however. On 20 March, Jacomoni told him that Mussolini knew Italy's interests were best served by working with King Zog. As other sources corroborated Jacomoni's statement, the Foreign Office deemed it a "fair representation" of Italy's official position.⁹⁸

Ryan remained convinced that Italy would settle its problems with Albania without violence, even after a "fairly good source" told him on 31 March that Italy was concentrating troops at Brindisi and Bari where a large force had already been embarked. Rumour had it that the troops were bound for Albania. But Ryan was

sceptical, almost certainly in part because he knew that Italy was reinforcing Libya. In his opinion, "if the troops have been concentrated and embarked, the real objective is North Africa". No one in the Foreign Office took issue with or even questioned Ryan's assessment.⁹⁹ The Foreign Office apparently agreed that Libya was a plausible destination for these troops. However, the rumours were true. By 23 March, Italy had mobilised four regiments of Bersaglieri, an infantry division, air force detachments and a naval squadron which were being concentrated in Puglia for possible use in Albania. On 29 March, a second division and a tank battalion were mobilised.¹⁰⁰ Expectations that Italy would settle matters with Albania peacefully plus Albania's strategic unimportance led the British to discount rumours of an invasion. Ryan's sightings of Italian warships off-shore prior to the invasion came too late to shake their certainty, and thus too late to provide any real warning.¹⁰¹

Ryan's reports tended to be accepted because his view generally matched that of the Foreign Office. In March, although Ryan felt "completely at sea" and unable to exclude any possibility, he believed Italy had shelved its plans to invade Albania, and that moderation now prevailed.¹⁰² The fact that Ryan's views tended to confirm their own, may help explain why Foreign Office officials seemed to accept Ryan's belief that the troops concentrated in Bari and Brindisi would probably be sent to North Africa. But this is speculative since Ryan appears to have been as obscure as his posting. His papers shed no light on his influence in the crisis, and the records of his contemporaries tend to ignore him, perhaps because Albania was deemed of little account. He is not mentioned in Cadogan's diary, Chamberlain's papers or Halifax's memoirs. The only references to Ryan during his tenure in Albania appear to be in the Foreign Office documents. It is thus likely that Ryan's influence, such as

it was, existed because he reflected the prevailing view, not because he helped shape it.¹⁰³

In contrast, sources whose information did not mesh with expectations were given short shrift by policy-makers. Many, like the British woman in Albania, offered only one report and were easy to dismiss as unproven sources. Others, like Yugoslavia's minister in Tirana were better-known and more persistent, but no more successful. The Yugoslav minister was dismissed as "an alarmist" who was probably echoing the panic of palace circles in Albania. The Foreign Office believed the minister had been influenced by German activity in eastern Europe, and felt justified in downplaying his concerns.¹⁰⁴

Most persistent of all the prophets of an invasion was King Zog. However, he was suspected of "crying wolf", and his warnings were taken with a grain of salt. After all, rumours of an Italian invasion had been circulating in Tirana since July 1938, without materialising. The Foreign Office believed Zog was over-dramatising when he warned that the Italians were plotting to assassinate him and annex Albania. Officials felt if King Zog accepted that he must "within limits ... play the Italian game", the status quo would continue for some time.¹⁰⁵ On the eve of the invasion, Perth and Sir Andrew Noble of the Foreign Office, a former head of chancery in Rome, agreed that King Zog's open defiance and appeals to Britain, France and the Balkan entente could be to blame for the breach with Italy.¹⁰⁶ They appeared to think a crisis might be averted if King Zog acted like a statesman, which may help explain the lack of attention paid to the resumption of Italian pressure on King Zog. The onus

was placed on the potential victim, while the potential aggressor was relieved of much of the responsibility for its actions.

Expectations were instrumental in British attempts to determine Italian intentions since noise and a lack of high-level sources precluded a reliable warning of Italy's invasion of Albania. Britain had no source with access to the deliberations of Italian policy-making, no equivalent to Group-Captain Malcolm Grahame Christie in Germany.¹⁰⁷ Mussolini's mind remained close to the British who found it impossible to predict his intentions with any certainty, as the Foreign Office admitted in February 1939.¹⁰⁸ What Britain needed was an observant, discerning source with access to and a good understanding of the inner circle of Italian policy-making. Such sources are rare, even in dictatorships like Fascist Italy where authority and decision-making is concentrated in one individual as opposed to democracies where policy is a group decision. As such a source did not exist for Fascist Italy, the accuracy of British assessments depended substantially on luck.

The lack of a window on Italian policy-making, in turn, increased the difficulty of penetrating the noise surrounding reports about Albania. Cadogan was well aware of the noise that spring. He later recalled that Foreign Office officials "were daily inundated by all sorts of reports ... we had no means of evaluating their reliability at the time of receipt".¹⁰⁹ In fact, Albania demonstrated the three types of noise identified by Handel. These are noise due to 1) deliberate or inadvertent enemy action; 2) an excessively quiet or excessively busy international environment and 3) hypotheses, assumptions or misjudgements. Not surprisingly, Italy's efforts to "darken the waters" created noise as analysts relied on assumptions and

hypotheses to explain them. So too did the international environment, not because it was so quiet that the British were lulled to sleep, but because it was so lively that they did not know where to look next. Britain's problems in distinguishing noise from genuine reports illustrates Handel's Paradox of Surprise Number One.

As a result of the great difficulties in differentiating between 'signals and noise' in strategic warning, both valid and invalid information must be treated on a similar basis. In effect, all that exists is noise, not signals.¹¹⁰

As a result, expectations were brought into play for Albania to determine which information was dismissed and which accepted. Expectations that Italy would not resort to force against King Zog underlay Britain's acceptance of Italy's formal denial of hostile intent toward Albania on 19 March, King Victor Emmanuel's 23 March pronouncement that Italo-Albanian relations were satisfactory and Jacomoni's assurances that Italy's intentions were benevolent.¹¹¹

The British were not oblivious to possible Italian designs on Albania. They realised that the March 1939 Prague Coup might have left Mussolini desiring a foreign policy success to restore Italy's standing in the Axis. On the other hand, an invasion of Albania would commit Italy "irrevocably" to the Axis and estrange it from the rest of Europe. The Foreign Office and the Rome embassy saw only one explanation if Italy invaded Albania. It must be an attempt to affirm Axis solidarity by imitating the Prague coup.¹¹² However, credible sources insisted that Mussolini was so eager to reinsure Italy with the West, no doubt due to tension within the Axis after Prague, that he was prepared to be moderate with France.¹¹³ An invasion of Albania therefore appeared highly unlikely.

But even before Albania was linked to the Prague Coup, two factors mitigated the likelihood of an invasion in the opinion of British analysts. The first was the belief that Mussolini desired peace. As Chamberlain told the House of Commons on 31 January 1939,

I would remind the House that Signor Mussolini gave proof last September both of his willingness and of his ability to intervene in favour of peace. It was, therefore, very welcome to hear his assurances that his services could again be relied upon in case of need.¹¹⁴

Chamberlain assumed that Mussolini, like himself, abhorred war and would "leave no stone unturned" to ensure peace.¹¹⁵ Crediting Mussolini with an altruism he lacked, Chamberlain took Perth's advice to use the Prague Coup to strengthen Anglo-Italian relations.¹¹⁶ Wishful thinking thus played an important role in Chamberlain's reading of Mussolini.

The Foreign Office was far less certain that Mussolini was a peace-maker in disguise.¹¹⁷ It suspected that Mussolini's price was high and would rise if Britain offered its friendship. Nor did the Foreign Office trust Mussolini to stay bought.¹¹⁸ Nevertheless, officials accepted that the COS were correct when they stated in December 1937 that better relations with Italy would ease Britain's strategic situation.

Without overlooking the assistance which we should hope to obtain from France, and possibly other allies, we cannot foresee the time when our defence forces will be strong enough to safeguard our territory, trade and vital interests against Germany, Italy and Japan simultaneously. We cannot, therefore, exaggerate the importance, from the point of view of Imperial defence, of any political or international action that can be taken to reduce the numbers of our our potential enemies and to gain the support of potential allies.¹¹⁹

The second factor against an invasion was the belief that Mussolini was sensible enough to see the folly in an action which could precipitate a general war. Noble reflected this belief in his minute of 23 February 1939.

It is unfortunately impossible to form any very definite opinion of what is in Signor Mussolini's mind, and there is some reason to fear that his judgement is not as good as it was nor his temper as calm. But we have no reason to suspect that he had parted with his senses, and one thing seems certain is that whoever won a European war, Italy would lose it, if not on the field of battle, at least at the conference table.¹²⁰

Reason should tell Mussolini that an invasion was unnecessary. The League of Nations gave Italy supervisory responsibility in 1921. Albania became a virtual Italian protectorate in 1926. No one objected or would object to this arrangement if Italy acted without violence and avoided damaging the Mediterranean status quo. Nor was there any economic advantage in annexing Albania as the country was poor and undeveloped.¹²¹ The British do not seem to have considered that Mussolini might have seen a parallel between Albania and Abyssinia whose conquest was greeted only with ineffectual protests.¹²² Instead, they expected Mussolini's reasoning to follow their own, which would rule out an invasion of Albania.

The belief that Mussolini would see no need to invade Albania was comforting because Britain also faced possible German and Japanese aggression. As it was impossible for Britain to prepare for every eventuality, priority had to be given to the most vital areas. Among the areas deemed expendable was Albania because, as Noble minuted on 5 April

First of all, it must be recognized that nothing we or anyone

else can do will stop the Italians from overrunning Albania if they decided to do so. Even if Yugoslavia and Greece were prepared to go to war against Italy, she could only be driven out of Albania as the result of a general defeat, which would mean a European war.¹²³

Britain's inability to save Albania likely increased the appeal of assessments which suggested that Italy would resolve its problems with Albania peacefully, such as Perth's report in early April that negotiations were continuing.

But Mussolini was not bound by British expectations, and King's Zog's refusal to sign Italy's draft treaty removed the last obstacle to an invasion. On 6 April, Italy began evacuating its nationals from Albania. By evening there were almost no Italians in Tirana or Durazzo. In addition, Italian aircraft began flying over the major cities, and the three warships which arrived in Durazzo harbour that morning had vanished.¹²⁴ Early on 7 April Italian troops attacked Albania under the cover of intense naval bombardment and aerial bombing.¹²⁵ The Italians claimed light resistance, and this appeared true in Tirana.¹²⁶ However, Albania's minister in London, Kurti, said resistance was "fierce" in Durazzo despite Italy's over-whelming numbers and material superiority, and his account was corroborated by Greece's minister in Albania.¹²⁷ The invasion was not trouble-free. Organization was muddled, several units were not prepared for their assigned tasks, and confusion reigned supreme. Nevertheless, it was all over in two days, and King Zog fled into Greece. On 19 April, Victor Emmanuel united Albania with Italy. The occupation proceeded without incident, although many Italians remained fearful of international reprisals.¹²⁸

Abroad, reaction to the invasion was mixed. There was panic in Belgrade, Paris, Bucharest and Athens. Berlin sent congratulations. Britain's initial reaction was so

calm that Mussolini and Ciano thought Britain might already be reconciled to Albania's annexation.¹²⁹ Their mistaken impression may have been encouraged by the language used by the British. Perth was instructed to tell Ciano that if reports reaching London were true

... it would appear that the independence of Albania as well as the integrity and inalienability of its frontier, which the Italian Government as well as His Majesty's Government have pledged themselves to as a question of international importance, are being threatened ... The explanations proffered to date have caused His Majesty's Government profound misgivings as to those intentions and will not satisfy public opinion in this country.¹³⁰

The displeasure and deep concern evident to British ears may have escaped the Italians. If they heard, instead, uncertainty and mere concern over the public reaction, it is not surprising that they thought the British might already be reconciled to Albania's annexation.

Britain's reaction was partly due to ignorance. With Ryan incommunicado, an "extremely obscure" situation faced the hastily assembled "scratch" cabinet on 8 April. (Ten of twenty two cabinet ministers attended.) The extent of Albanian resistance was as unknown as were Italian intentions, and the presence of the Mediterranean Fleet in Italian ports limited Britain's options.¹³¹ A military response was thus impossible. Halifax believed Italy had acted alone, and that closer relations with Turkey and Greece were the only viable response, even if Mussolini was offended. The Cabinet agreed, but would do no more than order the British ships in Italian ports to proceed immediately to Malta.¹³² As Britain had few interests in Albania and faced a *fait accompli*, the invasion was minimised in the interests of Anglo-Italian relations.¹³³

This initial calm was short-lived. Reports that Italy had invaded with twenty divisions awakened Greek fears of Italian aggression. (In reality, Italy's first wave consisted of one tank battalion and four Bersaglieri regiments.) On 8 April the Greeks heard the same rumour from a source in contact with the Italian General Staff and from a German source in London. The rumour was corroborated by independent press reports.¹³⁴ The Greeks told the British who were galvanized into action. To the British, Corfu was a "strategic jewel" and a potential naval base in the eastern Mediterranean.¹³⁵ The possibility that Italy might invade the island had already occurred to Hore-Belisha and General Gort, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS). On 8 April, they suggested sending ships to Corfu to block Italy, a recommendation they repeated on 9 April.¹³⁶ Churchill, influential despite being a backbencher, also urged Chamberlain to order the navy to occupy Corfu to forestall Italy.¹³⁷

But Italy had no desire for war with Britain, and on 9 April, Crolla repeated Mussolini's assurances of 8 April that Albania would not prejudice Italy's relations with Britain, and that Italy would honour its pledge to withdraw from Spain after the victory parade. Halifax told Crolla of Greek anxiety about Corfu, and warned that Britain would take a very dim view if Italy invaded Corfu. The upshot was a message from Mussolini that Italy had no designs on Corfu and a promise to tell the Greeks, which Italy did on 10 April.¹³⁸ While the Greeks were suspicious of the "distinctly flowery message", Chamberlain saw it as evidence of Mussolini's good intentions.¹³⁹ Cadogan, however, was uneasy about a policy which tried

to steer between provocation and an impression of

impotence. If you are too bellicose, you provoke Dictators into doing something irrevocable. If you are too passive, you encourage them to think they can do anything.¹⁴⁰

In any event, Italy's assurances did not lessen the need to stabilise the eastern Mediterranean.¹⁴¹ On 10 April, the Cabinet discussed unilateral guarantees for Greece and Turkey. Chamberlain, who favoured a gentle line, was surprised by the depth of feeling against Mussolini in the FPC and the COS. The FPC deemed strong action in support of Greece and Turkey essential, "not to save Greece from being overrun, but to smash Italy" according to Admiral Lord Chatfield, the Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence. The COS recommended a guarantee to strengthen Greece and warn Italy, which already knew of British interest in Corfu.¹⁴² A decision could not be delayed. While the Foreign Office believed Italy's first post-invasion call-ups were a precaution against complications caused by the invasion, they were more consistent with aggression than an attempt to ease tensions.¹⁴³ The Foreign Office felt the situation was "as dangerous as it could be" because Mussolini seemed "capable of any folly".¹⁴⁴ On 13 April, the Cabinet decided a Balkan front was necessary even if it upset Italy, and approved a unilateral guarantee for Greece plus a reciprocal undertaking with Turkey.¹⁴⁵

Britain also bowed to French pressure and guaranteed Romania on 13 April. The French were convinced that Albania was part of a larger Axis plan. As proof, they sent London reports of a planned Italian attack on Gibraltar, surprise German air strikes on Paris and London and Axis attacks on Yugoslavia, Poland and Egypt. On 9 April after the Corfu rumours surfaced, France put its Mediterranean Fleet on an emergency footing and made plans to call-up reservists to augment its frontier

forces. Prime Minister Edouard Daladier also demanded that Romania be guaranteed against attack by Germany or Hungary.¹⁴⁶ Britain initially opposed a guarantee for Romania. It would undermine plans to use guarantees to persuade eastern European and Balkan states to form an anti-Axis bloc offering mutual aid against aggression. Halifax spoke for many when he described French panic as "singularly unfortunate and ill-considered".¹⁴⁷ But soon reports of German designs on Romania changed everything. Britain guaranteed Romania on 13 April, to keep its oil from Germany and keep pace with France which intended to guarantee Romania, no matter what.¹⁴⁸

The possibility of a German move in the Balkans also increased Turkey's value as an ally. Turkey was the only Balkan power capable of serious resistance to Germany which could not afford a hostile Turkey astride its communications in the eastern Mediterranean. Turkey could also provide defence-in-depth for the Suez Canal, Anglo-Iranian oilfields and the Basra-Palestine route.¹⁴⁹ It was true that Turkey's army, fully mobilised, numbered only 200,000, lacked first-rate anti-aircraft and anti-tank equipment and was short of modern weapons. Istanbul was also a firetrap without proper air raid defences. But Anatolia was a natural fortress whose capture would cost Germany dearly.¹⁵⁰ The SAC felt that Turkey's assistance was worth a great deal, but advised against a guarantee. British aid would be effective only if Turkey agreed to assist Greece and Romania. Instead, the SAC recommended an offer of political and military support, especially for rearmament, to a Balkan bloc of Turkey, Greece, Romania and Bulgaria even if the bloc "proved impossible or fickle or unreliable". On 12 May, Britain announced an Anglo-Turkish accord, pending an alliance.¹⁵¹ For Anglo-French strategy, Italy's seizure of Albania seizure was a

turning point. The guarantees to Greece and Romania, and the accord with Turkey were a line across south-east Europe which the Axis crossed at its peril.¹⁵²

Britain's response to possible Italian designs on Corfu was the first indication of a more realistic image of Mussolini which was one of Albania's principle legacies for Britain. The invasion left little doubt that Mussolini was untrustworthy and that his policies were opportunistic and self-serving. Therefore, the sooner he was dealt with, the better. The Foreign Office dismissed suggestions that the invasion was meant to block a German move in the Balkans as an attempt to justify "smash and grab" tactics.¹⁵³

In particular, Albania shattered Chamberlain's illusions about Mussolini. Before the invasion, Chamberlain had taken care not to upset Mussolini and hoped to enlist him in a peace front, as his 15 March letter requesting Mussolini's help to preserve peace illustrated. On 31 March, Chamberlain told Mussolini, via the Ball-Dingli channel that Britain awaited only a formal request to mediate between France and Italy.¹⁵⁴ However after the invasion, when Mussolini tried to send reassurances via the secret channel, Ball told Dingli that Chamberlain was very angry, and that Italian gestures deceived no one. In Chamberlain's opinion, Mussolini had behaved "like a sneak and a cad", cynically carrying out a "smash and grab raid ... Any chance of a future rapprochement with Italy had been blocked by Musso just as Hitler had blocked any German rapprochement".¹⁵⁵ Never again would Chamberlain see Mussolini in the rosy glow of early 1939. He now knew that Mussolini was motivated primarily by self-interest.¹⁵⁶ But while Albania caused the idealised image of

Mussolini prevalent in some circles to be replaced by a more pragmatic reading, it did not eliminate wishful thinking about Italy, as British policy was to demonstrate.

For Britain, Albania had a further significance because it helped spur some important intelligence reforms. The first was the establishment of the Situation Report Centre (SRC) in late April. Bogus warnings of German intentions plus Italy's seizure of Albania allowed the COS to pressure the Foreign Office into participating with the services in a bureau to co-ordinate intelligence so plans and emergency measures would be based on the most reliable and best-co-ordinated intelligence. The result was the SRC, whose task it was to circulate intelligence warnings quickly.¹⁵⁷ The second reform was the Middle East Intelligence Centre (MEIC), set up in June 1939 to co-ordinate the intelligence efforts of the services in the Middle East. The services would now pool and collate their intelligence to formulate joint plans for the region. The MEIC was also to provide the JIC with an overview of intelligence for the Middle East as a whole.¹⁵⁸ In both cases, the aim was to improve planning by providing intelligence on a more comprehensive and global basis. For Britain, Albania appears to have been a catalyst for the realisation that the piecemeal approach was inadequate in an increasingly unsettled world where events often had far-reaching ramifications. To cope Britain needed, not a plethora of independent intelligence agencies so intent on their own concerns that they could not see the forest for the trees, but a co-ordinated approach which provided a reliable overview of the forest. The SRC and the MEIC represent early steps toward the co-ordinated approach to intelligence Britain employed in the Second World War.

In summary, Britain suffered an intelligence failure over Albania due to a lack of high-level sources which led to misperceptions of Italy's likely actions. The absence of good sources with access to the inner circle of Italian policy-making left the British unable to read Mussolini's likely intentions. Instead, they found it virtually impossible to distinguish signals from the surrounding noise, and all their intelligence appeared ambiguous. Expectations were thus employed to determine which sources were credible and which suspect, which scenarios were likely and which unlikely. However, their expectations led the British astray about Italy's intentions. Albania thus illustrates both Handel's belief that the greatest danger in ambiguous intelligence is that wishful thinking is often substituted for facts as analysts indulge their most optimistic expectations, and Wark's contention that faulty expectations are central to intelligence failures.¹⁵⁹

In this case, expectations led the British to believe Italy would assess its military capabilities, strategic options and indeed, Albania's value in British terms. Had Italy done so, there would have been no invasion of Albania which, to the British, was neither logical nor necessary. The British did not realise that logic is in the eye of the beholder, that what was illogical within the constraints of British policy might look very different to Italian eyes. Because the British believed the Italians would dismiss an invasion of Albania as not worth the effort, they accepted Italian disclaimers of hostile intent at face value. Italy's efforts to cloak its invasion of Albania were thus inadvertently furthered by British expectations. Secure in their faulty assessments, the British were surprised when Italy presented the world with a *fait accompli* on 7 April 1939.

But while Britain deemed Albania insignificant in its own right, the invasion affected British policy. The rumours of Italian designs on Corfu prompted guarantees to Greece and Romania, and negotiations with Turkey to create an anti-Axis barrier in south-east Europe. Albania thus became Italy's last free meal. As well, Albania lent support to the "Mediterranean First" strategy which replaced conciliation. When that policy was, in turn, replaced by a policy of encouraging Italian neutrality, Albania's effects remained in the more realistic assessment of Mussolini. The blinkers were removed from British eyes. It might be possible to deal with Mussolini, if one remained on one's guard. But an appeal to his higher instincts was pointless because Mussolini was motivated solely by self-interest and opportunism. Mussolini would work with Britain only as long as he saw a direct benefit.

In conclusion, after Albania changed Britain's perception of Mussolini, the British should have been less susceptible to delusions, and quicker to realise when a policy was not viable. But the new view of Mussolini did not end all delusions, as subsequent chapters will show. It may be argued that as Britain resumed appeasing Italy in the summer of 1939, its more realistic view of Mussolini was short-lived. However, Britain's new view of Mussolini and appeasement were not necessarily incompatible. It may be that policy-makers believed Mussolini's opportunism would respond to the benefits of conciliation, removing, at least temporarily, one potential enemy from the equation. Instead, as will be discussed in a subsequent chapter, the British deluded themselves into believing that a short-term fix would prove a long-term solution because the need to believe that Italy could be kept from joining their enemies over-rode a more realistic appraisal of the chances of keeping Italy out of the war.

Perhaps most of all, Albania is significant because of what it reveals about deception and intelligence assessments. As intelligence resources were finite, choices had to be made. This meant that British eyes were not on Albania but on areas deemed more important. Britain's inability to devote much attention to Albania, and its inability to help Albania if Italy did invade, may have increased its willingness to accept assessments which said that nothing of consequence would happen in Albania, especially as these assessments fit British expectations. The first conclusion this suggests is that states may be more prone to falling victim to intelligence surprises when assessments tend to be based more on expectations than on good sources and sound intelligence. But as even unimportant areas do not exist in isolation, surprise may have a ripple effect. This was the case in Albania. The effects of British surprise were felt not in assessments of Albania and its role in British policy (which remained negligible) but in Britain's image of Mussolini which underwent a major revision, and in the process of intelligence with the establishment of the SRC and the MEIC . Indeed, these intelligence reforms may have been Albania's most important legacy for Britain. They were the first steps in the evolution from a piecemeal approach to a co-ordinated intelligence effort providing assessments of the bigger picture - the approach which served Britain so well during World War II.

Finally, British surprise in Albania demonstrates that the most crucial factor in a successful deception is the victim's willingness to believe. Without this, there is no deception. It thus follows that if an adversary suggests events will unfold as the victim hopes and/or expects, the chances of a successful deception are much

greater. This was certainly true in Albania where Italian words complemented British expectations. Had the British been more sceptical of Italian pronouncements, Italian efforts to mislead might have gone for naught. Instead, their desire to believe that Italy would not rock the boat convinced the British that Italy would not invade Albania, and they discounted suggestions to the contrary. In the final analysis, therefore, the most important factor in Britain's intelligence failure in Albania was British willingness to be deceived.

NOTES

For this chapter, FO 371, CAB 23, ADM 223, ADM 116 and WO 106 were the most useful. There was little reporting from the Air attaché, and the Air Ministry documents were not particularly useful, perhaps because the Air Ministry was concerned primarily with Germany. PREM 1 and the papers of Chamberlain, Hore-Belisha and Churchill each had a small amount of relevant material. On the other hand, the SIS, NID and MI5 records are not open, and there are no signals intelligence decrypts available for the pre-war period. Ryan's papers are open but contain nothing of value on his time in Albania. He seemed to regard the appointment as beneath him, and therefore not worth remembering. There is also nothing on this topic in the GFM papers. (These are the same as the Italian papers held at St. Anthony's College, University of Oxford and the National Archives, Washington D.C. Nor have the Italian documents for 1939 prior to the Pact of Steel been published. While it is, therefore, impossible to have the last word on this subject, I believe a valuable study can be made of the Albania episode based on the material which is available.

¹ Great Britain. House of Commons. Parliamentary Debates. Vol. 346. (London: HMSO, 1939.), 31.

² Minute by Noble. 24 March 1939. R1908/725/90. FO 371/23711.

³ Minute by Noble. 25 March 1939. R1936/725/90. FO 371/23711.

⁴ Barton Whaley. Codeword Barbarossa. (Cambridge Mass: The MIT Press, 1973.), 223, 242-4; Michael Handel. "The Yom Kippur War and the Inevitability of Surprise". International Studies Quarterly. 3(1977.), 462, 472; Michael Handel. "The Politics of Intelligence". Intelligence and National Security. 4(1987.) 14-5, 33. Whaley agrees that noise is often important in surprise, but believes disinformation must be distinguished from noise. Disinformation tries to reduce ambiguity and uncertainty by making the victim more certain of incorrect assessments. Noise makes warnings appear ambiguous.

⁵ Roberta Wohlstetter. Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962.), 2-4, 225-6, 387, 393, 397.

⁶ Wesley Wark. "Intelligence Predictions and Strategic Surprise: Reflections on the British Experience in the 1930s". ("Intelligence Predictions") British and American Approaches to Intelligence. ed. by K.G. Robertson. (Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press, 1987.), 89; Donald Cameron Watt. "British Intelligence and the Coming of the Second World War in Europe". Knowing One's Enemies. ed. by Ernest R. May. (Princeton: Princeton University Press (Paperback), 1986.), 249-51; D. Cameron Watt. "Intelligence and the Historian: A Comment on John Gaddis's 'Intelligence, Espionage and Cold War Origins'". Diplomatic History. 14(1990); D. Cameron Watt. "Misinformation, Misconception, Mistrust: Episodes in British Policy and the Approach of War, 1938-1939". High and Low Politics in Modern Britain. ed. by Michael Bentley and John Stevenson. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983.).

⁷ Michael Handel. "The Yom Kippur War and the Inevitability of Surprise". International Studies Quarterly. 3(1977.), 462, 472; Michael Handel. "The Politics of Intelligence". Intelligence and National Security. #4, 1987. 14-5, 33.

⁸ Avi Schlaim. "Failure in National Intelligence Estimates: The Case of the Yom Kippur War". World Politics. 28(1976) 356-7.

⁹ Richard K. Betts. "Analysis, War, and Decision: Why Intelligence Failures are Inevitable". World Politics. 31(1978), 88.

¹⁰ Eliot A. Cohen and John Gooch. Military Misfortunes. The Anatomy of Failure in War. (New York: The Press, 1990.), 18, 21, 26, 47-9, 52, 126-7, 180.

¹¹ Wesley Wark. "Intelligence Predictions". 88; Wesley K. Wark. The Ultimate Enemy. (London: Tauris, 1985.), 19.

¹² Denis Mack Smith. Mussolini. New York: Vintage Books, 1982.), 230-1; Laura Fermi. Mussolini. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961.), 386-7; MacGregor Knox. Mussolini Unleashed 1939-1941. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.), 38, 40-1; Ivone Kirkpatrick. Mussolini A Study in Power. (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1964.), 379-80; Renzo De Felice. Mussolini il duce. Part II. (Torino: Giulio Einaudi, 1981.), 502-4, 581-91; 606-11. Mack Smith, Fermi, Knox and Kirkpatrick agree that plans to annex Albania were of long-standing, although Mussolini delayed a definite decision until the eleventh hour. De Felice concentrates on Mussolini's motivations and the invasion's timing.

¹³ Williamson Murray. The Change in the European Balance of Power 1938-1939. {The Change} Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984.), 301; N.H. Gibbs. Grand Strategy. Vol. 1. Rearmament Policy. (London: HMSO, 1976.), 392, 707-9; Richard Overy. The Road to War. (Toronto: Stoddart, 1989.), 173; Peter Calvocoressi, Guy Wint and John Pritchard. Total War The Causes and Courses of the Second World War. Vol. 1. The Western Hemisphere. 2nd ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1989.) 70-1, 95; Christopher Thorne. The Approach of War 1938-1939. (London: Macmillan, 1968.), 109-10, 132, 165; Lawrence R. Pratt. East of Malta, West of Suez. Britain's Mediterranean Crisis, 1936-1939. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975.), 159, 178. Donald Cameron Watt. How War Came. (London: Heinemann, 1989.), 206-14. Gibbs states that Britain's reaction to the coup was due to the policy of encouraging Italian neutrality. But, aside from noting that there were unheeded rumours of an Italian invasion, Gibbs does not discuss British surprise. Overy says only that Mussolini decided to invade Albania after the 15 March 1939 Prague coup, although an invasion was neither necessary nor logical. Calvocoressi et al name Ciano as the coup's driving force, and note that Britain responded by guaranteeing Greece. Thorne says that Britain remained aloof to avoid a rupture with Italy, until rumours about Corfu pushed Britain to guarantee Greece. Pratt sees the invasion was a test of British faith that Italy could be detached from the Axis. Britain avoided any action which might provoke Mussolini until rumours of Italian designs on Corfu started to swirl. Watt's emphasis is on the coup's aftermath.

¹⁴ P.M.H. Bell. The Origins of the Second World War. (London: Longman, 1986.), 256, 280.

¹⁵ Sidney Aster. 1939. The Making of the Second World War. (London: Andre Deutsch, 1973.), 129-30.

¹⁶ Christopher Andrew. Secret Service. (London: Sceptre, 1986.), 582, 586, 588-591. {All references to Secret Service are to the 1986 Sceptre paperback, which has different pagination from the 1985 edition entitled Her Majesty's Secret Service.}

¹⁷ F.H. Hinsley. British Intelligence in the Second World War. Vol. 1. (London: HMSO, 1979.), 84. MI5 and other sources provided general warnings that an invasion of Albania was possible, but there was nothing specific until the morning of 7 April. Hinsley provides no detail on the specific nature or source of these warnings.

¹⁸ Mack Smith. 230; Kirkpatrick 380.

¹⁹ Watt. How War Came. 206; Fermi. 380-1; Galeazzo Ciano. Ciano's Diary 1937-1938. (London: Methuen, 1952.), 94; De Felice. 502-3.

²⁰ Ciano. Ciano's Diary 1937-1938. 125; De Felice. 504, 582; Watt. How War Came. 207.

²¹ Ciano. Ciano's Diary 1937-1938. 176-7, 179, 184; De Felice. 583; Kirkpatrick. 380.

²² Knox. Mussolini Unleashed. 38; Ciano. Ciano's Diary 1937-1938. 201; De Felice. 583.

²³ De Felice. 583.

²⁴ Fermi. 380-1.

²⁵ Watt. How War Came. 207.

²⁶ Galeazzo Ciano. Ciano's Diary 1939-1943. (London: Heinemann, 1947.), 12; De Felice. 583.

²⁷ Ciano. Ciano's Diary 1939-1943. 14; De Felice. 583.

²⁸ Ciano. Ciano's Diary 1939-1943. 23-4; De Felice. 582-4.

²⁹ Ciano. Ciano's Diary 1939-1943. 29, 38. De Felice. 584.

³⁰ David Dilks. "Flashes of Intelligence: The Foreign Office, The SIS and Security Before the Second World War". The Missing Dimension. ed. by Christopher Andrew and David Dilks. (Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 1984.), 116-8.

³¹ Ciano. Ciano's Diary 1939-1943. 30-1.

³² De Felice. 585.

³³ Ciano. Ciano's Diary 1939-1943. 46; De Felice. 585

³⁴ Ciano. Ciano's Diary 1939-1943. 46-7; De Felice. 585-7; Fermi. 383.

³⁵ Ciano. Ciano's Diary 1939-1943. 48-9; De Felice. 587-8; Kirkpatrick. 380.

³⁶ Ciano. Ciano's Diary 1939-1943. 51-2, 54; Knox. 38, 40-1; De Felice. 588-90, 606-7; Fermi. 384; Kirkpatrick. 380; Aster. 128.

³⁷ De Felice. 607; Ciano. Ciano's Diary 1939-1943. 45-6.

³⁸ Ciano. Ciano's Diary 1939-1943. 54.

³⁹ Ciano. Ciano's Diary 1939-1943. 57-8; Kirkpatrick. 380. De Felice believes that until 1 April, Mussolini and Ciano would have preferred an accord giving Italy a formal protectorate and more of Albania's resources. For his part, Ciano appears to have hoped for Zog's capitulation. (De Felice. 607; Ciano. Ciano's Diary 1939-1943. 59.)

⁴⁰ Ciano. Ciano's Diary 1939-1943. 55, 57, 59-60, 61-3; Watt. How War Came. 207; Aster. 129.

⁴¹ Fermi. 384-7; Watt. 209; Ciano. Ciano's Diary 1939-1943. 57-8; 61-4. De Felice. 607; Halifax to Perth. 6 April 1939. #77 3rd Series. Volume V. DBFP. (London: HMSO, 1952.).

⁴² Perth to Foreign Office. 4 April 1939. Minutes by Noble and Ingram. 5 April 1939. R2333/1335/90. FO 371/23711; De Felice. 608-9.

⁴³ Ciano. Ciano's Diary 1939-1943. 62.

⁴⁴ Admiralty Daily Reports. 24-31 March 1939. 1-6 April 1939. ADM 223/79; Perth to Halifax. 4 April 1939. R2325/1335/90. FO 371/23711.

⁴⁵ Andrew. Secret Service. 582, 586, 588-90.

⁴⁶ David Dilks, ed. The Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan 1938-1945. {The Cadogan Diaries} (London: Cassell, 1971.), 169; Donald McLachlan. Room 39. (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968.), 246.

⁴⁷ Dilks. The Cadogan Diaries. 169; McLachlan. 246.

⁴⁸ Minute by Sargent. 6 April 1939. R2333/1335/90. FO 371/23711.

⁴⁹ Ryan to Foreign Office. 9 March 1939. R1611/725/90; Ryan to Foreign Office. 19 March 1939. R1808/725/90. FO 371/23711; Ryan to Halifax. 4 March 1939. R1697/725/90. FO 371/23711; Ryan to Foreign Office. 16 March 1939. R1793/725/90. FO 371/23711; Ryan to Foreign Office. 14 March 1939. R1936/725/90. FO 371/23711; Waterlow to Foreign Office. 23 March 1939. R1987/725/90. FO 371/23711.

⁵⁰ Athens Chancery to Southern Department. 20 March 1939. R1908/725/90. FO 371/23711.

⁵¹ Foreign Office Minute by P. Nichols. 17 March 1939. R1807/725/90. FO 371/23711; Foreign Office Memorandum. 4 April 1939. R2758/1335/90. FO 371/23713.

⁵² Andrew. Secret Service. 590; Aster 129.

⁵³ Foreign Office Minute by O. Sargent. 1 April 1939. R2226/1336/90. FO 371/23711; Foreign Office Minute by M. Ingram. 3 April 1939. R2227/1335/90. FO 371/23711; Perth to Foreign Office. 3 April 1939. 3 telegrams. R2257/2262/2263 /1335/90. FO 371/23711; Perth to Foreign Office. 4 April 1939. R2327/1335/90. FO 371/23711; Perth to Foreign Office. 5 April 1939. R2351/1335/90. FO 371/23711.

⁵⁴ Watt. How War Came. 202.

⁵⁵ Minute by Ingram. 5 April 1939. R2333/ 1335/90. FO 371/23711. I could find no statement in the Foreign Office records or private papers as to why Prince Paul was considered well-informed on Italy although these sources indicate that the

Foreign Office set great store by his views in the spring of 1939. The Foreign Office may have that felt Prince Paul was well-informed from necessity. He was aware of Italy's potential threat to Yugoslavia, and may have tried to be as well-informed as possible to protect Yugoslavia's interests.

⁵⁶ Andrew. Secret Service. 590.

⁵⁷ John Harvey, ed. The Diplomatic Diaries of Oliver Harvey 1937-1940. (London: Collins, 1970.), 252.

⁵⁸ Campbell to Ingram. 27 March 1939. R2162/399/22. FO 371/23816.

⁵⁹ Campbell to Foreign Office. 22 March 1939. R2021/725/90. FO 371/23711.

⁶⁰ Andrew. Secret Service. 590.

⁶¹ Minute by Ingram. 5 April 1939. R2333/1335/90. FO 371/23711.

⁶² Foreign Office Memorandum. 4 April 1939. R2758/1335/90. FO 371/23713.

⁶³ Minutes by Noble and Nichols. 18 March 1939. R1793/725/90. FO 371/23711.

⁶⁴ Minute by Noble. 18 March 1939. R1793/725/90. FO 371/23711; Perth to Foreign Office. 17 March 1939. R1806/725/90. FO 371/23711.

⁶⁵ Ciano. Ciano's Diary 1939-1943. 61-4. It is possible that word of Italy's plans to invade Albania reached Japan and thus British intelligence which enjoyed some success with Japanese codes and ciphers between the wars. (Andrew. Secret Service. 500-1.) If so, the information does not appear to have percolated down to the Foreign Office. There is no reference to a Japanese connection in the Foreign Office's files on Albania in early 1939. Nor do Ciano or De Felice mention Japan receiving advance notice of the invasion.

⁶⁶ Perth to Halifax. 20 February 1939. R1214/399/22 FO 371/23816; Perth to Halifax. 21 February 1939. R1242/399/22. FO 371/23816. His tour of Spezia and Naples in early March revealed no unusual activity. (Perth to Halifax. 10 March 1939. R1672/399/22. FO 371/23816.

⁶⁷ Perth to Halifax. 4 April 1939. R2325/1335/90. FO 371/23711.

⁶⁸ Perth to Halifax. 12 April 1939. R2709/1335/90. FO 371/23713.

⁶⁹ Admiralty Daily Reports. 24-31 March 1939. 1-6 April 1939. ADM 223/79.

⁷⁰ Backhouse to Pound. 28 March 1939. ADM 205/3.

⁷¹ Pound to Admiralty. 2 April 1939. ADM 116/3844.

⁷² Admiralty. Albanian Crisis Telegrams. ADM 116/3844.

⁷³ Watt. How War Came. 85; Felix Gilbert. "Two British Ambassadors: Perth and Henderson". The Diplomats 1919-1939. Volume 2. The Thirties. ed. by Gordon A. Craig and Felix Gilbert. (New York: Atheneum, 1974.), 545-7.

⁷⁴ Ciano. Ciano's Diary 1939-1943. 82.

⁷⁵ Minute by Noble. 17 February 1939. R1111/399/22. FO 371/23816; Minute by Noble. 20 February 1939. R1164/399/22. FO 371/23816.

⁷⁶ Perth to Halifax. 17 March 1939. R1806/725/90. FO 371/23711.

⁷⁷ Perth to Halifax. 24 March 1939. R1954/399/22. FO 371/23816.

⁷⁸ Perth to Foreign Office. 4 April 1939. Minutes by Noble and Ingram. 5 April 1939. Minutes by Sargent and Cadogan. 6 April 1939. R2333/1335/90. FO 371/23711

⁷⁹ Foreign Office Memorandum. 4 April 1939. R2758/1335/90. FO 371/23713; P.M.H. Bell. The Origins of the Second World War in Europe. (London: Longman, 1986.), 179; Pratt. 5-6, 165-7.

⁸⁰ Minute by Cavendish Bentinck. 6 March 1939. J915/33/66. FO 371/23386; Kinsella to Foreign Office. 9 March 1939. J988/33/66. FO 371/23386; Phipps to Foreign Office. 3 March 1939. J989/33/66. FO 371/23386; Watt. How War Came. 202.

⁸¹ Foreign Office to Lampson. 23 March 1939. J1011/33/66. FO 371/23386.

⁸² Perth to Foreign Office. 27 February 1939. Minutes by Montgomery, Cavendish Bentinck and Kelly. 28 February 1939. J816/33/66. FO 371/23386.

⁸³ Perth to Foreign Office. 30 January 1939. Minutes by Brown and Noble. 31 January 1939. R738/399/22. FO 371/23816.

⁸⁴ Perth to Foreign Office. 8 February 1939. Minute by Noble. 9 February 1939. R943/399/22. FO 371/23816.

⁸⁵ Perth to Foreign Office. 10 February 1939. Minute by Noble 13 February 1939. Minute by Cadogan. 14 February 1939. R987/399/22. FO 371/23816. I have been unable to locate an Army List after 1717 or a Who's Who before 1948. The 1948 Who's Who is not very helpful on intelligence background. Lt. General Montagu Brocac Burrows, CB, DSO, MC, MA, served in the 5th Dragoon Guards World War I, military attaché Rome 1938-40, major-general commanding an armoured division and corps in 1940-4, head of the British Military Mission, Moscow, 1944 and GOC-in-C, West Africa 1945-6.

⁸⁶ Perth to Foreign Office. 27 February 1939. R1361/399/22. FO 371/23816; Perth to Foreign Office. 23 February 1939. Minute by Noble 27 February 1939. R1322/15/22. FO 371/23800.

⁸⁷ Minute by Noble. 2 March 1939. R1446/399/22. FO 371/23816.

⁸⁸ Report by Industrial Intelligence Centre. "Italy. General State of Material Resources and Industry in their Bearing Upon National War Potential." March 1939. (received by the Foreign Office on 5 March 1939) R1425/1425/22. FO 371/23824.

⁸⁹ Minute by Noble. 29 March 1939. R2042/399/22. FO 371/23816.

⁹⁰ Perth to Foreign Office. 30 March 1939. R2245/399/22. FO 371/23816.

⁹¹ Perth to Halifax. 3 April 1939. R2288/399/22. FO 371/23817.

⁹² Perth to Halifax. 6 April 1939. R2415/399/22. FO 371/23817.

⁹³ Minute by Ingram. 5 April 1939. R2288/399/22. FO 371/23817.

⁹⁴ James Marshall-Cornwall. Wars and Rumours of Wars. (London: Leo Cooper, 1984.), 123.

⁹⁵ Brian Bond. Chief of Staff The Diaries of Lt.-General Sir Henry Pownall. Vol. 1. (London. Cooper, 1972.), 197.

- ⁹⁶ Dilks. The Cadogan Diaries. 146-7, 149-50.
- ⁹⁷ Ryan to Foreign Office. 14 March 1939. R1936/725/90. FO 371/23711.
- ⁹⁸ Foreign Office Memorandum. 4 April 1939. R2758/1335/90. FO 371/23713.
- ⁹⁹ Ryan to Foreign Office. 31 March 1939. R2207/1335/90. FO 371/23711.
- ¹⁰⁰ Ciano. Ciano's Diary 1939-1943. 54, 58, 60.
- ¹⁰¹ Ryan to Foreign Office. 31 March 1939. R2207/1335/90. FO 371/23711;
Ryan to Foreign Office. 3 April 1939. R2285/1335/90. FO 371/23711; Ryan to
Foreign Office. 6 April 1939. R2349/2387/1335/90. FO 371/23711.
- ¹⁰² Ryan to Halifax. 19 March 1939. R1808/725/90. 25 March 1939. R1989/
725/90. 22 March 1939. R1999/725/90. 24 March 1939. R2026/725/90. 31 March
1939. R2207/1335/90. All references to FO 371/23711.
- ¹⁰³ Andrew Ryan. The Last of the Dragomans. (London: Geoffrey Bles,
1951.); Dilks. The Cadogan Diaries; The Papers of Neville Chamberlain. University
of Birmingham. The Halifax Papers. FO 800; The Papers of Sir Andrew Ryan. St.
Anthony's College. Oxford University.
- ¹⁰⁴ Ryan to Foreign Office. 19 March 1939. R1808/725/90. FO 371/23711.
- ¹⁰⁵ Ciano. Ciano's Diary 1937-1938. 136; Ryan to Foreign Office. 10 March
1939. Minute by Noble 13 March 1939. R1638/725/90. FO 371/23711; Ryan to
Foreign Office. 14 March 1939. R1936/725/90. FO 371/23711; Ryan to Foreign
Office. 22 March 1939. R1999/725/90. FO 371/23711.
- ¹⁰⁶ Perth to Foreign Office. 5 April 1939. Minute by Noble 6 April 1939.
R2351/1335/90. FO 371/23711.
- ¹⁰⁷ See Wark. The Ultimate Enemy. 52-5, 60-1, 77, 181-2. on Christie's role.
- ¹⁰⁸ Minute by Noble. 23 February 1939. R1379/7/22. FO 371/23793.
- ¹⁰⁹ Dilks. The Cadogan Diaries. 158.
- ¹¹⁰ Handel. "The Yom Kippur War". 464-70.
- ¹¹¹ Perth to Foreign Office. 19 March 1939. R1809/725/90 FO 371/23711;
Minute by Noble. 28 March 1939. R1989/725/90. FO 371/23711.
- ¹¹² Foreign Office Minute. 4 April 1939. R2758/1335/90. FO 371/23713.
- ¹¹³ Minute by Noble. 29 March 1939. R2081/7/22. FO 371/23794; Watt. How
War Came. 179.
- ¹¹⁴ Parliamentary Debates. Vol. 343. p.38.
- ¹¹⁵ Williamson Murray. "Appeasement and Intelligence". Intelligence and
National Security. 4(1987.), 48-9.
- ¹¹⁶ Watt. How War Came. 179.
- ¹¹⁷ Pratt. 158.
- ¹¹⁸ Dilks. The Cadogan Diaries. 162; Aster. 84-5.
- ¹¹⁹ Anthony Adamthwaite. The Lost Peace. International Relations in Europe
1918-1939. (London: Edward Arnold, 1980.), 197-8, quoting CAB 23/90A.
- ¹²⁰ Minute by Noble. 23 February 1939. R1379/7/22. FO 371/23793.
- ¹²¹ Aster. 129-30.

- ¹²² This is speculation. De Felice and Ciano are silent on this point.
- ¹²³ Minute by Noble. 5 April 1939. R2333/1335/90. FO 371/23711.
- ¹²⁴ #80 Ryan to Halifax. 7 April 1939. #133. Ryan to Halifax. 11 April 1939. DBFP. 3rd Series. Vol. V. (London: HMSO, 1952.); Ryan to Halifax. 6 April 1939. R2349/2389/1335/90. FO 371/23711.
- ¹²⁵ #94 Kurti to Halifax. 8 April 1939. DBFP. 3rd Series. Vol. V. (London: HMSO, 1952.).
- ¹²⁶ #113 Ryan to Halifax. 11 April, 1939. DBFP. 3rd Series. Vol. V. (London: HMSO, 1952.); Ciano. Ciano's Diary 1939-1943. 65-6.
- ¹²⁷ #82 Perth to Halifax. 7 April 1939; #94 Kurti to Halifax. 8 April 1939. #93 Halifax to Waterlow. 8 April 1939. DBFP 3rd Series. Vol. V. (London: HMSO, 1952.).
- ¹²⁸ Waterlow to Halifax. 8 April 1939. #91 DBFP 3rd Series. Vol. V. (London: HMSO, 1952.); De Felice. 608; Ciano. Ciano's Diary 1939-1943. 66-8.
- ¹²⁹ Kirkpatrick. 380; De Felice. 609; Watt. How War Came. 209.
- ¹³⁰ #86 Halifax to Perth. 7 April 1939. DBFP. 3rd Series. Vol. V. (London: HMSO, 1952.).
- ¹³¹ Cabinet Meeting. 8 April 1939. 18(39). CAB 23.
- ¹³² Cabinet Meeting. 8 April 1939. 18(39). CAB 23.
- ¹³³ Watt. How War Came. 208-9; Ciano. Ciano's Diary 1939-1943. 68; De Felice. 609.
- ¹³⁴ Watt. How War Came. 200, 210; E. Bauer. The History of World War II. (Toronto: Royce, 1979.), 20; Dilks. The Cadogan Diaries. 171; Harvey. 277; #97 Waterlow to Halifax. 9 April ;1939. #105 Halifax to Waterlow. 9 April 1939. DBFP. 3rd. Series. Volume V. (London: HMSO, 1952.).
- ¹³⁵ Aster. 133.
- ¹³⁶ Papers of Leslie Hore-Belisha, Churchill College, Cambridge. HOBE 1/5.
- ¹³⁷ The Papers of Neville Chamberlain. University of Birmingham. N/C 7/9; Aster. 133; Watt. How War Came. 212.
- ¹³⁸ Cabinet Meeting. 10 April 1939. 19(30). CAB. 23; Aster. 131; Keith Feiling. The Life of Neville Chamberlain. (London: Macmillan, 1947.), 404; MacDonald. "Britain, France". 156; #95 Halifax to Perth. 8 April 1939. #101 Halifax to Perth. 9 April 1939. #105 Halifax to Waterlow. 9 April 1939. #109-10 Halifax to Perth. 9 April 1939. DBFP. 3rd Series. Volume V. (London: HMSO, 1952.); #118 Waterlow to Halifax. 10 April 1939. DBFP. 3rd Series. Volume V. (London: HMSO, 1952.).
- ¹³⁹ Aster 134. #111-112 Halifax to Waterlow. 9 April 1939. #131 Perth to Halifax. 11 April 1939. DBFP. 3rd Series. Volume V. (London: HMSO, 1952.).
- ¹⁴⁰ Dilks. The Cadogan Diaries. 171.
- ¹⁴¹ Watt. How War Came. 213. #136 Halifax to Waterlow. 12 April 1939. #138 Halifax to Knatchbull-Hugessen. 12 April 1939. DBFP. 3rd Series. Volume V. (London: HMSO, 1952.).
- ¹⁴² Cabinet Meeting. 10 April 1939. 19(39) CAB 23.

¹⁴³ Perth to Foreign Office. 10 April 1939. Minute by Noble. 11 April 1939. R2511/399/22. FO 371/23817.

¹⁴⁴ Minute by Noble. 13 April 1940. R2662/399/22. FO 371/23817.

¹⁴⁵ Cabinet Meeting. 13 April 1939. 20(39) CAB 23; Pratt. 159; Aster 132-3; MacDonald. "Britain, France". 155.

¹⁴⁶ #96 Phipps to Cadogan. 8 April 1939. #103. Phipps to Halifax. 9 April 1939. DBFP. 3rd Series. Vol. V. (London: HMSO, 1952.); Aster. 133; Watt. How War Came. 211-2.

¹⁴⁷ Watt. How War Came. 213.

¹⁴⁸ Watt. How War Came. 214; Aster. 140-1.

¹⁴⁹ Watt. How War Came. 213; I.S.O. Playfair. The Mediterranean and the Middle East. Vol. 1. The Early Successes Against Italy. (London: HMSO, 1954.), 49.

¹⁵⁰ Frank G. Weber. The Evasive Neutral. Germany, Britain and the Quest for a Turkish Alliance in the Second World War. (Columbia. University of Missouri Press. 1979.), 214-5.

¹⁵¹ Aster. 136-7, 141.

¹⁵² Aster 131-2.

¹⁵³ Perth to Halifax. 11 April 1939; Minute by Noble. 13 April 1939. Minute by Ingram. 14 April. R2663/399/22. FO 371/23817; Minute by Noble. 20 April 1939. R3059/1335/90. FO 371/23713; Charles to Foreign Office. 25 April 1939. Minutes by Noble, Ingram, Oliphant. 25 April 1939. R3289/57/22. FO 371/23808.

¹⁵⁴ Watt. How War Came. 208.

¹⁵⁵ Neville Chamberlain to Hilda Chamberlain. 15 April 1939. Papers of Neville Chamberlain. University of Birmingham. N/C 18/1; Watt. How War Came. 213-4.

¹⁵⁶ Neville Chamberlain to Ida Chamberlain. 10 September 1939. The Papers of Neville Chamberlain. University of Birmingham. N/C. 18/1.

¹⁵⁷ Hinsley. British Intelligence. Vol. I, 42, 84-5; Andrew. Secret Service. 591.

¹⁵⁸ In the case of the MEIC, Albania did not remove the Foreign Office's objections to a political/military bureau, and the services were forced to proceed alone. Hinsley British Intelligence. Vol. I, 40-1; 356 CID Meeting. 11 May 1939. Minute by Cavendish Bentinck. 16 May 1939. Minute by Kelly. 17 May 1939. J1993/126/66; Minute by Kelly. 19 May 1939. J2029/126/66; Beaumont Nesbitt to Cavendish Bentinck. 30 May 1939. Minute by Cavendish Bentinck. 31 May 1939. Minute by Kelly. 1 June 1939. J2138/126/66; CID 1556-B. "Establishment of a Combined Intelligence Centre in the Middle East". 27 June 1939. J2545/126/66. All references are to FO 371/23391.

¹⁵⁹ Handel. "The Yom Kippur War and the Inevitability of Surprise", 462, 472; Handel. "The Politics of Intelligence". 14-5, 33; Wark. "Intelligence Predictions" 88. Wark. The Ultimate Enemy. 19.

CHAPTER 3 - "CUT FLOWERS IN A VASE":

THE MEDITERRANEAN FIRST STRATEGY

In the months before the outbreak of war in September 1939, a shooting star known as the "Mediterranean First" strategy appeared in the strategic skies over Britain. Like a shooting star, the strategy blazed brilliantly, then vanished. It emerged in January 1939 when British planners began to regard the strategic situation with greater optimism. In the summer, when strategic optimism turned to pessimism, the "Mediterranean First" strategy was repudiated. Its portrayal of Italy as a certain enemy in war-time was a radical departure from Britain's traditional view of Italy as, at the least, a potential friend interested in preserving peace. That belief was so firmly entrenched that despite Italy's invasion of Abyssinia in 1935 and its ongoing military involvement in Spain, neither the CID nor the Cabinet would name Italy as a "probable enemy" in February 1937, although they agreed that Italy could no longer be considered a "reliable friend".¹ This changed in April 1939. Italy's invasion of Albania dispelled the illusion that Italian policy had any aim save material gain, and encouraged the belief that the only way to deal with Italy was with force. The invasion was thus the catalyst for Britain's adoption of the "Mediterranean First" strategy that spring. In turn, the "Mediterranean First" strategy provided the first tangible expression of the new attitude toward Italy which arose in the wake of Italy's invasion of Albania.

The "Mediterranean First" strategy's premise was simple. The allies would defeat Germany via Italy.² As Germany would feel obligated to support its ally, it would be

drained by Italy's economic and military weakness and competition for imported raw materials, and by the allied blockade which Italian belligerency would make more effective.³ As Winston Churchill, one of the strategy's staunchest advocates, wrote on 27 March 1939, allied domination of the Mediterranean would fatally injure Italy's war effort by making Italy's troops in Libya "cut flowers in a vase". "A series of swift and striking victories" in the Mediterranean early in the war would also have a "most healthy and helpful bearing" on the main struggle with Germany.⁴

The "Mediterranean First" strategy's appeal was based on its assertion that Germany could be defeated without a repeat of the bloodbath of World War I's Western Front. Policy-makers and planners, haunted by the carnage of trench warfare, were drawn to a strategy which promised success without slaughter.⁵ If Germany supported Italy, a Mediterranean offensive might even help Poland.⁶ An added attraction was the chance to dispatch Italy in the process. Anglo-Italian relations had been uneasy since October 1935 when Britain supported sanctions in response to Italy's invasion of Abyssinia. Neither the 1937 Gentlemen's Agreement nor the 1938 Easter Accords returned Anglo-Italian relations to their pre-sanction cordiality. As the international situation deteriorated, the Italian threat became more worrisome because Egypt, the gateway to the Suez Canal and Britain's chief military base in the Middle East, was sandwiched between Italy's territories of Libya and Abyssinia.⁷

Two themes emerge from the "Mediterranean First" strategy's rise and fall. One is the need to base policy on a sound appreciation of other states' intentions and capabilities. Instead, the "Mediterranean First" strategy was burdened with

ambiguous intelligence which planners and policy-makers moulded to their preconceptions. As a result, unrealistic expectations of Italy, Japan and especially France, were instrumental in Britain's adoption of the "Mediterranean First" strategy. When these expectations were unmasked as faulty, support for the strategy ebbed, and it was rejected in July 1939. The "Mediterranean First" strategy thus demonstrates the need for states to have good intelligence so their assessments will lead to realistic expectations which are the heart of viable policy.

The second theme is the importance of net assessments in policy-making because the "Mediterranean First" strategy was adopted, and then rejected, on the basis of a net assessment. While in Military Misfortunes. The Anatomy of Failure in War, Cohen and Gooch confine their study to military operations, they state that net assessments are part of all policy-making. Individuals and organizations are always performing net assessments, either implicitly on the basis of hunch and instinct or explicitly on the basis of analysis as in the "Mediterranean First" strategy.⁸

The "Mediterranean First" strategy can boast a substantial literature. Among the most prominent contributions are: Donald Cameron Watt's How War Came, Williamson Murray's The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938-1939, Lawrence R. Pratt's East of Malta, West of Suez. Britain's Mediterranean Crisis 1936-1939, N.H. Gibbs' Grand Strategy, volume one and Sidney Aster's 1939 The Making of the Second World War. These works agree that the COS' January 1939 "European Appreciation, 1939-1940", which advocated a forward strategy against the Axis, opened the door for the "Mediterranean First" strategy. The strategy rose to prominence when the Admiralty questioned the wisdom of stripping the

Mediterranean to send a fleet to the Pacific. Led by the CNS, Admiral Sir Roger Backhouse and Admiral Sir Reginald Plunket-Erle-Drax, his special adviser on war planning, the Admiralty began to see the "Mediterranean First" strategy as the solution to Britain's strategic dilemma. Where Italian weakness once encouraged appeasement, it now appeared to offer speedy military success. The "Mediterranean First" strategy rapidly gained adherents. In May 1939 the SAC, established by the CID on 24 February to study the COS's "1939-1940 European Appreciation", formally gave the Mediterranean priority over the Pacific for planning purposes.⁹ But the "Mediterranean First" strategy's reign was brief. Japan's military resurgence and the loss of an early French offensive in Libya authored its fall. In July, the JPC and the COS favoured Italy's "assured" neutrality, although this could not be guaranteed, and persuaded Chamberlain and the Cabinet that a neutral Italy was best.¹⁰

These works differ, however, over the wisdom of the "Mediterranean First" strategy. Pratt and Watt attribute its adoption to illusion and superficial thinking. Planners apparently forgot that the allies' initial strategy would be defensive and misread the United States, Japan and France. Japanese unpredictability and the American refusal to commit in the Pacific made the strategy risky; French preoccupation with Europe made it unviable. When planners realised this, they abandoned the "Mediterranean First" strategy.¹¹

In contrast, Murray sees the "Mediterranean First" strategy as a lost opportunity because an over-cautious military saw only the "worst case" scenario, most ministers were strategically ignorant, and planners and policy-makers failed to set Italian policy in the context of grand strategy. The Cabinet saw the "Mediterranean First"

strategy only in terms of a knock-out blow, ignoring the other possibilities Italy offered.¹² Britain's choice of a neutral Italy was

... one more sad commentary on a British leadership, military as well as civilian that saw danger in every policy, that preached caution at every turn, and that was unwilling to take the slightest risk in defence of its far-flung interests.¹³

Murray believes Britain would have found it relatively easy to precipitate Italian belligerency since allied actions determined Italy's course and Mussolini's perch on the fence was precarious. Instead, military advisers urged "a soft line" toward Italy which they refused to place "within the framework" of grand strategy.¹⁴ If Italy had been a belligerent from the outset of war, the allies could have settled the Mediterranean before Germany sent substantial forces there. (This appears to contradict his contention that the allies' best course was to keep a battered Italy in the war to drain Germany.) An Italian collapse in Libya, especially in conjunction with a victory over the Italian fleet, would have ended "the growing myth of Axis invulnerability", balanced Germany's victory in Poland, and allowed the allies to increase the effectiveness of the blockade against Germany.¹⁵

This chapter agrees with the basic outline of the "Mediterranean First" strategy set out in the published works. But as there is no work dealing specifically with the role of intelligence in the "Mediterranean First" strategy, this chapter will put more emphasis on the role of intelligence, and in particular net assessments, in the rise and fall of the "Mediterranean First" strategy .

The earliest suggestion of the "Mediterranean First" strategy was on 19 September 1935, when Backhouse, then the naval Commander-in-Chief (C-in-C) in the

Mediterranean, suggested to the CNS, Admiral Sir Ernest Chatfield, that a quick start by Britain and France could cause Italy to lose heart and possibly to quit the war.¹⁶ Then in September 1937, Drax proposed replacing passive defence with a forward policy.¹⁷ A year later Drax said that an "energetic" Anglo-French offensive in the Mediterranean would eliminate the need for defensive measures against Italy and facilitate Germany's defeat.¹⁸ Drax felt World War I's most important lesson was that victory could be won by exploiting soft spots, especially on secondary fronts like the Middle East and south-east Europe. He concluded that Italy might hold the key to Germany's defeat.¹⁹

Soon these views were being echoed by army and air force officers. One of the more outspoken was General Sir Edmund Ironside, Governor-General of Gibraltar and a future Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS). Ironside attached little value to the 1938 Easter Accords. In October 1938 he recommended increasing Britain's defences and reserves in the Middle East to allow a forward policy against Italy.²⁰ That same month the Air Attaché in Rome, Group-Captain Medhurst, proposed bombing the Genoa-Turin-Milan industrial triangle at the outset of war so an alarmed Italian public would force its government to sue for peace. But as the Foreign Office was not certain that Italy was irrevocably committed to the Axis, it threw cold water on Medhurst's ideas.²¹

However, on 14 November 1938, Admiral Sir Dudley Pound, the naval C-in-C in the Mediterranean, made the first official reference to the "Mediterranean First" strategy in two letters to the Admiralty. Before the 29 September Munich Conference defused the threat of war, Pound had expected Italy to side with Germany and planned to

have the Mediterranean Fleet "sweep the whole eastern Mediterranean and bombard Tobruk on the way back". Pound now expanded his plans to include immediate Anglo-French land operations in Libya to force Italy out of the war and open the Mediterranean to allied ships. If Italy closed the Mediterranean, ships would be forced around the Cape of Good Hope, transforming the Mediterranean from one of the navy's nearest stations to one of its most distant.²² The "Mediterranean First" strategy had entered British planning.

The timing was propitious. Pound's proposals coincided with a reassessment of British policy occasioned by Italy's apparent support for Germany at Munich. In Backhouse's opinion, Mussolini's blustering and boasting indicated that Italy would stand by Germany, no matter what.²³ The Director of Naval Intelligence (DNI), Rear Admiral Troup, agreed. He felt the Italian naval attaché had gone "a little out of his way" to say that he "had never heard absolutely" that Italy would have sided with Germany in the event of war, and concluded that Italy "had very nearly committed herself against us".²⁴ The War Office took a similar view. Its 9 November 1938 appreciation stated that Italy would not hesitate to act in concert with Germany in the Middle East, probably against the "open sore" of Palestine.²⁵ On 29 November, the JIC agreed that planners should assume that Italy would join Germany if war broke out.²⁶

One constant in these assessments was the Mediterranean's importance to Britain. Defeat here could jeopardise the security of Egypt and the Suez Canal, damage relations with Turkey and Greece, and make Britain's Pacific position untenable. If the Mediterranean was closed, the Pacific would be difficult to reinforce. Nor could it

be reinforced without stripping the Mediterranean of capital ships, a risky move so long as the Mediterranean was unsecured. Italy might seize the opportunity to attack British interests in the region and British ships bound for the Pacific. The Mediterranean must therefore be secured before the Pacific was reinforced.²⁷

The Admiralty was particularly keen on planning for a hostile Italy, perhaps because the navy bore the primary strategic responsibility for the Mediterranean. Its views were encapsulated by Captain Packer, the naval attaché in Athens, in a March 1939 paper the Admiralty deemed "worthy of their commendation". Packer felt Britain must make every effort to hold its position in the eastern Mediterranean. Without a strong British presence, the Balkan states might succumb to Axis pressure, Italy would continue to import via the Black Sea, and Britain could not defend the Suez Canal.²⁸ The possibility that Britain might have to go to war with Italy to maintain its status in the eastern Mediterranean probably did not escape the Admiralty.

The next significant development came in January 1939, when the COS finished re-assessing the strategic situation and decided that Britain must plan for a hostile Italy. Equally important, for the first time since 1935, the COS saw a shift in the European balance of power in Britain's favour. With the lifting of the pessimism which had shrouded strategic thinking, the COS accepted the JPC's 18 January "1939-1940 European Appreciation", with only minor changes of wording.²⁹ This appreciation was instrumental in the rise of the "Mediterranean First" strategy .

The COS' appreciation saw the Axis as a single entity with plans to exploit its land and air superiority, and possibly its submarine strength, to push for a quick victory.

The situation could become critical if Japan joined the Axis as the allies had barely enough capital ships for the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. There was nothing to spare for the Pacific.³⁰ The COS assumed Italy's long-range goal was to expand its empire at the expense of Britain and France. Gibraltar appeared secure if Spain was neutral, and allied naval supremacy should protect the eastern Mediterranean and allied shipping. Therefore, Italy would probably forego large naval attacks and allow attrition to deplete the allied fleets.³¹ Italy might have designs on Malta, strategically valuable as a base from which the allies could interfere with Italy's communications with Libya. The COS believed Malta's strategic value and "the political effect" of its capture would likely lead Italy to stage a coup de main, a large sea-borne expedition or air attacks against Malta's repair facilities and aerodromes.³²

However, the COS felt that Italy's first target would likely be Egypt in order to secure the Italian empire by ensuring access to the Suez Canal.

We point out that Italy could not attack all the objectives discussed at the same time. Having regard to all the circumstances, we consider that Egypt is the most likely objective, unless the war begins by hostilities between Italy and France alone.³³

If Italy captured the Suez Canal, Britain would lose control of the eastern Mediterranean, the Red Sea and Egypt. To prevent this, the COS recommended taking control of Italy's sea communications to disrupt its trade and isolate its empire. This would require close co-operation with the French fleet, and the COS suggested asking France to take charge of the western Mediterranean while Britain oversaw the eastern Mediterranean.³⁴ In addition, Britain should create land reserves in the Middle East sufficient for at least three months of war in case the fleet had to be sent to the Pacific. The Middle East would be very difficult to reinforce as Italy would

command communications in the eastern Mediterranean. If war broke out, the COS favoured pressuring Italy in the Mediterranean and the Red Sea where defeat could cause Italy "to lose heart". The COS did not doubt that the allies could defeat Italy. Air defence, public morale and latent economic strength would tip the balance in the allies' favour, especially in a long war. The Royal Navy's superior use of resources would translate into naval supremacy, and the Axis' land and air strength would fade before the allies' superior "staying power". However, it was better to dispatch Italy as soon as possible, so the allies could concentrate on Germany's defeat.³⁵

Contained within the COS' appreciation was a new net assessment of Italy. In the past, allied weakness had precluded a forward policy against Italy. Now assessments stated that the allies had a decided edge in a long war. When optimism about the allies' prospects was combined with intelligence detailing Italy's military and economic weaknesses and growing identification with the Axis, the resulting net assessment indicated that a forward policy against Italy stood a good chance of success. The COS' Appreciation was thus crucial to the "Mediterranean First" strategy due to its favourable views of both the allies long-term prospects and a forward strategy against Italy.³⁶

Economic intelligence was a key component of this net assessment. In October 1938 the Foreign Office identified Italy as the end of the Axis most susceptible to economic strain. Its trade figures were poor, its standard of living was falling, and Italy was living beyond its means.³⁷ In November Major Desmond Morton, the head of the IIC, told the Foreign Office that economic weakness would cause Italy to avoid all but the shortest of wars, unless it could continue to import during hostilities.³⁸

The COS' "1939-1940 European Appreciation" took a similar view. Italy could not hope to attain a high degree of economic self-sufficiency. Its reserves of foreign exchange were too low, it was overly dependent on seaborne trade and the physical concentration of its industries made Italy very vulnerable to air attack in war-time.³⁹

The optimistic net assessment at the heart of the COS's appreciation was one prerequisite for the "Mediterranean First" strategy. The second was France's pledge to take a leading role against Italy. The importance of French participation was affirmed by the Cabinet on 1 February, when it accepted the FPC's recommendation that plans to deal with a hostile Italy be made jointly with France.⁴⁰ As a result, on 17 March, the SAC asked the COS to develop plans "to knock Italy out of the war at the outset" which should include "joint action by France at sea, on land and in the air".⁴¹

French enthusiasm for the "Mediterranean First" strategy was rooted in the Munich Conference.⁴² Before Munich, Italy was integral to France's strategy of alliances to keep a future war with Germany from being fought on French soil. France's economic, diplomatic and military policies all relied on Italy to take a leading role in an eastern front against Germany. At the June 1935 staff talks Italy appeared to offer what, according to Nicole Jordan, France wanted most, "a cut-price war on the peripheries". The resulting Rome Accords reflected the high value General Maurice Gamelin, Chief of the General Staff (1931-40), Inspector-General of the Army (1935-40) and Chief of the National Defence Staff (1938-40), placed on Italian friendship.⁴³ Until Italy's involvement in the Spanish Civil War (1936-9), French planners felt that Italy offered France "... the greatest number of immediate advantages, and equally importantly, the least number of choices".⁴⁴

But by October 1938 Italian policy, especially in Spain, convinced the French General Staff that Italy was no friend, and transformed their plans to defend central Europe with Italy's help into plans to fight a long war allied to Britain.⁴⁵ Munich was the turning point. Italy's support for Germany shattered Gamelin's plan to have a war for Czechoslovakia fought mainly by Italy and Poland. Gamelin now saw no alternative to a Mediterranean strategy in alliance with Britain, the strategy France's Prime Minister, Edouard Daladier (1938-40), advocated in 1937.⁴⁶ As French planners were certain Italy would not leave the Axis, they substituted Turkey for Italy on the eastern front and planned to attack Italy and the Dodecanese Islands and neutralise Italy's air force.⁴⁷ But France would not support a Mediterranean offensive without a quid pro quo from Britain. Without a British commitment to western Europe France saw no way to protect itself from Germany, and this was France's over-riding concern. A continental commitment thus became the prerequisite for France's support in the Mediterranean.⁴⁸

French desire for a continental commitment was not new. In 1936, Gamelin sought a continental commitment because, while Italy offered immediate help against Germany, British aid was more valuable in the long run.⁴⁹ But on 22 December 1937, the British Cabinet reaffirmed the high priority of home and imperial defence, and the low priority of assistance to friendly continental states such as France.⁵⁰ Britain's policy of "cold, reserved detachment from continental entanglements" stemmed from Chamberlain's certainty that Hitler could be appeased, Britain's military weakness and imperial commitments, a pronounced dislike of France's Popular Front government and domestic turmoil and the COS' conviction that

Germany could not launch a major land offensive before 1939. Until then, the COS judged France's army and fortifications sufficient to deter Germany.⁵¹ Chamberlain, the Foreign Secretary Lord Halifax, the government's technical advisers, most generals and The Times' military correspondent, Basil Liddell Hart, who had much influence over the Secretary of State for War, Leslie Hore-Belisha, were united against a continental role for the army.⁵² Neither France's warnings that Germany was almost capable of a western offensive, nor its threats to abandon Belgium unless assured of the support of a British mechanised corps, moved the British who saw no "no significant risk of a French defensive collapse".⁵³

However, British complacency began to dissolve in late 1938. When Chamberlain and Halifax visited Paris in November, the French pressed for a land contribution to make up for Czechoslovakia's loss at Munich. Halifax felt that without more British support, France could feel it was being left to fight alone, and might stand aside if Germany attacked Britain.⁵⁴ In December War Office assessments indicated that France would need help against Germany, which meant sending the ill-prepared British army to the continent. Hore-Belisha told the CID on 15 December that the army could not now discharge "satisfactorily and safely" the various tasks that might be required of it, and requested more funds to allow the army to perform a continental role.⁵⁵ The CIGS, General, the Lord Gort, repeated Hore-Belisha's arguments at the COS' 21 December meeting and convinced Backhouse, but the Chief of the Air Staff (CAS) Sir Cyril Newall, was unmoved.⁵⁶

Perhaps encouraged by War Office lobbying, France increased pressure for a continental commitment. Britain's ambassador in Paris, Sir Eric Phipps, and its

military attaché, Colonel W. Fraser, reported that French military leaders, politicians and public all demanded a demonstration of support. On 29 January, Daladier inquired "rather anxiously" if Britain planned to introduce compulsory military service and pointed out the British army was out-of-date with respect to mechanisation and motorisation. Phipps stressed the need to reassure France, even if it meant relinquishing limited liability on the continent.⁵⁷

The clinching argument for a continental commitment was provided in January by intelligence reports of an imminent German invasion of Holland. The COS deemed Holland strategically vital and a German invasion a casus belli, but admitted little could be done if Germany invaded. On 25 January, the Cabinet asked the FPC to determine the best response to a German attack on Holland. The FPC urged that plans be co-ordinated with France for whom Holland was a vital interest.⁵⁸ The Cabinet was encouraged when Daladier said a German attack on Holland should be a casus belli for both France and Britain.⁵⁹ The COS were thinking along similar lines. Their "1939-1940 European Appreciation" stressed the need to support France, lest Britain be forced to wage war alone.⁶⁰ To ensure French support and aid Holland, the COS endorsed a continental commitment on 20 February. The Cabinet made the COS' recommendation official on 22 February, thus satisfying the political pledge Britain gave to France in early February.⁶¹ The requirement for French support in the Mediterranean had been satisfied.

The combination of French support in the Mediterranean and strategic optimism resulted in the first official endorsement of the "Mediterranean First" strategy at the SAC's first meeting on 1 March. Chatfield, now the Minister for the Co-ordination of

Defence, reiterated the COS's belief that Germany and Italy wanted a short war and would probably try to knock-out the allies. To pre-empt the Axis, Backhouse, now the CNS, said that if Italy were dealt "a series of hard blows at the start of hostilities, she might be counted out and the whole course of the war turned in Britain's favour". The allies should begin by strangling Axis trade at Gibraltar and harassing Italian communications with Libya and in the Aegean.⁶² To that end, Backhouse had instructed the naval staff to prepare appreciations for offensives against Massawa, Genoa, Elba and Italy's Black Sea trade, and these were sent to the Fleet on 13 March.⁶³ Backhouse considered it preferable for the fleet to be actively engaged in the central Mediterranean, than for it to sit in harbour, exposed to air attack and watching crew morale deteriorate.⁶⁴

Chatfield was not swayed by Backhouse's arguments. At the CID's 24 February meeting, he stated that it would be better to incur territorial losses in the Mediterranean than in the Pacific. Chatfield insisted that Britain must "if necessary, send the Fleet East" and leave France to handle Italy. Not until Germany's 15 March Prague coup underlined the Axis threat in Europe was Chatfield willing to run risks in the Pacific to obtain a speedy resolution in the Mediterranean.⁶⁵ But Backhouse felt the danger of Japanese hostility increased the desirability of dispatching Italy as rapidly as possible and insisted that if the Italians were given "a few hard knocks in the early stages of the war, we might have no more bother from them at sea". Chatfield notwithstanding, Backhouse's views were well-supported. Drax felt a strong Anglo-French force could defeat Italy before Japan was able to enter the war.⁶⁶ Gort said that Britain should "exploit to the full" Italy's "extreme sensitivity" about Libya, and counter Italy's intention to "punch out" France by "knocking out" Italy.⁶⁷

As a result, the SAC endorsed Backhouse's proposals and instructed British representatives to the 1939 AFCs to support the "Mediterranean First" strategy.⁶⁸

The SAC's support of the "Mediterranean First" strategy was detailed in its 14 March Strategic Memorandum prepared for Britain's representatives to the 1939 AFCs, the purpose of which was to set Anglo-French war plans. The SAC's memorandum agreed with the COS' appreciation that while Italy might launch an air offensive against the war industries in southern France to aid Germany, its ultimate objective was to expand its empire. To that end, Italy would likely launch "an intensive air attack" to prevent the allies from using Malta as a naval base. But first, Italy would probably invade Egypt to secure access to the Suez Canal.⁶⁹ To safeguard allied interests in the Mediterranean, the SAC recommended that

once war had broken out, Allied control of the exits from the Mediterranean would, to a greater extent, confine the Italian naval forces ... The object of the Allies would be to secure their interests in the Mediterranean and the Middle East and to knock Italy out of the war as soon as possible. This would entail offensive naval action from the outset, wherever possible, against Italian forces, coasts and bases. Close co-operation in plans and operations would be required between the available British and French naval forces.

The allies also should curtail Italy's Black Sea trade to "embarrass Italy and shorten the period of her resistance".⁷⁰

The SAC's Mediterranean offensive called for the allies to be initially on the defensive because

we should be faced by enemies who would be more fully prepared than ourselves for war on a national scale, would have superiority in air and land forces, but would be inferior

at sea and in general economic strength. In these circumstances, we must be prepared to face a major offensive directed against either ourselves or France. To defeat such an offensive, we should have to concentrate all our initial efforts, and during this time, our major strategy would be defensive.⁷¹

Once the allies had defeated the initial Axis offensive, they would hold Germany and use economic pressure and "intensive propaganda" against Italy and build up their military strength for a major offensive. At this point,

command of the sea would then confer freedom of choice in striking at the enemies' most vulnerable points. Once we had been able to develop the full fighting strength of the British and French Empires, we should regard the outcome of the war with confidence.⁷²

Japanese belligerency would seriously complicate matters because the Royal Navy did not have separate fleets for the Pacific and the Mediterranean. To send a fleet to the Pacific, it was necessary to deplete the Mediterranean's naval forces. Britain could thus only commit to a Mediterranean offensive if Japan had been neutralised, or France maintained a strong naval presence in the western Mediterranean to deter Italy from attacking Egypt, Palestine or Syria. The "Mediterranean First" strategy relied on France to keep Italy quiet in the event that Britain had to pacify Japan.⁷³

The documents do not specify why the SAC departed from the COS' version of the "Mediterranean First" strategy. However, the threat of German aggression in Europe, which led to Britain's continental commitment on 22 February, may have convinced planners that it was too risky to commit to a Mediterranean offensive before Europe had been stabilised. Planners may also felt that Japan was more likely to remain quiet if Europe was peaceful. Japan's bursts of activity, such as occupying Hainan Island in February 1939 and seizing the Spratly Islands in March, seemed to

coincide with periods of tension in Europe. Japan gambled, correctly, that Britain and France would be too occupied in Europe to make any formal protest. These factors may also have caused Chamberlain and Chatfield to throw their considerable influence behind a strategy of stabilising Europe first.⁷⁴

In any event, the SAC's version of the "Mediterranean First" strategy supplanted the Mediterranean offensive of the COS's appreciation. On 4 April, representatives to the AFCs adopted the three-stage strategy set out by the SAC. Stage one would be predominantly defensive, characterised by a blockade of Germany and limited offensives against the Italian empire. In stage two, Germany would be held while the allies concentrated on Italy's defeat. They would begin with a naval offensive. If Mussolini still stood by Hitler, the allies would attack Libya, and possibly Italian East Africa to knock Italy out of the war and clear the Mediterranean. This would clear the way for stage three, Germany's defeat. The COS approved this strategy on 12 April.⁷⁵ Italy's invasion of Albania on 7 April increased support for the "Mediterranean First" strategy. It extinguished hopes of a rift in the Axis which flared when Germany failed to give Italy notice of the Prague coup.⁷⁶ Albania also illustrated that Italy was as opportunistic as ever and a potential "loose cannon". In the invasion's wake, the Foreign Office was flooded with reports of imminent Axis attacks on Danzig, Portugal, Romania, Tangiers, the Dalmatian Coast, Gibraltar and Egypt.⁷⁷ Pratt thus rightly concludes that Albania increased Britain's tendency to take decisive action against Italy.⁷⁸

Italy's invasion of Albania had an even more dramatic effect on France. Its government and general staff saw the invasion as evidence of Axis collusion and

feared that Europe was teetering on the brink of war. As a result, Daladier resisted all entreaties to open talks to discuss Italy's claims against France, and ordered French forces to stand ready for an immediate descent on Italy by sea and air in the event of war.⁷⁹ Then at the 11 April AFCs, French representatives advised that "if the Italians attacked Tunisia, the French were ready to meet them and had no doubts about the issue". The French suggested a concurrent British offensive from Egypt to contain as many Italian troops as possible in Cyrenaica (eastern Libya). British representatives, in turn, promised

limited offensives in such circumstances, although a large-scale offensive from Egypt would not be possible until considerable reinforcements had arrived, and an administrative organisation had been built up.

Even without this offensive, the French were so confident that they promised an immediate offensive to draw off as many Italian forces as possible, if Italy moved against Egypt rather than Tunisia.⁸⁰ French enthusiasm for an early offensive was music to the ears of British advocates of the "Mediterranean First" strategy .

The 11 April AFCs were a milestone for the "Mediterranean First" strategy. France's eagerness to engage Italy and its confidence about the results eased British doubts about the "Mediterranean First" strategy's viability and seemed to ensure its success. The 11 April AFCs also foreshadowed the demise of an early offensive in the Mediterranean. The conditional nature of the British offensive was a harbinger of the problems which would lead Britain to abandon the "Mediterranean First" strategy a few months after its adoption.

But that was in the future. In the spring, the British expected an early French offensive against a belligerent Italy. According to the Foreign Office's April review of the COS' appreciation, even the Easter Accords did not guarantee that Italy would stand aside if war broke out. While Italy had no wish for war and, left alone, would probably delay as long as possible before siding with the apparent victor, German pressure was expected to force Italy into war at the outset. Therefore, "it would be most unsafe to count for strategic purposes on Italian neutrality".⁸¹

Italian belligerency opened the door for an early offensive in the Middle East, and the COS and the SAC expected France to attack Tripolitania (western Libya) immediately upon the outbreak of war. The SAC also discussed air and sea strikes on Italy at war's outset to emphasise Italy's vulnerability to attack.⁸² On 17 April, the day the Admiralty deemed it impracticable to send a large fleet to Singapore, the SAC said a "determined attempt to knock out Italy" was the allies' best chance of early military success, and should not be abandoned lightly.⁸³ The SAC elaborated on 25 April.

Nevertheless, Italian action in North Africa may give the opportunity for counter-offensive operations early in the war, without prejudice to the success of the defence of Europe. In general, therefore, we should be ready to seize any opportunity of obtaining, without undue cost, successes against Italy which might reduce her will to fight.

If Italy attacked Tunisia before France could launch an offensive, the SAC recommended immediate British offensives to tie up as many Italian troops as possible on the Egyptian front. In this event, the SAC expected a French counter-offensive "as soon as possible". But no matter how the Mediterranean campaign

began, the SAC was confident the allies could capture Italian East Africa and Libya, and that this would facilitate the campaign against Italy in Europe.⁸⁴

On 2 May, the CID approved both the COS' appreciation and the 14 March SAC memorandum as a basis for planning. Italy must be knocked-out early in hostilities since, as Chatfield stated, "if we took on more enemies than we had the strength to combat, we must try to knock out one of them before the others could cause us serious injury". Chatfield suggested asking the United States to deter Japan while the allies dealt with Italy. But Halifax felt that two years of war in China plus uncertainty about the attitudes of the USA and the USSR would make Japan "think very carefully before embarking on any further major aggressive enterprise". The CID accepted Halifax' argument, voted to increase Middle East reserves and gave operations in the Mediterranean priority over the fleet's dispatch to the Pacific.⁸⁵

This rising tide of support for the "Mediterranean First" strategy was a product of a net assessment depicting Italy as an easy target. Key to this image of Italy were economic assessments which consistently portrayed Italy as economically weak. For example, in March 1939, the Rome embassy reported that Italy's living conditions were deteriorating, its balance of payments was poor and its budget was "badly unbalanced".⁸⁶ The IIC's March 1939 assessment stated that Italy's economic weakness would permit only the briefest of wars against a fully armed, first-class power.⁸⁷ The SAC's 14 March Strategic Memorandum echoed the IIC's assessment. Despite shortages of raw materials and poor manufacturing capacity, Italy could probably conduct full-scale naval and air operations for a short time, if its Black Sea trade was not curtailed. However, large-scale land operations were out of the

question.⁸⁸ In May, the CID's Advisory Committee on Trade Questions in Time of War collated information from the IIC and concluded that Italy's manufacturing capacity was too low to maintain its forces in the field for more than three months after which its raw material stocks would be exhausted. Even with access to peace-time markets, Italy's gold reserves could not cover an adverse trade balance.⁸⁹ As the COS had said in January 1939, Italy's economic weakness allowed only very limited wars.

Military assessments painted a similar picture. In early March, the War Office stated that call-ups had "greatly diminished" Italy's military efficiency for the immediate future.⁹⁰ Britain's military attaché in Rome, Colonel Brocas Burrows, agreed. Re-organization had made the Italian army less war-ready now than it was a year ago, and Brocas Burrows doubted it had the equipment or the artillery to operate anywhere close to full strength.⁹¹ As a result, Italy's prospects were bleak in a war of any magnitude.

Support for the "Mediterranean First" strategy also grew from the belief that Italy would prove a willing target, i.e. that it would fight at Germany's side in the event of war. One sign that Italy was firmly in the Axis camp was "persistent rumours" of German troops in Italy and Libya. Some reports said these troops would appear on the frontiers of Egypt, Kenya, Tunisia and Gibraltar when Axis claims were presented for the Middle East. Other reports had thousands of German soldiers in mufti travelling through Italy to Abyssinia via Libya, to occupy Kenya. A "reliable source" told Brocas Burrows that lorries and trains moved south through Rome each night, suggesting that the reports might have some basis. The Foreign Office

wondered if the rumours might be part of a campaign to keep Britain "in a state of apprehension".⁹² But the War Office was unconcerned and proposed several explanations for the German troops. They could be Italian troops from Trentino (and thus German-speaking), German officers, officials and tourists visiting Italy, German emigrés and businessmen residing in Italy or the product of deliberate Axis disinformation.⁹³ Neither the Rome embassy nor the Passport Control Office (the cover for MI6) could trace the rumours' source or find any sign of German troops, although officials travelled north to Pescara and south to Naples. As a result, Britain's minister in Rome, Sir Noel Charles, accepted the War Office's explanations and suggested the rumours be laid to rest.⁹⁴

But this gave the Foreign Office little respite because, as they dispatched one worry, a new one arose to take its place. Italian propaganda was the next concern. In April Radio Bari gradually, but markedly, increased its anti-British propaganda in the Middle East, and Italy began directing "fairly offensive", in the opinion of the Foreign Office, anti-British propaganda at Malta.⁹⁵ This propaganda so upset Britain's high commissioner in Egypt, Sir Miles Lampson, that he planned immediate counter-propaganda, unless the Foreign Office objected. The Foreign Office considered Lampson panicky and ordered him to do nothing.⁹⁶ But officials were uneasy, and wondered if the anti-British propaganda foreshadowed an Italian move against Egypt.⁹⁷ The situation remained static for most of May.⁹⁸ The Foreign Office found it reassuring that many Egyptians and Arabs appeared to listen to Radio Bari for its "entertainment value" and ignore the propaganda.⁹⁹ Then in late May Italian propaganda became "very offensive", especially in Malta. However, little could be

done without precipitating a diplomatic incident since Italy's Consul-General in Malta was apparently co-ordinating the propaganda.¹⁰⁰

Even more disturbing was the 22 May Pact of Steel. The pact was a product of the 15 March Prague coup which left Mussolini anxious to protect Italy's interests in south-east Europe. He believed a German alliance would best serve his purpose. Reports in the French press that Britain was building an anti-fascist front were one reason. More importantly, Mussolini felt German hegemony had been established in Europe and wanted to associate Italy with the dominant power.¹⁰¹ However, his reasons were not communicated to Britain. Its new ambassador to Italy, Sir Percy Loraine, thus saw the pact as proof that Italy now identified completely with the Axis.¹⁰² As he felt that Mussolini must have received something for relinquishing Italy's freedom of action, Loraine suspected the pact was Mussolini's way of controlling German actions in Poland.¹⁰³ A German promise to take no drastic action without consulting Italy signified little, as neither Germany nor Italy was over-zealous about promises.¹⁰⁴ But if Mussolini was trying to put a brake on Germany, he might not be fully committed to the Axis and could be open to reconciliation. However, these were "fragile" hopes because Mussolini still saw Axis membership as the path to his territorial goals.¹⁰⁵ The Pact of Steel therefore suggested that Britain might be well-advised to seize the initiative against Italy.

Loraine was not alone in suspecting that there was more to the Pact of Steel than met the eye. After the pact was announced, the British received reports that it contained a secret clause in which Germany promised not to launch a war for three years. (These reports were accurate. In the Cavallero Memorandum of 30 May 1939,

Mussolini confirms this undertaking and reiterates the reasons the Axis should avoid war before 1943.) But while analysts felt Mussolini might have increased his ability to influence Hitler by pledging Italy militarily to Germany, they doubted that he would be able to resist German pressure to become a belligerent if Hitler launched a war before 1943.¹⁰⁶

The Pact of Steel, Albania and Italian propaganda all promoted the image of Italy as a prime candidate for an early offensive because each indicated that Italy was too firmly committed to the Axis to stand aside if war broke out. There were few challenges to this interpretation as intelligence was able to shed little light on Italy's intentions. One reason was its endemic problems of organization, outlook and resources, which often resulted in intelligence too ambiguous to be of much value. This left analysts free to interpret intelligence to fit their expectations and hopes. In this case, it meant seeing Italy as a ready means of relieving Britain's strategic dilemma, although it was by no means certain that Italy would play its assigned role.

Perhaps most important in portraying Italy as Britain's strategic saviour was the lack of high-level intelligence sources with access to the deliberations of Italian policy-makers. Their absence left analysts with little insight into the thinking of Italian policy-makers, which meant that all information was perceived as "noise". As a result, analysts often had to guess Italy's intentions.¹⁰⁷ In early 1939, the Foreign Office feared a clash in North Africa due to the Italy's anti-French rhetoric and insistence on matching France's reinforcements in Tunisia.¹⁰⁸ Then in mid-April, press reports of outrages against Italians in Tunisia and claims by Italy's Director of Military Intelligence, Colonel Tripiccione, that French troops were moving toward the

Italian frontier led the Foreign Office to wonder if Italy was creating a pretext to attack France.¹⁰⁹ The Foreign Office was also uneasy about a possible offensive against Egypt after the General Officer Commanding (GOC) in Tunisia said that Italy had transferred a parachute battalion plus command post to eastern Libya.¹¹⁰

Their inability to determine Italy's intentions even led some analysts to see danger in Italian weakness. Their anxiety expressed itself in fears that Mussolini might perpetrate a "mad dog" act in the Mediterranean. The concept of a "mad dog" act first surfaced in December 1935, with reports that Italy was training a suicide air squadron to attack the Sudan.¹¹¹ It re-emerged in June 1939, when uneasiness about Italy's intentions led to fears that Mussolini might indulge his emotional and impulsive nature at Britain's expense. The new version of the "mad dog" act featured a "desperata air squadron" of

dare-devil aviators who are prepared to fly straight at our warships with aeroplanes loaded with high explosives and risk certain death in order to destroy our capital ships.¹¹²

As a "mad dog act" was not based on logic, it was unrealistic to expect Mussolini to be deterred by its risks.¹¹³ But even if a "mad dog" act was dismissed as the product of an over-active imagination, assessments still suggested that Italy was potentially dangerous, and thus lent support to the "Mediterranean First" strategy.

Yet even as its support grew, the "Mediterranean First" strategy's chances of success were evaporating. The turning point was the AFC meetings at Rabat on 3-6 May. France was now concerned about Spain, and refused to launch an offensive against Libya until 20 to 30 days after Spanish Morocco had been neutralised. British promises to harass the Italians on the Egyptian front if the main theatre was in

the west were futile. The French knew the British could not advance past Bardia without reinforcements and that no reinforcements were available. There would be no early offensive in Libya.¹¹⁴ In retrospect, France's change of heart is not surprising. For France, the "Mediterranean First" strategy appears to have been primarily a means to an end. French enthusiasm and promises of an early offensive in Libya were largely to ensure Britain's adherence to its continental commitment.¹¹⁵

Initially, the loss of the early French offensive in Libya, had little impact on the "Mediterranean First" strategy. On 30 May, allied commanders in the Mediterranean and the Middle East met at Aden to discuss ways to make Italy's position in Libya and Abyssinia untenable. The commanders recommended sea and air operations against Italy's communications with Libya, aid for the rebels in Abyssinia and Libya and a land offensive in Libya, although this had been ruled out at Rabat.¹¹⁶ But an early naval offensive might be possible, with Turkey's co-operation. The COS's "1939-1940 European Appreciation" had stressed the importance of good relations with Turkey. If the allies could persuade Turkey to close the Dardanelles, Italy's Black Sea trade would be severely damaged, while an alliance between the allies and Turkey would make the Dodecanese Islands, 25 miles from the Turkish coast, a defensive liability for Italy.¹¹⁷ However, Turkish friendship proved elusive and expensive. The Turks used the outbreak of war to "drive a hard, almost brutal bargain" for an alliance, then remained neutral until the spring of 1945.¹¹⁸

Moreover, the "Mediterranean First" strategy soon suffered a second blow with a resurgence of Japanese military activity in June. This was significant because, as Britain could not act in the Mediterranean unless the Pacific was secure, the

"Mediterranean First" strategy was dependent on a quiescent Japan.¹¹⁹ One solution would have been to enlist another state to intimidate Japan into inactivity while Britain dealt with Italy, a mirror image of hopes that France would keep Italy quiet while Britain dispatched Japan. The United States was the only candidate, due to the strength of its Pacific fleet, and on 24 March President Roosevelt promised to return the fleet to its Pacific stations in mid-April. However, he would not guarantee that the United States would relinquish its neutrality legislation and become "the protector of the British Empire".¹²⁰ His actions confirmed the assessment in the COS's "1939-1940 European Appreciation" that the United States was, at best, a friendly neutral in the early stages of war, and convinced the Admiralty that the United States' value was limited. The American Pacific Fleet's return to Hawaii would probably deter Japan from offensives in the south Pacific and against the dominions. But to check Japan in south-east Asia, the Pacific Fleet would also have to maintain a presence in the Philippines, Singapore, northern Australia or New Guinea, something the Admiralty doubted the Americans were willing to do. The SAC agreed. On 17 April it warned against expecting armed assistance from the United States in the first stages of war.¹²¹ There would be no American solution for Britain's strategic woes.

Initially, the lack of a Pacific saviour was no obstacle to the "Mediterranean First" strategy because planners and policy-makers assumed that Japan would remain inactive while the allies handled Italy. They found it hard to believe that Japan would risk challenging the military might of Britain, the United States, or the USSR.¹²² But on 14 June, the magnitude of Britain's vulnerability in the Pacific was brought home when Japan blockaded Britain's concession at Tientsin in northern China. The crisis

was precipitated by Britain's refusal to surrender four Chinese implicated in the murder of the manager of the Japanese puppet Federal Reserve Bank in Tientsin. The Foreign Office decided there was no prima facie evidence against the men, although both Jamieson, Britain's consul-general in Tientsin, and Sir Robert Craigie, Britain's ambassador in Tokyo, warned that Britain's refusal to hand over the men was invalid in law and probably unwise politically.¹²³

Japan had two motives for precipitating a crisis. The first was to damage British prestige to improve Japan's bargaining position in the negotiations for a German alliance. Second, Britain's concession at Tientsin had long been a thorn in Japan's side. The concession supported the Chinese Nationalists who opposed Japan's occupation of northern China, and often gave sanctuary to Chinese guerillas. Thus, once the blockade began, the Japanese military declared it would not be enough for Britain to relinquish the suspects. Japan now demanded the end of all support for the Chinese nationalists and an end of the concessions' special rights in the areas of economics, broadcasting and education.¹²⁴

The crisis left Britain in a dilemma. On 16 June the COS advised that a strong stand against Japan would require at least seven ships. As the Mediterranean could provide only five ships, two would have to be transferred from home waters. But this would jeopardise Britain's position in the Atlantic, and Hitler might seize the opportunity to move in eastern Europe. A weaker response was less likely to tempt Hitler, but could beget Japanese reprisals. The COS therefore ruled out a military response and persuaded the Cabinet to negotiate with Japan.¹²⁵ Britain negotiated from necessity, not preference. As Chamberlain admitted, "it is maddening to have to

hold our hand in the face of such humiliation but we cannot ignore the terrible risks of putting such temptations in Hitler's way".¹²⁶ Negotiations began on 24 July, and an agreement was signed on 20 August.¹²⁷ While the crisis ended when negotiations began, its influence lasted much longer. As the Foreign Office reminded the Cabinet on 3 August, Britain "must not underestimate Japan's present power to harm us in the Far East by acts which singly could not be regarded as war-like measures".¹²⁸ By making it clear that Britain could not rely on a peaceful Pacific, the Tientsin Crisis indicated that early Mediterranean offensive was very risky.

Japan's military resurgence and the loss of an early French offensive in Libya had, perhaps, their greatest impact in terms of the new net assessment which appeared that summer. Some elements remained from the January net assessment. Italy was still deemed too weak, militarily and economically, for the rigours of a major war, and planners were still convinced of the allies' advantage in a long war. But the thrust of the net assessment had changed. The British now realised that Italy's links to Germany did not ensure its belligerency, and that forcing a neutral Italy into war could prove difficult. Worries about Japan plus the the loss of the Libya offensive led analysts to magnify the problems in the early stages of war with Italy which caused them to inflate the advantages of a neutral Italy. As a result, the new net assessment abandoned the strategic optimism of January 1939 in favour of an emphasis on the need to keep Italy from becoming an enemy. In essence, planners returned to the net assessment which preceded the COS' "1939-1940 European Appreciation".¹²⁹

The effect of the new net assessment was felt at the CID's 22 June meeting. This meeting was a turning point for the "Mediterranean First" strategy. On one hand,

service ministers unanimously endorsed an early Mediterranean offensive and supported attacking a neutral Italy to force it into the war. The Home Secretary, Sir Samuel Hoare, declared the "Mediterranean First" strategy to be the allies' "main chance" of success against Italy, as well as a possible source of aid for Poland if Germany supported Italy.¹³⁰ However, there were signs that the "Mediterranean First" strategy's days could be numbered. Chamberlain postulated that Britain might be better served by a neutral Italy, and the CID agreed to invite the COS to examine the strategic effect of Italian neutrality at the outset of war with Germany. The CID also asked the COS to examine the effects of an early Mediterranean offensive on Poland and the Pacific.¹³¹

The CID's 26 June meeting was a turning point for the "Mediterranean First" strategy. Backhouse's death earlier that month cost the strategy its champion.¹³² In his absence, Chatfield, who had always advocated sending the main fleet to Singapore, convinced the CID that as hostilities were far likelier in the Pacific than in the Mediterranean, the Pacific must therefore take precedence in war plans. Once again, a peaceful Mediterranean was strategically vital. To ensure that Italy, the state most likely to disrupt the Mediterranean, stayed quiet while Britain settled matters in the Pacific, Chatfield suggested asking France to station some battleships in the Mediterranean. Pound, the new CNS, felt that three French capital ships should be able to handle Italy's two capital ships.¹³³ The CID now felt that the best course was to deter Italy from hostilities.

By July, the "Mediterranean First" strategy's support was rapidly ebbing away. On 12 July, the COS recommended forcing a neutral Italy into war only if Italy seemed to

have plans to come in against the allies at a later date. In this event, the COS proposed "some impossible military demand upon Italy, such as the handing over of some part of Libya".¹³⁴ On the same day, the JPC took the CID's concern not to push Italy into belligerency to the next level and advocated a gentle line toward Italy. To that end, Britain should refrain from issuing an ultimatum or planning any offensives against Italy. Nor should Italy be subjected to rigorous rationing in the early stages of war or included in any economic measures against Germany. In short, Britain should do nothing to encourage Italian belligerency as the JPC now feared Italy might be able "to hit us more effectivly at the outset than we can hit her ..."¹³⁵ The JPC saw only the problems a belligerent Italy could cause Britain. The new net assessment left no room for strategic optimism about the possibilities a belligerent Italy could offer the allies.

By mid-July, the tide had turned against the "Mediterranean First" strategy. In a paper of 18 July, the COS deemed the strategy unviable, and declared Italy's "genuine neutrality" more valuable than its belligerency. An offensive against Italy would not aid Poland or improve Britain's situation in the Pacific. Perhaps most critical of all, the COS saw "no grounds for assuming that Italy can be knocked out in the early stages of war" as France's pre-occupation with Spain ended any hope of an early offensive in Libya.¹³⁶

The CID discussed this paper on 24 July. At that meeting, Hore-Belisha championed the "Mediterranean First" strategy, and insisted that Italy be forced to declare itself at the outset of war. As neutrality would not remove the need to station forces in the Mediterranean to watch Italy, it would be better to "smash Italy" and release these

forces for other theatres. It should be remembered that while a neutral Italy would sustain Germany, a belligerent Italy would drain Germany. The Secretary of State for Air, Kingsley Wood agreed, adding that allied inactivity in the Mediterranean would have a "terrible" effect on neutral states. But Hore-Belisha and Kingsley Wood were voices in the wilderness. Led by Chatfield and Newall, the CID accepted the COS' argument that the loss of the early French offensive made a quick, knock-out blow impossible. The CID concluded that

- (i) Italian neutrality, if it could by any means be assured would be decidedly preferable to her active hostility.
- (ii) No action that we can take against Italy on sea, or land or in the air would materially relieve the pressure of a German attack on Poland.
- (iii) An immediate offensive concentrated on Italy, far from improving would tend to weaken our position in the Far East.¹³⁷

For all practical purposes, the "Mediterranean First" strategy was "dead in the water". Its formal repudiation came on 24 August when the Cabinet accepted the COS' recommendation that Britain do nothing if Italy remained neutral. With that decision, the strategic initiative passed to the Axis.¹³⁸ Britain accepted Italian non-belligerency, a state which lasted only as long as Mussolini deemed belligerency's risks too high. On 10 June 1940, he judged the perils of war to be the lesser evil, and brought Italy into the war.

The "Mediterranean First" strategy did not vanish without a trace. Elements survived in the plans of Admiral Cunningham, who became the naval Commander-in-Chief in the Mediterranean in June 1939. Cunningham agreed that a quick knock-out of Italy was not feasible, but believed Libya, Eritrea and Italian Somaliland could be out of

the war in six months if Libya was isolated and its troops kept fighting. The surrender of Italy's army in Libya, together with naval attacks which inflicted material damage on the Italian coast, might cause the Italians "to lose heart and think that they had had enough". Cunningham presented this plan, the only one he felt could succeed, to the Admiralty on 14 July. But the Admiralty found the risk of civilian casualties unacceptable, and insisted that naval bombardment be limited to military targets.¹³⁹ When Italy declared itself non-belligerent on 1 September, even this modest plan was scrapped, and Britain tried to encourage Italy's continued non-belligerency, despite the damage to the blockade. However, after Italy joined the war in June 1940, Britain's offensives in the Western desert and Italian East Africa were both intended to knock Italy out of the war before the Britain faced Germany directly. Like the phoenix, the "Mediterranean First" strategy had risen from the ashes.

In summary, the "Mediterranean First" strategy's appeal was based on its promise to defeat Germany, without a long, bloody war of attrition. Eliminating Italy in the process only increased the strategy's appeal. An early Mediterranean offensive appeared possible after the COS' "1939-1940 European Appreciation" indicated that the allies had good hopes of success against the Axis, especially in a long war. The appreciation's strategic optimism was at the heart of a net assessment which supported a forward strategy against Italy. Key to this net assessment were Italy's growing closeness to Germany, belief that Japan's inactivity in the Pacific would continue and French promises of an early offensive in Libya. In the spring of 1939, this net assessment suggested that the "Mediterranean First" strategy could be the answer to Britain's strategic dilemma.¹⁴⁰

Great hopes were attached to the "Mediterranean First" strategy while strategic optimism ruled British planning. The desire to see the strategy succeed was so strong that the true meaning of the loss of the early French offensive in Libya was not realised until Britain was struck by a resurgence of Japanese military activity. The "Mediterranean First" strategy required a quiescent Japan to allow Britain to avoid its worst strategic nightmare, i.e. the need to fight on two (or even three) fronts simultaneously. In the spring, this appeared to present no problem as Japan was believed to have little interest in disturbing the Pacific status quo. But in the summer, Japan displayed a propensity to seize opportunities to make trouble in the Pacific which left the "Mediterranean First" strategy dependent on France to keep Italy in line while Britain pacified Japan. It was then that the full significance of the loss of the French offensive in Libya struck planners, and strategic optimism turned to pessimism. The result was a new net assessment which said that an early Mediterranean offensive was not viable after all. The "Mediterranean First" strategy's time had passed.

In conclusion, the tale of the "Mediterranean First" strategy demonstrates that a successful foreign policy must be based on an accurate assessment of one's friends as well as one's foes. To achieve this, intelligence must not only collect information but must analyse and interpret it correctly, and ensure that assessments reach policy-makers.¹⁴¹ For Italy, the intelligence record was mixed. On one hand, intelligence accurately confirmed Italy's economic and military weakness. On the other hand, it was unable to penetrate Mussolini's thinking and create informed assessments of his likely intentions. As almost no possibility could be ruled out, planners and policy-makers were forced to formulate policies for the most serious,

although not necessarily most likely, contingencies, such as an Italian strike against Egypt. As a result, the "Mediterranean First" strategy was attractive to British planners as a quick way of eliminating the Italian menace.

British intelligence's inability to read Japan also played a role in the rise and fall of the "Mediterranean First" strategy. Before December 1941, no British agency produced "cogent and accurate" assessments of Japan's capabilities.¹⁴² There were several reasons for this. Reliable information on Japan's armed forces was in particularly short supply.¹⁴³ The low priority given to intelligence on Japan left the Far East Combined Bureau "underfinanced and largely ineffective".¹⁴⁴ The COS insisted that war with Japan be delayed as long as possible not because they were well-informed about Japan but because an excess of commitments and a shortage of resources made any other course appear unwise.¹⁴⁵

But while writers appear to agree that reliable information on Japan was in short supply, they are divided over racism's role in assessments. Peter Lowe and Christopher Thorne believe racism coloured assessments because analysts found it inconceivable that Japan could be the military equal of a European power. They attributed Japan's success to Chinese weakness and incompetence, and saw Japan's failure to achieve a complete military victory in China as proof that Japan was not a first-class power.¹⁴⁶ Their evaluation of Japan rested on a foundation of inadequate information, ignorance and racial bias.¹⁴⁷ However, Wesley Wark and John Ferris maintain that racism was only one element, and not the most dominant, in British assessments of Japan. Ferris sees military and cultural ethnocentrism and ideas of "national character" as more significant. Japan's "national character"

included beliefs that the Japanese had no aptitude for machines or innovation, possessed great endurance and a high tolerance for pain and were obedient to hierarchy. Perhaps most significant, the British assumed that their approach to war was the "universal means to measure military value", and judged Japan by its ability to fight in Europe, not in Asia.¹⁴⁸ Wark takes a similar view. He identifies a "pervasive characterisation of Japan as a 'second-class' power" in British assessments, due to a lack of good information, cultural stereotyping and, above all, the fact that the Royal Navy's "strategic and bureaucratic needs" drove intelligence assessments of Japan. Britain's strategic situation led analysts "to under-estimate almost every aspect" of Japan's armed forces and produce best-case assessments from an instinct for survival. The result was a "tragedy of over-confidence".¹⁴⁹

As British assessments of Italy were also influenced by cultural bias, it is not surprising to find similarities in British evaluations of Japan and Italy. Both were deemed second-rate powers with a fondness for bluffing. Analysts also believed that the Italians and the Japanese shared Britain's view of the world and that their assessments and decisions would, consequently, mirror those of Britain.¹⁵⁰

But the most critical failing was intelligence's poor performance with respect to France. Intelligence provided neither a realistic picture of French capabilities, nor an accurate assessment of French intentions. Britain's support of the "Mediterranean First" strategy and its plans to begin with a French offensive in Libya, were based on a faulty understanding of France. When France withdrew its pledge of an early campaign in Libya, desire to see the "Mediterranean First" strategy succeed made the

British reluctant to accept the implications of the loss of the French offensive. Its full significance only came home after the Tientsin Crisis in June, and the British beat a hasty retreat from the "Mediterranean First" strategy.¹⁵¹

Why did the British misunderstand French intentions? The reasons are not specified in the documents. One possibility is that French promises of an early offensive in Libya were disingenuous, made simply to secure a continental commitment from Britain. However, it is more likely that French promises were sincere, but not immutable. Thus, when war began to appear imminent, France re-assessed its ability to carry out its commitments and concluded that an early offensive in Libya would jeopardise French security in Europe.

If France's change of heart in Libya was due to a new net assessment, Britain misread French intentions not because it was duped by France, but for other reasons. One factor may have been the urgent need to solve Britain's strategic dilemma. In the spring of 1939, the "Mediterranean First" strategy, with its promise to eliminate Italy while defeating Germany indirectly, was seen as the answer. Other commitments caused Britain to base plans for a Mediterranean offensive on French support, particularly an early French strike in Libya. The British seem not to have considered that as Europe was France's first priority, European concerns might cause France to postpone, or even cancel, its Libya offensive. Perhaps the need to solve Britain's strategic dilemma made the British unwilling to contemplate the possibility of their plans falling through. If Britain's need for a successful Mediterranean offensive had been less, analysts might have examined French promises in light of France's strategic situation, rather than in terms of British needs.

Had they done so, the British might have anticipated that France could renege on its promises in the Mediterranean if the European situation grew too disturbing and incorporated more flexibility into the "Mediterranean First" strategy. Instead, the needs of grand strategy appear to have blinded the British to the possibility that France's Mediterranean commitment might be conditional. When this realisation hit home, the stage was set for the next phase of British policy for Italy, an attempt to coax Italy to remain on the sidelines after the outbreak of war in September 1939, in order to simplify Britain's strategic situation.

The moral of the story of the "Mediterranean First" strategy thus appears to be that the best intelligence on an enemy will go for naught if it results in policy based on a faulty understanding of the intentions and capabilities of one's allies. The story of the "Mediterranean First" strategy's rise and fall illustrates that Martin Alexander was correct when he said that it is as important to understand one's allies as to know one's enemies.¹⁵²

NOTES

The following primary sources were the most helpful for this chapter: FO 371, AIR 9, ADM 1, CAB 2, CAB 53 and CAB 55, and the Drax papers. Of lesser value were WO 106, CAB 23, CAB 24, CAB 47, and the Chatfield papers.

¹ CID 288th Meeting. 11 February 1937. CAB 2; 9(37) Cabinet Meeting. 24 February 1937. CAB 23.

² Lawrence R. Pratt. East of Malta, West of Suez. Britain's Mediterranean Crisis 1936-1939. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975.), 193-4; Williamson Murray. The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938-1939. {The Change} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984.), 318.

³ Murray. The Change. 314, 319; Pratt. 183; Brian Bond. British Military Policy Between the Two World Wars. {British Military Policy} (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980.), 316.

⁴ Churchill to Halifax. 27 March 1939. W5721/108/50. FO 371/23982.

⁵ Bond. British Military Policy. 316.

⁶ Bond. British Military Policy. 314; Pratt. 182; John Mearsheimer. Conventional Deterrence. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983.), 84.

⁷ Bond. British Military Policy. 265-7.

⁸ Eliot A. Cohen and John Gooch. Military Misfortunes. The Anatomy of Failure in War. (New York: The Press, 1990.), 127-30.

⁹ CID 348th Meeting. 24 February 1939. CAB. 2; N.H. Gibbs. Grand Strategy. volume one. Rearmament Policy. (London: HMSO, 1976.), 421, 644-5; Donald Cameron Watt. How War Came. (London: Heinemann, 1989.), 165, 421-2; Murray. 316; Pratt. 161-2, 169-173, 175, 177; Sidney Aster. 1939 The Making of the Second World War. (London: Andre Deutsch, 1973.), 119, 142. {The COS committee, established in 1923, was comprised of the heads of the navy, the army and the air force. Wesley K. Wark. The Ultimate Enemy. (London: Tauris, 1985.), 190.}

¹⁰ Gibbs. 423, 425, 427, 668, 672-4; Watt. How War Came. 421-2; Murray. The Change. 317-20; Pratt. 181-3, 186, 194-6; Aster. 146-7.

¹¹ Watt. How War Came 356-9, 421-2; Pratt. 181-2, 188, 190-1.

¹² Murray. The Change. 315-7.

¹³ Murray. The Change. 321.

¹⁴ Murray. The Change. 317, 320

¹⁵ Murray. The Change. 254-5, 315, 321. Murray thinks a series of "humiliating" Italian defeats in the Mediterranean might have forced Hitler to launch a late fall offensive against northern France, guided by "a pedestrian replay of the Schlieffen plan rather than by the thrust through the Ardennes."

¹⁶ Backhouse to Chatfield. 19 September 1935. CHT 4/1. The Papers of Admiral Lord Chatfield. National Maritime Museum, Greenwich (CHT)

¹⁷ 3 September 1937. Drax to Secretary of the Admiralty. DRAX 2/10. The Papers of Admiral Sir Reginald Plunket-Erle-Drax, Churchill College, Cambridge. (DRAX)

¹⁸ Lord Cork & Orrery to Drax. 9 September 1938. DRAX 2/8.

¹⁹ "Major Strategy ". 1 February 1939. DRAX 2/11.

²⁰ Ironside to Ismay. 22 October 1938. CAB 104/136; Edmund Ironside. The Ironside Diaries 1937-1940. (London: Constable, 1962.), 66-9.

²¹ Perth to Halifax. 22 October 1938. Minutes by Noble, Nichols. 26 October 1938. R8491/899/22. FO 371/22438.

²² Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean to Secretary of the Admiralty. 14 November 1938. ADM 116/3900; Stephen Roskill. Naval Policy Between the Wars. Vol. II. 1930-1939. (London: Collins, 1976.), 438; Pratt. 167.

²³ Murray. The Change. 253; Backhouse to Pound. 11 October 1938. ADM 205/3.

²⁴ Troup to Ingram. 22 October 1938. R8892/899/22. FO 371/22438.

²⁵ "War Office Appreciation of the Situation in the Middle East from the Intelligence Aspect in the event of Great Britain and France becoming involved in war against Germany and Italy in April 1939." 9 November 1938. WO 106/1594B.

²⁶ P.R. Stafford. "The Chamberlain-Halifax Visit to Rome: A Reappraisal." English Historical Review. 98(1983), 76.

²⁷ Michael Howard. The Continental Commitment. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974.), 139-40; Gibbs. 663-4; Muffett. 211, 214.

²⁸ "A Review of the Strategic Situation in the Eastern Basin of the Mediterranean." March 1939. ADM 1/9941.

²⁹ COS. "1939-40 European Appreciation, January 1939". CAB 55; Wesley K. Wark. The Ultimate Enemy. (London: Tauris, 1985.), 212-3. {The JPC was a COS sub-committee established in 1927. Comprised of the heads of the service planning staffs, it was responsible for drafting regular strategic appreciations and defence reviews. Wark. The Ultimate Enemy. 190; F.H. Hinsley. British Intelligence in the Second World War. Vol. 1. (London: HMSO, 1979.) 38; Sir John Slessor, The Central Blue. (New York: Praeger, 1957.), 144.}.

³⁰ COS 1504B. "1939-40 European Appreciation, January 1939". CAB 55.

³¹ COS 1504B. "1939-40 European Appreciation, January 1939". CAB 55.

³² COS 1504B. "1939-40 European Appreciation, January 1939". CAB 55.

³³ COS 1540B. "1939-40 European Appreciation, January 1939". CAB 55; Gibbs. 664; Howard. The Mediterranean Strategy. 135.

³⁴ COS 1504B. "1939-40 European Appreciation, January 1939". CAB 55.

³⁵ COS 1540B. "1939-40 European Appreciation". CAB 55; Gibbs. 657, 660, 664; Howard. The Mediterranean Strategy. 135. Wark. The Ultimate Enemy. 213-5.

³⁶ COS 1504B. "1939-40 European Appreciation, January 1939". CAB 55.

- 37 CP 215(38) "Economic Situation in Italy. Foreign Office Memorandum". 3 October 1938. CAB. 24.
- 38 Morton to Ingram. 25 November 1938. R9633/899/22. FO 371/22439.
- 39 COS 1504B. "1939-40 European Appreciation, January 1939". CAB 55.
- 40 Cabinet Meeting. 25 January 1939. CAB 23; FP(36), FPC 26th Meeting 26 January 1939. CAB 27; Pratt. 169-72; Gibbs. 654-5; Bond. British Military Policy. 298-9.
- 41 SAC 3rd Meeting. 17 March 1939. AIR 9/113.
- 42 Pratt. 159, 178; Watt. How War Came. 213.
- 43 Martin Alexander. The Republic in Danger. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.), 255; Jordan. 66.
- 44 Nicole Jordan. The Popular Front and Central Europe. (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1992.), 2, 310.
- 45 Jordan. 69, 309.
- 46 Jordan. 289.
- 47 Robert Young. "French Military Intelligence and the Franco-Italian Alliance 1933-1939". Historical Journal. 28(1) 1985., 165.
- 48 Alexander. 275.
- 49 Alexander. 256.
- 50 Alexander. 137.
- 51 Alexander. 270-1, 274-6.
- 52 Alexander. 263-4; Bond. British Military Policy. 290.
- 53 Alexander. 276-7.
- 54 Bond. British Military Policy. 292-3, 294-5.
- 55 CID 341st Meeting. 15 December 1938. CAB 2.
- 56 COS 265th Meeting. 21 December, 1938. CAB 53.
- 57 #484 Phipps to Halifax. 26 December 1938. DBFP. 3rd series. Volume III. (London: HMSO, 1950.); #52 Phipps to Halifax. 29 January 1939. DBFP. 3rd series. Volume IV. (London: HMSO, 1951.); Bond. British Military Policy. 295-6.
- 58 Cabinet Meeting. 25 January 1939. CAB 23; FP(36), FPC 26th Meeting 26 January 1939. CAB 27; Pratt. 169-72; Gibbs. 654-5; Bond. British Military Policy. 298-9.
- 59 Cabinet Meeting. 3(39) 1 February 1939. CAB 23.
- 60 Gibbs. 663.
- 61 Cabinet Meeting. 8(39) 22 February, 1939. CAB 23; Howard. The Continental Commitment. 129.
- 62 COS 1504B. "1939-40 European Appreciation, January 1939". CAB 55.
- 63 "Naval Staff Appreciations for offensive operations against Massawa, Genoa, Savona, Elba and Italy's Black Sea Trade in the event of war with Italy". 13 March 1939. ADM 1/9900.
- 64 SAC 1st Meeting. 1 March 1939. W4653/108/50. FO 371/23981/AIR 9/113.

⁶⁵ CID 348th Meeting. 24 February 1939. CAB 2; Watt. How War Came. 165; Chatfield to Churchill. 29 March 1939. The Papers of Admiral Lord Chatfield. CHAT 6/4. Maritime Museum, Greenwich; Murfett. 223.

⁶⁶ "An Outline of Principles Affecting the Use and Distribution of Warships". 3 March 1939. DRAX 2/9.

⁶⁷ SAC 1st Meeting. 1 March 1939. W4653/108/50. FO 371/23981/AIR 9/113.

⁶⁸ SAC 1st Meeting. 1 March 1939. W4653/108/50. FO 371/23981/AIR 9/113.

⁶⁹ AFC(39)1 "British Strategical Memorandum". 14 March 1939. CAB 55

⁷⁰ AFC(39)1 "British Strategical Memorandum". 14 March 1939. CAB 55.

⁷¹ AFC(39)1 "British Strategical Memorandum". 14 March 1939. CAB 55.

⁷² AFC(39)1 "British Strategical Memorandum". 14 March 1939. CAB 55.

⁷³ AFC(39)1 "British Strategical Memorandum". 14 March 1939. CAB 55; Gibbs. 421; Bond. British Military Policy. 299.

⁷⁴ Akira Iriye. The Origins of the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific. (London: Longman, 1987.), 76.

⁷⁵ AFC(39)1 "British Strategical Memorandum". 14 March 1939. AIR 9/114; Murray. The Change. 316-7; Aster. 143-5; Slessor. 211; Robert J. Young. In Command of France. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978.), 243; Pratt. 182, 186; Bond. British Military Policy. 312-4; Playfair. 23; Gibbs. 668, 672.

⁷⁶ Foreign Office Memorandum. 4 April 1939. R2758/1335/90. FO 371/23713.

⁷⁷ Minute by Kelly. 20 April 1939. J1569/33/66. FO 371/23387.

⁷⁸ Watt. How War Came. 179, 199; Galeazzo Ciano. Ciano's Diary 1939-1943. (London: Heinemann, 1947.), 45; Aster. 84; Pratt. 178.

⁷⁹ #255 Phipps to Halifax. 22 April 1939. #296 Halifax to Phipps. 26 April 1939. #328. Halifax to Phipps. 1 May 1939. #570 "Extract from Record of Conversation between the Secretary of State and MM Daladier and Bonnet at the Ministry of War in Paris". May 20, 1939. DBFP. Third Series, Volume V. (London: HMSO, 1952.); C.A. MacDonald. "Britain, France and the April Crisis of 1939" European Studies Review. 2(1972), 156-7, 159, 166; Toscano. 236; Young. In Command of France. 226, 230-1.

⁸⁰ AFC(7) Revise. "Anglo-French Staff Conversations, 1939. United Kingdom Delegation. Report on Phase 1." 11 April 1939. AIR 9/114.

⁸¹ COS. "1939-40 European Appreciation. January 1939". Appendix I. Political Review by the Foreign Office. April 1939. CAB 55.

⁸² SAC 4th Meeting. 6 April 1939. W6763/108/50. FO 371/23983; Pratt. 173; Murfett. 226.

⁸³ SAC 6th Meeting. 17 April 1939. AIR 9/113; Murfett. 226; Stephen Roskill. Naval Policy Between the Wars. Vol. II. 1930-1939. (London: Collins, 1976.), 456; Pratt 173-5; John Harvey, ed. The Diplomatic Diaries of Oliver Harvey. (London: Collins, 1970.), 456.

⁸⁴ SAC 17 (also COS 877) "Staff Conversations with the French. Report by COS Subcommittee". AIR 9/114.

⁸⁵ CID 355th Meeting. 2 May 1939. CAB 2; Gibbs. 425; Murfett. 226-7.

⁸⁶ Perth to Halifax. 14 March 1939. R1772/15/22. FO 371/23801; Charles to Halifax. 26 April 1939. Minute by Noble. 3 May 1939. R3460/15/22. FO 371/23801; Perth to Halifax. 31 March 1939. R2213/15/22. FO 371/23801.

⁸⁷ IIC Memorandum. "Italy. General Survey of Material Resources and Industry in their bearing upon national war potential". March 1939. R1425/425/22. FO 371/23824.

⁸⁸ SAC Memoranda. AFC (39)1. "British Strategical Memorandum." 14 March 1939. AIR 9/114.

⁸⁹ ATB 181(CID Paper 1458-B) CID Advisory Committee on Trade Questions in Time of War. "Plan for Economic Warfare against Germany. Appendix VI". 24 May 1939. CAB 47/14.

⁹⁰ Minute by Noble. 2 March 1939. R1446/399/22. FO 371/23816.

⁹¹ "Memorandum respecting the Italian Army". 3 May 1939. WO 106/6086; #363 Loraine to Halifax. 4 May 1939. DBFP. Third Series. Vol. V. (London: HMSO, 1952.).

⁹² Perth to Halifax. 17 April 1939. R2968/399/22 and R2969/399/22. FO 371/23817; Perth to Halifax. 17 April 1939. Minute by Noble. 18 April 1939. R2970/399/22. FO 371/23817. There was no discussion in the Foreign Office records of what these German troops were doing by day.

⁹³ Major Miller to Noble. 21 April 1939. R3191/399/22. FO 371/28816.

⁹⁴ Charles to Halifax. 30 April 1939. R3453/399/22. FO 371/23816; Christopher Andrew. Secret Service. (London: Sceptre, 1986.), 491. {All references to Secret Service are to the 1986 Sceptre paperback, which has different pagination from the 1985 edition entitled Her Majesty's Secret Service.}

⁹⁵ Lampson to Halifax. 14 April 1939. R2898/1/22. FO 371/23785; Perth to Halifax. 15 April 1939. R2899/1/22. FO 371/23785; Colonial Office to Foreign Office. 22 April 1939. Minute by Noble. 27 April 1939. R3233/108/22. FO 371/23812.

⁹⁶ Lampson to Halifax. 20 April 1939. Halifax to Lampson. 23 April 1939. Minutes by Noble, Broad, Kelly. 21 April 1939. R3104/1/22. FO 371/23785.

⁹⁷ Campbell to Sargent. 17 April 1939. R3041/399/22. FO 371/23817; Troutbeck to Halifax. 19 April 1939. Minutes by Cavendish Bentinck, Kelly and Cadogan. 20 April 1939. J1569/33/66. FO 371/23387.

⁹⁸ Minute by Vansittart. 5 May 1939. R4207/1/22. FO 371/23785.

⁹⁹ Minute by Hooper. 25 May 1939. R4002/1/22. FO 371/23785.

¹⁰⁰ Barlow to Broad. 29 May 1939. R4430/108/22. FO 371/23813; Loraine to Halifax. 2 June 1939. Minute by Broad. 5 June 1939. R4600/108/22. FO 371/23813; Williams to Noble. 7 June 1939. R4679/108/22. FO 371/23813.

¹⁰¹ Watt. How War Came. 204; Mario Toscano. The Origins of the Pact of Steel. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1967.), 203.

¹⁰² Loraine to Halifax. 23 May 1939. R4384/57/22. FO 371/23808.

¹⁰³ Gordon Waterfield. Professional Diplomat. Sir Percy Loraine of Kirkharle Bt. 1880-1961. (London: Murray, 1973.), 228, 230; Toscano. 322.

¹⁰⁴ Loraine to Halifax. 23 May 1939. R4384/57/22. FO 371/23808; Ramsay to Halifax. 10 June 1939. Minute by Noble. 20 June 1939. R5011/57/22. FO 371/23809.

¹⁰⁵ Loraine to Halifax. 23 May 1939. R4384/57/22. FO 371/23808; Toscano. 322, 394-5.

¹⁰⁶ Loraine to Halifax. 1 September 1939. R7051/57/22. FO 371/23810; Osborne to Halifax. 14 November 1939. Minutes. Noble. 22 November 1939. Nichols. 22 November 1939. R10434/57/2. FO 371/23810; #59. Mussolini to Hitler. 30 May 1939. DDI. ottava serie. vol. XII. (Roma: La Libreria dello stato. 1952.); COS. "1939-40 European Appreciation. January 1939". Appendix I. Political Review by the Foreign Office. April 1939. CAB 55.

¹⁰⁷ David Dilks, ed. The Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan 1938-1945. {The Cadogan Diaries.} (London: Cassell, 1971.), 158.

¹⁰⁸ Perth to Halifax. 27 February 1939. J816/33/66. FO 371/23386; Harvey. 351; Perth to Halifax. 28 March 1939. R2113/7/22. FO 371/23794.

¹⁰⁹ Perth to Halifax. 13 April 1939. R2762/7/22. FO 371/23794; Perth to Halifax. 14 April 1939. R2958/7/22; Perth to Halifax. 18 April 1939. R3068/7/22. FO 371/23794.

¹¹⁰ Knight to Halifax. 17 April 1939. Minute by Kelly. 18 April 1939. J1537/33/66. FO 371/23387.

¹¹¹ Rome Chancery to Addis Ababa. 4 December 1935; Drummond to Hoare. 6 December 1935; Drummond to Foreign Office 13 December 1935. DBFP. 2nd Series. Vol. XV. (London: HMSO, 1976.).

¹¹² Memorandum by Burrows. 12 June 1939. R4922/108/22. FO 371/23813; Air Intelligence Officer, Malta to Loraine. 2 June 1939. R4761/399/22. FO 371/23817.

¹¹³ Watt. How War Came. 412; Toscano. 395-6; Waterfield. 233.

¹¹⁴ "Note on Discussions with the French General Staff, Rabat. 3-6 May 1939". AIR 9/117. Gibbs. 672-3. The advice of General Lelong, France's military attaché in London, that France planned an immediate invasion of Libya from bases in Tunisia, if Italy attacked Egypt, appears to have been due to poor communications between the General Staff and its attaché. See Murray. The Change. 316-7; Pratt. 186, Murfett. 202; Gibbs. 672.

¹¹⁵ Murray. The Change. 317; Pratt. 182-4; Bond. British Military Policy. 316. Given the SAC/COS paper, I am puzzled by Murray's suggestion that the British expected a French attack on Italy proper in the early stages of war.

¹¹⁶ "Anglo-French Plans in the event of war with Italy. Red Sea and Italian East Africa Area. Inter-Service Conference. Aden. 30 May - 3 June 1939". ADM 1/9898 and AIR 9/112; Playfair. 25.

¹¹⁷ Aster. 117-8, 136, 145; ISO Playfair. The Mediterranean and the Middle East. Vol. I. Early Successes Against Italy (to May 1941). (London: HMSO, 1954.), 25; Gibbs. 675.

¹¹⁸ Frank G. Weber. The Evasive Neutral. Germany, Britain and the Quest for a Turkish Alliance in the Second World War. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1979.), 44, 50. Dilks. The Cadogan Diaries. 584.

¹¹⁹ Howard. The Continental Commitment. 139-40; Gibbs. 663-4; Murfett. 211, 214.

¹²⁰ Bond. British Military Policy. 316; Pratt. 176-7 179 187-8; Murfett. 189, 212-3, 218, 227; CHT 6/4.

¹²¹ Murfett. 224-5.

¹²² Christopher Thorne. Allies of a Kind. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978.), 3-4. CID. 355th Meeting. 2 May 1939. CAB 2.

¹²³ 31(39) Cabinet Meeting. 7 June 1939. CAB 23; 32(39) Cabinet Meeting 14 June 1939. CAB 23; #169 Jamieson to British Embassy (Shanghai) 9 June 1939; #180 Jamieson to Halifax. 11 June 1939; #197 Craigie to Halifax. 14 June 1939; #208 Halifax to Craigie. 15 June 1939; DBFP. 3rd Series. Vol. IX. (London: HMSO, 1957.); Akira Iriye. The Origins of the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific. (London: Longman, 1987.), 76; Watt. How War Came. 349-55; Dilks. The Cadogan Diaries. 189. D.C. Watt believes the Foreign Office's Far Eastern department exacerbated the crisis by refusing to see the situation in light of British commitments or interests, a view Cadogan apparently shared. After the crisis, Cadogan wrote in his diary (p. 189) that the Far Eastern department and its Assistant Under-Secretary of State, Sir George Mounsey, "have been working in their little groove and never referred a paper to me."

¹²⁴ #271 Craigie to Halifax. 28 June 1939. DBFP. 3rd Series. Vol. IX. (London: HMSO, 1957.); Iriye. 76; Watt. How War Came. 349-54; Dilks. The Cadogan Diaries. 187.

¹²⁵ 33(39) Cabinet Meeting. 21 June 1939. CAB 23; Correlli Barnett. The Collapse of British Power. (London: Eyre Methuen, 1972.), 567.

¹²⁶ Keith Feiling. The Life of Neville Chamberlain. (London: Macmillan, 1947.), 413.

¹²⁷ Iriye. 76; Barnett. 567-8; Watt. How War Came. 349-60. See Watt for a detailed description of the events of the crisis.

¹²⁸ "Memorandum on British policy in the Far East". Foreign Office. 3 August 1939. DBFP. 3rd Series. Vol. IX. (London: HMSO, 1957.).

¹²⁹ CID. 360th Meeting. 22 June 1939. CAB 2; CID. 362nd Meeting. 26 June 1939. CAB 2; CID JPC "The attitude of Italy in War and the problem of Anglo-French support to Poland". 12 July 1939. CAB 55; Morton to Nicholls. 13 July 1939. R5734/1/22. FO 371/23786; COS 309th Meeting. 19 July 1939. CAB 53/11; CID. 368th Meeting. 24 July 1939. CAB 2; Murray. The Change. 318; Pratt. 194-5; Stephen Roskill. Hankey, Man of Secrets. vol. III. (London: Collins, 1974.), 511.

- 130 CID 360th Meeting. 22 June 1939. CAB 2.
- 131 CID 360th Meeting. 22 June 1939. CAB 2.
- 132 CID 362 Meeting. 26 June 1939. CAB 2; CID 368 Meeting. 24 July 1939. CAB 2; Murfett. 187; Murray. The Change. 319; Williamson Murray. "The Role of Italy in British Strategy 1938-1939." Journal of the Royal United Services Institute. 124(1979), 47.
- 133 CID 362nd Meeting. 26 June 1939. CAB 2.
- 134 Morton to Nicholls. 13 July 1939. R5734/1/22. FO 371/23786; Roskill. Hankey, Man of Secrets. vol. III. 511.
- 135 CID JPC "The attitude of Italy in War and the problem of Anglo-French support to Poland". 12 July 1939. CAB 55; Murray. The Change. 318.
- 136 COS 309th Meeting. 19 July 1939. CAB 53/11.
- 137 COS 309th Meeting. 19 July 1939. CAB 53/11; CID. 368th Meeting. 24 July 1939. CAB 2; Murray. The Change. 318; Pratt. 194-5.
- 138 Cabinet Meeting. 24 August 1939. 42(39) CAB 23; Murray. The Change. 319.
- 139 Andrew Browne Cunningham. A Sailor's Odyssey. (London: Hutchinson, 1951.), 210; Admiralty to Cunningham. 29 July 1939. ADM 1/9946.
- 140 COS 1504B. "1939-40 European Appreciation, January 1939". CAB 55.
- 141 Wesley Wark. "Intelligence Predictions and Strategic Surprises: Reflections on the British Experience in the 1930s". ("Intelligence Predictions") British and American Approaches to Intelligence. ed. by K.G. Robertson. (Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press, 1987.), 87.
- 142 Peter Lowe. "Great Britain's Assessment of Japan before the Outbreak of the Pacific War." Knowing One's Enemies. ed. by Ernest R. May. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986.), 473.
- 143 Wesley K. Wark. "In Search of a Suitable Japan: British Naval Intelligence in the Pacific before the Second World War". ("In Search of a Suitable Japan") Intelligence and National Security. Vol. 1. (May 1986) #2. 201, 206; Lowe. 474.
- 144 Lowe. 456-7.
- 145 Wesley K. Wark. "British Intelligence and Small Wars in the 1930s". Intelligence and National Security. 2(4) 1987. 81; Lowe. 473.
- 146 Wark. "British Intelligence and Small Wars in the 1930s"; 81; Thorne. 4-5; Lowe. 461-2, 474-5.
- 147 Wark. "British Intelligence and Small Wars in the 1930s"; 81; Lowe. 474.
- 148 John Ferris. "Worthy of Some Better Enemy?": The British Estimate of the Imperial Japanese Army 1919-1941, and the Fall of Singapore". Canadian Journal of History. 28(1993) #2. 226, 230, 242.
- 149 Wark. "In Search of a Suitable Japan". 190-1, 194-5, 206-7.
- 150 Wark. "British Intelligence and Small Wars in the 1930s"; 81-2; Lowe, 473; Thorne. 5. For Italy, see chapters 1 and 2.

¹⁵¹ A detailed discussion of French policy and planning is outside the scope of this thesis.

¹⁵² Alexander. 240.

CHAPTER 4 - IN SEARCH OF A SECURE ITALY:

BRITAIN'S ITALIAN POLICY DURING THE PHONEY WAR

In the summer of 1939, a new policy rose, like a phoenix, from the ashes of the "Mediterranean First" strategy. Its aim was to persuade Italy to remain neutral in the coming war as the British government now saw advantages in Italy's neutrality. The shape of this policy began to emerge on 19 July, when the COS declared Italy's assured neutrality preferable to its hostility.¹ On 24 August, the Cabinet endorsed the COS' recommendation that Britain do nothing if Italy appeared to be embracing neutrality.² As a result, Britain went to war on 3 September 1939 with a policy of encouraging Italian neutrality firmly in place.

This policy was not a return to the conciliation which pre-dated Italy's invasion of Albania on 7 April 1939. While both policies were intended to keep Italy "sweet", their ultimate aims were very different. The earlier policy aimed at restoring the traditional Anglo-Italian friendship so Britain could number Italy among its allies in the battle to preserve peace. The new policy had less exalted aims. Influenced by the more realistic assessment of Mussolini which was one of Albania's principle legacies, policy no longer sought to restore Anglo-Italian friendship or appeal to Mussolini's higher instincts. The British accepted that Mussolini would keep Italy out of the war only as long as he saw a direct benefit to Italy. What did remain from the earlier policy was the desire to ease Britain's strategic situation by removing Italy, the enemy judged easiest to neutralise, from the equation. But with the "Mediterranean First" strategy discredited, Britain had no ready means of

despatching Italy. It therefore decided to bribe Italy to continue the non-belligerency it proclaimed on 1 September 1939. As a result, during the Phoney War (September 1939 to May 1940), Britain was engaged in the pursuit of a phantom in the shape of Italy's permanent non-belligerency.

Although Britain's return to a conciliatory policy for Italy stemmed from its rejection of the "Mediterranean First" strategy, there were similarities between the two policies. Both looked to Italy to facilitate Germany's defeat by indirect means, thereby avoiding a long, bloody war of attrition. However, there were significant differences in their approach. The "Mediterranean First" strategy required Italy to fight to drain Germany which would feel bound to aid its ally. The new policy envisaged a neutral Italy which participated in the Allies' blockade of Germany.³ Britain came to prefer a non-belligerent Italy because its strategic situation would be eased if Italy could be kept out of the war, and the blockade would be more effective if Italy was a participant.⁴ However, conciliation was no more viable than the "Mediterranean First" strategy. Once again, need overwhelmed assessments, and policy was deemed likely to succeed primarily because Britain needed it to succeed.

British policy during Italy's non-belligerency is not dealt with extensively in standard accounts of World War II although it was central to British strategy.⁵ The official histories are an exception. In The Economic Blockade, W.N. Medlicott admits that Italy's neutrality hurt the blockade. However, it did give Britain time to prepare for a Mediterranean war, and Italy still proved an economic liability for Germany when it became a belligerent.⁶ In the official history of Britain's war-time foreign policy, Llewellyn Woodward points out that while a knock-out blow would have damaged

Axis morale, and strengthened the blockade and the allies' position in south-east Europe, the allies were too weak to take the offensive against Italy. Consequently, Britain saw Italian non-belligerency as its only viable option.⁷

Later historians have been less charitable. Brian Bond sees Britain's Italian policy as the most notable example of the COS's habit of seeing the worst case scenario.⁸ MacGregor Knox terms the policy misguided. Only the "sudden and ruthless application of overwhelming force", which Britain had in September 1939, would have ensured Italy's neutrality.⁹ Perhaps the harshest critic is Williamson Murray, who says that Britain divorced Italian policy from grand strategy and saw only the worst case scenario. Allowing Italian non-belligerency was the allies' greatest strategic mistake, and a "sad commentary" on Britain's political and military leaders.¹⁰

This chapter will examine the assessments and beliefs underlying British policy for Italy during the Phoney War. It will discuss why the policy was pursued and why it failed, focusing particularly on the intelligence which detailed Italy's capabilities but was deficient on its intentions. Analysts thus fell back on expectations, which resulted in an unviable policy of courting Italy. This policy may have inadvertently sabotaged hopes of keeping Italy out of the war by convincing Mussolini, who only respected strength, that the allies were too weak and passive to win the war.

Ironically, Germany made a policy of encouraging Italian non-belligerency possible. On 7 July, Italy's ambassador in Berlin, Bernardo Attolico, became suspicious that Germany planned to invade Poland in the near future, after a conversation with Germany's Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop. Attolico told Italy's Foreign

Minister, Count Galeazzo Ciano, who dismissed the warnings as "another of Attolico's endemic crises of fear", although Italy's military attaché in Berlin, General Mario Roatta, echoed the warnings.¹¹ Thus when Hitler mentioned his intention to attack Poland at the Salzburg meetings (11-13 August), Ciano was surprised, angry, appalled and frightened.¹² Mussolini felt "betrayed and abandoned". He thought the diplomatic crisis over Danzig would lead Britain and Germany to ask for Italian mediation, for which Mussolini expected to be well-rewarded.¹³ Now he was in a quandary. Mussolini believed Italy must uphold the Pact of Steel or be labelled a traitor to the Axis. He was also reluctant to admit his policies had failed. However, Italy was unfit for war. Its economic situation was "very grave", its military situation was little better. Mussolini was terrified of war, and angry that Hitler had put him in a "no-win" situation.¹⁴ His dilemma grew acute on 18 August when Roatta reported German preparations for a vast military operation to incorporate Poland into the Reich, and Lorraine told Ciano that Britain would honour its guarantee to Poland.¹⁵

The 23 August Nazi-Soviet Pact resolved matters by convincing Mussolini that war was inevitable. Italy's economic and military weakness ruled out immediate participation, but Mussolini wanted to keep his options open. This meant ensuring that Hitler accepted Italy's non-belligerency with good grace, and on 25 August Mussolini instructed Attolico to tell the Germans that Italy could go to war only if Germany filled a list of arms, equipment, and supplies. He sent the list, which Ciano termed large enough "to kill a bull - if a bull could read it", on 26 August. Attolico added that everything must be delivered before Italy declared war. Hitler, in turn, accepted Italy's non-belligerency, asking only that Mussolini delay the official

announcement and use troop movements and propaganda to keep the allies guessing in the interim.¹⁶

Italy's declaration of non-belligerency on 1 September came as no surprise in London. Its ambassador in Rome, Sir Percy Loraine, expected this after a senior official in Italy's Foreign Ministry told him that Mussolini was unhappy with Hitler's plans.¹⁷ Mussolini might try to coerce Poland into acceding to German demands, but would not go to war over Danzig. Loraine's belief that Italy would stay out of the war was strengthened on 27 August when Count Dino Grandi, Italy's Minister of Justice and a trusted source, said he felt matters would "go well" for Britain and Italy. (However, Grandi was no longer a reliable source, having been in disgrace with Mussolini since his recall from London in 1932.) Colonel Brocas Burrows, Britain's military attaché in Rome, concurred due to Italy's "astonishing" lack of war preparations and widespread anti-war sentiment.¹⁸ On 31 August, Ciano gave Loraine advance notice of Italy's non-belligerency.¹⁹ Denis Mack Smith believes Ciano did so only to curry favour.²⁰ But Ciano claimed he was afraid Italy's pseudo-war preparations had pushed Britain to the brink of war, especially after Britain cut its telephone links with Italy earlier in the evening, and the evidence appears to support him.²¹

Hopes that Italy might become a genuine neutral were boosted by reports of friction with Germany over the repatriation of German-speakers in the Alto Adige and improvements to Italy's Brenner fortifications (its frontier with Germany) as well as Italy's appointment of the moderate Bastianini as ambassador to Britain.²² On 21 September, the Foreign Office's Political Intelligence Department (PID) reported that Italian broadcasts had evolved "from hostility to objectivity to friendliness" in the last

48 hours.²³ The JPC felt the longer Italy delayed aiding Germany, the less likely it was to go to war. Time appeared to favour the allies.²⁴

Britain did more than hope Italy would stay out of the war, but several of its schemes proved unfeasible. An example was Loraine's suggestion on 26 September that Britain urge Italy to lead a neutral Balkan bloc.²⁵ While the COS and the Foreign Office found the idea interesting, Mussolini did not want to become the war's leading neutral, and the plan came to nothing.²⁶ The COS also rejected neutralising the Mediterranean because that would restrict belligerent rights and end contraband control, and no self-rationing agreement was an adequate replacement.²⁷ Other ideas were overtaken by events. In December 1939, the Admiralty invited Italy's naval attaché to tour the fleet to dispel German claims that the Royal Navy could not stand up to the Luftwaffe, but the attaché was recalled before the visit could be arranged.²⁸ Plans for Britain to participate in the 1942 Rome Exhibition also came to nothing as Italy's declaration of war cancelled the exhibition.²⁹

But these were sideshows. The basis of British policy for Italy was economic warfare, a descendant of the blockades of the Napoleonic Wars and World War I. Economic warfare's intent was to "so disorganize the enemy's economy as to prevent him from carrying on the war".³⁰ Major Desmond Morton, the head of the IIC, deemed economic warfare a military operation because it aimed to defeat the enemy by targetting its trade with neutral states.³¹ For Germany, trade with Italy was crucial to its economy. In 1938, Germany supplied a quarter of Italy's imports, including almost sixty per cent of its coal. This would likely rise as the blockade curtailed seaborne

trade. As other neutrals would follow Italy's lead, Italo-German trade must be curtailed to make the blockade effective.³²

For Italy, economic warfare was designed to encourage permanent non-belligerency.³³ Care was thus taken to avoid upsetting Italy.³⁴ In September, for example, the Army Council felt it "most undesirable" to exchange military information on North Africa with Italy, as required under the Easter Accords, since Italy was the "declared Ally of our enemy". But it accepted Halifax's advice to continue doing so on "purely political grounds", lest Italy make common cause with Germany.³⁵ This policy was not chosen at random. It was based on assessments of Italy's economic strength, military capabilities and intentions. Economic information came from friendly Italian businessmen and industrialists, the press, financial reports, officials and diplomats posted to Italy and Richard Nosworthy, the Rome embassy's commercial counsellor. In the opinion of Sir Orme Sargent, Deputy Under-Secretary of the Foreign Office, Nosworthy was "one of the most important economic links" in reports on Italy.³⁶ The IIC collated economic information on Italy until its incorporation into the MEW on 3 September.³⁷

The IIC and the MEW painted a consistent picture of economic weakness in Italy. According to the IIC's 31 December 1938 report, Italy's economy was too weak to keep its "mobilisable forces in the field long against a fully armed first-class Power".³⁸ In March 1939, the IIC said that Italy was short of fuels, timber and iron ore and its manufacturing capacity and finances were weak. If war broke out at the end of March and the allies treated petroleum and related products as absolute contraband, Italy would have petroleum for only four or five months. Italy probably

had enough naval armaments for a fairly long war, but no measures could keep Italy's forces in the field long against a "fully armed first-class power".³⁹ Sir Andrew Noble of the Foreign Office minuted that

economically and industrially, Italy is a third rate power pretending to be a first class power and that, though she might be able to fight a naval and air war for some while without economic support from outside, she could not maintain a large army in the field for any length of time by her own unaided effort. In other words, she is in poor shape to fight any sort of war.⁴⁰

The IIC echoed these views on 20 April 1939.⁴¹

When Britain declared war on 3 September, the MEW became responsible for economic assessments.⁴² Initial assessments said war would worsen Italy's situation. On 3 September, Morton said Italy would find it very difficult to augment its "undoubtedly very low" coal stocks with German coal, especially as its gold reserves had fallen dramatically since January.⁴³ However, on 1 January 1940, the MEW estimated that Italy had petroleum for nine or ten months.⁴⁴ The MEW could not estimate Italy's stocks of raw materials since Italy stopped publishing statistics on its overseas trade in July 1939, but as of 1 March 1940 it believed Italy had

no substantial reserves of war materials other than of fuel oil and aviation spirit. In particular: - (i) Sufficient fuel oil is held for about 12 months' naval war. (ii) Stocks of aviation spirit amount to about 3 months' supply on a war basis. (iii) There is enough wheat to last until the next harvest. (iv) There may be small stocks of iron ore, manganese ore, nickel ore, chrome and molybdenum. (v) There may be moderate stocks of castor seed and cellulose. (vi) There is probably a shortage of copper, cotton, coal, leather, oils and fats. With regard to (i), (ii), (iv) and (v), it is pointed out that these are all German deficiency commodities and while there is, as yet, no certain information, the possibility cannot be excluded that the whole or a part of the stocks may, in fact, have found their way into Germany.⁴⁵

On 22 April 1940, the MEW reported that Italy had foodstuffs for a year of war, petroleum for eight months and small stocks of iron, nickel, chrome, manganese and molybdenum. However, as of 31 March, the gold reserves and foreign exchange totalled only \$130 million. As belligerency would probably cost Italy its overseas suppliers, once its reserves of manufactured goods were exhausted, Italy would be dependent on Germany. However, the only raw materials that Germany could supply were coal, coke, potash and nitrogenous fertilisers, and Italy would soon be "gravely deficient" in iron, coal, petroleum, coke, tin, rubber, timber, copper and textile raw materials, save silk, flax and hemp.

At the moment, therefore, Italy's preparations for war, though being pressed on with all speed are incomplete. Should she go to war, she must logically do so in the expectation of a rapid decision. She could spare no significant part of her stocks for her ally, Germany, and would probably encounter acute shortages in certain directions in a few months ... The importance of holding firmly to the Eastern Mediterranean and preventing Italian sea-borne trade passing through the Dardanelles is clearly very great.

In short, Italy was "very vulnerable" to economic pressure.⁴⁶

On 15 May, Morton said Italy could only improve its military fitness for war in 1941 by sacrificing stocks of essential raw materials. But without these, Italy could not fight for more than six months. Morton therefore believed Italy would try to avoid war as once Italy went to war "her position will rapidly decline".⁴⁷ The IIC and MEW assessments appear essentially accurate. Medicott states that the IIC and the MEW provided the COS with ample evidence that Italy was economically unfit for war, and Italy proved an economic liability for Germany when it joined the war in June 1940.⁴⁸

Murray and Playfair agree that by 1940, Italy's economic vulnerability was pronounced.⁴⁹

The second key assessment concerned Italy's military capability. Reports were provided primarily by Britain's service attachés in Italy, especially its military attachés, Colonel Brocas Burrows (until May 1940) and Brigadier Charles Bridge (to 10 June 1940). British officials and diplomats posted to Italy and North Africa were secondary sources of military information.

Until May 1940, Italy's military situation caused little concern. On 17 October, wireless traffic between Rome and its colonial stations reverted to the pre-war procedure of commercial call signs. By 21 October plain language wireless traffic was at pre-war levels. A decrease in cypher traffic on 24 October marked a further return to peacetime.⁵⁰ In Libya, Italian troops rose from 105,000 on 14 September to 150,000 by 26 October with the arrival of two regiments of artillery, four regiments of infantry and two legions of Blackshirts. But the War Office believed the reinforcements were intended mainly for defence, which the early release of troops and transport seemed to confirm.⁵¹ The Foreign Office was reassured by the War Office's assessment.⁵² On 23 November, the War Office insisted that Italy's army was focusing on re-organization and training, despite rumours of German troops in Italy and a secret general mobilisation.⁵³ It was true that "from the purely military aspect, she [Italy] could still go to war and hamper the Allied effort, even if she adopted a mainly defensive attitude by land".⁵⁴ But the services were not worried. The Admiralty went from daily to weekly intelligence reports for Italy on 27 November, as Italy's fleet dispositions and wireless traffic were unchanged from 3

September.⁵⁵ On 28 November, the COS forecast Italy's continued non-belligerency.⁵⁶ On 5 January 1940, Brocas Burrows reported that Mussolini's service chiefs considered Italy too weak for war.⁵⁷ In February Italy's rearmament remained incomplete, and it continued to reinforce the Brenner.⁵⁸ On 19 February, Brocas Burrows reported the call-up of the 1919 and 1920 classes. As their training would take at least three months, he deduced no large-scale military action by Italy until at least June. The War Office estimated that by 31 March almost half of Italy's troops would be new recruits. Italy could do little until they were trained.⁵⁹

Nor was the War Office alarmed by activity in Libya where the garrison rose to 175,000 by 14 March.⁶⁰ General Carboni, Italy's Director of Military Intelligence, told Brocas Burrows that the January reinforcements were to replace soldiers on leave. In February reinforcements were needed to give Italy enough troops to defend Libya, while conscripts were trained to replace soldiers due for discharge in March. Brocas Burrows accepted this explanation. The Foreign Office suspected Italy would retain its recruits, if only as a precaution, but felt protests would be futile.⁶¹

During this period, the War Office remained sanguine. As it told the Foreign Office on 3 April, Italy's actions in Libya had been "uniformly defensive" since the outbreak of war. Most reinforcements went to western Libya (Tripolitania), where forces were barely adequate for defense. If the Libya garrison was at war strength, the War Office attributed it to routine call-ups.⁶² The COS agreed on 26 March.

Generally speaking, Italy's economic and financial position is such that she would go to considerable lengths to avoid being involved in hostilities, particularly if the measures that we took were firm without being unduly provocative and did

not involve her in too manifest a loss of prestige.⁶³

Without irrefutable evidence of belligerency, and this was lacking before May 1940, neither the War Office nor the COS were alarmed about Italy's course.

But evaluations of Italy's economic strength and military capability were incomplete without an accurate reading of Italy's likely intentions which required assessments of Mussolini. Many sources evaluated him, including the British embassy in Rome, officials who had served in Italy like Noble, head of the chancery in Rome from 1933-8, and Italians friendly to Britain. But the main sources were two British diplomats, the minister to the Holy See, Sir D'Arcy Osborne, and the ambassador to Italy, Sir Percy Loraine.

The senior diplomat, Sir Percy Loraine, was no stranger to intelligence work. While head of the chancery in Madrid from 1916-8, he did work for the DNI, Admiral Sir Reginald "Blinker" Hall. Loraine's success with dictators in Persia, Egypt and Turkey won him the post of ambassador to Italy, and he arrived in Rome in May 1939 with instructions "to burn no bridges which one day the Italians might wish to recross".⁶⁴ Soon after his arrival, Loraine decided that while fascism had captured Italy and warped the Italian character, Italy was not fascist at heart.⁶⁵

Loraine had two main sources. One was Grandi, formerly Italy's ambassador to Britain (1932-9), and now Minister of Justice, who Loraine believed was working "heart and soul for a complete cementing of Anglo-Italian friendship and intimacy".⁶⁶ Loraine had trusted Grandi's advice since their meeting in London in March 1939, calling it a "beacon" in the fog he often felt surrounded him in Italy. But on the eve of

Italy's entry into war, the light went out when Grandi refused Lorraine's attempts to make contact.⁶⁷

Ciano was an even more important source. He was Lorraine's liaison with Mussolini whom Lorraine met only twice, on 27 May and 7 July 1939. As Lorraine wrote Churchill on 30 January 1940, "except to his [Mussolini's] own people, he has become just about as inaccessible as the Dali Lama!"⁶⁸ Lorraine saw Ciano as an ally in his battle to keep Italy neutral, especially after Ciano officially denied several German statements, attacked Germano-Soviet ties and advocated aid to Finland in the autumn of 1939.⁶⁹ On 16 December, Ciano accused Germany of breaking faith because the Pact of Steel had promised no war for at least three years, leading Lorraine and the Foreign Office to hope briefly that Italy might be planning a break with Germany.⁷⁰ But Ciano's loyalty to Mussolini plus his lack of an independent power base and inability to formulate alternate policies negated Ciano's efforts to restrain Mussolini who, the Foreign Office soon realised, was firmly in charge.⁷¹

Britain's minister to the Holy See, Sir D'Arcy Osborne, came to the Vatican from Washington in 1936. Until the 15 March 1939 Prague coup, the Holy See was considered an easy post of small importance. After the coup, Mussolini appeared the best-placed to restrain Hitler. The Pope, who hoped to keep Italy neutral, seemed, in turn, to have the best chance of persuading Mussolini to work for peace, although his chances of success were considered slim. However, in the last months of peace, any chance of averting war seemed worth pursuing.⁷² With the Vatican occupying a potentially more influential position internationally, the role of the British minister to the Holy See was elevated in importance. Like Lorraine, Osborne was familiar with

clandestine activities. In 1938-9, he forwarded Father Lieber's (Secretary to Pope Pius XII) secret reports of German troop movements to London. From November 1939 to March 1940, Osborne was part of a chain relaying information from dissident German generals to London. Osborne believed in appeasement until the Pact of Steel, but considered fascism "sinister".⁷³

Osborne got much information from Vatican officials, who were either more astute or less influenced by their hopes than Ciano and Grandi. In September 1939, for example, they doubted that Italy's non-belligerency would last past the spring.⁷⁴ But Osborne's prime source was a German-Jewish doctor with strong anti-Nazi sentiments, who was in touch with German groups critical of Hitler and numbered Ciano and Lorraine among his patients.⁷⁵ While the doctor's information was often very accurate, the Foreign Office viewed his reports with scepticism because Lorraine said the doctor often exaggerated and over-dramatised, although his facts should not be dismissed lightly. The Foreign Office therefore accepted the doctor's reports "with reserve".⁷⁶ But by mid-May 1940 the Foreign Office rated Osborne's reports on the Italian leader more highly. While Osborne's smaller staff provided fewer opportunities to gather information, he had been in Rome longer and knew Italy better than did Lorraine.⁷⁷ Osborne's sources made up in quality what they lacked in quantity. On 23 May, for example, they told him Italy would declare war around 10 June, after Hitler had entered Paris, information Lorraine did not receive from Ciano until 3 June.⁷⁸

According to Lorraine and Osborne, Mussolini was a peculiar mixture of traits. He was susceptible to flattery, vain, unsophisticated and opportunistic, but sensible enough to keep Italy non-belligerent until a victor was evident and Italy was better

able to wage war.⁷⁹ Loraine felt Mussolini was torn between keeping Italy out of the war and a desire to benefit from a German victory. As most Italians were anti-German, he expected Mussolini to ride the fence as long as possible.⁸⁰ In January 1940, Loraine and the Foreign Office agreed that a threat to one of its vital interests could cause Italy to declare war.⁸¹ But the crucial factor was Mussolini's ability to spot a winner.⁸² While Mussolini's emotional nature could make him dangerous, his policy would likely be governed by Italy's economic and military situation and British actions. Consequently, Mussolini might be capable of being reasonable, pragmatic and open-minded, and of putting Italy's interests ahead of his ambitions. If so, he might yet prove to be someone Britain could do business with. In September 1939 Loraine said Britain could keep Italy neutral by treating Mussolini gently and subordinating military concerns to political ones. He recommended muzzling the press, avoiding an anti-fascist crusade, increasing trade, and enforcing contraband control with a light hand.⁸³ On 2 November, Loraine said Britain could obtain Italy's post-war co-operation if it did not wound Italian pride or threaten Italo-German relations. It should limit propaganda to objective presentations of British strength, and pursue closer economic and cultural ties with Italy.⁸⁴

On 30 January 1940, Loraine forwarded a detailed assessment of Mussolini. He was an "enigma ... so inaccessible to any but his own people that direct information is unobtainable". Loraine believed Mussolini was anti-bolshevik, and agreed with General Sir Edmund Ironside, the CIGS, that Mussolini wanted to keep the Balkans free of the war.⁸⁵ But working with Britain and France would be "entirely against the grain", as it would restrict his options. Mussolini probably favoured a negotiated

settlement, failing which he would prefer Britain and Germany to fight "to a standstill". Loraine expected Mussolini to "cling" to non-belligerency as

the longer he can hold on this middle 'independent' course, the better chance there is of a spin of fortune's wheel restoring to him the initiative, or of it becoming plain that the fortunes of war are so adverse to one or other of the belligerents that he can safely cast in his lot with the winner.⁸⁶

Loraine felt Mussolini would welcome an excuse to intervene at Germany's side, to prove the wisdom of the Axis and the Pact of Steel, but did not want a compelling reason to join the allies. Mussolini appeared to dislike Britain more than France which was illogical, given Italy's claims against France. Loraine thought there must be more to this than sanctions, which the 1937 Gentlemen's Agreement, the 1938 Easter Accords, recognition of Italy's conquest of Abyssinia and annexation of Albania and "other marks of British goodwill should have obliterated". Perhaps Mussolini's desire to free Italy in the Mediterranean, find an outlet for Italy's excess population and secure industrial supplies, which led to competition with Britain, were to blame.⁸⁷ Loraine considered Mussolini stubborn enough to gamble on a waiting strategy, which would do the allies no harm. If the allies won the war, Mussolini would have to be "pretty nimble" to avoid losing his gamble, but Loraine expected him to succeed. In time, Mussolini might realise that co-operation with Britain and France was best for Italy. But for now things were too uncertain to ask Ciano to determine Mussolini's attitude to Britain. First, Britain must have firm policies on contraband control and coal plus a war trade agreement with Italy. The Foreign Office was impressed by Loraine's report. Sargent called it "admirable". Nichols deemed it Loraine's best appreciation of Mussolini.⁸⁸

On 14 March, Loraine supplemented his portrait. Mussolini was deteriorating physically, and realised his pro-German policy had been a mistake. If not for the danger to fascism, Mussolini would almost prefer an allied victory, so great was his hatred of Germany. But he was too uncertain of the war's outcome to commit himself, and too afraid of Germany to "jump ship". Where Mussolini once put Italy first, his priorities were now himself, fascism and Italy, in that order. The Foreign Office doubted that Mussolini hated Germany, but accepted the rest of the assessment.⁸⁹ The belief that events were in the allies' hands remained unshaken.

Lorraine's portrait appears accurate in many respects. Renzo De Felice depicts Mussolini as believing he had a mission he would achieve through genius and inflexible will. He was humiliated by watching while others fought, envied Hitler's success and was angered by anything which reduced his freedom of action, including the blockade. Mussolini was mercurial, prone to vacillate and fearful. He feared declaring war too soon or too late, German revenge because Italy had delayed, a lack of influence at the peace table and the absence of a decisive German victory. However, Loraine's portrait was deficient in one very important aspect, namely Mussolini's intentions. Despite Loraine's belief to the contrary, Mussolini was far from being undecided. After Poland's fall, he was determined to join the war, barring a negotiated settlement benefitting Italy.⁹⁰

British biographers paint a similar picture. Denis Mack Smith describes Mussolini as an actor who changed personas to suit his audience. He was an exhibitionist, fond of flattery, outwardly self-confident and possessed of personal magnetism which he used to good advantage. But despite a love of violence and a tendency to be vindic-

tive, Mussolini was timid, plagued by an inferiority complex, impractical, gullible and superficial. His faults were exacerbated by isolation, an insistence on servility from those around him and a refusal to brook contradiction or hear unpleasant truths.⁹¹ Sir Ivone Kirkpatrick, head of the Rome chancery (1930-3), said that Mussolini exuded "power and animal vitality" and was a "magical" orator. But behind a facade of arrogant self-assurance, he was "curiously indecisive", plagued by doubts and a deep sense of inferiority. Mussolini was also superstitious with "a strange confidence in his own premonitions" - a gambler who believed in his star and relied on faith, intuition and will power rather than intellect. He was superficial, valued principles and ideas only if they advanced his aims and was an opportunist, driven by ambition and a lust for power.⁹² D.C. Watt agrees. Mussolini was vain, egotistical and contradictory. He advocated "bold, uncompromising, piratical, ruthless action", and portrayed himself as the personification of "Fascist activism" But underneath, Mussolini was insecure, over-sensitive, bombastic, anxiety-ridden and indecisive. He wanted to be ruthless and daring, but feared the consequences.⁹³

These assessments did not, however, reveal Mussolini's intentions. The root of the problem was Mussolini's tendency to vacillate. As he rarely settled on a course until the last minute, there was seldom clear, advance warning of his intentions. This is not unusual, although Mussolini often went to extremes. According to Michael Handel, "one reason that we rarely obtain clear signals from the enemy is simply that few signals exist".⁹⁴ It is thus no surprise that Avi Schlaim deems the art of determining intentions, "the most difficult and crucial element in the intelligence craft".⁹⁵

It is true that Mussolini made no secret of his dissatisfaction with non-belligerency in discussions with associates such as Ciano. In particular he feared, according to de Felice, appearing to be not "a prophet and a great man but a little man who took 'refuge in the mediocre formula of Salandra in 1914", that is neutrality. (Antonio Salandra was the prime minister in 1914 when Italy chose neutrality over its alliance with Germany and Austria-Hungary.) Mussolini was furious at any comparison between non-belligerency and Italian neutrality in 1914 as this undermined Fascism's claims to have broken with Italy's past. His chagrin at the comparison was revealed in his comment to Ciano after Germany's Prague coup, that "We cannot change our policy now. After all, we are not prostitutes."⁹⁶ In early September 1939 Loraine conceded that Mussolini might be sensitive about any suggestion that he was betraying his ally. However, the full extent of Mussolini's dissatisfaction with non-belligerency did not reach British ears because Ciano, their chief source on Mussolini, was anxious not to discourage British efforts to keep Italy out of the war. As a result, while analysts acknowledged that Mussolini might be awaiting the right opportunity to join Germany's war, the War Cabinet believed Mussolini was either pragmatic or mercenary enough to remain out of the war if he found the inducements sufficiently attractive.⁹⁷

In the absence of clear signs, reassuring assessments of Italy's capabilities led analysts to forecast little change in Italian policy through March 1940. The Brenner meeting set off few alarms in London. Ciano's presence was seen as a sign that Mussolini would continue to exploit Italy's nuisance value, and leave the combatants to exhaust each other.⁹⁸ Loraine was certain that Mussolini accepted Italy's limitations and discounted rumours that Italy was preparing for war.⁹⁹

Instead, Britain believed economic and military weakness would keep Italy on the sidelines in the short term, and that economic inducements could keep Italy out of the war permanently. To that end, Britain pursued a double policy. Part one, contraband control, was instituted on 6 September 1939, although ships in the Mediterranean, the Gibraltar Straits and the Suez Canal, were examined only if they openly carried contraband or were suspected of unneutral service.¹⁰⁰ Full contraband control, save for temporary concessions on mail, was in effect by the end of October.¹⁰¹ Britain planned to treat Italy as a neutral, handling its ships "with utmost courtesy and expedition".¹⁰² This would not be easy, as the Foreign Office reminded the Customs Department on 7 September. "Most delicate of all perhaps is the position of Italy. This country is at one and the same a public ally of Germany and a declared neutral". The Foreign Office was anxious to avoid anything which could "conceivably exacerbate Italian feelings", and would be grateful if, for now, Italy was treated "as a special individual case, calling for most careful and considerate handling".¹⁰³ To that end, contraband control was sometimes compromised. In September, for example, the MEW had reports that Germany planned a large-scale evasion of controls through Trieste and Genoa. But without irrefutable evidence, Britain felt unable to act.¹⁰⁴ Instead, Britain let Italy avoid appearing to comply voluntarily with controls, lest Germany accuse Italy of departing from strict neutrality. Nor did Britain interfere with shipping between Italy and its colonies, unless the colonial port had an entrepot trade.¹⁰⁵

Initially, it appeared that the gentle approach might succeed. On 8 September, Italy's Directors-General of Exchange and Trade told Nosworthy that Italy would use

controls to avoid becoming a channel for German trade.¹⁰⁶ In November, the Foreign Office's Weekly Intelligence Reports noted increased interest in neutrality's commercial benefits and little correlation between Italy's policy and its pro-German propaganda.¹⁰⁷ But contraband control led to delays which the Italians felt the British were slow to investigate. The Italians were also irritated by a lack of co-ordination between Britain and France which sometimes caused ships to be examined twice on the same trip.¹⁰⁸ On 30 November, Ciano warned Loraine that contraband control had Mussolini "on the verge of the boiling point".¹⁰⁹

Attempts to mitigate Italian complaints sometimes caused one problem to be exchanged for another. For example, in December 1939 Britain reduced the delays at control bases. The result was more congestion at ports of destination, and more Italian unhappiness with contraband control.¹¹⁰ While the Admiralty suspected Ciano of inventing some complaints to impress the Germans, it agreed with the MEW that many were justified.¹¹¹ Loraine and the Foreign Office felt if Italy's grievances were not addressed, non-belligerency might soon be only a memory.¹¹² Britain therefore decided, on 24 December, to release all cargoes intended for domestic use only, on receipt of guarantees, a concession Ciano felt would go far to placate Mussolini.¹¹³ But Italian ports remained congested, the situation worsened by a more extensive application of holdback guarantees in February. (These allowed ships to proceed to neutral destinations after undertaking not to deliver cargoes under consideration by the Contraband Committee.) To soothe the Italians, Britain sent Sir Wilfred Greene, President of the Anglo-Italian Joint Standing Committee, to Rome on 15 February, but the Italians rejected his proposals, and the lack of a trade agreement precluded state guarantees. Thus, on 4 March, the MEW agreed to

accept blanket guarantees from reliable firms, in lieu of individual guarantees for each shipment.¹¹⁴

But Britain did not rely on contraband control alone. There were also trade negotiations whose aim was to garner the lion's share of the Italian market. If Britain succeeded, Italy's vested interest in the allied cause should make neutrality more appealing.¹¹⁵ While the purchases were valuable, the aim was to stop Italy from acting as an entrepot for German trade.¹¹⁶ On 21 September, the First Secretary of the Italian embassy, told the Foreign Office that Italy welcomed negotiations, if they were kept secret to avoid exciting the pro-German party.¹¹⁷ The next day, Alberto Giannini, the deputy head of Italian State Railways, told Morton that Mussolini was furious over Poland, and wanted to trade with the allies as much as possible.¹¹⁸

Negotiations began in late September, when Francis Rodd of the MEW and Edward Playfair of the Treasury arrived in Rome.¹¹⁹ Preliminary reports were encouraging. Rodd advised against pushing too hard since Italy feared German reprisals if its neutrality appeared to favour the allies. But as the need for trade should make Italy willing to walk a tightrope between Germany and the allies, purchases could be instrumental in keeping Italy out of the war.¹²⁰ Britain should therefore become Italy's best customer, paying generously for a wide range of goods so Italy would feel unable to risk losing Britain's trade.¹²¹

The situation was less favourable when Rodd returned to Rome in November. Germany had been making purchases, and the Italians now realised that sales to Britain would not allow them to buy only British coal.¹²² The British also suspected

the Italians of being disingenuous, while the Italians were disheartened by delays in finalising purchases.¹²³ On 12 October, Italy agreed to sell hemp to Britain. But by the time British experts reached Rome on 30 October, Germany had persuaded Italy to sell it the entire surplus. Similarly, on 11 October Italy agreed to sell aircraft parts to Britain, but when no British experts had reached Rome by 7 November, Italy sold some parts to France and began talks with Yugoslavia, Holland and Finland. Any more delays, and Rodd feared that the only resort would be to ration Italy, i.e to limit Italian imports via contraband control.¹²⁴

The delays did not arise because the services refused to consider Italian goods. The War Office was interested in anti-tank and anti-aircraft guns and ammunition, and the Admiralty in Isotta engines. The Air Ministry wanted up to 800 fighter planes and twin-engine trainers and possibly the seaplanes originally intended for Poland.¹²⁵ On 5 September, the Air Ministry told the War Cabinet it favoured commercial relations with Italy to keep material from Germany, increase allied stocks and lessen the chances of Italian hostility.¹²⁶ But the Air Ministry found only one Italian aircraft worth its price, the Caproni CA313, and did not want a million bombs, the minimum order the inventor would accept.¹²⁷ The services were also unwilling to buy untested goods, and the Italians often failed to answer enquiries or allow the prospective purchases to be inspected.¹²⁸

There were also problems with France. On 2 October, Playfair learned that France planned to increase its purchases and its prices.¹²⁹ He worried that France planned to buy aircraft entirely for dollars, which would be "fatal" to hopes of securing better terms from Italy. France talked co-operation while "splashing dollars about" with no

thought of the cost, and Playfair feared Britain would be stuck with the bill.¹³⁰ On 6 October, Playfair complained that the French negotiators gave their British counterparts "polite assurances and then more horrors come in". He would appreciate anything the Treasury could do to rein in the French.¹³¹

Despite the problems, the War Cabinet decided to order 20 million pounds sterling worth of military equipment and agricultural produce in 1940 to enable Italy to buy at least 8.3 tons of British coal.¹³² Ciano was advised on 16 December. He was also told that Britain would not seize seaborne German coal, pending sales of British coal to Italy. On 17 December, Mussolini accepted this as a basis for negotiation.¹³³ This was as close as Britain came to a trade agreement with Italy. On 16 January, after negotiations foundered, Britain told Italy that all seaborne shipments of German coal would be halted. British coal was offered instead. Greene and Loraine suggested buying more produce, even if much of it was thrown into the sea, to enable Italy to purchase more British coal. They believed purchases could buy Italian friendship and keep German coal from Italy and Italian foodstuffs from Germany without sanctions. In essence, Loraine and Greene were proposing the economic conquest of Italy.¹³⁴

The crunch came on 8 February. Mussolini vetoed arms sales to Britain, leaving Italy unable to pay for the 5.3 million tons of British coal already ordered.¹³⁵ Ciano attributed the veto to Italy's need for armaments. But the British suspected German pressure plus Mussolini's belief in Germany's ultimate victory and a desire to either create grievances against Britain or exploit Italy's nuisance value.¹³⁶ Given the "violent" German reaction to the proposed sale of Italian airplanes to France in

January 1940, German pressure may indeed have been a factor. Another factor may have been that, according to de Felice, Mussolini was considering limited military action in January and February 1940, and thus did not want to reduce Italy's supply of arms.¹³⁷ Britain responded by giving priority to the principles of the blockade. On 19 February Ciano was told that seaborne shipments of German coal would be stopped as of 1 March.¹³⁸ A coal embargo could mean Italy's economic ruin as Germany could not guarantee land deliveries, especially in poor weather. However, Mussolini did not believe economic problems had ever toppled a government, and held to his veto.¹³⁹ The War Cabinet was equally determined. On 10 March, Chamberlain told his sister he would rather quarrel with Italy than give way over German coal.¹⁴⁰

Britain did not put all its eggs in one basket. Playfair returned to Rome on 23 March to resume negotiations for a trade agreement. The discussions were cordial, but Italy's affinity for Germany was marked, and its negotiators wanted an agreement more than Mussolini did.¹⁴¹ It was soon clear that trade negotiations and contraband control could not keep Italy out of the war. On 26 March, the COS advocated a "more robust" attitude, including military displays to intimidate Italy, and requested a brief from the JPC on measures to deter Italy. The JPC warned that Italian belligerency would create problems in the Middle East where war preparations were incomplete, and that deterrence might provoke Italy into striking before the allies were ready. Nevertheless, the JPC favoured firm words and shows of force to persuade Mussolini to make Italy a genuine neutral. Strong naval forces should be stationed in the Red Sea and the Mediterranean, and plans to bomb northern Italy from French airfields should be leaked to the Italians.¹⁴²

April was a difficult month for British planners. There were rumours that Italy would join the war after Germany's next success, but no sign of the violently anti-allied press campaign the Foreign Office believed would herald Italian belligerency.¹⁴³ On 4 April, the War Cabinet appointed a committee to review economic relations with Italy, with special reference to contraband control. The committee noted the Italian media's anti-allied nature and its support for German actions in Scandinavia. Mussolini might only be intending to raise Italy's nuisance value, but Italy was increasingly pro-German, its war potential was rising and goods were apparently leaking to Germany. The allies had two choices, both risky. One was to relax contraband control to make Italy's early entry less likely. However, Italy's war potential would rise as the blockade weakened. The other was to tighten controls. But while Italy would become weaker as the blockade grew stronger, Mussolini might feel compelled to declare war before Italy became too weak to take the field.¹⁴⁴

Then on 9 April Germany invaded Norway and Denmark. The invasion was a watershed for Anglo-Italian relations, although this was not immediately apparent. Britain did, however, appreciate that Italy's course depended on events in Norway. (Denmark capitulated on 9 April.)¹⁴⁵ On 12 April, Morton deemed it impossible, even dangerous, to set policy for Italy until the situation in Norway was clearer. In the interim, he suggested treating Italy like any other neutral. However, the COS were unwilling to risk making an enemy of Italy, although they did order commanders in the Middle East to prepare, unobtrusively, for possible hostilities with Italy.¹⁴⁶ The Foreign Office and the COS agreed that Mussolini's attitude is unlikely to be governed by considerations other

than the progress of the war. In particular, he is likely to be influenced by the developments in the situation in Scandinavia.¹⁴⁷

As a result, the British felt that they, too, must wait on events in Norway.

In the interim Italy did not remain idle. On 12 April, the Italian fleet was mobilised, sparking rumours of a move in the Adriatic, which Mussolini claimed "a special sphere of Italian interest". France's ambassador in Rome, André François-Poncet, thought Italy would seize Corfu and possibly Crete.¹⁴⁸ However, Carboni told Brocas Burrows that Italy had no designs on Corfu and no desire to activate Britain's guarantee to Greece.¹⁴⁹ British intelligence believed that Yugoslavia was a likely target only if Germany launched an offensive in the west, and this was substantially correct.¹⁵⁰ Mussolini had no immediate plans to attack Yugoslavia unless it collapsed, although he neglected to tell the Yugoslavs.¹⁵¹ However, Britain still did not know what Mussolini would do.

In fact, Mussolini's intentions were governed by three factors. One was the blockade. If Italy stood by the Axis, the blockade would tighten, strangling Italy's economy. If Italy traded too vigorously with the allies, it risked German reprisals. The answer seemed to be to support the victor, which Mussolini expected would be Germany.¹⁵² On 11 March, Mussolini told Ribbentrop Italy would fight a parallel war "at the appropriate moment".¹⁵³ To gain time to prepare, Mussolini tried to dissuade Hitler from an early attack in the west, but promised to declare war after Germany's first victories in France.¹⁵⁴ On 31 March, Mussolini told his Cabinet and service chiefs it was "absurd" for Italy to remain on the sidelines. Italy was best served by a parallel war of naval offensives on all fronts plus a land offensive to secure Eritrea.¹⁵⁵

Germany's invasion of Scandinavia on 9 April refined Mussolini's plans. Up to that time, he felt no sense of urgency to intervene in the war. However, the invasion suggested that if Italy did not intervene quickly, it might soon be too late. Thus, on 26 April, Mussolini told France's prime minister, Paul Reynaud, that Italy would honour its alliance with Germany.¹⁵⁶ Mussolini's resolve was strengthened by letters from Hitler describing German success in glowing terms.¹⁵⁷ On 19 May, Mussolini said Italians were enthusiastic about German victories and ready to join the war.¹⁵⁸

The third factor, Germany's campaign in France determined the timing of Italy's entry into the war. Italy's weakness made the timing crucial. France's defeat must be secure enough to render Italy's military deficiencies inconsequential, without making its intervention irrelevant. Germany's rapid progress suggested France's imminent fall. But while France's demise promised glittering prospects if Italy hastened to Germany's side, opportunism was not the strongest impetus behind Mussolini's declaration of war. Fear was an even more compelling reason. German victories in France made it clear to Mussolini that he could not expect Hitler to tolerate a neutral ally much longer, and that non-belligerency would soon cease to protect the Mediterranean. Fear of Hitler's anger if Italy continued to delay, even more than Mussolini's appetite for spoils, doomed non-belligerency. Mussolini went to war to salvage the policy of weakening Britain in the Mediterranean while restraining Germany in Europe. He expected Britain to sue for a negotiated settlement once Italy declared war, allowing him to satisfy Italy's claims and preserve the balance of power.¹⁵⁹ Mussolini brushed aside warnings from General Pietro Badoglio, the head of the General Staff, that Italy needed all of June to prepare. On 25 May, he told Hitler that Italy would soon enter the war.¹⁶⁰ Five days later Mussolini said Italy

would declare war on 5 June, but postponed this to 10 June at Hitler's request.¹⁶¹ His actions illustrate Handel's assertion that when political concern are paramount, "the decision to initiate war is not always directly related to one's relative capabilities".¹⁶²

But as the British were not privy to Mussolini's thinking, they found it difficult to get a clear reading on Italy's intentions, especially as the signs were contradictory. Italian officers hinted at imminent action, while Italian liners and merchant ships continued regular sailings.¹⁶³ As of 28 April Italy had diverted no shipping, and its wireless traffic was normal.¹⁶⁴ Yet there were persistent rumours of German aircraft and airmen in Genoa.¹⁶⁵ A 14 April report from a "most reliable" Vatican source which said that Mussolini was "overwhelmed" by Hitler's "brilliant" plans, led the Foreign Office to wonder if a "mad dog" act was in the offing.¹⁶⁶ The NID and the Admiralty noted a rise in pro-German feeling in Italy since the Brenner meeting. However, the NID believed Mussolini was obsessed by Hitler's apparent invincibility and feared fascism would not survive Germany's defeat. But predictions were difficult as Mussolini's mental state appeared "somewhat abnormal and excited".¹⁶⁷

The most consistent signs of imminent belligerency came from the Italian press. On 12 April, the Admiralty's Weekly Intelligence Report wondered if recent bellicose articles in Popolo d'Italia were meant to prepare Italians for war.¹⁶⁸ The Foreign Office's 16 April Weekly Political Intelligence Summary did not wonder. It believed Mussolini was using propaganda to justify Germany's invasion of Norway, and might succeed in justifying the invasion if the allies faltered.¹⁶⁹ By 18 April, the Italian press was entirely pro-German, according to Sir Noel Charles, Minister of the Rome

embassy.¹⁷⁰ The Foreign Office countered this by giving more information to Italian authorities and more support to the Vatican's newspaper Osservatore Romano. As the only Italian-language newspaper in Italy not subject to Mussolini's censors, it was a valuable channel to the Italians who considered it more objective than their own press.¹⁷¹

Britain also contemplated action to deter Italy. On 16 April, the COS suggested unobtrusive measures to strengthen Britain's position in the Mediterranean, economic pressure and displays of naval strength.¹⁷² The JIC recommended a forceful reply to Germany and an "instant and impressive" presentation of Britain's case in Italy.¹⁷³ The War Cabinet decided on 18 April that success in Norway was the best deterrent. But in case deterrence failed, the War Cabinet asked the COS to examine the implications of war against Italy.¹⁷⁴

On 21 April, the COS advised that Italian belligerency would strengthen the blockade, while the weakness of its armed forces and the vulnerability of its industrial areas and communications could make Italy a liability for Germany. However, the COS did not suggest encouraging Italy to go to war. Hostilities in the Mediterranean would mean sacrifices, especially in Norway where the allies were heavily committed. They would also disperse allied strength and interrupt communications in the Red Sea and the Mediterranean. Rather

(a) It is in our interests to keep Italy out of the war at the present juncture. Nevertheless, we cannot afford to acquiesce in any Italian aggression in the Balkans, however limited.

(b) In the event of war with Italy our present naval and land forces are adequate to ensure the security of our vital

interests, though we are dangerously weak in air forces.

(c) Initially our major strategy would have to be defensive but at the same time we should be exerting economic pressure on Italy. In due course there should be opportunities for local offensives in Libya and Italian East Africa.

(d) Italy is particularly vulnerable to air attack on her North Western industrial area, we should be prepared to undertake this if circumstances permit.

(e) The entry of Spain into the war as an enemy would make the Allied strategic position more difficult, but should not affect the conclusions above.

The COS recommended using military preparations, diplomacy and propaganda to keep Italy out of the war. If, however, Italy attacked Greece or Yugoslavia, the allies should declare war and launch air attacks on Italy's industries.¹⁷⁵ On 27 April, the COS reiterated the importance of air attacks.

We feel that Mussolini's chief fear is that the war may penetrate into his own country. Thus any preparations for launching rapidly an effective air attack on the industrial areas in North Italy would be a powerful deterrent, and is the best means of inducing him to keep out of the war.

The British had long been aware that the Italian people were war-weary and anti-German. While analysts expected the Italians to obey if Mussolini ordered them to march, their performance would almost certainly reflect their dislike of the Axis and their aversion to being involved in another war. As a result, British analysts believed that Mussolini could be persuaded to keep Italy out of the war if public opinion was mobilised against belligerency by the threat of air attacks.¹⁷⁶ However, the COS took issue with Morton's 25 April suggestion that the allies pressure Mussolini to declare his position. (Morton felt Italy's ambiguous state was damaging the

blockade.) The COS opposed anything that might bring Italy into the war and repeated their views of 21 April.¹⁷⁷ But even limited Italian aggression in the Balkans was intolerable, and inaction could cause the allies' political influence to collapse. The COS therefore recommended declaring war if Italy attacked Yugoslavia or Greece, although it meant curtailing the Norway campaign.¹⁷⁸

The COS' recommendation that the allies counter Italian aggression in southern Europe at Norway's expense was not tested as Italy declared war after Norway fell. Nevertheless, the spectre of Italian belligerency may have influenced the campaign. Churchill says the Trondheim offensive was curtailed and a direct assault cancelled, to release naval forces for other theatres.¹⁷⁹ COS and War Cabinet concern with Italy suggests that one of these theatres may have been the Mediterranean.¹⁸⁰ Butler is more direct. He states that the deteriorating military situation in Europe and concern that Italy would join the war led Britain to relinquish an attack on Trondheim, and insist on a reduced naval commitment at Narvik.¹⁸¹ Woodward concurs.¹⁸² Derry agrees that Britain did not want to risk a battleship at Trondheim, fearing a blow to British prestige might cause Italy to declare war.¹⁸³

Returning to the Mediterranean, on 27 April, the War Cabinet discussed the COS' 21 April report, and agreed that even a limited offensive would have "a very big moral effect" on Italy.¹⁸⁴ On 29 April, it ordered the Middle East reinforced and merchant shipping re-routed around the Cape of Good Hope after a report that the Fascist Grand Council had approved a declaration of war in early May.¹⁸⁵ But on 30 April, the War Cabinet tabled a decision about air attacks on northern Italy.¹⁸⁶ The COS did not give up. They endorsed the JPC's 30 April strategic summary stressing the

"utmost" importance of early attacks on Italy's war industries if Italy joined the war. As Britain might be unable to undertake this for several weeks, it would be "of the greatest value" if France launched the initial attacks. The COS cited this report on 1 and 13 May when it urged the War Cabinet to authorise air attacks on the industries of a belligerent Italy, but the War Cabinet continued to delay.¹⁸⁷

The COS also considered two French proposals for Italian hostility. The first was a plan to capture Crete. As the allies did not have the resources to defend advance bases on Crete, the COS recommended the allies simply deny the island to Italy.¹⁸⁸ The COS could see no way to salvage France's plan to occupy Salamis, Navarino, Milos and Argostoli. Insufficient air cover made the plan too costly, and the dispersal of resources would jeopardize allied security in the Middle East. In short, the plan was militarily unsound.¹⁸⁹

But Britain did not relinquish all hope of coming to terms with Italy. As even a temporary rapprochement would buy valuable time, the War Cabinet decided, on 24 April, to resume discussions to amend contraband control and negotiate a war trade agreement. Halifax reminded the War Cabinet that a trade agreement could strengthen Italy, which might turn against Britain. But Chamberlain pointed out that Britain's obligations and resources did not permit "strong diplomacy", and his view carried the day.¹⁹⁰ On 26 April, Halifax told Bastianini that Britain would order at least eleven ships from Italy and was working to ease Italy's grievances.¹⁹¹

However, the Italians did not appear interested in meeting the British halfway. On 26 April, they arrested Luigi Barzini, an anti-Fascist journalist who warned the British

that the Italian Secret Service was active in their Rome embassy and had broken one of its cyphers. (This may have been Cypher K. On 1 January 1940, Cadogan warned Loraine this important cypher had been compromised.) It is thus not surprising that Ciano learned of Barzini's activities from "one of the usual documents lifted from the British Embassy".¹⁹² Italy also began interfering with Britain's short-wave broadcasts. By 30 April, British transmissions to Italy were virtually inaudible. Charles felt protests would be unavailing. Instead, the BBC should broadcast on as many transmitters as possible to strengthen the signal, and use waves adjacent to Italian signals so the Italians risked jamming their own broadcasts.¹⁹³

In May, Italy moved closer to war. Allied reverses in Norway had increased Mussolini's enthusiasm for war, according to the 7 May Weekly Political Intelligence Summary.¹⁹⁴ As if in confirmation, anti-British posters appeared in Rome on 11 May. Loraine did not know if this meant that Mussolini would give Hitler all help short of war, or was "trailing his coat" on Hitler's orders. In any event, he warned against declaring war or stiffening contraband control. If Mussolini was set on war, the allies could do nothing. If Mussolini was undecided, he would find intervention more difficult if the allies had not already declared war on Italy.¹⁹⁵ Halifax relayed Loraine's advice to the War Cabinet on 13 May.¹⁹⁶

Demonstrations against the war and the blockade followed the posters, and rumours ran rampant. One said that 75,000 troops were concentrated in south-east Italy. Another claimed that general army and air mobilisation had been ordered in Italian East Africa.¹⁹⁷ On 16 May, the War Cabinet learned that Italy's maritime insurance policies had been transferred from London to New York.¹⁹⁸ The Italians were also

discovered spreading lies in letters bearing the forged signature of the Prime Minister's sister-in-law, Lady Ivy Chamberlain, (the widow of Sir Austen Chamberlain, Foreign Secretary from 1924 to 1929).¹⁹⁹

With political intelligence pointing to Italy's belligerency, the advice of an "entirely reliable source" that Mussolini had decided against war, led Halifax to tell the War Cabinet on 14 May that Mussolini wanted the allies to declare war on Italy. He recommended closing the Suez Canal and stopping Italian supplies instead, but the War Cabinet decided that the allies "must wait and see".²⁰⁰ On 17 May, Halifax told the War Cabinet the Foreign Office believed Italy was teetering on the brink of war. Ciano told "confidential" Yugoslav sources that Italy had no plans to attack Yugoslavia and would enter war "by the front door".²⁰¹ Loraine agreed. Rising numbers of Germans, including Gestapo, in Rome and Genoa made him doubt that Mussolini was still a free agent.²⁰²

Military intelligence also showed Italy moving toward war in May. The Admiralty, which re-instituted daily situation reports on Italy on 23 April, noted a surge in war preparations.²⁰³ For example, on 15 May, a signals intelligence source the Admiralty rated as A.1 (a completely trustworthy source whose information was reliably corroborated) reported orders to mobilise the Italian navy on 20 May and a marked increase in naval cypher traffic between Rome and its empire during the night of 14-15 May.²⁰⁴ On 16 May, the NID deemed Italian belligerency increasingly likely.²⁰⁵ The War Office agreed that Italy's military activity was increasing. By 14 May, Italy had reinforced its borders with Yugoslavia and France, occupied defended posts on the French frontier and mobilised its anti-aircraft defences.²⁰⁶ Army call-

ups now also concentrated on men of prime fighting age.²⁰⁷ On 31 May, Bridge was reliably informed that Italy would declare war once France's defeat was certain.²⁰⁸ Reports from the Middle East said that Italy had large troop concentrations on Albania's frontier with Greece, and had increased its military activity on Libya's frontier with Tunisia. In Italian East Africa, there were abnormally high purchases of transport animals, new regulations to conserve fuel and persistent rumours that Italy was recruiting for the "Germani".²⁰⁹ Analysts conjectured that Germans were serving as non-commissioned officers in Italy's colonial forces.²¹⁰ Air intelligence was similar. On 15 May, Britain's air attaché in Rome, Commodore FMF West, noted only "precautionary measures". By 17 May, Air Ministry sources, including West, noted more military activity and war preparations. Italian air officials seemed anxious that war was imminent and expected Mussolini to show his hand by 15 June.²¹¹

These military assessments appear to have been basically accurate. Playfair says that by mid-May, Italy's navy was fully prepared for war and its air force as ready as resources allowed. By 10 May, the army had been mobilised and Albania, Libya and the Dodecanese reinforced. With reasonable accuracy, British analysts estimated nine metropolitan (regular) divisions, four Blackshirt divisions (there were three) two Libya native divisions, several army and corps troops plus miscellaneous units and frontier guards in Libya. The British correctly believed the formations to be complete in personnel, and knew or suspected their deficiencies in training, equipment, morale and transport. Estimates of 130,000 Italian soldiers in East Africa were close to the Ministry of Africa's official figure of 290,476 which included naval and air personnel. The British also estimated 312 Italian aircraft in Libya and the Dodecanese Islands, and 213 aircraft, plus reserves in Italian East Africa. The true totals were 313 aircraft

in Libya and the Dodecanese Islands, 183 aircraft on active service in Italian East Africa and 142 in reserve.²¹²

As Italy prepared for war, British precautions kept pace. On 16 May, the War Cabinet asked the JIC to give the Foreign Office daily appreciations of the military situation, and ordered shipping reduced in the Mediterranean.²¹³ The JPS-ME advised local authorities to prepare for hostilities with Italy.²¹⁴ In Egypt, the government instituted a more stringent exit permit system, dismissed Italian technicians from utility companies and essential services, gave the military control of civil airports, and amended the penal code to allow the death penalty for sabotage. On 31 May, Egypt decided to collect all firearms and explosives and expel all Hungarian cabaret artists (due to Hungary's links to the Axis).²¹⁵

To gain more time to prepare, Britain tried to delay war with Italy. On 16 May, Churchill, who became prime minister on 10 May, asked Mussolini "Is it not too late to stop a river of blood from flowing between the British and Italian peoples?"²¹⁶ Mussolini's reply on 18 May charged Britain with leading the sanctions against Italy in 1935, although Italy had only taken a little piece of Africa for itself, in a region of minimal interest to anyone else.²¹⁷ Britain also proffered a final economic inducement. Greene, Playfair and Nicholls of the Foreign Office went to Rome on 20 May to discuss Italy's continuing grievances with contraband control. But while contraband control was relaxed on 23 May, discussions were put in abeyance two days later. On 28 May, Mussolini ordered the talks broken off.²¹⁸ The "economic carrot" and the appeal to reason had both been rejected.

France shared Britain's desire to postpone war with Italy, to avoid fighting both Italy and Germany, and on 21 May, France's Foreign Minister, Edouard Daladier, suggested asking Roosevelt to again approach Mussolini. (On 14 May, Roosevelt had asked Mussolini to spare Italy the miseries of war. Mussolini replied that, as Germany's ally, Italy could not stand aside while Europe's future was decided.)²¹⁹ The War Cabinet did not want Britain blamed for the failure to settle with Italy, and agreed on 24 May to ask Roosevelt to determine Mussolini's minimum demands and guarantee Italy's equal participation at the peace conference. As Mussolini now refused all contact with foreign representatives, the American ambassador delivered Roosevelt's appeal to Ciano on 27 May.²²⁰

Then on 26 May, France's Prime Minister, Paul Reynaud, suggested the allies offer to discuss Italy's claims, if Mussolini agreed to mediate with Hitler. But Churchill felt this would only reduce Britain's bargaining position and told Reynaud that, while the War Cabinet would discuss the proposal, the allies' only safety lay in their ability to fight.²²¹ Nor was Churchill receptive to Reynaud's suggestion that the allies make Mussolini a specific offer. He was certain this would only arouse Mussolini's contempt. The War Cabinet agreed that further approaches to Mussolini would be useless, and possibly dangerous. But to avoid appearing to dismiss Reynaud's proposal out of hand, the War Cabinet waited until Mussolini's "entirely negative" reply to Roosevelt was received on 30 May. Churchill then told Reynaud that fighting was the allies' only option. Reynaud agreed, after Mussolini rejected France's unilateral settlement plan.²²² It is true that at the 26 May 1940 War Cabinet meeting, Churchill stated that if Britain could keep Italy out of the war by giving up Malta, Gibraltar and some African colonies, he would seize the opportunity. But it is

unlikely that he seriously considered doing so. Churchill was certainly aware of Malta's and Gibraltar's strategic value, especially to the navy, and told Reynaud that it would be a major mistake to make Italy a specific offer. It is likely, therefore that Churchill's words were intended to reassure the appeasers in the War Cabinet that he was not trying to force Italy into war with Britain, while underlining how high, and thus how unacceptable, Italy's price would be.²²³

By early June, Italian belligerency seemed inevitable. War Office sources reported war preparations by Italy in Europe, East Africa, Libya and the Aegean.²²⁴ Italy's suspension of all discussions with Britain on 31 May convinced Loraine that Mussolini was set on war, although Italy's war preparations were incomplete.²²⁵ His suspicions were confirmed on 3 June when Ciano said that Italy would declare war in a week.²²⁶ The rapid repatriation of Italians led the Admiralty to conclude that Italy would declare war between 10 and 20 June, an assessment it felt the marked increase Italy's naval cypher wireless traffic and decline in plain language traffic confirmed.²²⁷ As the Weekly Political Intelligence Report of 5 June stated, Mussolini was too "tied to the German chariot" to extricate himself.²²⁸

As Italy drew nearer to war, British plans crystallised. France agreed to joint air strikes in northern Italy, and on 30 May, the JPC ordered the navy to secure communications in the eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean.²²⁹ On 31 May, the War Cabinet decided to restrict Italy's imports of scarce commodities and raw materials. Loraine should continue arranging for British subjects to leave Italy, while the Home Secretary prepared to round up "desperate characters" when Italy declared war. Italians in sensitive jobs in Britain had already been "stood down".²³⁰

On 4 June, the War Cabinet decided to delay Italian ships in colonial ports on "devious pretexts", increase precautions against sabotage in the Suez Canal, and declare all waters within 12 miles of the Italian coast dangerous to navigation.²³¹ If Italy was going to war, Britain was determined to be ready.

But Britain could not be fully prepared unless it knew where Italy would strike first, and by 29 May, the JIC could only restrict the possibilities to France, Malta, Egypt, Corfu, Crete, Salonika, the Balearics, Corsica, Yugoslavia, Jibuti and the Mediterranean Fleet.²³² Egypt appeared the likeliest target. On 21 May, military intelligence reported a four-fold increase in Italy's wireless traffic to Derna and signs that Italy's 21 Corps had been moved to eastern Libya.²³³ The Commander-in-Chief, Middle East, General Sir Archibald Wavell told General Sir John Dill, Vice-Chief of the Imperial General Staff, (VCIGS) that Mussolini must "take the plunge" soon or lose face. Wavell saw no definite signs that Italy would attack Egypt, but the territory was too valuable to ignore a threat to its security.²³⁴ Nothing was certain, however. The tale of the suicide squadron was even revived after a report on 2 June that Italy had 30,000 pilots trained for flying at sea and seaplanes equipped to carry marine torpedoes. These could become "so called death squadrons" of very fast, torpedo-carrying aircraft which could be crashed into enemy warships. The Foreign Office did not entirely discount the prospect.²³⁵ Almost anything seemed possible once Italy went to war.

Instead of settling the issue, Italy's declaration of war on 10 June 1940 ushered in another kind of phoney war, punctuated by minor naval skirmishes. The first land engagement came on 3 August, when Italy invaded British Somaliland. British forces

were too small and the colony's defences too weak to hold out, and Wavell ordered the colony evacuated on 15 August. Italy did not turn to Egypt until 13 September. The offensive was less formidable than expected. On 18 September, the Italians halted after capturing Sidi Barani.²³⁶ The Egyptian front was quiet until Britain's counter-offensive, "Operation Compass" on 9 December. It took only a week to push the Italians back to Bardia. On 7 February, the British reached Benghazi. In two months, British forces covered five hundred miles and destroyed an army which outnumbered them six to one.²³⁷

Italy's choice of British Somaliland as its first major target surprised the British who had little regard for the colony. In 1937, the War Office had called British Somaliland "an embarrassing commitment in a theatre of minor strategic importance".²³⁸

According to the War Office's appreciation of 21 July 1939

an attack on British Somaliland offers the prospect of raising Italian morale by an easy success. It would also free some Italian forces that might otherwise be immobilised on this frontier. Nevertheless, no important strategic objective would be secured, and the operation would be rather in the nature of a diversion with little influence on the general situation in North Africa or the eventual ownership of British Somaliland.

Wavell echoed these views in April 1940.²³⁹ It was thus no surprise that on 1 September 1939 Victor Cavendish-Bentinck of the Foreign Office's Egyptian and Ethiopian Department suggested giving Italy "this barren and useless land" (British Somaliland), if Italy agreed to maintain "a genuine neutrality". The head of his department, David Kelly, saw merit in the idea. It would not increase the risk of war or strengthen Italy, yet could easily be represented in Italy "as a glorious acquisition". But Sir Maurice Ingram, the head of the Southern Department, said no transfer could

be considered until Italy formally declared itself.²⁴⁰ The British simply could not see Italy wasting effort on British Somaliland when Egypt was there to be had.

However, Mussolini did not see the world through British eyes. Confounding British expectations, he set his sights on British Somaliland, perhaps in part tempted by the prospect of an easy conquest. The colony was vulnerable due to limited resources, the low regard in which it was held by planners and Colonial Office parsimony which frustrated the efforts of Wavell and Lieutenant-Colonel A.R. Chater, the Officer Commanding in British Somaliland, to organize its defence. The result was a policy Wavell called "pure scuttle", which left the invading Italians far better equipped than the British whom they outnumbered by about twenty to one.²⁴¹ The British expected Mussolini to bypass British Somaliland in favour of Egypt, because they projected their assessments on to Mussolini, a common failing, according to Walter Laqueur.²⁴² The episode thus illustrates Wesley Wark's contention that expectations are at the heart of intelligence failures.²⁴³ Fortunately, British Somaliland's loss did little lasting damage to British grand strategy, and had no appreciable effect on the outcome in East Africa. The episode can thus be termed a "benign" intelligence failure, to borrow from Betts.²⁴⁴ Nevertheless, it does illustrate the power of expectations to obscure and misdirect.

The episode also illustrates the consequences of a poor net assessment. While Italy's ability to capture British Somaliland was not questioned, analysts did not believe Italy would feel the potential gains worth the effort. The British did not appreciate that for Italy, British Somaliland had a value which justified the cost of its conquest.²⁴⁵ France's fall may have contributed to their inability to understand

British Somaliland's worth to Italy. British analysts could see only one reason for Italy to invade the colony - to facilitate an attack on French Somaliland. (An attack on French Somaliland may have been attractive to the Italians as compensation for their failure to advance more than a few miles on the Franco-Italian front.)²⁴⁶ British analysts thus felt that France's fall eliminated any need to invade British Somaliland.

In summary, after war broke out on 3 September 1939, their assessments led the British to believe they could persuade Mussolini to adopt genuine neutrality. To that end, contraband control was often compromised, leaving it unable to halt the leakage of goods from Italy to Germany. Nevertheless, Italian grievances with contraband control were a major obstacle to good relations. Britain also sought a trade agreement to give Italy a vested interest in non-belligerency, but negotiations came to nothing. However, until April 1940, there were few signs that Italy's days as a non-belligerent were numbered.

The turning point was Germany's invasion of Scandinavia on 9 April. Mussolini opted for non-belligerency because Italy could not wage a long war successfully. An opportunity for a short, campaign, parallel to the main offensive, would bring him off the fence.²⁴⁷ German success in northern and western Europe in April and May indicated that this time was at hand and would be brief. Of even more concern, if Italy did not declare for Germany, it could become the object of Hitler's wrath for not demonstrating the proper support for its Axis partner. The British realised that as Mussolini would wait on events, allied success in Norway was vital to keep Italy out of the war. To delay Italy's entry into war, Britain offered to discuss contraband control and re-opened trade negotiations. But Italy's grievances were incapable of

resolution, and negotiations broke down irreparably on 28 May. When Mussolini compared British bribes and allied military failures with Germany's victories, he grew even more certain now was the time for Italy to go to war. Britain could only watch as Italy declared war on 10 June 1940.

There are those who believe Britain should have encouraged Italy to declare war earlier. Murray, Knox and Bond all believe Britain should have forced Italy into the war to saddle Germany with a "crippled and battered" ally. In Murray's opinion, Britain over-estimated the risks of facing Germany, Japan and Italy simultaneously, although the events of 1941-2 suggest that the danger was real. Above all, these authors chastise Britain for not appreciating the damage economic and military weakness had done to Italy's military capability and for failing to take advantage of the situation by forcing Italy into the war.²⁴⁸

These criticisms may not be entirely fair. As discussed, Britain knew that economic and military weakness made Italy militarily vulnerable. But Britain was also weak militarily and faced a hostile Germany, with no guarantee that Japan would remain inactive if the allies engaged Italy. Britain thus felt unable to strike at Italy until attrition had eroded Germany's military strength. Its failure to act forcefully in the face of Italy's military weakness stemmed, not from ignorance of Italy's vulnerability, but from an inability to take advantage of the situation. Britain found itself in this predicament for two reasons. First, it had expected too much from economic warfare, and laid insufficient plans in the event that it failed. Second, it was slow to accept that Italy might be an enemy. In 1937, the British government conceded only that Italy might not prove a friend. Not until the spring of 1939 did Britain acknowledge

that Italy might be a war-time foe. This eleventh hour awakening left few resources for action against Italy, as Britain had to secure its interests in Europe and the Pacific. Britain's relations with Italy make it clear that it avails a state little to be aware of an opportunity unless it has the means, as well as the will, to exploit the situation.

In this case, Britain's limitations led it to adopt, not a "knock-out" blow of Italy, but a policy of encouraging Italy's non-belligerency. Intelligence played a key role in that policy. In some respects, intelligence performed well against Italy. Intelligence assessments of Italy's economic and military weakness and of Mussolini's character were very accurate, and analysts appreciated that Norway would be a major influence on Italian policy. As well, in late May, intelligence forecast the date of Italy's declaration of war with a fair degree of accuracy, no mean feat given Mussolini's tendency to vacillate and delay decisions to the last minute. While intelligence did not predict Italy's first target, this did little damage to British strategy. If Italy had been more formidable, the consequences could have been serious. On the other hand, had Britain valued British Somaliland more highly, it might have taken the possibility of an Italian invasion more seriously. However, both these scenarios belong in the realm of "what might have been".

But accurate information is only one component of viable policy. The second is accurate forecasts of likely actions which, in this case, meant good estimates of Mussolini's intentions. This was something intelligence could not provide. On the surface, this may seem surprising as the British were familiar with many aspects of Mussolini's character. However, despite Mussolini's capacity for irrational behaviour,

the British did not believe him unbalanced enough to run amok. Rather, they expected Mussolini to behave like a statesman, putting the interests of Italy and Europe ahead of his ambitions. In reality, Mussolini put his aspirations and prestige first. This misreading of his character had serious consequences for it led the British to believe they could persuade Mussolini to keep Italy out of the war.

Delusions about Mussolini took root in British policy for two reasons. The first was a shortage of direct contact with Mussolini. Loraine, Britain's chief source on Mussolini, rarely saw the Duce, and was forced to rely on Ciano as his intermediary. Neither he nor the planners and policy-makers in London realised that Ciano's desire to keep Italy out of the war coloured his reports. As a result, Mussolini's thinking was often terra incognita for the British. The second reason was that British assessments contained little or nothing on the role of fascist ideology in Mussolini's policy. There was, for example, no discussion of Mussolini as a fascist ideologue in Chamberlain's reflections on his visit to Rome in January 1939 or Loraine's assessments of Mussolini.²⁴⁹ Nor does fascist ideology intrude in British assessments of Italy's likely course.²⁵⁰ Instead, analysts appear to have assumed that Mussolini assessed his options and formulated his policies as the British did. Their consequent over-emphasis on the importance of economic factors to Mussolini made them overly optimistic about the chances of turning Italian policy in the direction most beneficial to Britain.

Consequently, needs and expectations overwhelmed assessments. To fill in the blanks in their evaluations, analysts turned to mirror-imaging, that is, they looked at Italy and saw a reflection of Britain. This led them to impose their expectations on

Italy.²⁵¹ As analysts assumed they would find Mussolini's actions predictable and logical, their assessments emphasised his reason and pragmatism. In part, this may have been because reports of Mussolini's irrationality were more entertaining than credible. But more importantly, the British could not afford to believe that Mussolini might "go off the deep end". Britain needed a Mussolini with whom it could reach an understanding, a Mussolini who would simplify the strategic situation by making Italy a genuine neutral. Britain had no use for a "rogue" Mussolini whose unpredictable actions could strain Britain's military strength past its breaking point. Their need for a malleable Mussolini convinced the British that economic inducements (the one thing Britain could offer) could persuade Mussolini to make Italy a genuine neutral.

Perhaps the lesson of British relations with Italy in 1939-40 is that the greater the desire of policy-makers to believe a policy will succeed, the greater the need for intelligence capable of assessing its feasibility. As British intelligence could not assess Italian intentions adequately, it was unable to evaluate properly the viability of trying to keep Italy out of the war. Instead, assessments were overwhelmed by the need for a particular policy to succeed. The resulting image of Mussolini's intentions led Britain to pursue a spectre. Only with hindsight did the British realise that a permanently non-belligerent Italy was an illusion.

NOTES

The following unpublished primary sources were the most helpful for this chapter: FO 371, FO 837, FO 1011, WO 106, WO 201, ADM 223, CAB 65 and CAB 84. Also useful were WO 216, WO 206, AIR 8, CAB 66, CAB 80, CAB 104, the Chamberlain papers and the Chater Papers. Among the published primary sources, the Documents on British Foreign Policy and Weekly Political Intelligence Summaries were useful. On the Italian side, the best sources were de Felice's biography of Mussolini, I Documenti Diplomatici Italiani, Ciano's memoirs and GFM 36. These sources compensate for the fact that the SIS, MI5 and NID files are not open, and there are no Ultra decrypts for this period. There is also little on this topic in the Treasury and Board of Trade files. Most of their material is pre-1939, and Italy tends to be discussed in terms of trade figures for specific commodities. However, useful economic information, in the form of IIC and MEW reports, was contained in FO 371 and FO 837.

¹ 309th COS Meeting. 19 July 1939. CAB 53/11; 368th CID Meeting, Minute 1, 66 WP(39)1, CAB 66; Williamson Murray. The Change in the European Balance of Power 1938-9. {The Change.} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984.), 318.

² Cabinet Meeting. 42(39). 24 August 1939. CAB 23; Murray. The Change. 319.

³ Martin Gilbert. Winston S Churchill. Vol. V. 1922-1939. (London: Heinemann, 1976.), 79; William I. Shorrock. From Ally to Enemy. The Enigma of Fascist Italy in French Diplomacy 1920-1940. (Kent Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1988.), 274-5; Frank G. Weber. The Evasive Neutral. (Columbia Miss: University of Missouri Press, 1979.), 41.

⁴ #269 Loraine to Halifax. 25 August 1939. DBFP. Third Series. Vol. III. (London: HMSO. 1950.); MEW Minute. "Trade with Italy". 10 September 1939. FO 837/510; W.N. Medlicott. The Economic Blockade. Vol. I. (London: HMSO 1952, revised 1978.), 52; Michael Howard. The Mediterranean Strategy in the Second World War. (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1968.), 5-6; Loraine to Halifax. 4 September 1939. R7415/399/22. FO 371/23819; David Dilks. ed. The Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan 1938-1945. {The Cadogan Diaries.} (London: Cassell, 1971.) 209; Gordon Waterfield. Professional Diplomat. Sir Percy Loraine of Kirkharle Bt. 1880-1961. (London: John Murray, 1973.), 248; Woodward. 22.

⁵ B.H. Liddell Hart. History of the Second World War. (London: Cassell, (1970.), 109; John Keegan. The Second World War. (London: Hutchinson, 1989.), 84; Peter Calvocoressi, Guy Wint and John Pritchard. Total War. Volume I. 2nd ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1989.), 140; Martin Gilbert. Second World War. (Toronto: Stoddart, 1989.), 50; J.F.C. Fuller. The Second World War 1939-1945, (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1948.), 90; John Ellis. Brute Force. (London: Andre Duetsch, 1990.), xix; H.P. Willmott. The Great Crusade. (London: Michael Joseph,

1989.); R.A.C. Parker. Struggle for Survival. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.), 24; Gordon Wright. The Ordeal of Total War 1938-1945. (New York: Harper & Row, 1968.), 19. According to Liddell Hart, Keegan, Calvocoressi et al and Gilbert, Mussolini opportunistically declared war when France's defeat looked certain. Fuller discusses Italy only in the context of German strategy, and says Hitler's preoccupation with the Eastern Front led him to overlook an opportunity to defeat Britain. Ellis says the Mediterranean is over-rated in histories of the war, especially in relation to the Eastern Front. Neither Ellis nor Willmott discuss Italy in the Phoney War. Parker and Wright claim Italian neutrality was useful to the allies to keep the Balkans quiet.

⁶ Medlicott 282. Medlicott states that forcible rationing might have accelerated Italy's entry into the war as the "touchy and incalculable Mussolini could have stampeded into war any time he saw an insult to his personal dignity or Italy's national honour.

⁷ Llewellyn Woodward. British Foreign Policy in the Second World War. Vol. I. (London: HMSO, 1970.), 21-2.

⁸ Brian Bond. British Military Policy Between the Two World Wars. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980.), 316. Bond states that in September 1939, the COS exaggerated the military difficulty of acting against Italy, thus inhibiting all positive action.

⁹ MacGregor Knox. Mussolini Unleashed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.), 45.

¹⁰ Murray. The Change. 315, 368, 321.

¹¹ #503 Attolico to Ciano. 7 July 1939; #717. Attolico to Ciano. 28 July 1939; #773 Attolico to Ciano. 4 August 1939; #759 Roatta to Mussolini. 3 August 1939. Documenti Diplomatici Italiani. {DDI} ottava serie: 1935-1939. Vol. XII. (Roma: La Libreria dello stato, 1952.); Renzo De Felice. Mussolini il duce. II. lo stato totalitario. 1936-1940. (Torino: Einaudi, 1981.), 643, 645, 649; Donald Cameron Watt. How War Came. (London: Heinemann, 1989.), 417-8; Galeazzo Ciano. Ciano's Diary 1939-1943. (London: Odhams Press, 1948.), 115, 121.

¹² #1 Record of meeting between Ciano and Von Ribbentrop. 12 August 1939; #2 Record of meeting between Ciano and Hitler. 13 August 1939. DDI. ottava serie: 1935-1939. Vol. XIII. (Roma: La Libreria dello stato, 1953.); Ivone Kirkpatrick. Mussolini. A Study in Power. (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1964.), 397-8.

¹³ Watt. How War Came. 409; Harry Ciliadakis. "Neutrality and War in Italian Policy 1939-1940". Journal of Contemporary History. 9(1974), 171-2, 174, 176; De Felice. 652-3.

¹⁴ Kirkpatrick. 400; De Felice. 562-3, 652-3; Ciano. 128-9, 131-2, 134.

¹⁵ #82. Ciano to Magistrati. 18 August 1939; Roatta to Carboni. 18 August 1939. DDI. ottava serie: 1935-1939. Vol. XIII. (Roma: La Libreria dello stato, 1953.)

¹⁶ De Felice. 656, 663-4; #293. Mussolini to Hitler. 26 August 1939; #299. Mussolini to Hitler. 26 August 1939. #329. Hitler to Mussolini. 27 August 1939. DDI.

ottava serie: 1935-1939. Vol. XIII. (Roma: La Libreria dello stato, 1953.); Ciano. 135; Watt. How War Came. 494, 501. Mussolini made one final attempt to avert war on 31 August. But he withdrew his proposal for a conference to revise the Treaty of Versailles because Britain and France refused to discuss a conference unless Hitler first withdrew from Poland. Mussolini knew Hitler would never agree. (#548. Loraine to Ciano. 1 September 1939. DDI. nona serie. Volume IV. (Roma: La Libreria dello stato, 1960.); Watt. How War Came. 574; Woodward. 307; De Felice. 666.

¹⁷ #621 Loraine to Halifax. 31 August 1939. DBFP. Third Series. Vol. III. (London: HMSO, 1954.).

¹⁸ Loraine to Halifax. 27 August 1939. R6820/1/22. FO 371/23786; #86 Loraine to Halifax. 20 August 1939. #97 Loraine to Halifax. 20 August 1939; #160 Loraine to Halifax. 22 August 1939; #173 Loraine to Halifax. 23 August 1939. DBFP. Third Series. Vol. III. (London: HMSO, 1950.); Waterfield. 237, 246; Ciano. 31, 124-5; Dilks, ed. The Cadogan Diaries. 197.

¹⁹ #595 Loraine to Halifax. 31 August 1939; #646 Halifax to Loraine. 1 September 1939; #711 Loraine to Halifax. 2 September 1939; #731 Minute by Loraine. 2 September 1939; #739 Loraine to Halifax. 2 September 1939. DBFP. Third Series, Vol. III. (London: HMSO, 1950.); P.R. Stafford. "The French Government and the Danzig Crisis". International History Review. 6(1) 1984. 66-9, 77, 81-4; Woodward. 3-8; Ciano. 143; De Felice. 669-70.

²⁰ Denis Mack Smith. Mussolini. (New York: Random House, 1982.), 236.

²¹ Appendix I. p. 408. DDI. ottava serie. Volume XIII. (Roma: La Libreria dello stato, 1953.); Ciano. 141; Watt. How War Came. 528.

²² Loraine to Foreign Office, 6 September 1939, R7307/399/33. FO 371/23819; War Cabinet Meeting. WM 17(39)12. 16 September 1939. CAB 65.

²³ Leeper to Foreign Office. 21 September, 1939. R7959/1/22. FO 371/23787.

²⁴ JPC. "Strategy in the Near East and Balkans". JP(39)41. 24 September, 1939. CAB 104/138.

²⁵ Loraine to Foreign Office. 26 September 1939. CAB 104/138.

²⁶ Minutes by Nichols. 15 October 1939. and Sargent. 17 October 1939. R8838/399/22. FO 371/23821; #736. Ghigi to Ciano. 13 October 1939. DDI. nona serie. Vol. I. 4. (Roma: La Libreria dello stato. 1954.); F. Marzari. "Projects for an Italian-Led Balkan Bloc of Neutrals, September - December 1939". Historical Journal. 13(1970.) 768, 774, 779; Knox. Mussolini Unleashed. 50.

²⁷ "Possible detente with Italy in the Mediterranean". COS(30)84. 17 October 1939. CAB 80/4.

²⁸ Loraine to Foreign Office. 28 September 1939, Minutes Noble 29 September 1939; Nichols 30 September 1939, Halifax to Churchill. 4 October 1939. R8190/7248/22. FO 371/23829; Churchill to Halifax. 15 December 1939. R11804/12013/1/22. FO 371/23788.

²⁹ Loraine to Foreign Office. 8 August 1939; Ingram to Loraine. 26 August 1939. Loraine to Foreign Office. 18 December 1939. BT/60/58/1; Hudson to Butler.

15 January 1940. R862/862/22. FO 371/24960; Butler to Crookshank. 19 January 1940. BT 61/74/4; Crookshank to Butler. 29 January 1940. R1537/862/22. FO 371/23960; Crookshank to Butler. 29 January 1940. BT 61/74/4; Loraine to Butler. 1 March 1940, Butler to Loraine. 12 March 1940. R2947/862/22. FO 371/24960.

³⁰ Medicott. 1-2.

³¹ Medicott. 16-7; Alan S. Milward. War, Economy and Society 1939-1945. (London: Allen Lane, 1977.), 295. The Americans also included measures against enemy forces in the field.

³² Report by the Chancellor of the Exchequer. "Promoting Trade with Italy". WP(39)20. September 1939, CAB/66; Minute by Martelli. 19 September 1939. R7849/57/22. FO 371/23810; Leith-Ross to Bridges. 9 September 1939. FO 837/501; Medicott. 290; ISO Playfair. The Mediterranean and the Middle East. Vol. I. The Early Successes Against Italy. (London: HMSO, 1954.), 45-7; Milward. 88; Shepard B. Clough. The Economic History of Modern Italy. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964.), 273.

³³ War Cabinet Meeting. WM 2(39)2. 4 September 1939. CAB 65; MEW Minute "Trade with Italy". 10 September 1939. FO 837/510; Medicott. 280-1.

³⁴ Morton to J.W. Nicholls. 13 July 1939. R5734/1/22. FO 371/23786.

³⁵ Minute by Rodd. 7 September 1939. FO837/492; "Exchange of Military Information with Italy". COS 39(41). 30 September, 1939. CAB 80/3.

³⁶ Sargent to Loraine. 21 October 1939. Loraine Papers. FO 1011/204. There are few direct references to Nosworthy in the Foreign Office and Treasury files. It appears that his reporting was either incorporated into IIC and MEW reports or weeded in later purges of the records.

³⁷ Medicott. 2, 13.

³⁸ IIC. "General Survey of Material Resources and Industry in their bearing upon National War Potential." 31 December 1938. T160/860/F14922/2/2384.

³⁹ IIC. "Italy. Petroleum Supply in War." March 1939. R1563/1425/22. FO 371/23824.

⁴⁰ IIC "Italy. General Survey of Material Resources and Industry in their Bearing upon National War Potential". March 1939. Minute by Noble. 5 March 1939. R1425/1425/22. FO 371/23824.

⁴¹ "Proposed Appendix to ATB 181 Plan for Economic Warfare Against Germany." ATB(EPG)53. 24 April 1939. CAB 47/15.

⁴² Milward. 294.

⁴³ Minute by Morton. 3 September 1939. FO 837/510; Loraine to Halifax. 11 October 1939. R8730/336/20. FO 371/23815.

⁴⁴ MEW. "Italy. Petroleum Situation". 7 February 1940. R2124/1108/22. FO 371/24960.

⁴⁵ MEW "Italy. Stocks of Strategic Raw Materials." 1 March 1940. R3260/56/22. FO 371/24936.

⁴⁶ MEW. "Preliminary Notes on Italy's Economic Situation in the event of war in the near future." 22 April, 1940. Memorandum by Morton. 22 April 1940. R5311/56/22. FO 371/24936.

⁴⁷ Morton to Nichols. 15 May 1940. R4479/56/22. FO 371/24936.

⁴⁸ Medlicott. 281-2, 308.

⁴⁹ 368th CID Meeting. 24 July 1939. CAB 2; Murray. The Change. 314-5, 318-9; Playfair. 88.

⁵⁰ Naval Intelligence Reports, 17, 21, 24 October 1939. ADM 223/80.

⁵¹ War Office Weekly Commentary #5. 21 September 1939. War Office Daily Summary #25. 23 September 1939. War Office Daily Summary #26. 24 September 1939. War Office Weekly Commentary #10. 26 October 1939. WO 106/2138; Brocas Burrows for DMO & I. 10 October 1939. R8767/1/22. FO 371/23797.

⁵² Rodd to Ingram. 7 November 1939. R10175/41/22. FO 371/23806.

⁵³ War Office Weekly Commentary #14. 23 November 1939. WO 106/2138.

⁵⁴ Miller to Noble. 23 November 1939. R10647/399/22. FO 371/23821.

⁵⁵ Naval Intelligence Reports. 20 and 27 November 1939. ADM 223/80.

⁵⁶ "Future of Military Policy in the Middle East". JP(39)74 [also COS (39)137(JP)]. 28 November 1939. CAB 84/8.

⁵⁷ Memo by Burrows. 5 January 1940. R1047/58/22 FO 371/24938.

⁵⁸ War Office Daily Summaries. #41. 9 October 1939. #122. 1 January 1940; #164. 14 February 1940. WO 106/2138.

⁵⁹ Memorandum by Burrows. 19 February 1940. Minutes by Noble. 22 February 1940. Nichols. 23 February 1940. R2409/1627/22. FO 371/24961.

⁶⁰ War Office Daily Summary #171, 21 February 1940, and Weekly Commentary #119, 29 December 1939. #30, 14 March 1940, WO 106/2140.

⁶¹ Memorandum by Burrows. 21 February 1940. J697/264/66. FO 371/24543; Minutes by Dixon. 5 April 1940. Nichols and Sargent. 8 April 1940. Vansittart. 16 April 1940. J1125/264/66. FO 371/24644.

⁶² Miller to Broad. 3 April 1940. Minute by Vansittart. 26 March 1940. J1009/264/66. FO 371/24643.

⁶³ "Measures to Deter Italy from entering the war against the Allies." JP(40)76. also COS (40)277 JP. 26 March 1940. CAB 84/11.

⁶⁴ Waterfield. 36, 51-2, 228.

⁶⁵ Loraine Papers, PRO. Lecture for Cambridge ITC. 25 November 1947. FO 1011/214.

⁶⁶ Loraine to Cadogan. 13 October 1939. FO 1011/204.

⁶⁷ Grandi to Chamberlain. 1 September 1939; Loraine to Grandi. 1 September 1939; Loraine to Grandi. 11 January 1947; FO 1011/214.

⁶⁸ Waterfield. 230, 234; Loraine to Churchill. 30 January 1940. FO 1011/212.

⁶⁹ Loraine to Foreign Office. 4 October 1939. R8439/1/22. FO 371/23787; Knox. Mussolini Unleashed. 63-5.

⁷⁰ Osborne to Halifax. 26 December 1939. R12216/6/22. FO 371/23790; Waterfield. 256; Owen Chadwick. Britain and the Vatican during the Second World War. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.), 86.

⁷¹ Great Britain. Foreign Office. Weekly Political Intelligence Summaries. (WPIS). Vol. I. #1 - 3 September - 3 October 1939. #11, 12 December, 1939; Knox. Mussolini Unleashed. 46-7.

⁷² Chadwick. 4-5, 15-7, 61, 57, 77, 61.

⁷³ Chadwick. 29, 70, 93-4.

⁷⁴ Osborne to Foreign Office. 22 September 1939. R7943/399/22. FO 371/23819; Chadwick. 85.

⁷⁵ Chadwick. 94.

⁷⁶ Osborne to Foreign Office. 14 March 1940. Osborne to Foreign Office. 15 March 1940. Foreign Office to Osborne. 16 March 1940. R3330/3400/57/22. FO 371/24936; Loraine to Foreign Office. 19 March 1940. Minutes by Noble and Nichols. 20 March 1940. R3548/57/22. FO 371/24936.

⁷⁷ Chadwick. 104-6.

⁷⁸ Loraine to Halifax. 4 June 1940. R6424/58/22. FO 371/24947; Waterfield. 272; Woodward. 237, 244.

⁷⁹ WPIS. #2 -10 October 1939. Minute by Martelli, PID. "Italy Since the War". 3 October 1939. R8593/399/22. FO 371/23820.

⁸⁰ Foreign Office Minute. "Review of the Italian Situation". 5 October 1939. R8681/399/22. FO 371/23819.

⁸¹ Loraine to Foreign Office. 2 January 1940. R306/58/22. FO 371/24937; Loraine to Sargent. 7 January 1940. R518/57/22. FO 371/24936; Foreign Office Minute. 31 January 1940. R2258/58/22. FO 371/24938.

⁸² WPIS. #23 - 5 March 1940; War Cabinet Meeting. WM 92(40)10. 14 April 1940. CAB 65.

⁸³ Loraine to Foreign Office. 4 September 1939. R7115/399/22. FO 371/23819. Loraine to Halifax. 4 September 1939. R7116/399/22. FO 371/23819; Loraine to Foreign Office. 9 September 1939. R7290/399/22. FO 371/23819; Loraine to Foreign Office. 14 September 1939. R7739/399/22. FO 371/23820; Loraine to Foreign Office. 17 September 1939. R7686/399/22. FO 371/23820; Waterfield. 248.

⁸⁴ Record of a meeting at the Foreign Office. 2 November 1939. R9719/1/22. FO 371/23787.

⁸⁵ Memorandum by the CIGS. "The Major Strategy of the War". 19 January 1940. WO 216/779.

⁸⁶ "The Major Strategy of the War." Memorandum by the CIGS. 19 January 1940. WO 216/779; Loraine to Foreign Office. 30 January 1940. Minutes by Noble. 3 February 1940. Nichols. 5 February 1940. Sargent. 5 February 1940. R1595/60/22. FO 371/24949.

⁸⁷ "The Major Strategy of the War". Memorandum by the CIGS. 19 January 1940. WO 216/779; Loraine to Foreign Office. 30 January 1940. and Minutes by Noble. 3 February 1940. Nichols. 5 February 1940. Sargent. 5 February 1940. R1595/60/22. FO 371/24949.

⁸⁸ "The Major Strategy of the War". Memorandum by the CIGS. 19 January 1940. WO 216/779; Loraine to Foreign Office. 30 January 1940. Minutes by Noble. 3 February 1940. Nichols. 5 February 1940. Sargent. 5 February 1940. R1595/60/22. FO 371/24949.

⁸⁹ Loraine to Halifax. 14 March 1940. R3579/58/22. FO 371/24938.

⁹⁰ De Felice. 652, 654, 687, 690, 798.

⁹¹ Mack Smith. 6, 21, 111-2, 114-5, 130, 239, 278-80.

⁹² Kirkpatrick. ix, 22, 37, 69, 83, 154, 157-63; 168, 178-80, 358.

⁹³ Watt. How War Came. 57, 205, 207, 491-2.

⁹⁴ Michael Handel. "The Yom Kippur War and the Inevitability of Surprise". International Studies Quarterly. 21(3) 1977. 464.

⁹⁵ Avi Schlaim. "Failures in National Intelligence Estimates: The Case of the Yom Kippur War". World Politics. 28(1976) 362.

⁹⁶ De Felice. 653; Ciano's Diary. 52.

⁹⁷ Foreign Office Minute. Cadogan. 29 August 1939. Minute by Noble. 29 August 1939. R6901/399/22. FO 371/23818; Loraine to Halifax. 4 September 1939. R7115/399/22. FO 371/23819; Loraine to Halifax. 5 September 1939. R7138/399/22. FO 371/23819; Minute by Cadogan. 16 September 1939. R7527/399/22. FO 371/23819; War Cabinet Meeting. WM 2(39)2. 4 September 1939. CAB 65.

⁹⁸ WPIS. #25. 19 March 1940.

⁹⁹ Loraine to Foreign Office. 18 March 1940. R3564/57/22. FO 371/24936.

¹⁰⁰ Medlicott. 289; Playfair. 46.

¹⁰¹ Medlicott. 291, 294.

¹⁰² Minute by Ross. 7 September 1939. FO 837/492.

¹⁰³ Farquhar to Customs Department. 7 September 1939. W13254/9805/49. FO 371/23904.

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¹⁰⁵ Medlicott. 290-1, 294.

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¹⁰⁸ Playfair. 44-46.

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129 Waley to Noble. 2 October 1939. R8361/41/22. FO 371/23804.

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- 137 De Felice. 684-5; Ciano. Ciano's Diary 1939-1943. 196-7, 205.
- 138 Knox. Mussolini Unleashed. 71-2, 75.
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- ¹⁶⁴ War Cabinet Meeting. WM 106(40)3. 28 April 1940. CAB 65.
- ¹⁶⁵ Report by Brocas Burrows. 16 April 1940. R5159/173/22. FO 371/24956; Charles to Foreign Office. 18 April 1940. R4999/58/22. FO 371/24940.
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- ¹⁶⁷ NID Report #3. 15 April 1940. ADM 223/82; Confidential Admiralty Weekly Intelligence Report #6. 19 April 1940. ADM 223/146.
- ¹⁶⁸ Confidential Admiralty Weekly Intelligence Report #5. 12 April 1940. ADM 223/146.
- ¹⁶⁹ WPIS. #28. 16 April 1940.
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- ¹⁷¹ Chadwick. 107-8.

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¹⁹³ Charles to Halifax. 30 April 1940. R5049/980/22. FO 371/24960.

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¹⁹⁵ Loraine to Foreign Office. 12 May 1940. R5995/58/22. FO 371/24944.

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²²² War Cabinet Meeting. WM.145(40)1.28 May 1940. CAB 65; War Cabinet Meeting. WM 146(40)11. 29 May 1940; War Cabinet Meeting. WM 148(40)5. 30 May 1940. CAB 65; #659 Guariglia to Ciano. 30 May 1940. DDI. nona serie 1939-1943. Volume IV. (Roma: La Libreria dello stato, 1960.); Woodward. 202-8.

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- 242 Walter Laqueur. A World of Secrets. (New York: Basic Books, 1985.), 273.
- 243 Wesley Wark. "Intelligence Predictions and Strategic Surprises: Reflections on the British Experience in the 1930s". {"Intelligence Predictions"}

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250 As Donald Lammers points out, the Foreign Office appears to have seen ideology primarily in terms of the USSR. Cadogan, in particular, was of a "severely unideological set of mind" as his diary attests. Donald Lammers. "Fascism, Communism and the Foreign Office, 1937-39". Journal of Contemporary History. VI (1971)., 67, 85; Dilks. The Cadogan Diaries.

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CHAPTER 5 - "RAISING THE TRIBES":

BRITISH POLICY FOR ITALIAN EAST AFRICA, 1939-1941

One of World War II's more colourful episodes occurred in January 1941, when Britain "raised the tribes" in Abyssinia against the Italians. (There is a map of Italian East Africa on page 274.) The immediate aim was Italy's defeat in East Africa. The ultimate aim was to remove Italy from the war and, by Italy's demise, to defeat Germany.¹ As a project, "raising the tribes" appeared relatively simple. Britain would contact native leaders prepared to rebel against the Italians and offer them supplies, arms, ammunition, money, military advisers and military support.² In practice, however, "raising the tribes" proved more complex.

The catalyst for Britain's decision to "raise the tribes" in Abyssinia was Italy's declaration of war on 10 June 1940. With Italy a belligerent, a policy of bribing it to remain out of the war was clearly irrelevant. However, Britain's need for its Italian policy to contribute to Germany's defeat remained. As an offensive against Germany was out of the question in 1940-1, and with Italy now committed to the Axis cause, Britain re-examined the merits of a forward policy. This approach had languished in obscurity since the "Mediterranean First" strategy's rejection the previous summer. However in the new strategic climate, planners and policy-makers again saw advantages in military action against Italy, especially if it could help defeat Germany. This opened the door for "raising the tribes" to become Britain's policy in East Africa. As a result, the indirect approach of the "Mediterranean First" strategy emerged in triumph in Abyssinia. While the immediate aim of "raising the tribes" was to defeat

Italy by conquering its empire in East Africa, the ultimate goal of both strategies was to aid Germany's defeat by removing Italy from the war.

As discussed in the introduction, "raising the tribes" is worthy of examination for several reasons. First, it marked the end of Italy's independent ability to fight the parallel war which was Mussolini's aim when he brought Italy into the war. While it is true that in Greece and the Western Desert Italy began by waging a parallel war, setbacks in both theatres led Germany to become involved in and eventually to assume control of both campaigns. As a result, neither case delineates the end of Italy's parallel war as clearly as does "raising the tribes". In the case of the war at sea, Italy's reluctance to engage the British fleet, and its inability to do so after Britain's successful attack on the Italian fleet at Taranto in November 1940, meant that there was no parallel war on the high seas.³ In addition, the campaigns in the Western Desert (especially Operation "Compass", Britain's December 1940 campaign), Greece and the Mediterranean have all been covered more extensively in the published literature than the East Africa campaign and in particular "raising the tribes". Therefore, "raising the tribes" has more potential to add to knowledge of British policy and intelligence concerning Italy and to an understanding of British grand strategy in the early stages of World War II than other case studies. Finally, "raising the tribes" deserves attention as perhaps the culmination of Britain's use of the indirect approach. When Britain "raised the tribes" in Abyssinia, it sought not only to defeat Italy by conquering its East African empire but through Italy to contribute to Germany's defeat, and this was the Allies' ultimate aim in World War II.

"Raising the tribes" went through three phases, defined by two turning points. Phase one lasted until General Sir Archibald Wavell arrived in Cairo in August 1939 to take up his appointment as the C-in-C, Middle East, and war broke out on 3 September. The second phase lasted until Italy declared war on 10 June 1940. The third phase saw plans for a revolt developed and put into action in January 1941. Each phase was characterised by competing assessments of the chances of success and the policy implications. In each phase, "raising the tribes" was defined by the way competing assessments were resolved. "Raising the tribes" thus illustrates that to be of use, information must be assessed accurately, then applied to policy.⁴ Because Britain did this, it was able to "raise the tribes" successfully.

Although the campaign in Italian East Africa (Abyssinia, Eritrea and Italian Somaliland) is a useful study of policy and intelligence, many published works give it short shrift. These include official histories such as British Foreign Policy in the Second World War by Llewellyn Woodward, J.R.M. Butler's Grand Strategy Vol. II, and George Kirk's Survey of International Affairs 1939-1945.⁵ Nor are works on the Italian and Abyssinian experiences very helpful.⁶ East Africa tends to receive even less attention in general histories. Several make no reference to East Africa.⁷ Others give the campaign a brief mention but offer little on its strategic importance.⁸ Indeed, H.P. Willmott's The Great Crusade and John Ellis' Brute Force maintain that the Mediterranean has been over-emphasised in war histories.⁹ From here it is but a short step to Neil Orpen who deems the revolt of little value, and Williamson Murray who insists that a campaign to destroy Italy's army in Abyssinia was "meaningless".¹⁰ The prevailing view is that the East Africa campaign was insignificant, perhaps because Abyssinia was a secondary front against a secondary

enemy, Italy, and not deemed of much value in its own right. These writers may have overlooked or downplayed Italy's pivotal role in British policy against Germany, thereby reducing the war in Europe to a struggle between the allies and Germany.

But there are exceptions. In volume 5 of British Intelligence in the Second World War, which deals with deception, Michael Howard states that Britain's offensive in Italian East Africa was intended to coincide with tribal risings in Abyssinia. It achieved complete surprise because Britain had been reading Italian signals in East Africa for some time.¹¹ In Volume 1 of that series, F.H. Hinsley discusses the wealth of cryptanalysis available to Britain in East Africa. He states that by 1941, "it had become imperative to bring about as quickly as possible the defeat of the Italian forces in East Africa" to release troops for the Balkans where intelligence indicated an imminent German move and to open the Red Sea to allied shipping.¹²

Wavell's biographers also see value in the campaign. In Wavell. Scholar and Soldier, John Connell says that it was important to defeat Italy as quickly as possible in East Africa. Wavell believed the best way to do this was to "raise the tribes". In Connell's opinion, "the sum total of their [the rebels] victories had a crucial effect on the campaigns as a whole".¹³ In The Chief, Ronald Lewin praises Wavell for supporting the rebels who "captured ground and eroded Italian confidence". Lewin concedes that some question the cost of victory in East Africa, but believes the Fourth Indian Division's transfer to East Africa had a "marginal" effect on Operation "Compass". On balance, he believes the East Africa campaign represented the best use of Wavell's resources.¹⁴ In the latest Wavell study, Wavell in the Middle East 1939-1941, Harold E. Raugh Jr. calls "raising the tribes" the key to Wavell's strategy

in East Africa. Even before Italy declared war, Wavell appreciated a revolt's ability to force Italy to dissipate resources prior to an invasion. Raugh believes the rebels "significantly aided the British in isolating and harassing Italian outposts". East Africa was a "highly successful" campaign which resulted in the capture of a million square miles of territory, the permanent removal of a quarter of a million Italian troops from the war and the clearing of the Red Sea.¹⁵

Official histories of the East Africa campaign are even more laudatory. The Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War 1939-45. East Africa Campaign 1940-41, terms the revolt a "powerful force" in Britain's victory.¹⁶ In The Mediterranean and the Middle East, vol. I, I.S.O. Playfair praises the rebels' "remarkable" achievements.¹⁷ The War Office's The Abyssinian Campaign. The Official Story of the Conquest of Italian East Africa states that Italy's fears of the "smouldering rebellion" bursting into flames drained its resources, and tied down the equivalent of 56 battalions in early 1941 when Italy needed every soldier in the Western Desert. "The Patriot Movement was therefore a most useful factor on our side from the very first to the very last - both when it was mainly a possibility and when it was an actuality."¹⁸

This chapter agrees with the official histories of intelligence and the East Africa campaign and with Wavell's biographers, that "raising the tribes" made an important contribution to a valuable campaign, and merits more attention than it generally receives. As Italy played a pivotal role in British policy for Germany, the revolt is significant because it played a key role in Italy's defeat in East Africa which hastened

Italy's exit from the war. This chapter seeks to add to the existing literature by examining the role of "raising the tribes" in British strategy

The British were not the first to consider "raising the tribes". Long before Britain made plans to incite a revolt, France was interested in exploiting Italy's imperial woes and apparently sent money and arms to the rebels between 1937 and 1940.¹⁹ Then at the AFCs on 3 August 1939, General Bührer said that, as Italy's situation in East Africa was "very precious", a well-co-ordinated offensive giving the rebels maximum support could be efficacious.²⁰ However, the subject receives little attention in the histories of France.²¹

The silence surrounding "raising the tribes" in French histories may be because France's primary concern was Europe. While problems with Italy made the prospect of a revolt attractive, the impetus for French interest was the need to ensure British support against Germany. Despite its February 1939 continental commitment, Britain showed little interest in helping France unless British interests were at stake. General Maurice Gamelin, the Chief of the National Defence Staff and the General Staff (1938-40), and Prime Minister Edouard Daladier thus decided to offer French co-operation against Italy in the Mediterranean, as a quid pro quo for British support in Europe.²² It was true that Gamelin wanted a "cut-price war on the peripheries", and considered a September 1939 plan by French naval and colonial commanders to establish a Balkan front through a landing at Salonika. France could then use "the blood of others" to buy time before Germany turned west in earnest. Gamelin decided the plan was "premature" and smacked of "adventurism". He favoured an allied response to a German initiative in the Balkans, but preferred to use his forces

to defend France, rather than in a "succession of strategic projets on the peripheries of Europe".²³ With French eyes firmly fixed on Europe, the British were left to "do the running" for Italy.

The French were not the only non-starters when it came to a revolt. In August 1939, a "reliable" source warned the War Office that Italy might try to stir up revolt in the allied territories bordering Abyssinia.²⁴ The British heard nothing more until the April 1940 East Africa Intelligence Summary reported that Italian agents were entering British territory to gather information and spread propaganda. Analysts suggested that Italy might be planning to "raise the 'British' tribes".²⁵ The conjecture was sound. In March 1940, Italy asked its Consul in Nairobi to report on the possibility of inciting revolt in Kenya. On 8 April, the consul advised that neither the Africans nor the Indians were promising material. While the Indians were dissatisfied with their second-class status, they were more privileged than the Africans and knew their situation would deteriorate under the Axis. Indian leaders had therefore offered their community's services to the Kenyan government in the event of war. The Africans lacked potential rebel leaders as most chiefs were part of the colonial system and loyal to the British.²⁶ While the Kenyan revolt did not materialise, Italian interest indicates the allure of "raising the tribes".

With France and Italy out of the running, it fell to Britain to "raise the tribes". For the British, there was an appealing precedent - the legend of T.E. Lawrence, popularly known as Lawrence of Arabia, and the Desert War of 1916-8. The British elevated Lawrence and the Desert War to almost mythical status between the wars. The Desert War was seen as "exhilarating and romantic" and "a just war of liberation",

especially compared to the Western Front. Lawrence was considered "all that is finest in the English Imperial Hero".²⁷ General Sir Archibald Wavell called Lawrence "the most impressive and attractive man I ever met".²⁸ Public opinion deemed him "one of the greatest Englishmen who had ever lived".²⁹ Winston Churchill echoed this, stating that Lawrence was "one of the greatest beings of our time ... whatever our need, we shall never see his like again".³⁰ Much of Lawrence's glamour was due to his role in the Arab Revolt which achieved impressive results with limited resources. The Official History of the Great War termed the revolt a "remarkable contribution" to victory, a "steady drain" on Turkish resources and a "powerful threat to the Turkish flank".³¹ In July 1917, for example, 500 Arabs captured Aba el Lissan, opening the way to Akaba. The Arabs killed 300 Turks and captured 160, at the cost of two dead.³² Like the Spanish guerillas who fought Napoleon (1808-13), the Arabs gave invaluable help while depending on the British for most of their opportunities.³³

The Arab Revolt's lessons were readily grasped by Wavell in his 1931 book on the Palestine campaign. Wavell was well-placed to assess the revolt. Between July and December 1917, he was the liaison officer between the C-in-C in Palestine, General Sir Edmund Allenby and the Supreme Command. In 1918, he commanded, first the XXII, then the XX, Corps in Palestine. Wavell saw the Arab Revolt as very valuable because it led the Triple Alliance to divert large amounts of resources from the main front, drained Turkish reserves and helped the allies counter German propaganda in the Middle East.³⁴ The Arab Revolt's success was all the more impressive because other fronts had priority for weapons and supplies, and frequent payments were needed to keep many of the tribes fighting alongside their traditional enemies.³⁵ Lawrence's success suggested that similar results might be possible in Abyssinia.³⁶

The Desert Revolt was not the only precedent World War I provided for "raising the tribes". In East Africa, the German commander, Von Lettow-Vorbeck used guerilla tactics and native agents behind enemy lines to lead Britain on a four year chase across German East Africa (which is now Tanzania) and the Kenya Colony. With no support from Germany, Von Lettow-Vorbeck successfully contained a much larger force and was never captured.³⁷ While not as famous as Palestine, the East Africa campaign was likely familiar to Wavell. A cousin, Lieutenant A.J.B. Wavell, commanded a detachment of King's Africa Rifles known as "Wavell's Own", early in the campaign. As well, the intelligence officer when Wavell was in Palestine was Major, later Colonel, Richard Meinertzhagen, who was the intelligence officer in East Africa until December 1916.³⁸ Wavell may have seen East Africa as an indication of the ability of irregular operations to achieve valuable results with few resources.

East Africa was not a native rising. Von Lettow-Vorbeck's forces, the Schutztruppe, were mainly askaris (European-trained African soldiers), with a sprinkling of German troops. But there were similarities. The Schutztruppe lived off the land, and waged a guerilla war over great distances and difficult terrain which included swamps, mountains and arid steppe. The climate was tropical, annual rains were torrential and malaria was endemic.³⁹ Much of this also describes Abyssinia, which has high plateaus topped by mountain massifs and cut by deep gorges and areas well below sea-level like the Danakil Depression and the arid Ogaden Desert. As Abyssinia is larger than France and Italy together, military operations must be carried out over great distances, and the generally tropical climate prohibited military operations

during the rainy season.⁴⁰ The parallels with East Africa may have suggested that guerilla warfare could also succeed in Abyssinia.

But "raising the tribes" was based on more than memories of World War I. In particular, the 1935-6 Italo-Abyssinian War indicated the Abyssinians might have potential as guerillas. In 1936, France's ambassador in Rome, le Comte de Chambrun, told his British counterpart, Sir Eric Drummond (later Lord Perth) that King Victor Emmanuel considered Italy very fortunate. If Haile Selassie had retreated instead of attacking Ashangi on 31 March 1936, the Italians could not have followed quickly enough to bring the Abyssinians to battle. Had the Abyssinians retreated in order, the King doubted Italy would have conquered Abyssinia, at least in the short term.⁴¹ Instead, the Abyssinians had been "courageous but ill trained and ill-equipped".⁴² Nevertheless, Arnold J. Toynbee, editor of the Royal Institute of International Affairs' Survey of International Affairs for 1935, deemed Abyssinia an "ideal nursery for guerillas". He believed guerilla tactics would have allowed the Abyssinians to win a war of nerves and cut Italy's communications, without providing good targets for Italian bombers.⁴³ The Italo-Abyssinian War suggested that if Britain wanted to engage Italy by proxy, the Abyssinians might be good candidates.

Ironically, the Italo-Abyssinian war initially led British planners to cast their eyes in a different direction. The brief war scare after Italy invaded Abyssinia in October 1935 prompted the General Headquarters, Middle East (GHQ-ME) to draw up plans for a revolt in Libya. With the Abyssinians' potential as guerillas unknown, planners turned to Libya where Italy was unable to pacify the Senussi until 1930, despite conquering Libya in 1912.⁴⁴ As well, from December 1915 to February 1917, the

Senussi, encouraged by Germany and Turkey, had attacked British positions on Egypt's eastern borders and threatened the Nile Valley. While there was no danger of a Senussi victory, the Official History of the Great War warned against complacency. "It is not difficult to stamp out a spark travelling along a fuze [sic] to a powder-barrel, but the task is one demanding speed and resolution." It would therefore be a mistake to dismiss the revolt.⁴⁵ Nor did planners who saw Libya as potentially fertile ground for a revolt.

Little came of the GHQ-ME's plans to foster revolt in Libya until spring 1939, when the tense international situation engendered support for dealing forcibly with Italy, especially after it invaded Abyssinia on 7 April. A revolt gained high-level political backing on 11 April, when the SAC, comprised of Cabinet ministers, recommended that a revolt supplement regular operations in Libya.⁴⁶ In May, Britain's military attaché in Rome, Colonel Brocas Burrows, reported that Italy's troops in Libya were poorly equipped, poorly trained and poorly led.⁴⁷ The GHQ-ME therefore created Arab 'G' Expansion Scheme to oversee the development of tribal leaders and their followers into a partisan force to operate against the Italians. When Wavell arrived in Cairo, staff officers told him the Senussi were ready to rebel at any time, if encouraged with money and arms.⁴⁸

But despite the GHQ-ME's enthusiasm, military opinion was guarded about a revolt's prospects in Libya. At the April and May AFCs, representatives warned that "an unsupported revolt could only lead to merciless suppression by the Italians".⁴⁹ On 23 May, the Foreign Office and the War Office agreed it would be foolish to "raise the tribes" before they could be supported militarily.⁵⁰ The need for military support

did not escape the GHQ-ME. Wavell's predecessor, General R. Gordon-Finlayson, insisted that adequate military support was vital to a revolt.⁵¹ The GHQ-ME was thus disquieted to learn, at a meeting with the High Commission Staff on 15 July, that France could not act in Libya for at least a month, and Britain for even longer, after the outbreak of war.⁵² Even before Wavell's arrival, several staff officers felt Arab 'G' Expansion Scheme was "an absurdity". The Senussi were few in number, and the arrival of reinforcements in Egypt would tie up motor transport and other resources. There were also political obstacles. "Certain influential Egyptians" felt it "sheer folly" to arm "desert ruffians, culturally alien and, worst of all, politically unreliable", and objected to British control of the rebels.⁵³ The revolt in Libya was on shaky ground even before the outbreak of war.

By the time war broke out, Wavell also doubted the wisdom of "raising the tribes" in Libya. In January 1940, he told the War Office that it would be impossible to act in Libya without more resources and a long period of preparation, and recommended reducing Libya by blockade.⁵⁴ In April, Wavell told the War Office that preparations for a revolt were "necessarily incomplete" to avoid provoking Mussolini. This left the policy for Libya open, and until it was set, plans for a revolt could not be finalised. However, in The Other Desert War, John Gordon attributes Wavell's doubt to more than the nebulous nature of planning. Gordon believes Wavell "sensed desert-style guerilla war, no matter how appealing the precedent of twenty years before", had little chance of success against Italy's "modern air, armored and motorized forces". Recent colonial campaigns had shown how easily guerillas could be isolated, hunted down and defeated. (Gordon gives no examples, but may be referring to the Rif War (1921-6), South Africa's 1922 campaign in South-West Africa (Namibia) and the

1919-20 Egyptian Revolt.) Planning continued, but Wavell increasingly lost faith in what desert guerillas could accomplish against Italian forces which could move faster and hit harder.⁵⁵

But while "raising the tribes" was not viable in Libya, Abyssinia was a different matter. Even as the sun began to set on a revolt in Libya, it began to rise on a revolt in Abyssinia. Some were attracted by the chance to restore Haile Selassie. These included Colonel D.A. Sandford, of the MEIC, who was in charge of planning for the revolt.⁵⁶ Sandford's devotion to the Emperor sparked fears that he might prove a "loose cannon". Major-General William Platt, the GOC in the Sudan, accused Sandford of living in the past and trying to create "a second Lawrence expedition".⁵⁷ Within the Foreign Office, Norton termed Sandford "an enthusiast in a lost cause", while Thompson accused him of "wishful thinking".⁵⁸ Lt.-Colonel A.T. Curle, the intelligence officer of the Somaliland Camel Corps, described Sandford as "remarkably brave to a point of stupidity".⁵⁹ Even the War Office, which favoured a revolt, conceded that Sandford had "bats in the belfry regarding Haile Selassie".⁶⁰ A quest to restore Haile Selassie disregarded the fact that as Italy was not a declared enemy, it might be in Britain's interests to keep Italy "sweet". The policy implications of "raising the tribes" to restore Haile Selassie were simply unacceptable before Italy's declaration of war.

But Sandford notwithstanding, most felt Abyssinia's future government a matter for the Abyssinians.⁶¹ They were attracted by the revolt's potential to damage Italy militarily. A revolt would leave Italy unable to attack areas like Egypt whose military weakness was a serious concern.⁶² It might even lead to Italy's defeat in Europe.⁶³

As the SAC declared on 11 April 1939, "one of the most effective means of neutralising the Italian effort would be to organise insurrection in Abyssinia at the outset of war".⁶⁴ Six days later, the SAC recommended that Britain and France complete plans for a revolt against Italy, "without delay".⁶⁵ The merits of "raising the tribes" were summed up by Victor Cavendish Bentinck of the Foreign Office's Egyptian and Ethiopian Department in May 1939. A revolt could "keep the Italians occupied, thus preventing them from attacking the Sudan or Kenya, and would hasten the downfall of the empire, which would produce an immense moral effect in Italy".⁶⁶

The Foreign Office saw potential in a revolt, as demonstrated by its reaction to the proposals of Captain Richard C. Whalley, formerly the consul at Maji Abyssinia, now a political officer in the Sudan.⁶⁷ In October 1938, Whalley said Abyssinian refugees could spearhead a successful revolt.⁶⁸ In February 1939, he told the Foreign Office that early preparations would enable Britain to "give the Italians such a knock as to take a great deal of heart out of them for adventures in the Mediterranean and elsewhere". Sir Stewart Symes, the Governor-General of the Sudan, termed Whalley's plan "utterly fantastic" and pointed out that the Sudan Defence Force (SDF) did not have the resources for "stunts". But Cavendish Bentinck felt Whalley's ideas worth investigating, even if Whalley did seem to fancy himself as "Lawrence of Abyssinia". David Kelly, the head of the Egyptian and Abyssinian Department, agreed. He disliked "the Khartoum attitude" of "always cold-shouldering" Whalley's enthusiasm, and believed even a failed revolt could worry and occupy Italy far out of proportion to the actual threat.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, caution characterised Foreign Office support for a revolt. A definite commitment to "raising the tribes" implied that Britain had given up

hope of coming to terms with Italy, and this the Foreign Office was not prepared to do. It favoured a revolt as an option, only if Britain was unable to neutralise Italy.

The Foreign Office's position was to "raise the tribes" if necessary, but not necessarily to "raise the tribes". The War Office was less equivocal, perhaps because it was less concerned with the policy implications of a revolt. In November 1938, in the wake of the Munich Crisis, Major Mallaby told the Foreign Office that the GOC in the Sudan, and possibly also the GOC in Kenya, planned to send small detachments of troops to Abyssinia in war-time to incite revolt to keep Italy from attacking British territory. Cavendish Bentinck urged care to keep this from Italy which might not be intending to side with Germany.⁷⁰ The need for caution did not dim War Office enthusiasm, however. In April 1939, the War Office told Platt that it attached the "greatest importance to an insurrection in Abyssinia to neutralise Italy's forces in East Africa". As this might be more difficult in practice than theory, advance preparations were essential. Plans could always be modified to handle the resistance Platt envisaged. But the War Office was "unwilling to give up the scheme too easily", and asked Platt to reconsider his objections.⁷¹

War Office support for "raising the tribes" was not unconditional, however. Its 1 July 1939 Appreciation offered qualified support as "all well organised rebel leadership had certainly been broken". A revolt appeared possible only in the highlands east and south of Lake Tana where unrest was sporadic. Italy controlled the rest of the country with approximately 34,000 European troops and 80,000 askaris, organized mainly for internal security, plus 44,000 white labourers, whose militia training made them potential soldiers. If war broke out, Italy would likely expect an upsurge of rebel

activity and its policy would likely be "primarily defensive". But it might attack Kenya, the Sudan, British Somaliland or French Somaliland instead, believing that a "bold stroke" against Europeans would have "more far reaching results" than the defeat of African rebels. If so, the chances of "raising the tribes" were slim.⁷² But the War Office agreed, on 7 July 1939, to take charge of planning a revolt.⁷³

A revolt's need for military support was acknowledged by British representatives at the April 1939 AFCs.

It will be important to do all in our power to foster rebellion in Abyssinia from the outset of hostilities, but no military forces should be committed in support of this rebellion until the available strength is adequate to achieve important results.⁷⁴

In June, representatives recommended that the allies do their utmost to make Italy's position in Abyssinia untenable. With Abyssinia not "completely subdued", the chances of success were good if political action was delayed until the rebels could be supported militarily. In the interim, the allies should formulate plans to destroy Italy's naval forces in the Red Sea, cut Italy's supply lines and clear vital communications. They should also collect arms and ammunition, select personnel to organize refugees and deserters "of real military value" in operations in Italian East Africa, and attach an intelligence officer to the Somaliland Camel Corps to pass native agents into Abyssinia. But above all

Blind encouragement to native uprisings should not be given before we can assess their prospects of success or support them more effectively than by propaganda or insufficient force.

Premature or ill-advised native risings may be squashed by the present military preponderance of Italy and would subsequently be more harmful than beneficial to our future prospects.⁷⁵

Support for "raising the tribes" was based on diplomat and attaché reports and signals intelligence. Signals intelligence was plentiful in the Middle East before June 1940, because Italy liberally used plain language and easy-to-read low-grade codes. In the 1920s the Government Code and Cipher School (GC & CS) reconstructed Italy's main naval code book "because of the delightful Italian habit of encyphering long political leaders from the daily press".⁷⁶ As a result, during the Italo-Abyssinian War signals intelligence was able to illuminate the Italian navy's strength and activities. By 1937, the Italian Navy's general and secret books plus one of the two naval attaché codes were largely readable. Signals intelligence became even more accessible in 1938, when Italy's navy introduced a re-encyphering system similar to that of the Admiralty.⁷⁷

Nor was British success limited to Italy's naval codes and ciphers. In 1938, cryptologists solved the high grade cipher book of the Italian Air Force in East Africa. The next summer, they broke an air force high grade cipher book for the Mediterranean. Army ciphers were no more secure. By the time Italy declared war, Britain had solved three of its six army cipher books for Libya while the other three were largely readable, as were the ciphers of Italy's military attaché, missions and intelligence services in Spain plus Italy's diplomatic and colonial ciphers. However, signals intelligence rarely included intentions. In the spring of 1940, for example, Britain suspected a change in Italian policy not from statements of intentions, but because decrypts began to detail unusual troop movements in Libya.⁷⁸

Armed with this intelligence, British analysts assessed Italy's economic, military, political, social and geographic situation. (Although they did not use the term, analysts were performing a net assessment, i.e. a "formal and explicit weighing of opposing military forces in the context of political objectives and conditions".⁷⁹) The results favoured "raising the tribes". First, the logistics were against Italy. Its sea and air communications in East Africa were easily cut, and Italian East Africa lacked the reserves, resources and industrial base to overcome long interruptions of its supply lines.⁸⁰ As all essential items, save grain, were imported, the Foreign Office asked the IIC to determine the size, location and rate of consumption of petrol and oil stocks in Italian East Africa.⁸¹ In July 1939, the IIC advised that Italy's oil and petrol stocks in Italian East Africa were low.⁸² Unless its stocks increased, Italy could not risk a long campaign in East Africa.⁸³

Abyssinia was also a serious military liability for Italy. The need to enforce order led Italy to organize its troops in many small, scattered garrisons with administrative backing only for localised operations. These forces were ill-equipped for large-scale resistance or operations over great distances, especially as they were short of ammunition, motor and aviation fuel, aircraft spares and motor vehicle tires. In short, Italy's 34,000 white troops and 80,000 native troops in Italian East Africa lacked the cohesion and flexibility to benefit from their numbers.⁸⁴

Italy's brutal colonial policy exacerbated its problems. Mussolini set the tone on 5 June 1936, when he ordered the first viceroy, Marshal Rodolfo Graziani, to shoot all captured rebels.⁸⁵ By February 1937, the major rebel leaders were either dead or had submitted to Italy.⁸⁶ Then on 19 February 1937, two Eritreans tried to

assassinate Graziani. Italy's savage reprisals left 3000 dead in Addis Ababa and reignited the revolt, which spread rapidly.⁸⁷ In November 1937, the moderate Duke of Aosta became viceroy, and halted the summary executions, but it was too late. Resistance had already reached "alarming proportions".⁸⁸ In August 1938, the Sudan Military Intelligence Summary termed rebel activity a serious problem. The Foreign Office suspected that the claims of several rebel chiefs to have many rifles and even more followers were exaggerated, but their confidence and the rebels' increasing activity emphasised Italy's fragile hold over Abyssinia.⁸⁹ Britain's Consul-General in Addis Ababa, Sir Hugh Stonehewer-Bird, felt that, with encouragement, all Abyssinians would unite against the Italians.⁹⁰ In December, an "exceptionally reliable" source told Brocas Burrows that things were going badly for Italy, especially north-west of Lake Tana.⁹¹ Abyssinia had become a sponge, absorbing increasing amounts of Italy's military resources.

By March 1939, few, save the Viceroy, were optimistic about Italy's prospects.⁹² Stonehewer-Bird felt it would take only a small spark to ignite full-scale rebellion. As the man on the spot, his views were respected by the Foreign Office and the War Office.⁹³ Italy's situation deteriorated in late June, when rebels in the Ankober district defeated six battalions of askaris.⁹⁴ There was further fighting in the Ankober district in August.⁹⁵ Rebel success, unaided so far as the British knew, was "music to the ears" of advocates of "raising the tribes". It indicated that the Abyssinians could mount an effective guerilla campaign against Italy.

However, senior colonial officials saw little merit and much harm in "raising the tribes". Their objections were based on their experience of administration, personal

observations and the reports of junior officials. The Governor of Kenya, Sir Robert Brooke-Popham, for example, conceded that a revolt could hinder Italy, but his sources advised that Abyssinia was quiet, save for sporadic revolts, and he saw little chance of fanning the embers of unrest into a flame. Brooke-Popham was also troubled by the morality of "raising the tribes". He felt it was wrong to encourage the rebels unless Britain took responsibility for them after the war. Brooke-Popham's moral qualms cut no ice with the Foreign Office. Cavendish Bentinck's sources said most refugees and deserters were willing to return to fight in Abyssinia, knowing that capture would be fatal. If they were willing to take this risk, Cavendish Bentinck felt they deserved Britain's help. As for Brooke-Popham

However, if the authorities in Kenya wish to have consciences as white as driven snow, they could, when handing out rifles, bandoliers and ammunition to the refugees, warn them with due solemnity of the perils which they will run.

If Italy declared war, the first task would be to prevent an attack on British territory. The second would be to produce "an Italian debacle". If Abyssinian refugees and Eritrean deserters could help, Britain should accept their assistance with gratitude, not heed Brooke-Popham and halt preparations, "an attitude which has cost us heavily in the past".⁹⁶

Symes and Platt also opposed "raising the tribes". (While the Sudan was administered by the Dominions Office, the outlook of its officials was as colonial as that of any member of the Colonial Service.) In April 1939, Symes warned that intelligence summaries and maps suggesting it would be easy to stir up trouble in Abyssinia were deceptive. Britain's "very limited" military resources plus Italy's sound tactical position and success in breaking the rebels' fighting organization mitigated

against success. Discontent could not become revolt without military support, and this was not available. Nor could an uprising be rushed. Italy could easily crush a premature revolt, making a second rising difficult to organize. It was fine to reserve a small stock of arms and ammunition for "Abyssinians of importance" who asked for help, but the Sudan's defence must come first. Symes hoped this warning would halt "any ideas of futile stunts or action in the blue".⁹⁷

Platt's view was similar. In April 1939, he told the War Office that a successful revolt was highly unlikely. The Amhara, though hostile to Italy, were broken militarily. The Galla (also known as the Omoro) were indifferent and capable only of sporadic banditry. Platt's sources estimated a thousand potential rebels at best, most tribal leaders were difficult, if not impossible, to contact, the SDF could not aid the rebels and Abyssinia was poor campaigning country, being mountainous and prone to flooding. It was simply unreasonable to launch a small rebel force against better armed, numerically superior, European-led troops, especially without current intelligence and local chiefs on whom the rebels could rely.⁹⁸ Platt was certain proponents of a revolt were using intelligence at least two or three years out-of-date and tailoring it to their plans. Supporters of revolt did not seem to realise that propaganda was not enough. To succeed, a revolt must have an effective administrative structure to equip and pay the rebels, troops to support them and air supremacy to encourage a general rising by demonstrating British strength.⁹⁹ In Platt's opinion, a revolt without adequate backing was a recipe for disaster.¹⁰⁰

While the objections of colonial administrators did not overturn support for "raising the tribes", they may have reinforced the caution which characterised support. The

Foreign Office, for example, insisted that until Britain and Italy were at war, preparations must be restricted to collecting information, buying currency and caching guns and ammunition, "enshrined in the utmost secrecy" to avoid arousing Italian suspicions.¹⁰¹ This caution was due to uncertainty about Italy's status in the event of war, and a suspicion that Italian neutrality might be in Britain's best interests. If so, there would be no room for "raising the tribes" in British plans. The fears of colonial administrators that a revolt could damage Britain's imperial position complemented the unwillingness of planners to relinquish any hope of coming to terms with Italy by supporting a revolt wholeheartedly. They may have been seen as another reason for a careful approach to "raising the tribes".

British caution was well-founded. In May 1939, there were reports that Italy feared Britain and France might be planning to "raise the tribes".¹⁰² The reports were accurate. After the assassination attempt, paranoia overwhelmed Graziani. He suspected an Indian trader, Mohammed Ally, of fronting for the SIS. Ally had shops throughout Italian East Africa in which, Graziani believed, "plots were hatched ... under the guidance of expert foreign elements", and he suspected British diplomats of complicity.¹⁰³ Graziani was not alone in his suspicions. In January 1939, the Duke of Aosta's Chief of Staff, General Count Ugo Cavallero, told the Duke he suspected France of aiding the rebels.¹⁰⁴ The Duke in turn, blamed Britain for five major disturbances in Abyssinia in May and June 1939.¹⁰⁵ If preparations to "raise the tribes" were not made very discretely, Italian suspicions would run rampant before a revolt could be launched.

The outbreak of war in September 1939, did not alter London's cautious support for a revolt. On one hand, British and French general staffs agreed on 16 October to foment risings in Abyssinia as soon as Italy declared war.¹⁰⁶ Ten days later, the COS warned that if risings were not incited immediately after Italy declared war, a revolt could be a "flash in the pan". But the JPC authorised only limited preparations.¹⁰⁷ The Foreign Office thus contented itself with caching funds for the rebels in Khartoum, and arranging to print the first batch of propaganda leaflets when Italy's belligerency appeared imminent. Middle East printers could not be used for fear of leaks, and few British printers had Amharic fonts.¹⁰⁸ In January 1940, the JIC asked the MEW to collate economic information to assess Italy's ability to handle a revolt.¹⁰⁹ Unqualified support for "raising the tribes" would have implied a policy of accepting a hostile Italy as inevitable, and through most of the Phoney War, London hoped to keep Italy neutral.

Senior colonial officials also continued their opposition. Sandford's appointment to the MEIC in September 1939 prompted Symes to warn that a rising was based on out-dated information, and that Britain could not support a levée en masse. Symes objected to any attempt to incite a revolt until Britain and Italy were at war and pointed out that a revolt would almost certainly be sporadic and localised. In its early stages it could not "be relied upon seriously to embarrass either the Italian military position or their plans".¹¹⁰ A revolt could be considered only "when the Italians should be known definitely to have their hands full".¹¹¹ Brooke-Popham reiterated his objections in October.¹¹²

The colonial chorus also gained a new voice, Governor Vincent Glenday of British Somaliland. In February 1940, Glenday worried that Sandford's propaganda would jeopardise negotiations with Italy over grazing rights, and asked the Colonial Secretary to have the War Office put his propaganda in abeyance until a new treaty was signed.¹¹³ The Colonial Office complied, and Wavell assured Glenday that he never meant to worry him or "in any way arouse the resentment of Italy".¹¹⁴ But Glenday worried that agents might be allowed to spread propaganda in Italian East Africa, "to get at defenceless leading Abyssinians".¹¹⁵ Glenday did not object to propaganda which started small and did not endanger the grazing rights treaty. But he suspected Sandford of exceeding the agreed limits in every way, and subversive activity was intolerable. Limiting propaganda to broadcasts refuting Italian propaganda was no solution. It would only raise false hopes among the Abyssinians and provoke Italian suspicions. In any event, 26 years of intelligence work had taught Glenday "how impossible it is to limit agents to negative work activities". Their actions were bound to be subversive. Glenday was reassured by the government's "wise attitude" in prohibiting agents in Abyssinia.¹¹⁶

Glenday, Brooke-Popham, Platt and Symes saw little merit in "raising the tribes", in part because the first task of every colonial official was to keep "his" (colonial officials were invariably male) territory in order. This meant "peace and quiet and good relations with the neighbouring power" since, as Abyssinia illustrated, states obtained little benefit from an unruly colony.¹¹⁷ This concern with order prompted Platt to suggest, in April 1939, that the rebels be armed with older model rifles to lessen the risk of problems for future administrators.¹¹⁸ Most colonial officials assessed a revolt in terms of its potential to cause problems in British territories, not

its ability to make life difficult for Italy. They were not unduly concerned with foreign policy or grand strategy.¹¹⁹ As an example, in May 1940, Glenday had "pretty clear evidence" that Italy's representative on the Trans-frontier Grazing Transit Traffic Commission was sending military information to the Viceroy in Addis Ababa, and was in contact with "native suspects of our own tribes". But he preferred not to act, lest Italy accuse Britain of breaking the Transit Traffic Agreement and close the frontier. This would disrupt grazing, with "unfortunate repercussions". However, the Colonial Secretary ordered him to close Italy's "valuable channel" of military information. If this resulted in reprisals, so be it.¹²⁰ The episode was atypical in that London rarely over-ruled the "man on the spot", who was thought to know best about "his" territory.¹²¹ But it does illustrate the local focus of most colonial officials.

A disinclination to look beyond local interests only partly explains the distaste of senior colonial officials for "raising the tribes", however. Behind their dislike was a conviction that enthusiasm for a revolt rested on a foundation of military weakness, out-dated intelligence and wishful thinking. This conviction was the product of expectations. Like all analysts, colonial officials were influenced by expectations of "what should happen", which led them to "fit the available information into a pre-determined frameworks of ideas".¹²² Colonial officials' expectations were shaped largely by their education. First, public school taught them to distrust the unorthodox and embrace justice within an over-riding framework of order. Then the Colonial Service taught them to buttress indigenous hierarchies and view the masses as lesser orders to be protected, almost as children.¹²³ Colonial officials thus found it difficult to believe the rebels could achieve any appreciable success on their own,

Whalley excepted.¹²⁴ Expecting the rebels to be capable of little more than glorified banditry, they dismissed reports of rebel achievements.

Although not a clean break with the past, the outbreak of war was a turning point for "raising the tribes" because it shifted the centre of planning to the GHQ-ME. The shift infused planning with a new vigour and sense of purpose for, if the Foreign Office was interested and the War Office keen on "raising the tribes", the GHQ-ME was positively enthusiastic. Much of this zeal came from Wavell, described by one of his biographers, Harold Raugh, as "the epitome of the tactically and technically proficient commander, full of audacity and imagination, and not afraid to take a calculated risk when the situation warranted". Wavell was a "firm believer in the indirect approach" and "a master of deception".¹²⁵ Michael Howard credits Wavell with "one of the more fertile minds ever possessed by a British senior officer".

No one understood better than he [Wavell] the role which deception and its child, surprise, should play in all military operations - especially operations conducted by numerically inferior forces far from home.

Wavell not only appreciated the contribution deception could make in operations by small, mobile forces, but set the pattern, with "A" Force's establishment in December 1939, for war-time deception organizations.¹²⁶

Ronald Lewin paints a similar picture. Wavell was a romantic at heart, waging war according to a creed of "mystery; daring; the calculated risk; above all the secret locked in the leader's head". Wavell was a great believer in deception, favouring "the unorthodox; the devious; the irregular; the clandestine".¹²⁷ Wavell's appreciation of the unorthodox made him so receptive to new ideas that fellow

officers sometimes considered him a "heretic".¹²⁸ He insisted, for example, that the Palestine campaign had done more for Mesopotamia in the last war than direct reinforcement could ever have accomplished, and that it was usually "fatal" for irregular forces to adopt the training and tactics of the regular army.¹²⁹ Wavell's interest in "raising the tribes" is thus not surprising.

Wavell's arrival in Cairo on 2 August 1939, began a new era in planning. He was appalled to discover the "purely passive" nature of most plans for the Middle East. Plans for the Sudan were "exaggeratedly defensive", while the policy for British Somaliland was "pure scuttle". For Britain to prevail, planning must embrace a more active defence in preparation for offensives against Italy.¹³⁰ Shortages of material and equipment ruled out many possibilities. But one plan suited both Wavell's prescription and resources, and in October he instructed his staff to examine the possibility of inciting a revolt in Abyssinia. Platt was ordered to study rebel activity to determine the best leaders and the best lines for subversive propaganda, and to take a census of the Abyssinian refugees in British territories to determine their military experience and technical knowledge. He was also to collect all potentially useful information on the best routes into areas of unrest, the most suitable guerilla bases and the best ways to communicate with and control the rebels.¹³¹ As preliminary inquiries were encouraging, Wavell sent for Colonel D.A. Sandford to take charge of planning, although the appointment was not official until Italy declared war in June 1940. Sandford was a logical choice. He had spent 15 years in Abyssinia, becoming a friend and occasional adviser to Haile Selassie.¹³² Sandford believed the Abyssinians were unreconciled to Italian rule and dismissed reports to the contrary as "empty propaganda".¹³³

Wavell's support for "raising the tribes" left him walking a tightrope because he could not afford to alienate colonial officials in the territories where preparations must be made. Thus, in October, Wavell expressed understanding of Symes' opposition to "raising the tribes" in peace-time and his fears that Sandford would jeopardize Italy's neutrality. In turn, Wavell asked Symes to understand that he must plan for Italy's hostility as well as its non-belligerency. As military commander, Wavell had to do his best, in the event of war

to embarrass and weaken my enemy; and action must be prepared in peace if it is to be effective in war. ... And I do not see why, in peace, we should allow Italian propaganda designed to lower British prestige to go unanswered and unchecked.

Wavell was certain Italy was more likely to remain non-belligerent if it knew Britain had plans for Italian East Africa, but agreed that Italy should not be given grounds to accuse Britain of bad faith. Wavell would therefore replace Sandford if Symes found his presence at Khartoum "too suspect".¹³⁴

But as Wavell had no intention of being caught "flat-footed", preparations for a revolt continued. On 10 January, Wavell asked Platt for a progress report. There would not be enough time to prepare after Italy entered the war, and Wavell was

very anxious that all our plans should be cut and dried as far as possible, and that our 'defensive-non-irritant' should not result in a passive attitude, but that we should do everything that is possible to enable us to assume the offensive if and when it is necessary to do so.¹³⁵

Platt's reply was encouraging. A frontier battalion was being raised and could be equipped with rifles, if local stocks were replenished, although bren and anti-tank

guns must be procured elsewhere. Five bases had been chosen along the most suitable approaches and were being reconnoitred, transport arrangements were being finalised, a census was being taken of the refugees, and 50,000 Maria Theresa dollars were available in Khartoum.¹³⁶ Progress was being made, despite the limitations imposed by Italy's non-belligerency.

Wavell's enthusiasm for "raising the tribes" was supported by intelligence on Abyssinia. When war broke out, the revolt was scaled back for a few weeks, on the advice of Haile Selassie, with whom the rebels were in contact.¹³⁷ In December, full-scale operations resumed, and Abebe Aregai, the police chief in Addis Ababa in 1935 and now one of the most important rebel leaders, inflicted three serious defeats on the Italians. Gibbs, Britain's acting Consul-General in Addis Ababa, felt Aregai's success indicated an "extremely efficient" espionage service, and suspected he had infiltrated followers into Italy's native forces, suspicions the War Office confirmed in March.¹³⁸ The new year brought Italy no respite. The East Africa Intelligence Summary for January reported fighting between Italian troops and the rebels in the east, while in the west, chiefs were said to "rule as before".¹³⁹ In March, Aregai inflicted heavy losses on the Italians.¹⁴⁰ The situation deteriorated so rapidly that on 6 April, the Viceroy told Italy's Foreign Minister, Count Galeazzo Ciano, the spirit of revolt was "very much alive". He expected full-scale rebellion if the Abyssinians "got any inkling of our difficulties".¹⁴¹ Despite Italy's efforts, by June the rebels were stronger than ever in Gojjam, Ammachs, Begemder and parts of Shoa.¹⁴²

Wavell also took steps to improve intelligence. In March 1940, he appointed Major R.E. Cheesman, the former consul at Dangila, Abyssinia, to handle intelligence for

the revolt.¹⁴³ That same month, Curle took up his appointment as the intelligence officer of the Somaliland Camel Corps. Before British Somaliland fell in August, his Somali agents gathered much useful information.¹⁴⁴ However, Wavell was unable to persuade Glenday to agree to a small agency in British Somaliland to gather "ordinary military intelligence" and make preparations to conduct the propaganda authorised by the War Office. Wavell assured Glenday that "these agents will not be employed in subversive propaganda or activities of any kind". Nor did Wavell intend to conduct subversive propaganda against Italy in peace-time, evade Foreign Office restrictions or embarrass Glenday. But Glenday was implacable.¹⁴⁵ Nor was this the only restriction. The JPC, concerned about relations with Italy, permitted only "unobtrusive" preparations to "raise the tribes".¹⁴⁶ Thus, while Haile Selassie was in contact with rebel leaders, and three Italians passed freely and regularly through Berbera's defences, Wavell could not send agents into Abyssinia before 10 June 1940.¹⁴⁷ He could only take unobtrusive measures to secure and disseminate information on the war's progress in Italian East Africa.¹⁴⁸

Wavell did, however, benefit from the establishment of the MEIC in June 1939. The MEIC became necessary because, while the Middle East grew in importance after 1918, and was "a single strategic entity" for Imperial defence after Italy's conquest of Abyssinia, no organization provided the C-in-C, Middle East, with intelligence for the entire region. The JIC therefore recommended a MEIC to furnish co-ordinated intelligence to the C-in-C, the Joint Planning Staff and heads of the civil departments in the Middle East, and the JIC in London. It was to be a collating centre with access to "all existing sources of information in its area", but the Foreign Office, which monopolised diplomatic intelligence, refused to participate.¹⁴⁹ Undaunted, the MEIC

set up a foreign affairs section and combined diplomatic and military intelligence in its appreciations. By spring 1940, the MEIC was issuing appreciations and background reports on resources, communications, frontiers, climate and hygiene, all of which were useful to those planning to "raise the tribes".¹⁵⁰

In particular, Wavell was eager to exploit the weakness of Italy's propaganda in Abyssinia. Italian propaganda was disseminated by pamphlets, wireless broadcasts and newspapers. The newspapers, read mainly by the small, educated class, were moderate but definitely biased. The wireless broadcasts were of no consequence as the poor quality of the loudspeakers made them unintelligible. Most Abyssinians were reached by pamphlets or agents disseminating the pamphlets. But the pamphlets were often too wild to be credible. In January 1940, for example, a pamphlet claimed that Germany had destroyed the entire British Fleet!¹⁵¹ This lack of credibility made it unlikely the pamphlets would win the "hearts and minds" of Abyssinians.

Wavell saw the weakness of Italian propaganda as a opportunity to build support for a revolt, and on 9 February 1940, he asked the JIC for a new directive on the political basis of propaganda. In September 1939, the Foreign Office stated that propaganda centred on Haile Selassie "would do more harm than good". Wavell requested the Foreign Office be asked to reconsider. In January, he told the War Office that in Abyssinia "there is no other personality in any way comparable to his [Haile Selassie's] as regards influence".¹⁵² He now advised the JIC that recent evidence revealed Haile Selassie as the "one outstanding figure in Abyssinian eyes". Moreover, the policy of avoiding anything Italy could view as provocation

is affecting not only the essential preparations for war, but is beginning to work to the advantage of Italy and to the disadvantage of ourselves. The longer war is deferred and our present inactive policy continues, the smaller the prospects become of causing embarrassment to the Italians through tribal action.

There was an urgent need to co-ordinate policy and propaganda with France so the allies could counter Italian propaganda, reassure the rebels about future policy and decide whether to train deserters and refugees as guerillas.¹⁵³

The Foreign Office poured cold water on Wavell's suggestions. It felt the French had achieved little in East Africa, especially as "their secret agents have signally failed to remain secret". Further, anti-Italian propaganda in Italian East Africa would be "most inexpedient", while the benefits of accepting deserters and training refugees were not worth the likely offence to Italy. The Foreign Office suspected that Wavell had been "over-impressed" by the French in Jibuti, officials in Berbera (presumably not Glenday) and Sandford, who was "something of a fanatic" about "raising the tribes". Thompson insisted that the Abyssinians would not rebel without help, and that propaganda would be ineffective because the civil authority in Abyssinia was too strong. It would not be wise to "look for any co-ordinated action on the part of oppressed blacks".¹⁵⁴ In short, the Foreign Office saw less likelihood of war with Italy in early 1940 and wanted to avoid awakening Mussolini's bellicose spirit.¹⁵⁵ Until this changed, the Foreign Office would "in no circumstances" approve subversive action in Italian East Africa or among Abyssinian refugees.¹⁵⁶ Its definition of "subversive" appeared to include most preparations for "raising the tribes".

Wavell did not give up without a fight. On 11 March he wrote to the War Office, stressing the need for timely preparations to "raise the tribes". A revolt would benefit Britain by preventing Italian offensives in East Africa, neutralising and exhausting Italy's air force in the region, and paving the way for the defeat of all Italian forces in East Africa. But if Britain was unable to

create disturbances in Italian East Africa effectively, at once and on a considerable scale, our own possessions will be in a position of danger and strong reinforcements will be required for their protection.

As preparations could not be "improvised at short notice", the GHQ-ME was organizing propaganda, with due attention to Italian sensibilities. Wavell was certain the best deterrent was the knowledge that Britain was fully prepared to support the rebels, but accepted that telling Italy was out of the question.¹⁵⁷ Until Britain and Italy were at war, the military authority had to defer to the civilian authorities. London's desire to avoid upsetting Italy in order to keep it out of the war, prohibited many preparations Wavell felt vital to a successful revolt. His solution was to take the preparations allowed, such as laying the foundation for propaganda and training the rebels, as far as possible without unduly alarming local officials, the War Office or the government in London.

The clash between Wavell's enthusiasm and London's caution was settled by the second turning point of "raising the tribes", Italy's declaration of war on 10 June 1940. With Italy definitely hostile, the British government was no longer concerned to keep its options open with respect to Italy. The GHQ-ME was now free to proceed with plans to "raise the tribes". But its plans had to be modified as Italy's belligerency and France's fall meant that Britain had lost an ally and gained an

adversary. For "raising the tribes", the first result was to resolve propaganda's political basis. Until France fell, Haile Selassie seemed destined to play no role in the revolt. In April 1940, the Foreign Office recommended the revolt be anti-Italian, not pro-Emperor as its sources claimed that non-Amharic Abyssinians would not rebel to restore Haile Selassie.¹⁵⁸ On 12 June, the Foreign Secretary, Lord Halifax, told the War Cabinet that many Abyssinians felt Haile Selassie had let them down.¹⁵⁹ However, the arguments of Wavell and the War Office plus the new strategic situation soon led the Foreign Office to alter its views. A 16 June Foreign Office paper presented at the 18 June War Cabinet meeting, stated that with Italy in the war, Britain's objective in Abyssinia was to maximise the military activity against Italy. As the revolt was being led by followers of Haile Selassie, and as there was no other figure around whom the rebels could rally, the Foreign Office now felt it reasonable to accept the military arguments and throw Britain's support behind Haile Selassie.¹⁶⁰ But a definite decision was delayed until France signed armistices with Germany on 22 June and Italy on 24 June. As it would soon be impossible to fly from London to Egypt with any safety, Haile Selassie's return must be now or never. The War Cabinet chose now, and on 25 June Haile Selassie arrived in Alexandria. His return implied British support for his restoration and Abyssinia's re-emergence as an independent state. On 13 January 1941 the War Cabinet made this official, stating that Britain would recognise Haile Selassie's claim to the throne as soon as he crossed the frontier. (In June 1940 the Foreign Office had recommended delaying a declaration of support to avoid uniting Italian public opinion, which was then considered divided over Abyssinia, behind Mussolini.)¹⁶¹

France's fall also settled the outline of "raising the tribes". From the beginning, British planners had assumed French participation in the revolt. Indeed, they deemed it essential. Planners had decided the revolt's main military support would be a French offensive from Jibuti due to its rail line and road to Addis Ababa. It was thus essential that French Somaliland remain in allied hands. If Italy gained control of Jibuti, an offensive would be impossible, and the rebels might conclude that they were on their own. If so, hopes of "raising the tribes" would be effectively ended.¹⁶² French Somaliland was most vulnerable across its border with British Somaliland where, according to Major-General Sir Arthur Chater, the Officer Commanding, British Somaliland (July 1937-August 1940), Colonial Office "parsimony ...made it difficult to get even the small sum of money without which the most elementary defence arrangements could be made".¹⁶³ As a result, the June 1939 AFCs in Aden recommended that the French commander in Jibuti, General Legentilhomme, be allowed to construct defences in British Somaliland.¹⁶⁴

The outbreak of war did not alter French Somaliland's role in the revolt, as the JPC and the COS affirmed in October 1939, January 1940 and April 1940.¹⁶⁵ But French Somaliland was still vulnerable. By late May 1940, mobilisation in Italian East Africa was almost complete, and Stonehewer-Bird suspected that if Italy could not persuade dissidents in French Somaliland to make trouble, it might attack Jibuti. The Foreign Office agreed. While Jibuti's defences had been strengthened, France would have problems unless Italy was busy with a revolt in Italian East Africa.¹⁶⁶ Fortunately, Italy's position in Abyssinia remained shaky, and the War Office believed a revolt would spread rapidly.¹⁶⁷ If Italy went to war, French Somaliland

might benefit as much from a revolt as the rebels would benefit from the Jibuti offensive.

Then the Franco-Italian armistice of 24 June severed the connection between French Somaliland and the revolt and left British Somaliland virtually defenceless. This was a blow, not because Britain deemed the territory valuable, but because British Somaliland provided defence-in-depth for French Somaliland. In Italian hands, it could do the same for Abyssinia.¹⁶⁸ For a time, Wavell hoped to salvage the Jibuti offensive as Legentilhomme insisted that he would fight on. However, Legentilhomme was replaced by a pro-Vichy general on 23 July.¹⁶⁹ The loss of France and its North African colonies necessitated a hasty revision of British plans. But for British Somaliland time had run out. Wavell's staff was studying an offensive against Italian East Africa from British Somaliland, a plan termed practical and suitable by the JPC, when Italy attacked on 4 August. The badly outnumbered British evacuated British Somaliland on 18 August, taking with them any possibility of replacing the Jibuti offensive with an offensive from Berbera.¹⁷⁰ Instead, Wavell decided that the rebellion would be supported by two offensives, one from the Sudan and a second from Kenya.¹⁷¹ The revolt's basic outline had been set.

But before it could "raise the tribes" Britain had to overcome the intelligence black-out after Italy declared war. Soon after 10 June, Italy changed its service ciphers, and Britain did not resume reading Italy's main naval ciphers, save briefly due to captures, until mid-1941. Italy's diplomatic cipher and many low grade ciphers were still accessible and useful, but revealed little of Italy's strategy or operational plans and could not replace high-grade service ciphers.¹⁷² In August, Italy changed its

army cipher for East Africa, leaving Britain in the dark about its order of battle, strength and war readiness in Italian East Africa. Without this information, the JPC could only term the prospects of a successful revolt "guarded". By late November, ignorance about Italy's strategic situation led planners to fear a large-scale Italian advance in East Africa.¹⁷³

Britain's intelligence woes were not limited to ciphers. Most overt intelligence disappeared because Italy improved its security after it declared war. Nor could SIS infiltrate agents to set up "stay behind" networks in Italy.¹⁷⁴ While senior SIS personnel were attached to the GHQ-ME, little was done to put the SIS on a war footing or strengthen its ties with service intelligence in the region.¹⁷⁵ Photo reconnaissance was also in a sorry state. In October 1940, the War Cabinet approved a photo reconnaissance unit for the RAF's (Royal Air Force) Middle East headquarters. But until 1941, the RAF had to share the army's lone photo interpretation officer.¹⁷⁶ Britain's direction-finding techniques were also generally ineffective as Italian submarines used wireless only when going to and from harbour.¹⁷⁷

Fortunately, Britain's intelligence problems were not insoluble. By 1940, Britain received valuable information from Middle East Censorship which was under the GHQ-ME. Once Italy declared war, censors added mail from Italian territories to their reading list. Even more valuable was the flood of Italian prisoners-of-war (POWs) after Operation "Compass" in December 1940. Because Italian security was lax, POW mail, supplemented by interrogations of POWs, became Britain's main source on Italy's order of battle.¹⁷⁸

But perhaps most important was the establishment of a Combined Bureau, Middle East (CBME) in November 1940. The GC & CS first suggested this in 1938, to give the services equal access to intelligence in the Middle East, speed the receipt of intercepts in London and divide cryptanalysis fairly between Britain and the Middle East. The services rejected a CBME in 1938, 1939 and early 1940, largely due to inter-service rivalry, and continued to handle signals intelligence independently. But when intelligence on Italy dried up in the summer of 1940, the services realised collaboration was vital to restore the flow of intelligence, and agreed to form a CBME with a small group of cryptanalysts, including the head of the GC & CS's Italian section, sent to Cairo that summer at Wavell's request.¹⁷⁹

Middle East signals intelligence was now divided between the GC & CS which controlled cryptanalysis and handled high grade ciphers, and the CBME which decrypted low grade ciphers and exploited the GC & CS's breakthroughs. Naval signals intelligence remained in Alexandria as the GC & CS was unable to break Italy's main naval cipher.¹⁸⁰ By December, the CBME had recovered Italy's new air force cipher, and the GC & CS had broken Italy's high grade army cipher for the Middle East. Within a month, the CBME had cracked so many low grade army, colonial and Carbinieri codes and ciphers that it was able to work only on those of the most operational value.¹⁸¹ Nor did Italy's naval signals intelligence in East Africa long remain a mystery. Cryptanalysts received an important break soon after Italy declared war. On 19 or 21 June 1940, (depending on the source), the Italian submarine "Galileo Galilei" was captured off Eritrea, with its codes and ciphers intact. Cryptanalysts were soon reading Italy's naval codes for East Africa. They did

so almost continuously while Italy was a belligerent because Italy changed its naval codes only monthly, and it never took cryptanalysts more than two days to break a new code.¹⁸²

Progress with Italian signals intelligence was so rapid that by January 1941, British commanders-in-chief were reading Italian plans and appreciations for East Africa almost as soon as they were issued. Signals intelligence from all levels, from the Viceroy to the smallest garrison, flooded in. The Viceroy's signals were particularly valuable. They contained Air Command previews of the next week's operations, reports on resources and army commanders' appreciations and orders.¹⁸³ Signals intelligence made East Africa the "perfect example of the cryptographers' war". Britain was blessed with a plentiful supply of captured documents, intercept stations able to receive every Italian communication, and an enemy isolated from its homeland and dependent on radio and operating over huge distances which made frequent cipher and code changes impossible. The previous summer the British had known little of Italy's order of battle, supply situation or war readiness. Now they were almost as well informed as the Italians.¹⁸⁴

Italy's declaration of war led to a re-birth, of sorts, of the "Mediterranean First" strategy. On 21 August 1940, the COS told the JPC that it was important to do everything to weaken Italy, including "raising the tribes" in Abyssinia, a view Eden echoed on 13 November.¹⁸⁵ In December, intelligence reported that Germany planned a Balkan advance, reports Ultra confirmed on 10 January. (Ultra was the name given to decrypts of signals intelligence produced by the German Enigma machine.) As the need for troops to face a German advance made a rapid victory

over Italy in East Africa imperative, the COS gave Italian East Africa priority after operations in the Western Desert had run their course.¹⁸⁶ But a conventional offensive was out of the question. The British estimated Italy had 290,000 troops, plus 213 aircraft in Italian East Africa. (In reality, Italy had 120,000 Italian and 230,000 native troops, plus 325 aircraft of which 142 were in reserve). Facing them were 9000 British troops in the Sudan, 8500 in Kenya, and 1475 in British Somaliland for a total of 18,975, plus 163 aircraft in East Africa.¹⁸⁷

But Britain had an ace up its sleeve as a revolt could bring about Italy's early demise in Italian East Africa at small cost to Britain.¹⁸⁸ With the War Office's blessing, Wavell had already taken the first steps. On 11 June 1940, letters offering money and material support plus military advice were sent to eleven rebel chiefs. Within a fortnight, rebels and potential rebels were arriving daily in the Sudan. They were organized into four battalions and several smaller units, each with British officers and NCOs (non-commissioned officers).¹⁸⁹ To co-ordinate their activities, Wavell established Mission 101. On 12 August, Sandford and one section of the mission crossed into Abyssinia to stimulate revolt, reconnoitre the route for Haile Selassie, report on the frontier east of Gallabat and set up a headquarters.¹⁹⁰ Additional sections of the mission crossed into Abyssinia on 31 August and 18 September.¹⁹¹

Next, Wavell, Haile Selassie, Eden and South African Prime Minister Smuts met at Khartoum on 28 and 29 October, to discuss plans to "raise the tribes". They agreed that a revolt was the best way to make Italy's position in East Africa untenable, and decided to begin offensive operations as soon as possible. Under the provisional timetable, Gallabat would be attacked in November, and Kassala and Kismayu in

early 1941, when the revolt would swing into high gear. In the interim, the rebels would be trained and organised by Operation Centres, consisting of a British officer, five British NCOs and two hundred Abyssinians specially trained in guerilla warfare. This was a departure from the 1916-8 Arab Revolt, which had no specially trained vanguard. The Patriots (as the rebels were known, in deference to Haile Selassie) would participate in operations, much as the Arabs had done in the last war. But the revolt's backbone would be a small, specially trained force, whose participation would be as regular as its methods were irregular.¹⁹²

The Khartoum Conference also brought the revolt's last major figure onto the scene. The conference authorised two British officers to liaise with Haile Selassie, Mission 101 and the GHQ-ME. On 6 November, Major Orde Wingate arrived in Khartoum to take up the appointment.¹⁹³ Wavell knew Wingate, who had been one of his intelligence officers in Palestine in 1937-8. He agreed to Wingate's appointment on one condition. On no account was Wingate to be employed in Palestine where his devotion to Zionism made him a security risk. Wingate's first assignment was to liaise between the GHQ-ME and Haile Selassie while supervising the recruitment, training and equipping of potential rebels. His abilities and enthusiasm enabled Wingate to turn this assignment into a more congenial role, that of guerilla leader.¹⁹⁴

A second conference at Cairo on 2 December decided that Haile Selassie should return to Abyssinia as soon as possible. The Cairo conference also set a provisional timetable for the revolt.¹⁹⁵ Wavell hoped to synchronise the revolt with Operation "Compass", the offensive in the Western Desert which began on 9 December, but the supporting operations ran into trouble. First, Platt's November offensive failed to

recapture Gallabat. Then Cunningham advised that the advance against Italian Somaliland must be delayed at least six months due to shortages of supporting arms and water. Despite pressure from Churchill, the campaign in Italian East Africa was postponed. The first major operation, Platt's offensive against Kassala, would now begin on 9 February. In the interim, Cunningham would take control of Kenya on its border with Italian Somaliland, and make the administrative arrangements to advance on Italian Somaliland in May. The Patriots were to seize a stronghold in Gojjam, install Haile Selassie and widen the area of the revolt.¹⁹⁶ When Platt's offensive began in February, the stage would be set to "raise the tribes".

But once more circumstances intervened, this time in the form of unexpected success. During the winter of 1940-1, the Patriots and small mobile detachments from Platt's main force, known as Gazelle Force, had been harrying the Italians on the Sudan-Abyssinia border. In January, the Italians, reportedly in a "precarious position", withdrew. As neither Gazelle Force nor the Patriots had the forces for pursuit, Platt's attack on Kassala was advanced to 19 January to exploit the retreat. But by 17 January, the Italians had evacuated Kassala and were withdrawing toward Asmara. As it now appeared that the Italians could be swept out of Eritrea and onto the Asmara plateau, Wavell ordered Platt to press on to Asmara.¹⁹⁷ Haile Selassie's return was advanced to 20 January to allow him to enter Addis Ababa with Platt.¹⁹⁸ Sandford became Haile Selassie's political adviser and turned Mission 101 over to Wingate who commanded the forces which were to support the rebel operations, namely Frontier Battalion, the Second Ethiopian Battalion and #1 and #2 Operational Centres. The first task of these troops, which Wingate christened "Gideon Force", was to secure a stronghold in Gojjam for Haile Selassie, while the

Patriots harried the main roads to force Italy to commit as many forces as possible to Addis Ababa's defence.¹⁹⁹ The preparatory phase of "raising the tribes" was over. The operational phase was about to begin.

The operational phase began on 27 February when Gideon Force and the Patriots (collectively termed "the rebels") attacked the forts at Burye. The Italians abandoned the forts on 29 February, after wasting much ammunition against imaginary targets. Next, the rebels attacked the forts protecting Debra Markos on 30 February.²⁰⁰ The campaign was not without problems. It was difficult to co-ordinate Gideon Force and the Patriots, and the rebels' habit of outrunning their communication and supply lines was never solved. Nevertheless, on 10 March rebel activity caused Italy's army in Gojjam to withdraw to Debra Markos.²⁰¹ In preparation for the siege of Debra Markos, the rebels captured the fort at Abima on 20 March. They then mounted continuous small operations over the next four days which convinced the Italians they faced at least a division. Wingate's intelligence, from spies attached to the Patriot bands and a steady stream of askari deserters, confirmed that Italian morale was cracking. On 24 March, the rebels attacked the Gulit Line, Italy's defensive line west of Debra Markos, and on 6 April, Debra Markos fell.²⁰²

The rebels had achieved all their objectives save one. They were unable to link up with Platt for the entry into Addis Ababa. April found Haile Selassie in Debra Markos with the Italian army in Gojjam between him and his capital because, despite Platt's capture of Agordat on 1 February and Barentu on 2 February, the Italians made a determined stand in Eritrea. Platt's advance stalled before the natural fortress of Keren, which did not fall until 27 March. On 1 April, Platt's forces occupied Asmara,

which the Italians had abandoned. When Platt captured Massawa on 8 April, Italian opposition in Eritrea was at an end.²⁰³ Platt had achieved his objectives, but fierce Italian resistance put him far behind schedule.

Italian resistance had a domino effect on the campaign. Originally, the southern front was to support the main offensive, a role which seemed confirmed in November when Cunningham insisted the attack on Italian Somaliland be postponed until after the spring rains. But when in January, his forces found water at Hagadesa, Cunningham persuaded Wavell to advance the offensive against Kismayu to 11 February.²⁰⁴ Two days later, Italy began evacuating the city which fell on 14 February. On 25 February, British forces captured Mogadiscio, and on 1 March, the Italians began evacuating Italian Somaliland. British Somaliland was reclaimed when Cunningham's forces re-occupied Berbera on 16 March.²⁰⁵

Cunningham's advance was more rapid than anticipated because no one had expected the Duke of Aosta to concentrate his forces in the north and leave the rest of Italian East Africa lightly defended. The speed of his advance convinced Cunningham that he could capture Addis Ababa, and Wavell gave his blessing as it was vital to finish the campaign as quickly as possible. Addis Ababa thus fell to Cunningham on 6 April, while Haile Selassie looked on from Debra Markos.²⁰⁶ This created friction as Haile Selassie wanted to reclaim his capital as soon as possible. Cunningham worried that the Abyssinians might take revenge on the Italians in Addis Ababa and insisted that Haile Selassie wait until the city was secured by British forces. Haile Selassie found the suggestion insulting, and feared a delay could damage him politically. He took matters into his own hands, and left Debra

Markos at the head of his rebel forces. On 5 May, five years to the day that the Italians forced him to flee his capital, Haile Selassie returned in triumph to Addis Ababa.²⁰⁷ The campaign's epilogue began on 6 May, when Platt's forces assaulted Amba Alagi where the Duke of Aosta was making a last stand. It ended on 19 May when the Duke surrendered his forces.²⁰⁸ "Raising the tribes" was over.

In summary, "raising the tribes" called for Britain to equip and train Abyssinian rebels as a guerilla force against the Italians. The ensuing revolt would defeat Italy in East Africa and, indirectly, in Europe. Support for the plan was based on the legacy of T.E Lawrence and the Arab Revolt, the campaign of von Lettow-Vorbeck, Senussi resistance against Italy, the 1935-6 Italo-Abyssinian War, Italy's economic and logistical situation in East Africa, ongoing unrest in Abyssinia and British fondness for the indirect approach. The first plans called for the "tribes to be raised" in Libya. When this was found to be unviable, British eyes turned to Abyssinia, where intelligence indicated a good chance of success.

"Raising the tribes" went through three phases, marked by two turning points. Phase one was characterised by cautious support in London (Italy might yet prove a friend, or at least neutral, in the event of war) and opposition from senior colonial officials. The first turning point was Wavell's arrival in Cairo in August 1939 and the outbreak of war in September. While London continued its cautious support and senior colonial officials remained opposed, Wavell infused planning with vigour and enthusiasm. As a result, the GHQ-ME pushed its preparations for a revolt to the limits allowed and laid the groundwork for "raising the tribes" once Italy declared war. The second turning point was Italy's declaration of war on 10 June 1940, which

removed all possibilities save a hostile Italy. This negated the objections of senior colonial officials and emboldened London. As a result, Wavell and the GHQ-ME were able to make "raising the tribes" a reality. France's fall soon after Italy's declaration refined many of the revolt's details. Circumstances determined the rest. The revolt was launched in February 1941. It concluded in May 1941 with Italy's surrender in East Africa.

"Raising the tribes illustrates that for intelligence to be useful, it must fulfill the three functions set out by Wesley K. Wark in "Intelligence Predictions and Strategic Surprises: Reflections on the British Experience in the 1930s". These functions are "to acquire information, to analyse and interpret the available facts, and to ensure that the digested information reaches decision makers".²⁰⁹ The importance of collecting accurate information is, perhaps, obvious, but information is of little value unless it is assessed accurately. Two factors played a major role in assessments of "raising the tribes" - expectations and policy implications. Expectations were behind the insistence of senior colonial officials that hopes of a successful revolt were wishful thinking, the qualified support for "raising the tribes" in London before Italy joined the war and the more enthusiastic support of Wavell and the GHQ-ME. The effect of Italy's declaration of war on London's support for a revolt also illustrates the role of policy implications on assessments because when the possibility of Italian neutrality ceased to exist, "raising the tribes" became Britain's policy in East Africa.

But correct assessments are not enough as intelligence must be applied to policy to realise its full value. In this case, intelligence did not create the idea of "raising the tribes". That seed was planted by events like the Arab Revolt, and the Italo-

Abyssinian War. Rather, intelligence's first task was to assess a revolt's viability . Planners then combined assessments of a revolt's viability and low cost to convince policy-makers of the wisdom of "raising the tribes", their task facilitated by the lack of another equally attractive option. Finally, Britain used its operational intelligence for East Africa to guide the revolt as it unfolded. By fulfilling all of Wark's requirements, intelligence was able to play a significant role in Britain's campaign in East Africa. Indeed, Hinsley states that Italy's dependence on radio, its inability to make frequent code and cipher changes, and Britain's ability to intercept Italy's traffic made Abyssinia the "perfect example of the cryptographers' war".²¹⁰

"Raising the tribes" is also meaningful for its links to the "Mediterranean First" strategy. Both sought victory through indirect means. Even as the "Mediterranean First" strategy would have used Italy, the Axis' weak link, to defeat Germany, "raising the tribes" planned to use Abyssinia, a secondary theatre, to defeat Italy. "Raising the tribes" thus played the same role in Italy's defeat that the "Mediterranean First" strategy was designed to play in Germany's demise. But unlike the "Mediterranean First" strategy which never left the drawing board, "the tribes" were successfully raised in Abyssinia.

Finally, "raising the tribes" was strategically significant for Britain's war effort. For one thing, the campaign in East Africa, to which "raising the tribes" made a major contribution, represented Italy's third major defeat in the first months of 1941. Coming hard on the heels of defeats in Greece and the Western Desert, the loss of its East African empire spelled the end of Italy's ability to fight a parallel war, thus simplifying Britain's strategic situation.²¹¹ Perhaps even more important, Britain's

victory in Italian East Africa ended the Axis threat to Allied shipping in the Red Sea. By contributing to the victory which opened the Red Sea route to the Allies, "raising the tribes" thus made a valuable contribution to the Allies' conduct of the war in both Europe and the Pacific.²¹² It appears, therefore, that while "raising the tribes" was helping Britain defeat Italy in East Africa, it may have been helping to lay the groundwork for Italy's exit from the war in 1943 and, through Italy's demise, perhaps even for the final Allied victory in 1945.

NOTES

The following classes of documents were the most helpful for this chapter: FO 371, AIR 9, WO 106, WO 201, CAB 65 and CAB 84. Also useful were CAB 56, WO 33, WO 169, ADM 1 and ADM 223 as well as the Beesly, Clarke, Denniston, Platt and Chater papers. However, there were some restrictions on this study. The SIS, NID and MI5 records are not open for this period, and there are no signals intelligence decrypts available for the campaign in East Africa. The available Ultra decrypts pertain to ship movements in the Aegean and the central Mediterranean. In addition, Gideon Force did not keep any codes, cyphers or war diaries, as that was considered too risky. (Papers of Lt.-Col. A.T. Curle, IWM) But while it was necessary to rely to a large degree on Hinsley, the Beesly, Denniston and Clarke papers and the Report of the Mediterranean Operational Intelligence Centre (ADM 223/89) shed light on aspects of intelligence only touched by Hinsley. The East Africa Intelligence Summary, the Sudan Military Intelligence Reports and the Weekly Political Intelligence Summary also proved useful. On the Italian side, Ciano's Diary 1939-1943 and GFM 36 contain little on this topic, while I Documenti Diplomatici Italiani stop soon after Italy declared war. For the British, Colonial Office records have been extensively weeded and deal almost entirely with local matters, but it was possible to reconstruct the "colonial" point of view from FO 371. I could not obtain access to General Sir Alan Cunningham's papers at the National Army Museum as the Museum could not process the request while I was in London. However, as there were no Patriot forces on the southern front, I do not believe his papers would have added much. Nor, so far as I could determine, are the Wavell papers generally available for research, although accredited biographers appear to receive access. However, I believe the War Office papers and biographies of Wavell provide a good, though of course not comprehensive, picture of his ideas about and role in "raising the tribes".

¹ According to Anthony Mockler. Haile Selassie's War. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984.), "... there is no difference between Ethiopia and Abyssinia. Abyssinia and Ethiopia are one and the same country". The confusion comes because from the Middle Ages to the end of World War II, the country was generally known as Abyssinia. After World War II, it was referred to as Ethiopia. As this thesis is pre-1945, I have used the name current before 1945 - Abyssinia.

² Major Cornwall Jones to Cavendish Bentinck. 22 May 1939. Annex II. Action taken by Service Departments in respect of raising insurrection in Abyssinia. May 1939. J2062/33/66. FO 371/23387.

³ E. Bauer. The History of World War II. (Toronto: Royce, 1979.), 126-7; John Keegan. The Second World War. (London: Hutchinson, 1989.), 147; Andrew Browne Cunningham. A Sailor's Odyssey. (London: Hutchinson, 1951.), 260-4; Peter

Calvocoressi, Guy Wint and John Pritchard. Total War. Vol. I. (London: Penguin Books, 1989.), 154.

⁴ Wesley Wark. "Intelligence Predictions and Strategic Surprise: Reflections on the British Experience in the 1930s". British and American Approaches to Intelligence. ed. by K.G. Robertson. (Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press, 1987.), 87.

⁵ Llewellyn Woodward. British Foreign Policy in the Second World War. Vol. I. (London: HMSO, 1970.), 511. Woodward relegates the campaign to a single footnote stating that Churchill wanted to keep the Italians out of Khartoum, and Platt and (Sir Alan) Cunningham obliged. He gives no details. J.R.M. Butler. Grand Strategy. Vol. II. September 1939 to June 1941. (London: HMSO, 1957.), 10, 139, 450. Butler states that British and French representatives at the 1939 AFCs in Aden agreed that "raising the tribes" in Abyssinia could yield early results. In November 1940, Wavell made Italian East Africa's liquidation his first priority, after Italy's forces in Egypt were defeated. Butler mentions Haile Selassie's 5 May, 1941 return to Addis Ababa, but does not discuss the rebellion which helped to make it possible. George Kirk. Survey of International Affairs 1939-1945. (London: Oxford University Press, 1952.), 49. Kirk credits British success in Abyssinia's Gojjam province to Sudanese troops, and states that the rebels were reluctant to run any risks until victory seemed certain. But he weakens his argument by quoting Wavell's Despatch on the East Africa campaign which attributed British success equally to Platt's offensive in the north, Cunningham's offensive in the south, and the rebellion in the west.

⁶ These include: Renzo De Felice. Mussolini l'alleato 1940-1945, L'Italia in guerra. (Torino: Giulio Einaudi, 1990.); Galeazzo Ciano. Ciano's Diary 1939-1943. (London: Heinemann, 1947.); Angelo Del Boca. The Ethiopian War 1935-1941. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1965.), 251; Alberto Sbacchi. Ethiopia Under Mussolini. Fascism and the Colonial Experience. (London: Zed Books, 1985.) and Anthony Mockler. Haile Selassie's War. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984.). De Felice and Ciano give East Africa only passing mention. Del Boca briefly discusses the revolt, but emphasises the 1935-6 Italo-Abyssinian War and Italy's administration of Abyssinia, as does Sbacchi. While Mockler provides useful discussion of the geo-political situation in Abyssinia, the local personalities and the course of the revolt, the focus is strictly local.

⁷ There is no discussion in: Donald Cameron Watt. How War Came (London: Heinemann, 1989.); Richard Overy. The Road of War. (Toronto: Stoddart, 1989.); Williamson Murray. The Change in the European Balance of Power 1938-9. {The Change.} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984.); Gordon Wright. The Ordeal of Total War 1938-1945. (New York: Harper & Row, 1968.); J.F.C. Fuller. The Second World War 1939-1945. (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1948.); Peter Calvocoressi, Guy Wint and John Pritchard. Total War. revised ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1989.); R.A.C. Parker. The Struggle for Survival. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.).

⁸ These include: Lawrence R. Pratt. East of Malta, West of Suez. Britain's Mediterranean Crisis 1936-1939. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975.), 132, 184; Martin Gilbert. The Second World War. (Toronto: Stoddart, 1989.), 153; John Keegan. The Second World War. (London: Hutchinson, 1989.), 322-4; and B.H. Liddell Hart. The History of the Second World War. (London: Cassell, 1970.), 125. Pratt briefly discusses planning for the campaign in Abyssinia. Gilbert states that the British decoded signals ordering Italian forces to withdraw from Kassala, a frontier post on the Abyssinia-Sudan border occupied by Italy in July 1940. This enabled them to attack the Italians in Abyssinia. During the campaign, the British read Italy's military instructions almost as soon as they were issued, and used this knowledge to foil Italy's plans and exploit its weaknesses. However, Gilbert gives no details. Keegan states that Smuts wanted a campaign in East Africa for domestic political reasons, while the Minister of War (to December 1940), Anthony Eden, wanted a campaign to counter German influence in Iraq and Palestine. But he offers little on the war against Italy. Liddell Hart briefly discusses the East Africa campaign, but offers nothing on its strategic importance.

⁹ H.P. Willmott. The Great Crusade. (London: Michael Joseph, 1989.), 1-5, 189. Willmott maintains that Britain and Italy were peripheral to the war since the Mediterranean was a "sideshow of very limited strategic relevance" incapable of affecting Europe. He does not mention East Africa. John Ellis. Brute Force. (London: Andre Deutsch, 1990.), xix-xx. Ellis believes the Mediterranean deserves only a short footnote, as the Luftwaffe's presence there reduced German strength overall, and because the allies learned valuable lessons about material and tactics in the Mediterranean. He makes no mention of East Africa.

¹⁰ Neil Orpen. South African Forces. World War II. Vol. 1. East Africa and Abyssinian Campaigns. (Cape Town: Purnell, 1968.), 95, 114, 298. Orpen makes a few disparaging references to the rebels, then dismisses the revolt as being of little value. There could be another reason for Orpen's dismissive attitude toward the rebellion. Orpen refers to the rebels as "shiftas", a derogatory term meaning thieves or bandits, and quotes an unnamed secretary of Haile Selassie who called them "swine in tatters". Williamson Murray. "British Military Effectiveness in the Second World War". Military Effectiveness. Volume III. (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1988.), 105-6. Murray states that Churchill's primary aim in the Mediterranean was to destroy the Italian army in Libya. Italian forces in Abyssinia were of little importance. Murray blames British involvement in East Africa on Wavell, who would not "keep his eye on the mark", and transferred the Fourth Indian Division from North Africa "to a meaningless campaign against the Italians who had so conveniently interned themselves in Abyssinia".

¹¹ Michael Howard. British Intelligence in the Second World War. Volume 5. (London: HMSO, 1990.), 34-5.

¹² F.H. Hinsley. British Intelligence in the Second World War. Volume I. (London: HMSO, 1979.), 199-200, 205-12, 380-1.

- ¹³ John Connell. Wavell, Scholar and Soldier. London: Collins, 1964.), 360-2.
- ¹⁴ Ronald Lewin. The Chief. (London: Hutchinson, 1980.), 71, 74-6.
- ¹⁵ Harold E. Raugh Jr. Wavell in the Middle East 1939-1941. (London: Brassey's, 1993.), 168, 170, 174, 176, 183.
- ¹⁶ Bisheshwar Prasad, ed. Official History of the Indian Armed Forces in the Second World War 1939-45. East Africa Campaign 1940-41. (New Delhi: Combined Inter-Services Historical Section, 1963.), 11, 151, 155-6.
- ¹⁷ ISO Playfair. The Mediterranean and the Middle East. Vol. I. The Early Successes against Italy (to May 1941). (London: HMSO, 1954.), 182-4; 402-5.
- ¹⁸ War Office. The Abyssinian Campaign. The Official Story of the Conquest of Italian East Africa. {The Abyssinian Campaign} (London: HMSO, 1942.), 13, 21.
- ¹⁹ Angelo Del Boca. The Abyssinian War 1935-1941. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965.), 244-5.
- ²⁰ Staff Conversation with the French. AFC(J)102. Anglo-French Conversations 1939. Meeting of 3 August 1939. AIR 9/112.
- ²¹ These include: J.-B. Duroselle. La Decadence 1932-1939. (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1979.); Eleanor M. Gates. End of the Affair. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981.); Robert J. Young. In Command of France. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978.); Martin S. Alexander. The Republic in Danger. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.); Nicole Jordan. The Popular Front. (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1992.).
- ²² Murray. The Change. 300; Young. In Command of France. 213, 217, 219-20; Alexander. The Republic in Danger. 257, 264.
- ²³ Alexander. The Republic in Danger. 350-1, 506.
- ²⁴ War Office Daily Summary #55. 25 August, 1939. WO 106/2139.
- ²⁵ East Africa Intelligence Summary #20. 12-22 April 1940. WO 106/2135.
- ²⁶ Italian Consul, Nairobi to Ministry of Italian East Africa. 8 April 1940. GFM 36/29. {The PRO has classified the captured Italian material (untranslated) under GFM 36 rather than giving it a class of its own.}
- ²⁷ Philip Knightly and Colin Simpson. The Secret Lives of Lawrence of Arabia. (London: Nelson & Sons, 1969.), 1.
- ²⁸ Connell. 175.
- ²⁹ Christopher Sykes. Introduction to Lawrence of Arabia. by Richard Aldington. (London: Collins, 1969.), 3.
- ³⁰ Knightly and Simpson. 1-2.
- ³¹ Lt. General Sir George MacMunn. Official History of the Great War. Military Operations. Egypt and Palestine. (London: HMSO, 1928.), 221.
- ³² Knightly and Simpson. 82.
- ³³ Capt. Cyril Falls. History of the Great War. Operations in Egypt and Palestine. Part II. (London: HMSO, 1930.), 409.

- 34 A.P. Wavell. The Palestine Campaigns. 3rd ed. (London: Constable, 1931.), 56, 180.
- 35 Falls. History of the Great War. Part II. 406.
- 36 T.E Lawrence. Revolt in the Desert. (London: Cape, 1937.), 37, 43.
- 37 Edwin P. Hoyt. Guerilla. Colonel Von Lettow-Vorbeck and Germany's East African Empire. (New York: Macmillan, 1981.), 3, 25, 58, 66; Brian Gardner. On to Kilimanjaro. (Philadelphia: Macrae Smith, 1963.), 265.
- 38 Gardner. 33, 37; Hoyt. 59; Connell. 128.
- 39 Hoyt. 66, 114; Gardner. 11, 143.
- 40 Arnold J. Toynbee. Survey of International Affairs 1935. Vol. II. Abyssinia and Italy. (London: Oxford University Press, 1936.), 360-2, 364-5, 368; Raugh. 168.
- 41 Earl of Avon. Facing the Dictators. (London: Cassell, 1962.), 380.
- 42 Geoffrey Thompson. Front Line Diplomat. (London: Hutchinson, 1959.), 109.
- 43 Toynbee. vi, 12, 370-1.
- 44 John W. Gordon. The Other Desert War. (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987.), 20-1; 38.
- 45 MacMunn. 113, 135-40, 144, 152-3.
- 46 SAC Meeting #17, 11 April 1939. AIR 9/114.
- 47 "Official Visit to Libya 19-31 May 1939". Memorandum by Colonel Brocas Burrows. 5 June 1939. J2363/33/66. FO 371/23388.
- 48 Gordon. 38.
- 49 Major Cornwall Jones to Cavendish Bentinck. 22 May 1939. Annex I - "Action taken by Service Departments on the subject of Raising the Tribes in Libya". J2062/33/66. FO 371/23387; War Office to GOC-in-C, ME. 25 May 1939. J1816/33/66. FO 371/23387.
- 50 "Record of a Meeting held at the Foreign Office on Tuesday 23 May 1939 to discuss the means of raising revolt in Italian territory in Africa in the event of war". J2120/33/66. FO 371/23387.
- 51 Lampson to Halifax. 14 June 1939. J2484/33/66. FO 371/23388.
- 52 Sterndale Bennett to Halifax. 2 August 1939. J3052/33/66. FO 371/23388.
- 53 Gordon. 38-9.
- 54 Connell. 221; Wavell to DMO & Plans. 26 January 1940. WO 201/2382.
- 55 Wavell to CIGS. 2 April 1940. WO 201/2382; Gordon 38-9; Roland Oliver and Anthony Atmore. Africa Since 1800. 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.), 174-5, 179, 198-9.
- 56 Kelly to Col. Hammond. 20 September 1939. J3751/126/66. FO 371/23392; Minute by Thompson. 4 March 1940. J726/8/66. FO 371/24642.
- 57 Platt to Pownall. 13 April 1939. J1625/41/1. FO 371/23377.
- 58 Minute by Thompson. 6 November 1939. J4378/ 2175/66. FO 371/23393; Minute by Norton. 4 March 1939. J726/8/66. FO 371/24642; War Office

Memorandum. 29 October 1939. Minutes by Hooper and Thompson. 6 November 1939; J4378/2175/66. FO 371/23393.

⁵⁹ "Odd Jottings from a Varied Life". Papers of Lt.-Colonel A.T. Curle. Imperial War Museum.

⁶⁰ Hammond to Kelly. 21 September 1939. J3836/126/66. FO 371/23392.

⁶¹ Minute by Cavendish Bentinck. 3 April 1939. J1542/812/1 FO 371/23381; Minute by Kelly. 21 April 1939. J1627/72/66. FO 371/23390.

⁶² SAC #17 (also COS 877) AFC(39)1. 11 April 1939. AIR 9/114.

⁶³ M13(a) Appreciation. 21 July 1939. WO 106/2024 and J1625/41/1. FO 371/23377.

⁶⁴ CID, SAC. "Staff Conversations with the French". Report by the COS. 11 April 1939. AIR 9 #114.

⁶⁵ SAC. 6th Meeting. 17 April 1939. AIR 9/113.

⁶⁶ "Record of a Meeting held at the Foreign Office, Tuesday 23 May 1939, to discuss the means of raising revolt in Italian territory in Africa in the event of war". J2120/33/66. FO 371/23387.

⁶⁷ Mockler. 196.

⁶⁸ Report by Cpt. R.C. Whalley. 3 October 1938. J3971/24/1. FO 371/22013.

⁶⁹ Whalley to Cavendish Bentinck. 21 February 1939; Symes to Cavendish Bentinck. 9 April 1939; Minutes by Cavendish Bentinck. 2 May 1939; and Kelly. 4 May 1939. J1467/41/1. FO 371/23377.

⁷⁰ Minute by Cavendish Bentinck. 17 November 1938. J3755/24/1. FO 371/22013.

⁷¹ War Office to Platt. 18 April 1939. WO 106/2333; Mallaby to Cavendish Bentinck. 18 April. 1939. J1625/41/1. FO 371/23377.

⁷² M13(a) Appreciation for the AFC. 1 July 1939. WO 106/2024; Connell. 226.

⁷³ Kennedy to Cavendish Bentinck. 7 July 1939. J2658/33/55. FO 371/23388.

⁷⁴ London AFC. April 1939. Annex II. "Action taken by Service Departments in respect of raising insurrection in Abyssinia". J2062/33/66. FO 371/23387.

⁷⁵ "Record of the AFC, Aden. 30 May - 3 June 1939". 4 October 1939. WO 106/5706B; Playfair. 182.

⁷⁶ Papers of Commander Alistair Denniston. {Denniston Papers} Churchill College, University of Cambridge; Papers of William F. Clarke. {Clarke Papers} Churchill College, University of Cambridge; Hinsley. Vol. I. 199.

⁷⁷ Denniston Papers; Clarke Papers; Hinsley. Vol. I. 199.

⁷⁸ Denniston Papers; Papers of Patrick Beesly {Beesly Papers} 2/29. Churchill College, University of Cambridge; Hinsley. Vol. I. 199-201.

⁷⁹ Eliot A. Cohen and John Gooch. Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War. (New York: The Free Press, 1990.), 127.

⁸⁰ Playfair. 165.

⁸¹ Minute by Cavendish Bentinck. 30 June 1939. J2608/33/66. FO 371/23388.

- 82 Moore to Coulson. 7 July 1939. J2714/33/66. FO 371/23388.
- 83 Charles to Halifax. 16 June 1939. R5006/15/22. FO 371/23802.
- 84 "Summary of Armed Forces in Italian East Africa". 20 July 1939. WO 33/1636; "Summary of Armed Forces in Italian East Africa". 14 March 1940. WO 33/1636; Playfair. 165-7.
- 85 Del Boca. 213; MacGregor Knox. Mussolini Unleashed 1939-1941. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.), 3.
- 86 Sbacchi. 37, 151, 176, 184-6; Del Boca. 220; Knox. 3-4.
- 87 Sbacchi. 37, 184-6, 189-90, 195-9.
- 88 Sbacchi. 199-200, 204; Del Boca 241; Mockler. 184.
- 89 Sudan Military Intelligence Report. #71 for period ending 30 September 1938. J4228/288/1. FO 371/22027.
- 90 Stonehewer-Bird to the Foreign Office. 29 September 1938. J3755/24/1. FO 371/22013.
- 91 Memorandum by Colonel Brocas Burrows. 28 December 1938. J46/40/1. FO 371/23376.
- 92 Del Boca. 249; Ciano. Ciano's Diary 1939-1943. 44.
- 93 Cavendish Bentinck to Kennedy. 22 April 1939. J1625/41/2. FO 371/23377.
- 94 Acting-Consul-General Gibbs, Addis Ababa, to Foreign Office. 15 July 1939. J46/40/1. FO 371/23376.
- 95 Gibbs to Cavendish Bentinck. 12 August 1939. J3613/40/1. FO 371/23377.
- 96 Governor of Kenya to Colonial Secretary. 6 May 1939; Cavendish Bentinck to Pedler. 2 June 1939; J1951/41/1. FO 371/23377.
- 97 Symes to Lampson. 27 April 1939. J2135/41/1. FO 371/23377.
- 98 Platt to Pownall. 12 April 1939. WO 106/2333; Mockler. 195.
- 99 Platt to Pownall. 13 April 1939. J1652/41/1. FO 371/23377.
- 100 Papers of General Sir William Platt. Lees-Knowles Lecture #1, 1951. Liddell Hart Centre, King's College, University of London.
- 101 Minute by Cavendish Bentinck. 14 July 1939. J2954/33/66. FO 371/23388.
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¹¹⁰ Symes to Lampson. 29 September 1939. J4344/2175/66. FO 371/23393.

¹¹¹ Minute by Kelly. 25 October 1939. J4245/2175/66. FO 371/23393.

¹¹² Brooke-Popham to Ironside. 7 October 1939. CAB 84/8.

¹¹³ Poynton to Major Taylor. 2 March 1940. J726/8/66. FO 371/24642.

¹¹⁴ Wavell to War Office. 4 March 1940. Repeated to Glenday. 5 March 1940. J747/8/66. FO 371/24642.

¹¹⁵ Glenday to Colonial Secretary. 6 March 1940. J630/1/66. FO 371/24640.

¹¹⁶ Glenday to Dawe. 2 March 1940. J1100/1187/8/66. FO 371/24642; Glenday to Dawe. 21 March 1940. J1187/8/66. FO 371/24642.

¹¹⁷ Mockler. 195.

¹¹⁸ Platt to War Office. 25 April 1939. War Office to Platt. 2 May 1939. WO 106/2333. The War Office told Platt he must make-do with modern rifles, as there were not enough older rifles to go around.

¹¹⁹ Robert Heussler. Yesterday's Rulers. The Making of the British Colonial Service. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1963.), 97.

¹²⁰ Glenday to Colonial Secretary. 25 May 1940. Colonial Secretary to Glenday. 25 May 1940. J1320/205/1. FO 371/24638.

¹²¹ Heussler. 95-6, 101.

¹²² Wark. 88.

¹²³ Heussler. 60, 90, 95, 97-8.

¹²⁴ Sbacchi. 129.

¹²⁵ Raugh. 28-9, 261, 267.

¹²⁶ Michael Howard. British Intelligence in the Second World War. Strategic Deception. Volume 5. (London: HMSO, 1990.), xi, 32-3.

¹²⁷ Ronald Lewin. The Chief. (London: Hutchinson, 1980.), 31, 48-50, 52.

¹²⁸ Raugh. 28-9.

¹²⁹ Wavell. The Palestine Campaigns. 96, 38.

¹³⁰ Notes on the Strategical Situation in the Middle East by General A.P. Wavell. 24 August 1939. WO 201/2119; Raugh 169.

¹³¹ War Office to Wavell. 20 September 1939; Wavell to Adam. 7 October 1939. WO 201/2119; Smith to Platt. 12 October 1939. WO 201/254; Playfair. 182.

- 132 Raugh. 170.
- 133 Connell. 246-7.
- 134 Wavell to Symes. 12 October 1939. WO 201/254.
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- 137 Sbacchi. 205.
- 138 Acting Consul-General Gibbs to Halifax. 29 December 1939. (received 12 February 1940.) J468/6/1. FO 371/24635; Sbacchi. 201; East Africa Intelligence Summary #19. 29 March-11 April 1940. WO 106/2135.
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- 141 Ciano. 232.
- 142 Great Britain. Foreign Office. WPIS. (Millwood: Kraus International Publications, 1983.), #31. 7 May 1940; Sbacchi. 200.
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- 144 "Odd Jottings from a Varied Life". Papers of Lt.-Col. A.T. Curle.
- 145 Wavell to Glenday. 24 April 1940. Chater Papers. Chater 3/1/7.
- 146 Allied Policy in Italian East Africa. 26 October 1939. JP(39)66, also COS (39)100(JP). CAB 84/8.
- 147 Kirk. 45; Connell. 220; Wavell to DMI & O, War Office. 11 March 1940. WO 201/254; "Operations in British Somaliland 1940". Chater 3/6/1. Papers of Major-General Sir Arthur Reginald Chater. {Chater Papers} Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, King's College. University of London.
- 148 Colonial Secretary to Glenday and Brooke-Popham. 14 May 1940. J1439/7/66. FO 371/24641.
- 149 JIC.87. "A Combined Intelligence Centre in the Middle East". 3 February 1939. CAB 56/4; H.O. Dovey. "The Middle East Intelligence Centre". Intelligence and National Security. 4(4) 800-2; Hinsley. Vol. 1. 40-1.
- 150 Hinsley. Vol. 1. 192-3.
- 151 Gibbs to Halifax. 27 January 1940. J795/18/1. FO 371/24635; According to De Felice, Italian propaganda was characterised by extreme verbal violence toward Britain and the British. De Felice. 170.
- 152 "A Review of our Relations in the Middle East vis-à-vis Italy". GHQ, ME. 13 January 1940. Wavell to DMO & Plans, WO. 26 January 1940. WO 201/2382.
- 153 JIC(40)7. "Propaganda in Abyssinia and Libya". Note by GOC-in-C, Middle East. 9 February 1940. Minutes by Laskey and Thompson. 14 February 1940. J482/482/1. FO 371/24638.

¹⁵⁴ JIC(40)7. "Propaganda in Abyssinia and Libya". Note by GOC-in-C, Middle East. 9 February 1940. Minutes by Laskey and Thompson. 14 February 1940. J482/482/1. FO 371/24638.

¹⁵⁵ Norton to Kelly. 30 January 1940. Cadogan to Lampson. 30 January 1940. J241/8/1. FO 371/24635; Minute by Nichols. 15 February 1940. J482/33/66. FO 371/24638.

¹⁵⁶ Kelly to Hammond. 20 September 1939. J3751/126/66. FO 371/23392; Hammond to Kelly. 21 September 1939. J3836/126/66. FO 371/23392; Symes to Lampson. 29 September 1939. J4344/2175/66. FO 371/23393; Minute by Thompson. 4 March 1940. J726/8/66. FO 371/24642; Colonial Office to Glenday. 12 March 1940. J841/482/1. FO 371/24638.

¹⁵⁷ Wavell to DMI. 11 March 1940. "Notes on the Abyssinian Rising to be brought about in the event of a war with Italy". 13 March 1940. WO 201/254.

¹⁵⁸ Minute by Cavendish Bentinck. 3 April 1939. J1542/812/1. FO 371/23381; Foreign Office Minute. April 1939. J1627/72/66. FO 371/23390.

¹⁵⁹ War Cabinet Meeting #162. Item 8. 12 June 1940. WM 162(40)8. CAB/65.

¹⁶⁰ "Abyssinia and Relations of His Majesty's Government with the Emperor Haile Selassie". WP(40)206. 16 June 1940. CAB 66; War Cabinet Meeting. WM171(40)15. 18 June 1940. CAB 65.

¹⁶¹ Connell. 247; Christopher Sykes. Orde Wingate. (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1959.), 242; War Cabinet Meeting. 13 January 1941. WM(41)5. CAB 65; "Abyssinia and Relations of His Majesty's Government with the Emperor Haile Selassie". WP(40)206. 16 June 1940. CAB 66.

¹⁶² "A Review of our Relations in the Middle East vis-à-vis Italy". 13 January 1940. WO 201/2382; Minute by Cavendish Bentinck. 27 April 1939. J1696/33/66. FO 371/23387. "Record of AFC at Aden on 30 May - 3 June 1939". 4 October 1939. ADM 1/9898 and WO 106/5706B.

¹⁶³ "Somaliland Protectorate 1937-1943". by Major General A. R. Chater. Chater Papers. Chater 3/6/5. Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives. King's College. University of London.

¹⁶⁴ Raugh. 75-6; Record of AFCs at Aden on 30 May - 3 June 1939. 4 October 1939. ADM 1/9898 and WO 206/5706B.

¹⁶⁵ JP(39)61. "Allied Policy in Italian East Africa". 19 October 1939. MR(J)(39)32. Note from the French General Staff. 14 October 1939. CAB 84/8; JPC Paper. "A Review of our Relations in the Middle East vis-à-vis Italy". 13 January 1940. WO 201/2382; "Draft. Military Action open to the Allies in the Event of War with Italy". April 1940. COS(40) CAB 84/13.

¹⁶⁶ Consul-General, Addis Ababa to Foreign Office. 27 May 1940. Minute by Lasky. 28 May 1940. J1360/1360/66. FO 371/24644.

¹⁶⁷ East Africa Intelligence Summary #2. 25 May 1940. WO 106/2135; WPIS. #31. 7 May 1940.

¹⁶⁸ "Secret Appreciation of the situation from the point of view of the OC British Troops in British Someliland in the event of war between Great Britain and Italy. September 1938". Chater to Churchill. 27 June 1950. Papers of Major-General Sir Arthur Reginald Chater. Chater Papers. Chater 3/1/1. In 1938 the British government decided that British Somaliland was not strategically important. MI3(a) Appreciation for the AFC. 1 July 1939. WO 106/2024. Kelly to Sterndale Bennett. 15 August 1939. J3161/9/66. FO 371/23384; Wavell to SMI & O, WO. 26 January 1940. WO 201/2382. WPIS. #46. 20 August 1940.

¹⁶⁹ WPIS. #39. 2 July 1940; Smith to Chaters. 21 June 1940. Chater Papers. Chater 3/1/7; Raugh. 64, 70-1, 76; Kirk. 44.

¹⁷⁰ "Draft. Operations in the Middle East. 6 August 1940". JP(40)378. CAB 84/17; Raugh. 71-2, 76, 82; War Office. The Abyssinian Campaign. 11, 16.

¹⁷¹ "Operations in East Africa, November 1940 to July 1941". Supplement to the London Gazette 1946, submitted by General Sir A.P. Wavell, 21 May 1942. Winston S. Churchill Papers. CHAR 20/246. Churchill College Archives, Cambridge.

¹⁷² Hinsley. Vol. I. 206-10.

¹⁷³ "Future Strategy". Draft by the JPC. 21 August 1940. JP(40)375 [also COS (40)647(JP)]. CAB. 84/17; Hinsley. Vol. I. 380.

¹⁷⁴ Hinsley. Vol. I. 206-7, 209-10

¹⁷⁵ Hinsley. Vol. I. 207.

¹⁷⁶ Hinsley. Vol. I. 208.

¹⁷⁷ Report of Mediterranean Operational Intelligence Centre. 5 February 1945. ADM 223/89.

¹⁷⁸ Hinsley. Vol. I. 205-6.

¹⁷⁹ Hinsley. Vol. I. 196-7.

¹⁸⁰ Hinsley. Vol. I. 197-8, 219-21.

¹⁸¹ Hinsley. Vol. I. 213-4, 281.

¹⁸² Beesly Papers. 2/29; Clarke Papers; Report of the Mediterranean Operational Intelligence Centre. 5 February 1945. ADM 223/89. Hinsley. 208. Hinsley gives the date as 19 June, the Report of the Mediterranean OIC as 21 June.

¹⁸³ Hinsley. Vol. I, 381.

¹⁸⁴ Hinsley. Vol. I. 380-1.

¹⁸⁵ "Future Strategy". 21 August 1940. JP(40)375 (COS(40) 647(JP)). CAB 84/7; "Review of our Policy in the Mediterranean". Draft Report by the COS. 17 January 1941. COS (41). CAB 84/26; Playfair. 183-4; Meeting of Ministers held on 13 November 1940. War Cabinet Minutes. Miscellaneous Papers. CAB 65.

¹⁸⁶ Playfair. 394; Hinsley. 380; Ralph Bennett. Ultra and Mediterranean Strategy. (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1989.), 27.

¹⁸⁷ Army Bureau of Current Affairs. "War: The Trouble with Italians". No. 35. 9 January 1943. by Lt. Richard Bennett. R.A. War Staff Writer. 10 June 1940. ADM 223/448; Playfair. 93-4, 96, 183-4; Raugh 170.

188 "Review of our Policy in the Mediterranean". Draft Report by the COS. 17 January 1941. COS (41). CAB 84/26.

189 "Future Strategy". Draft by the JPC. 21 August 1940. JP(40)375 also [COS (40)647(JP)]. CAB 84/17. Playfair. 183-4.

190 Playfair. 402-4.

191 Playfair. 184, 402; Kirk. 46.

192 Raugh. 171; Connell. 360-2; Sykes. 244-5; Playfair 404. {The Ethiopian Battalions kept no codes, cyphers or war diaries, as this was considered too risky. Papers of Lt.-Col. A.T. Curle.}

193 Sykes. 245; Playfair 404.

194 Connell. 360, 362; Sykes. 245.

195 Raugh. 174; Sykes. 252-3.

196 Playfair. 393-4, 405. Connell. 362-3; Raugh 173-5.

197 Record of a Meeting of Ministers not in the War Cabinet. 28 January 1941. CAB. 65; Connell 365-6; Playfair. 394; Kirk. 46-7; WPIS. #67. 15 January 1941; WPIS. #72. 19 February 1941.

198 Kirk. 46; Philip Mitchell. African Afterthoughts. (London: Hutchinson, 1954.), 201; Connell. 366.

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205 WPIS. #72. 19 February 1941; Raugh. 177-8; Connell. 377-8.

206 Connell. 378; Raugh. 182.

207 Sykes. 299-307.

208 Raugh. 182.

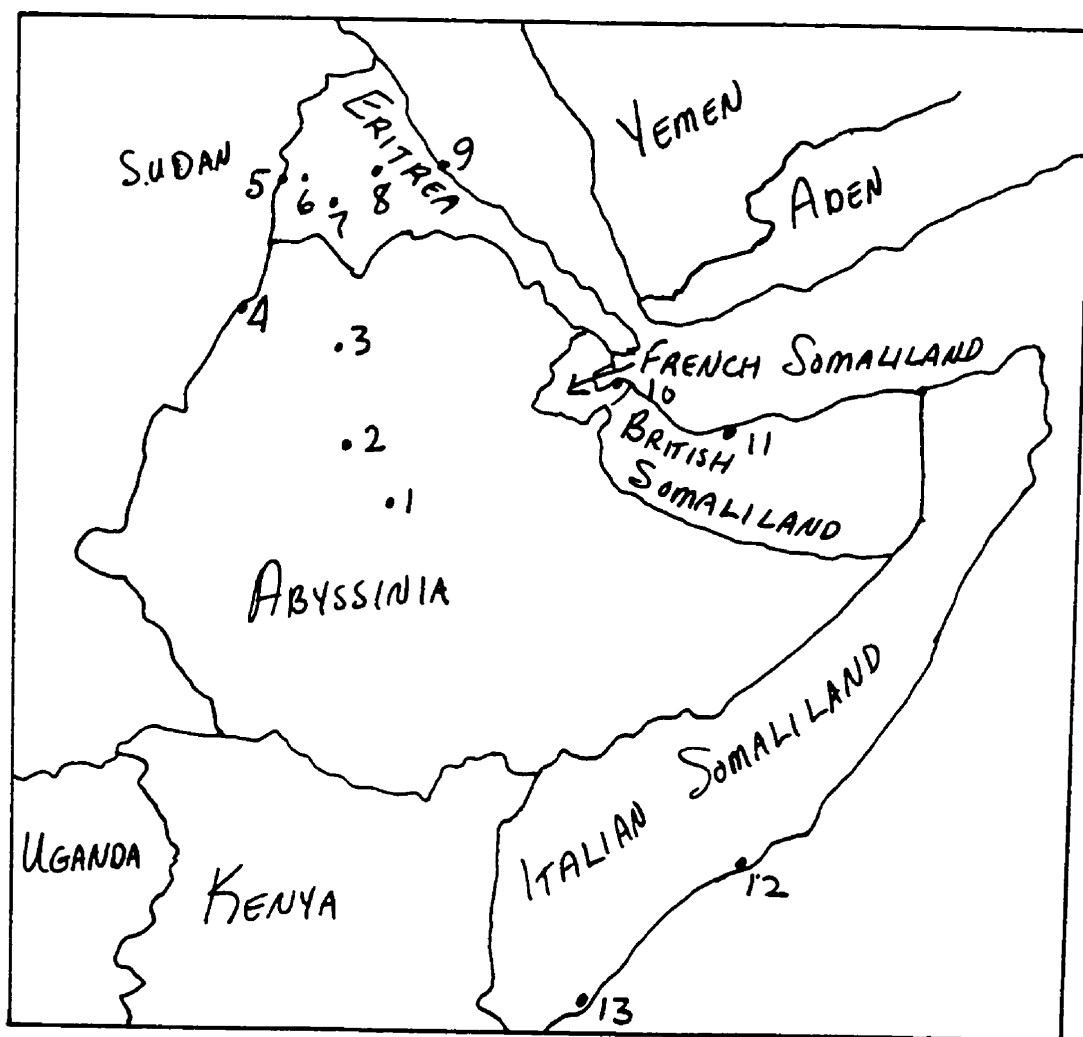
209 Wark. "Intelligence Predictions". 87.

210 Hinsley. Vol. 1. 380-1.

211 Playfair. 450.

212 Raugh. 183.

ITALIAN EAST AFRICA 1940-1941



LEGEND

- | | |
|----------------|---------------|
| 1 ADDIS ABABA | 8 KEREN |
| 2 DEBRA MARKOS | 9 MASSAWA |
| 3 GONDAR | 10 JIBUTI |
| 4 GALLABAT | 11 BERBERA |
| 5 KASSALA | 12 MOGADISCIO |
| 6 AGORDAT | 13 KISMAYU. |
| 7 BARENTU. | |

CONCLUSION

Britain's victory in Abyssinia in May 1941 brought to a close Britain's relations with Italy as a country capable of conducting a parallel war. From this point until the Allies' armistice with Italy in September 1943, Germany increasingly dictated Italy's war effort, reducing Anglo-Italian relations to an aspect of Anglo-German relations. But before Germany came to dominate Italian policy, British planners saw Italy as the means of easing Britain's strategic dilemma. In pursuit of that end, the four phases of Britain's Italian policy in 1939-41 ran the gamut from appeasement to a military offensive, each policy determined, in large measure, by the prevailing net assessment. While the first three phases were tales of misguided expectations ending in disappointment, the fourth phase, namely "raising the tribes", succeeded. Cumulatively, these four phases illustrate Britain's difficulty in formulating policy in the absence of intelligence capable of providing a window on Italy's intentions and policy.

The first phase of policy was the last flowering of British appeasement of Italy which began in the mid-1930s. This phase was driven by strategic pessimism about Britain's ability to handle Italian, German and Japanese hostility. To avoid adding Italy to its list of enemies, Britain sought Italy's friendship with, at times, a single-mindedness bordering on obsession. For instance, Britain excused Italy's actions in Abyssinia (1935-6) and Spain (1936-9) and ratified the Easter Accords in November 1938, although Italy had fulfilled only some of the prerequisites for ratification.¹ Intelligence could not counter the illusion that Italy's friendship was there for Britain

to win because it was handicapped by ambiguous information, slim resources, no systematic means of assessing information and the absence of high-level sources on Italian policy-making.² The belief that Britain could gain Italy's friendship, and that this friendship would ease Britain's strategic woes, influenced policy until Italy's invasion of Albania on 7 April 1939 made it clear that fascist Italy was too untrustworthy ever to be considered a friend.³

In the aftermath of Italy's invasion of Albania, a new policy, the "Mediterranean First" strategy, which had developed in the shadow of appeasement, took centre stage. The impetus behind the "Mediterranean First" strategy was the strategic optimism of the COS' "1939-1940 European Appreciation".⁴ When its strategic optimism was combined with the negative image of Italy engendered by the invasion of Albania, the result was a policy which looked to Italy's defeat to ease Britain's strategic situation. The immediate goal was to simplify Britain's strategic situation by removing Italy as an enemy, thus clearing the Mediterranean. The long-term goal was to use Italy to weaken Germany, in order to bring about Germany's defeat.⁵

The "Mediterranean First" strategy shared some traits with its predecessor. Once again, planners assumed that Italy would facilitate Britain's plans, this time by its hostility. In addition, with intelligence unable to solve its lack of high-level sources on Italian policy-making, analysts continued to base their assessments on expectations and mirror-imaging.⁶ Even more critical was intelligence's inability to illuminate French intentions because British plans for a Mediterranean campaign relied on an early French offensive in Libya. Not until July 1939 were the British forced to accept that there would be no early French offensive in Libya. Their strategic optimism then

turned to pessimism, and planners decided that an early Mediterranean offensive was not viable after all.⁷

The demise of the "Mediterranean First" strategy ushered in a third phase of policy which returned to the strategic pessimism and desire to keep Italy "sweet" that characterised the first phase. But this time, planners had few illusions about Mussolini's motives. They realised that if Mussolini kept Italy out of the war, it was not because he preferred peace, but because he saw an opportunity to profit from neutrality.⁸ With this in mind, Britain offered economic inducements in hopes of persuading Mussolini to make Italy a genuine neutral. This use of economic warfare was not surprising. Economic strength was the one area in which British planners and policy-makers believed the allies held an edge over the Axis. However, Britain relied too much on economic warfare, and made few plans in the event that it failed.⁹

Through most of the third phase, intelligence was able to shed little light on Mussolini's intentions because it lacked high level sources on Italian policy. As a result, analysts allowed their expectations to mislead them into believing that Mussolini could be persuaded to make Italy a genuine neutral.¹⁰ But by late May, Mussolini was determined to bring Italy into the war, and the signs of Italy's imminent belligerency became clear.¹¹ The third phase ended with Italy's declaration of war on 10 June 1940.

Italy's belligerency set the stage for the fourth phase of policy discussed here, "raising the tribes". Like the "Mediterranean First" strategy before it, "raising the tribes" was characterised by strategic optimism about Britain's ability to handle Italy,

and was intended as a stepping stone to victories in other theatres. However, "raising the tribes" approached its goals more indirectly. While the "Mediterranean First" strategy was to begin with an early offensive against Italy which would lead to victory over Germany, "raising the tribes" envisaged defeating Italy through the conquest of its East Africa empire. Italy's demise would, in turn, facilitate Germany's eventual defeat.¹² Another difference was that, unlike the "Mediterranean First" strategy, "raising the tribes" was put into action. It was thus able to play an important role in Britain's victory in Abyssinia in May 1941. Through this victory, "raising the tribes" was able to make a significant contribution to the Allied victory over Italy and to the eventual victory over Germany.¹³

Intelligence performed better in East Africa than it did in the earlier phases of policy. There was a short-lived intelligence black-out immediately after Italy declared war, but by the autumn of 1940, signals intelligence was providing very good intelligence on Italian East Africa. While signals intelligence contained little on Italy's long-term intentions, this was not unusual. Signals intelligence rarely contains information on intentions, save in the short-term, tactical sense, i.e. it often details such things as troop dispositions.¹⁴ The difference was that Italy's long-range intentions were of less importance after June 1940. Italy's declaration of war had already settled its basic course, and Italy's long-term plans were liable to change in response to the rebellion.

Despite their differences, some common threads linked these four phases of policy. One was the uniformity in British assessments of Mussolini after Italy invaded Albania on 7 April 1939. The invasion convinced British analysts that Mussolini was

too rapacious and opportunistic to become either a friend or a peacemaker. The first policy to express this new assessment was the "Mediterranean First" strategy. It was based on the assumption that, in the event of war, Mussolini would see belligerency at Germany's side as a golden opportunity to satisfy his territorial ambitions. When the "Mediterranean First" strategy was rejected as unviable, Britain turned to economic warfare on the assumption that Italy's neutrality could be bought. Mussolini's predatory nature appeared confirmed when Italy declared war on 10 June 1940, from which point Italy was merely an enemy to be defeated.

A more important similarity among the four phases was their indirect approach to grand strategy. Part of the indirect approach's appeal may have been that it tends to require fewer resources than a direct approach. This was likely attractive to the British whose resources were stretched to the limit in this period. Of even more significance was the support of military thinkers, particularly Captain Basil H. Liddell Hart, the Military Correspondent of The Times. His advocacy of the indirect approach was of long-standing. In The Decisive Wars of History, published in 1929, Liddell Hart stated that

in a campaign against more than one state or army, it is more fruitful to concentrate first against the weaker partner, than to attempt the overthrow of the stronger in the belief that the latter's defeat will automatically involve the collapse of the others.¹⁵

Liddell Hart thus anticipated by several years the "Mediterranean First" strategy's prescription to defeat Germany by concentrating first on Italy. It is true that Liddell Hart's belief in the indirect approach was not universal. Both Major-General J.F.C. Fuller and Major-General (later General Sir) W.H. Bartholomew took issue with the

idea that the indirect approach was a panacea.¹⁶ However, as the unofficial military adviser to Leslie Hore-Belisha, the Secretary of State for War (1937-40), Liddell Hart was well-placed to influence planning.

But above all, British policy for Italy was characterised by an indirect approach due to Britain's ever-present need to simplify its strategic situation and the belief that Italy was the key. With each phase of policy seeking to neutralise Italy before proceeding against Germany, from 1939 to 1941, Britain went from attempts to win Italy's friendship, to the "Mediterranean First" strategy, to attempts to buy Italy's neutrality and, finally, to "raising the tribes". Some phases emphasised a diplomatic solution; others relied on a military approach. However, all were the products of net assessments of Italy which created an overview of Britain's situation and prospects, and were expressed as either strategic pessimism or strategic optimism.

These changing strategic moods led Britain's approach to Italy to fluctuate. When strategic pessimism held sway, as it did before the COS' "January 1939-40 European Appreciation" and during the Phoney War, the difficulties of Britain's situation vis-à-vis Germany overwhelmed planners. Consequently, they inflated Italy's military capabilities and insisted that Italian belligerency was a complication Britain must avoid. Hostilities against Italy might encourage Japan to embark on an adventure in the Pacific and damage Britain's ability to counter Germany, perhaps fatally. The belief that Britain would be less vulnerable if it came to terms with Italy led planners to recommend trying to win Italy's friendship, even after they abandoned any hope of rapprochement with Germany. The approach was very different when strategic optimism ruled, as it did during the "Mediterranean First"

strategy's heyday and the campaign in East Africa. Planners felt confident that Britain could weaken the Axis by taking the initiative against Italy and advocated forward policies against Italy. So long as strategic optimism was in the ascendant, planners saw in Italy a means of defeating the Axis which Britain would be foolish to ignore. But whether planning was governed by strategic optimism or pessimism, Italy was an integral part of Britain's grand strategy.

But despite their differences, the first three phases of policy were similar in their lack of success. First, Italy's invasion of Albania proved that hopes of Italian friendship were unrealistic. Next, the "Mediterranean First" strategy proved unviable and was abandoned. Nor could Britain take credit for delaying Italy's entry into the war. Mussolini's decision to intervene was based on the emergence of an apparent victor, Germany, and the promise of a short campaign as Italy was too weak for the rigours of a long campaign. Then in the Phoney War, Britain's attempts at conciliation convinced Mussolini that his decision to support Germany was correct. Britain did avoid taking any steps, such as declaring war, which would have forced Mussolini's hand before June 1940. However, Britain could not prevent Italy from joining the belligerents once Mussolini became determined to bring Italy into the war.

Of the four phases discussed here, only "raising the tribes" can be termed a success, but then it had the advantage of operating in a simpler strategic climate than its predecessors. First, Italy's declaration of war clarified its status. Then, Britain's decision to seize the military initiative in East Africa changed the priorities of assessments. Italy's short-term plans remained important, but its long-term plans were of less concern because the rebellion would alter Italy's strategic situation and

with it, Italy's long-term plans. Britain's decision to "raise the tribes" also increased its need for current information on Italy's military strength and dispositions. Fortunately, intelligence on these subjects improved courtesy of Britain's success with Italian signals intelligence in the autumn of 1940.¹⁷

A final reason for the success of "raising the tribes" was its adaptability. For example, British plans adapted to Italy's decision to concentrate its forces in the north by reassigning Addis Ababa's capture to Cunningham, who was advancing rapidly from the south. When the success of "raising the tribes" is contrasted with the failure of the first three phases, the need for policy to be adaptable is clear. Flexibility was not an aspect of appeasement, the "Mediterranean First" strategy or British conciliation in the Phoney war. In these cases, when part of the plan had to be changed, the entire policy was doomed. The loss of the early French offensive in Libya thus ended plans for an early Mediterranean offensive, while Mussolini's disinterest, first in friendship then in neutrality, rendered both appeasement and conciliation unviable. Plans to incite rebellion in Abyssinia, on the other hand, were capable of being adapted to changing circumstances, and this flexibility facilitated the success of "raising the tribes". Cohen and Gooch point out that a failure to adapt is a major cause of military failure. "Raising the tribes" suggests that the reverse is also true, i.e. that the ability to adapt is an important factor in the success of policy.¹⁸

But although "raising the tribes" succeeded where its predecessors failed, intelligence's role was similar in all four phases of Britain's Italian policy between 1939 and 1941. In each case, intelligence supported but could not direct policy, because it was unable to provide a good reading of Mussolini's likely intentions. This

was due to a lack of high-level sources on Italian policy-making and the tendency of analysts to disregard of the impact of fascist ideology on policy. Italy's declaration of war did not cure these problems. "Raising the tribes" was simply less dependent on assessments of Italy's long-term intentions than earlier phases of Britain's Italian policy. Nevertheless, all four phases support Michael Handel's contention that planners would be wiser to plan on the basis of enemy capabilities, rather than on the basis of enemy intentions which are more difficult to assess.¹⁹ But while British policy for Italy would likely have benefitted had planners followed Handel's prescription, Britain simply did not have the resources to prepare for every contingency. Instead, choices had to be made, and were made, based on the expectations at the heart of Britain's intelligence on Italy.

Expectations' effect on policy was magnified because Italy's intentions were often a mystery to the British. Ideally, British intelligence would have been privy to Italy's intentions due to access to the inner circle of Italian policy-making. Instead, intelligence operated in a shadowy world where information was often ambiguous, Mussolini's mind was a closed book, and the effect of fascist ideology on policy was little examined. Mussolini's tendency to vacillate and delay decisions until the last minute increased the difficulty of forecasting his actions, and analysts turned to expectations to complete their assessments of Italy. This is not unusual. As analysts rarely, if ever, know all, assessments regularly combine fact and conjecture. It was the way in which British analysts "filled in the blanks" that led to problems.

Some expectations were related to a particular strategic mood. When strategic pessimism was in the ascendant, planners and policy-makers assumed that Italy

would be deterred by Anglo-French military might, and thus amenable to a negotiated settlement.²⁰ Strategic optimism brought different expectations into play. During the "Mediterranean First" strategy, planners and policy-makers assumed that Italy would join Germany if war broke out. After Mussolini's declaration of war on 10 June, planners assumed that if Britain "raised the tribes" in Abyssinia, Italy would devote itself to countering the rebellion, rather than conducting a holding operation in Abyssinia and launching a counter-offensive against an area Britain deemed important, such as Egypt.

However, the most important assumption, that intelligence operated in a rational world where decisions were made on the basis of careful calculation, transcended the strategic mood. This assumption was crucial because it led British analysts to believe that they would find Italy's policies logical.²¹ Inside information on Mussolini's thinking would have refuted this assumption, but it was not available. In its absence, analysts concluded that the logical course was for Mussolini's assessments to parallel their own, resulting in policies they found both logical and predictable.

When it came to Italy, the definition of "logical" appears to have been influenced by Britain's needs. It was not that analysts consciously forecast Italy's policy in terms of its ability to relieve Britain's strategic dilemma. But the policies Britain expected Italy to follow prior to June 1940 were all compatible with plans to improve Britain's strategic state. In the first phase, planners and policy-makers hoped Mussolini's devotion to peace was strong enough to keep Italy pacific, and that he might also exercise a moderating influence on Germany. The "Mediterranean First" strategy

was predicated on the belief that in war-time Italy would join Germany, and allow Britain to reduce its enemies by dispatching Italy early in hostilities. Then in the Phoney War, planners and policy-makers assumed Italy could be persuaded to stay out of the war, if neutrality was profitable as well as politically feasible, thus reducing Britain's potential enemies. Before Italy entered the war, British assessments of Italy appear to have been influenced, albeit subconsciously, by the expectation that Italy's policies would complement Britain's plans to ease its strategic situation. That is, Mussolini would act as Britain needed him to act. In each case, the result was unviable policy. Britain's successful campaigns in the Western Desert (December 1940- February 1941) and Abyssinia (January-May 1941) were possible only because Italy's declaration of war broke the spell of this expectation.

The importance of the expectation that Britain would find Italy's policies congenial extended beyond Anglo-Italians relations between 1939 and 1941. In particular, the unviability of the policies derived from this expectation illustrates the need for planners and policy-makers to avoid believing what they wish to believe. This danger is particularly acute when intelligence is inadequate or ambiguous, because, in those circumstances, other states tend to be poorly understood. Smaller powers, in particular, are often assessed primarily in terms of the great power's strategic needs, rather than in terms of their own interests and needs, as was the case with British assessments of Italy prior to June 1940.

Perhaps the most important lesson of British policy for Italy between 1939 and 1941 is that when intelligence is scarce or ambiguous, planners and policy-makers must resist the temptation to see other states through a veil of wishful thinking. Because

the British were unable to do this, they expected Italy to chose policies which served Britain's needs, but not necessarily Italy's. With wishful thinking prominent in evaluations of Italy, assessments reveal far more about Britain's needs and hopes than Italy's. Britain's difficulty in finding a viable Italian policy supports Michael Handel's contention that the greatest danger in the ambiguity often surrounding intelligence is the temptation to indulge in wishful thinking.²² Given the problems caused by mistaken assessments, perhaps the moral of Britain's relations with Italy between 1939 to 1941 is the need to guard against the temptation of seeing other states as you wish them to be, rather than as they really are. This was a lesson the British did not learn until circumstances, in the form of Italy's declaration of war, left them no choice. Once that happened, the British were then able to achieve something which had up to then eluded them, a successful policy for Italy.

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¹⁶ Brian Bond. Liddell Hart. A Study of his Military Thought. (London: Cassell, 1977.), 55-6.

¹⁷ Hinsley. British Intelligence. Vol. 1. 199-201, 380-1; Denniston Papers; Clarke Papers; Beesly Papers. 2/29.

¹⁸ Eliot A. Cohen and John Gooch. Military Misfortunes. The Anatomy of Failure in War. (New York: Free Press, 1990.), 161-3.

¹⁹ Michael Handel. "The Yom Kippur War and the Inevitability of Surprise". {"The Yom Kippur War"} International Studies Quarterly. 3(1977.). 478.

²⁰ Wark. The Ultimate Enemy. 235. This parallels one of the assumptions Wark identified in Britain's intelligence for Germany between 1933 and 1939.

²¹ Wark. The Ultimate Enemy. 237.

²² Handel. "The Yom Kippur War". 462.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AFCs	Anglo-French Conversations
CAS	Chief of the Air Staff
CBME	Combined Bureau, Middle East
CID	Committee of Imperial Defence
CIGS	Chief of the Imperial General Staff
C-in-C	Commander-in-Chief
COS	Chiefs of Staff
<u>DBFP</u>	<u>Documents on British Foreign Policy</u>
<u>DDI</u>	<u>I Documentici Diplomatici Italiani</u>
DNI	Director of Naval Intelligence
DRC	Defence Requirements Committee
FPC	Foreign Policy Committee
GC & CS	Government Code and Cipher School
GHQ-ME	General Headquarters, Middle East
GOC	General Officer Commanding
IIC	Industrial Intelligence Centre
JIC	Joint Intelligence Committee (of the COS)
JPC	Joint Planning Subcommittee (of the COS)
MEIC	Middle East Intelligence Centre
MEW	Ministry of Economic Warfare
MI5	Security Service
MI6	Secret (or Special) Intelligence Service (SIS)

NCOs	non-commissioned officers
NIC	Non-Intervention Committee
NID	Naval Intelligence Division
PID	Political Intelligence Department
POWs	Prisoners of War
RAF	Royal Air Force
SAC	Strategic Appreciations Committee
SDF	Sudan Defence Force
SIM	Servizio Informazioni Militari
SIS	Secret (or Special) Intelligence Service (MI6)
SRC	Strategic Appreciations Committee
VCIGS	Vice Chief of the Imperial General Staff
<u>WPIS</u>	<u>Weekly Political Intelligence Summary</u>

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September 1939 - October 1940. |
| ADM 199 | Private War Records of the First Sea Lord |
| ADM 205 | Papers of the First Sea Lord |
| ADM 223 | Admiralty Intelligence Papers |

Air Ministry

- | | |
|--------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| AIR 2 | Correspondence |
| AIR 8 | Chiefs of the Air Staff, Policy and Planning |
| AIR 9 | Director of Plans |
| AIR 23 | Overseas Commands |
| AIR 40 | Directorate of Intelligence |
| AIR 41 | Narrative. "The RAF in the Maritime War". vol. 6. "The
Mediterranean and the Red Sea. Air Historical Branch |

Board of Trade

- | | |
|-------|--------------------------------------------------|
| BT 11 | Commercial Department, Correspondence and Papers |
|-------|--------------------------------------------------|

BT 60	Department of Overseas Trade, Correspondence and Papers
BT 61	Department of Overseas Trade, Establishment Files - Italy
Cabinet Office	
CAB 2	Committee of Imperial Defence, Minutes
CAB 16	Committee of Imperial Defence, Ad Hoc Subcommittees of Enquiry
CAB 23	Minutes of Cabinet Meetings
CAB 24	Cabinet Memoranda
CAB 27	Committees: General Series
CAB 29	International Conferences
CAB 47	Advisory Committee on Trade Questions in Time of War
CAB 48	Industrial Intelligence in Foreign Countries
CAB 51	Committee of Imperial Defence, Middle East Questions
CAB 53	Chiefs of Staff Committee
CAB 55	Joint Planning Committee
CAB 56	Committee of Imperial Defence, Intelligence Committee
CAB 65	War Cabinet Minutes
CAB 66	War Cabinet Memoranda
CAB 67	War Cabinet Memoranda
CAB 68	War Cabinet Memoranda
CAB 80	War Cabinet, Chiefs of Staff Committee Memoranda
CAB 82	War Cabinet, Deputy Chiefs of Staff Committee
CAB 85	War Cabinet, Joint Planning Committee
CAB 104	Cabinet Office, Registered Files, Supplementary Series, Secret. Foreign Office

CAB 107 War Cabinet, Co-ordination of Departmental action in the
Event of War with Certain Countries

CAB 127 Private Collections, Files of Sir Horace Wilson

Colonial Office

CO 533 Frontier Policy, East Africa

CO 732 Middle East, Original Correspondence

CO 820 Military, Original Correspondence

Combined Operations

DEFE 2 Combined Operations Headquarters

Foreign Office

FO 371 General Correspondence, Political

FO 800 Private Collections, Papers of Lord Halifax

FO 837 Ministry of Economic Warfare

FO 898 Political Warfare Executive

FO 1011 Papers of Sir Percy Loraine

German Foreign Ministry

GFM 36 Captured Italian Documents

Prime Minister's Office

PREM 1 Correspondence and Papers

Treasury

T 160 Finance

T 161 Supply

War Office

WO 33 Reports and Miscellaneous Papers

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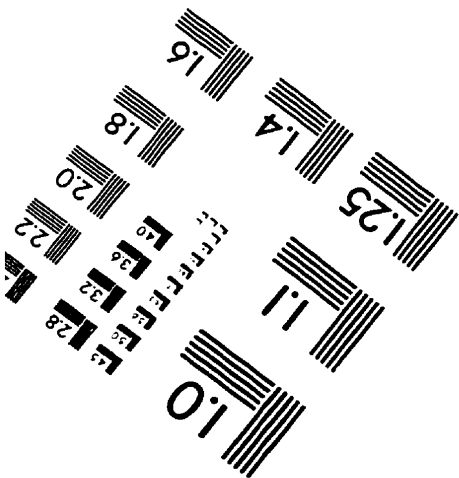
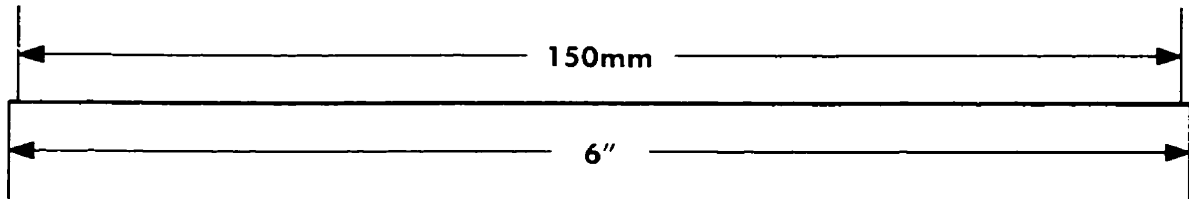
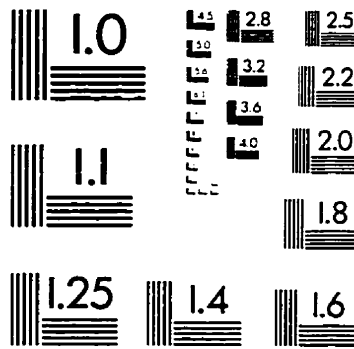
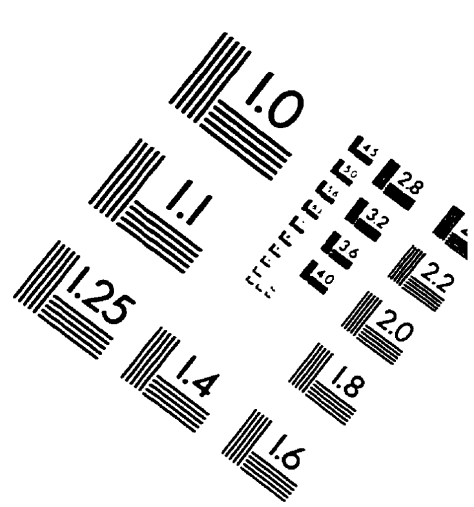
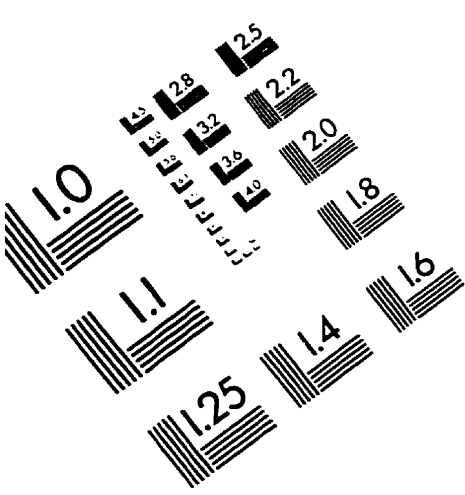
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