

Italian Aggressive Foreign Policy (1919–39)

The Italians emerged from World War I with feelings that they had suffered a 'Mutilated Victory'.

Italy had entered the war in 1915 because the Allies promised her territorial gains in the event of the defeat of

Austria-Hungary.

The secret Treaty of London (1915) promised Italy the Austro-Hungarian territories of Istria, Dalmatia and the Austrian Tyrol.

When the Austro-Hungarian Empire was broken up in 1919, however, the Italians were only given two of the promised territories (Tyrol and Istria).

Dalmatia went to Yugoslavia.

So did the town of Fiume; an Adriatic port which contained a majority Italian population.

The Italians had assumed that the Allies would give Fiume to them (remember Woodrow Wilson's 14 Points (see 5, Woodrow Wilson's 14 points): Point 9 – that Italy's frontiers should be restored along clear lines of nationality; and Point 10 – that the peoples of the Austro-Hungarian Empire should be allowed self-determination).

The Italians felt cheated.

They had 600,000 men killed; had 1 million wounded (450,000 of which were permanently disabled); and had 600,000 soldiers taken prisoner.

They had suffered all these casualties – and still hadn't got Fiume!

They had also failed to receive a share of German colonies in Africa and the Middle-East.

The Occupation of Fiume (September 1919)

In September 1919, within weeks of the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, a group of armed Italian nationalists under the leadership of Gabriele d'Annunzio marched into Fiume and occupied it. The small international army of British, French and American troops defending the town surrendered without resistance.

As C. C. Bayne-Jardine tells us:

"On the night of 11th September 1919 a motley band of men marched from Ronchi to Fiume. They were dressed in assorted uniforms but the black shirt of the Italian *arditi* (shock troops) was predominant.

Leading this dark column through the night was a colourful figure, the poet d'Annunzio. Bald, one-eyed and virtually bankrupt, he still had a romantic charm. He had written some stirring war poems and had served Italy during the war in the cavalry, the infantry, the navy and finally the air service. In the latter he had won a reputation for daring which had cost him an eye. Like so many Italians after the war d'Annunzio had grown disillusioned and he felt that Italy had been betrayed by politicians. He attacked President Wilson of the USA and the members of the [Paris] peace conference in a series of articles, and chose as the symbol of Italian wrongs the port of Fiume"

[Bayne-Jardine, Mussolini and Italy, p. 20]

As we have seen, Gabriele d'Annunzio was an ex-soldier, war hero, poet, dramatist and adventurer. Many of his band of 1000 armed men were war veterans filled with hatred and despair at the 'Mutilated Victory'.

D'Annunzio controlled Fiume for fifteen months.

Money to run d'Annunzio's tiny empire was got by hijacking passing ships and by raiding towns across the Yugoslav border.

The Fiume incident was an acute embarrassment to the Italian government; but the people were enthralled. As Bayne-Jardine tells us:

"Schoolboys ran away from home to join this hero of Fiume while his followers organised piracy to support their state. The whole venture has the appearance of comic opera and many of d'Annunzio's gestures were vulgar and futile. He flew over Rome and dropped a chamber pot full of carrots on the parliament buildings to show his feelings about the Italian government."

[Bayne-Jardine, Mussolini and Italy, p. 21]

By Christmas Eve 1920, the Italian government could stand the embarrassment no longer. They began to shell Fiume.

After three weeks of heavy fighting d'Annunzio was finally forced to surrender and the Italian government handed Fiume over to Yugoslavia.

Although Fiume was a minor affair in terms of world importance, it demonstrated the intense nationalism experience in Italy at the time.

As James Joll notes;

“...the withdrawal from Fiume was regarded as a betrayal by many Italians and added to the general sense of frustration and humiliation.”

[Joll, Europe Since 1870, p. 265]

As we know, frustration + humiliation + intense nationalism spells aggression. The age of Benito Mussolini and Italian Fascism was not far away.

The Aggressive Foreign Policy of Benito Mussolini

We have already seen how Italian feelings of a 'mutilated victory' following the Treaty of Versailles led Gabriele d'Annunzio to occupy Fiume in September 1919.

The message behind d'Annunzio's fervent nationalism was not lost on the ambitious young Fascist politician Benito Mussolini – aggression brings glory; even if only temporarily.

Following Mussolini's coming to power in October 1922, Fiume again became a target of Italian nationalist aggression. Fiume was occupied again in 1923 – and the following year the Yugoslavs agreed that it should remain Italian henceforth. The fact that Fiume became isolated from its Yugoslav hinterland, and suffered consequent economic stagnation, did not lessen the ecstatic enthusiasm of Italian patriots for the 'redemption' of Fiume. They simply chose to ignore such uncomfortable details.

Major Aims of Mussolini

1. To create a "Second Roman Empire" in Africa.
2. To make the Mediterranean an "Italian Lake" (to diminish British and French influence in the Mediterranean)
3. To make the Balkans an Italian satellite (to replace French influence with Italian influence in the Balkans)

The Corfu Incident (1923)

The Corfu Incident of 1923 (see page 19 **The Corfu Incident**) gave the Fascist leader Mussolini another chance to display armed aggression in the pursuit of national glory.

Mussolini's chance arose from a dispute between Greece and Albania on the border between the two states.

An Italian General and two other officers were killed in a cross-border shooting incident whilst working on an international boundary commission set up by the Conference of Ambassadors of the League of Nations.

Mussolini blamed Greece.

He demanded a full apology and compensation to the value of 50 million lire.

The Greeks refused and requested the League of Nations to investigate the incident.

The Italian navy then bombarded the Greek island of Corfu and Italian marines occupied the island.

Mussolini refused to recognise the competence of the League to deal with the matter and threatened to withdraw

from the League if he did not get his way.

The Ambassadors then ordered Greece to pay the full amount of compensation required.

The Greeks had no real choice but to pay up and Mussolini withdrew his troops from Corfu.

Mussolini was triumphant. Italians were filled with nationalist pride.

Mussolini had shown that aggression can pay.

Years of Caution (1924–35)

Although Mussolini had gained 50 million lire in compensation from the Greeks following the Corfu incident, he had come under intense pressure from Britain and France over the Italian occupation of Corfu.

Mussolini realised that Italy was not strong enough economically and militarily in the mid-1920s to argue with Britain and France.

For almost a decade, therefore, Mussolini trod more carefully.

He sought to strengthen Italy's position in Europe by maintaining good relations with Britain whilst attempting to undermine French influence in the Balkans and the Mediterranean.

Crucial to this strategy was his relationship with the British foreign secretary Austen Chamberlain – one of the many

European conservatives who admired Mussolini's anti-communism and the imposition of internal order in Italy. Chamberlain's benevolent attitude towards Mussolini, for example, assured British acquiescence in the establishment

of an Italian protectorate over Albania in 1926 (Albania was virtually under Italian economic control).

For long periods Mussolini acted as his own Foreign Secretary. Even when he did not (e.g. between 1929–32 when Dino Grandi was Foreign Secretary and after 1936 when his own son-in-law Galeazzo Ciano took the post) Mussolini's control persisted.

Generally speaking, from 1922–27 Italian foreign policy was muted by the power of Britain and France.

But by 1928, when Italy had gained in military and economic strength, Mussolini began to flex his muscles.

The Duce talked of the creation of an army of 5 million and an airforce containing so many aeroplanes that it would

'blot out the sun'.

But the Wall Street Crash of 1929 (and the economic depression which followed in its wake) led to another three years of cautious foreign policy.

Hitler's rise to power in 1933 brought new worries to Italy.

A possible German Anschluss with Austria would threaten the security of Italy's northern border with Austria.

When the Austrian Prime Minister Engelbert Dollfuss was assassinated by Austrian Nazis in July 1934, Mussolini moved three Italian divisions up to the Austro-Italian border (at the Brenner Pass) in order to counter a possible

German takeover of Austria.

The Germans took no further action.

NOTE: Dollfuss was a fascist-like dictator who had been helped by Mussolini in his quest for power. At the time of his assassination, Dollfuss' wife was staying with Mrs. Mussolini as a house guest.

The fear of a German Anschluss with Austria (which was forbidden under the terms of the Treaty of Versailles) encouraged the formation of the Stresa Front (under which Britain, Italy and France agreed to act together to protect future Austrian independence).

NOTE: The Stresa Front was to collapse in 1935 due to Britain signing the Anglo-German Naval Agreement with Hitler without prior consultation with Italy and France. Mussolini also blamed Britain and France for their part in the imposition of economic sanctions against Italy following the Italian invasion of Abyssinia in October 1935.

By 1935, Mussolini felt strong enough to use force against a smaller nation to win Italy's 'place in the sun'.

An overseas colonial empire would ease Italian gloom and despondence amidst the economic depression that now afflicted the whole of the commercial world.

The unfortunate target of Italian nationalist aggression would be the 'Third World' African nation of Abyssinia.

The Italian Invasion of Abyssinia (October 1935)

Towards the end of 1934 a large force of Abyssinians attacked an Italian outpost at Wal-Wal near the border of Italian Somaliland and Abyssinia. Mussolini saw this incident as the ideal opportunity to increase Italy's empire in Africa (which he had been planning to do for some time).

In October 1935 Italian troops poured into the East African kingdom of Abyssinia (or Ethiopia as we call it today).

Abyssinia was the only remaining independent state in Africa (under the rule of the Emperor Haile Selassie). A previous attempt to colonise Abyssinia in 1896 had ended in ignominious defeat for the Italians at Adowa. Mussolini now sought to avenge that defeat.

Italy's existing colonies in East Africa – Eritrea and Somaliland (which both bordered Abyssinia) – were not paying their way.

Italy felt she needed Abyssinia for:

1. The provision of cheap raw materials to supply her ailing industries.
2. To provide new living-space (Italian: "Spazio Vitale") for her expanding population.
3. For the 'glory' of conquest. Mussolini wanted to restore Italian nationalist pride by the founding of a second 'Roman Empire' overseas. Italy was in deep economic depression following the Wall Street Crash and the collapse of international trade. What better way to divert the minds of Italians from the poverty and unemployment at home by a glorious victory abroad?

Mussolini had been led to believe that Britain would not oppose his designs on Abyssinia.

There had been no mention of Abyssinia at the meeting of the Stresa Front in April 1935 (and it was common knowledge that Italy felt that Abyssinia was the natural area for Italian expansion and was making obvious preparations for an invasion).

Mussolini took this silence as a sign of British consent

It was with a good deal of confidence, therefore, that Mussolini directed a massive army into Abyssinia on 3rd October

1935 (the largest modern army to operate in Africa hitherto).

Five regular divisions, five blackshirt divisions, two native divisions, and a substantial airforce was placed under the command of General de Bono.

The use of mustard gas bombs against Abyssinian forces and civilians alike brought stern condemnation from the

League of Nations..

Adowa was occupied by the Italians on 6th October 1935.

Italy was condemned as the aggressor and economic sanctions were imposed by the League. Ships were forbidden to carry arms to Italy and transport cargoes from Italian ports.

However, there was no embargo placed on oil, coal, iron and steel entering Italy (the very thing which would stop the

Italian war machine in its tracks).

Even the Suez canal was left open to Italian warships and troop transporters.

Even though the sanctions were slight, Mussolini was furious with Britain and France for their part in their imposition. Britain and France then attempted to appease Mussolini in secret negotiations.

Samuel Hoare, the British Foreign Secretary, and Laval, the French premier offered Mussolini a secret deal in which they promised him nearly two-thirds of Abyssinia (which was more than he had already captured) if the invasion was called off.

When news of the deal was leaked, public indignation in Britain caused Hoare to resign on 18th December 1935. The Hoare-Laval pact was dead, the deal was off, and Mussolini was very angry indeed.

Meanwhile, the Italian invasion rolled on.

In April 1936, the Abyssinian army was finally defeated at the Battle of Lake Ashangi.

The emperor Haile Selassie fled and Marshal Badoglio (who had replaced de Bono) entered Addis Ababa at the head of the Italian army on 5th May 1936.

Mussolini had defied the League of Nations. Once again, aggression had triumphed.

From now on Italy was to move away from Britain and France and become closer to Hitler (who had not denounced the Italian invasion of Abyssinia and had refused to apply sanctions).

Italian Involvement in the Spanish Civil War (1936–38)

Encouraged by the military success in Abyssinia, Mussolini decided to help the Spanish nationalist rebels under General Franco in their fight against the Republican government forces in the Spanish Civil War.

Mussolini sought a quick and glorious victory, but got drawn deeper into the Spanish struggle than he either wished or imagined.

Mussolini's policy of intervention in the Spanish Civil War was encouraged by his son-in-law Ciano whom he had appointed minister of foreign affairs in the summer of 1936.

Italian victories, however, were neither quick nor very glorious and the Italian forces were not recalled until June 1938.

A Closer Relationship with Germany

(1936–39)

From 1925 onwards, Italy began to move further and further away from Britain and France in international relations and grew increasingly closer to Nazi Germany.

In many ways, Hitler and Mussolini were natural allies. Both were ultra right-wing nationalist dictators who shared a hatred of Bolshevik communism.

This ideological link underpinned both Hitler's and Mussolini's decision to support the Spanish right-wing nationalist leader General Franco in his struggle against socialist republicanism in the Spanish Civil War.

Both Hitler and Mussolini saw militarism as the answer to economic depression in the 1930s.

Both dictators saw military conquest as the route to glory and the re-establishment of national pride following the disappointments of the First World War.

Hitler saw military strength and power as the surest way to release Germany from the shackles of the 'Diktat' of Versailles and Mussolini saw it as the surest way to restore national pride following the 'Mutilated Victory' of the First World War.

Mussolini grew disillusioned with the British and French following the collapse of the Stresa Front in 1935 and the attitude of Britain and France to the Italian invasion of Abyssinia in 1935.

Hitler had not criticised Mussolini over the Abyssinian conflict (and Mussolini felt increasingly drawn towards a

Fascist/Nazi alliance).

In October 1936, Hitler's and Mussolini's new-found friendship was formalised in the Rome-Berlin Axis.

The Rome-Berlin Axis was not a military alliance, but more of an 'understanding' that Italy and Germany should operate closely together in foreign affairs.

In 1937 Italy joined the Anti-Comintern Pact with Germany and Japan.

Hitler and Mussolini, who shared a mutual antipathy towards Marxist communism, were now pledged with Japan, whose great enemy was communist China, in a pact sworn to resist the advance of international communism.

Hitler's and Mussolini's growing friendship allowed Hitler to occupy Austria (in March 1938) without fear of Italian intervention.

In April 1939, Italy occupied Albania.

Albania was already under Italian economic control (and was therefore a largely pointless exercise).

The Italian occupation of Albania was but a pale imitation of Hitler's occupation of Czechoslovakia the previous month (March 1939).

Italy too must have its share

of military glory!

But Mussolini's growing friendship with Nazi Germany was to have dire consequences for Italy. Italy was nowhere near as powerful as Germany in terms of military strength.

Italy could not afford to be drawn into a full scale conflict with Britain and France. On 21st May 1939, Germany and Italy forged the famous **Pact of Steel**.

The Pact of Steel pledged Italy and Germany to support each other on land, sea, and in the air, if attacked by hostile forces.

When Britain and France declared war on Germany following Hitler's invasion of Poland in September 1939, Hitler naturally expected Italy to enter the war on behalf of her Nazi allies.

But Italy stayed neutral because Mussolini felt she was too weak militarily to contemplate a major war.

In the spring of 1940, however, as the Nazi **Blitzkrieg** swept across north-western Europe, Mussolini entered the war in support of his German ally.

The Duce, encouraged by the German success and feeling embarrassed by his own lack of heroism, now committed Italy to a war which was to prove disastrous to himself and the Italian nation.