

Key question

What did Mussolini mean when he said he wanted to make Italy 'great, respected and feared'?

Key terms**Anti-imperialist**

Opposition to expanding Italy's empire.

Balkans

Area of south-eastern Europe including Greece, Albania and Yugoslavia.

Sphere of influence

An area where Italy would be the dominant power.

1 | Mussolini's Aims

On coming to power in 1922, Mussolini did not have any clear foreign policy. It was apparent that he had completely rejected the **anti-imperialist**, anti-war beliefs of his youth, but it was uncertain how far he had adopted the views of his political allies, the nationalists. He had loudly supported entry into the First World War and had condemned the peace settlement – the 'mutilated victory' (see page 21) – but it was unclear what revisions to the peace treaties he would seek.

There was no foreign policy 'master plan', but in his first few months in office the new Prime Minister did begin to develop a general aim – in his words, 'to make Italy great, respected and feared'. Italy would achieve great-power status via military build-up, diplomatic intrigue and, if need be, war. Italy would one day be the dominant power in the Mediterranean, would develop and even expand its colonial empire in Africa, and would have the **Balkans** as its own **sphere of influence**. The *Duce* would be the architect of all this, and would have transformed the Italians into a more energetic and aggressive people in the process.

However, until the 1930s these plans lacked detail. Mussolini was not sure which colonies would expand. Nor did he know how he would achieve 'dominance' in the Mediterranean, or how much power he desired in the Balkans. Nevertheless, the *Duce*'s overall objectives remained the same, even if circumstances, particularly the general situation in Europe, would force him to adopt a variety of tactics in pursuing these objectives.

The *Duce* soon recognised that foreign affairs could provide him with the ideal stage – he would impress his fellow-countrymen with spectacles where he would overshadow foreign statesmen, and defend and promote Italian interests with unending success. He would conduct foreign policy himself, avoiding the old, stuffy foreign office, and reap international prestige and internal support. Foreign affairs came to take up more and more of his time.

Mussolini appears to have convinced himself that he was beginning a new era in Italian foreign policy. In truth, desire for great-power status, high military expenditure and colonial adventures had also been a feature of the Liberal regime. However, Mussolini exceeded his Liberal predecessors in his ambitions and pursued his goals more relentlessly and recklessly, particularly in the 1930s. He squandered vast sums on colonial conflicts, and led Italy into a disastrous world war, the result of which was the collapse of Fascism, the onset of civil war and the death of the *Duce* himself.

2 | Diplomacy 1922–32

Italy in 1922 had a secure position in Europe but was unable to exert a great deal of influence, either diplomatically or militarily. The potential threat to its northern frontiers had been removed by the friendship with France and the dismemberment of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and Italy had no powerful enemies. However, it was Britain and France that were the dominant powers of Europe. They were the enforcers of the Versailles settlement, their colonies dominated Africa and their fleets controlled the Mediterranean. Furthermore, France was busy consolidating its political and economic influence in Central and Eastern Europe, including the Balkans. Any changes in the European **status quo** would require the consent of Britain and France, and smaller powers had few means of extracting concessions. A resurgent Italy would have to move carefully. Mussolini was to learn this lesson in his first real foray into European affairs.

Policy towards the Balkans Greece and Corfu

In August 1923, an Italian general and four of his staff were assassinated in Greece. They had been working for the international boundary commission set up under the terms of the peace settlement and were advising on the precise location of the new Greek–Albanian border. On hearing of the assassinations, Mussolini blamed the Greek government and demanded a full apology together with 50 million lira in compensation. When the Greeks refused, he ordered the bombardment and occupation of the island of Corfu, off the Greek mainland (see the map on page 128). The European powers, led by Britain and backed by its Mediterranean fleet, demanded that Italy withdraw. The *Duce* had little choice but to agree and, although he did receive the 50 million lira compensation, he did not receive a full apology from the Greeks.

The episode was hailed in Italy as a great success for dynamic Fascism, but it also showed that, although Mussolini might be able to bully smaller powers, he was unable to stand up to the great powers. This realisation rankled with Mussolini but it made him aware of the necessity of good relations with Britain, at least in the short term. He was fortunate that Austen Chamberlain, Britain's Foreign Secretary for much of the 1920s, was an admirer of the fledgling Italian regime and was inclined to look tolerantly on the *Duce's* actions.

Yugoslavia and Albania

Fascism had more success in the Balkans in 1924 when, in the Pact of Rome, Italy received Fiume, an Italian-speaking town on the Yugoslavian coast. This town had long been a target of Italian territorial ambitions, and had been occupied, temporarily, by Italian Nationalists in 1919 (see pages 21–2). Mussolini's

Key question

What factors limited Fascist foreign policy in the 1920s?

Status quo

The current or existing situation.

Key question

How did foreign policy successes strengthen the Fascist regime?

Corfu incident used to promote Fascist power and prestige: 1923

Pact of Rome – Yugoslavia ceded the city of Fiume to Italy: 1924

Key term

Key dates

Key term

Key dates

diplomatic success therefore brought him great prestige and popularity.

The *Duce*'s success over Fiume persuaded him that Yugoslavia could be pushed around. Mussolini resented French influence in Yugoslavia and was keen to demonstrate to this new state, which had been formed only in 1919, that Italy was the dominant power in the region. He wanted to make it clear that he could make life very difficult for Yugoslavia if it tried to resist Italian influence. An opportunity to illustrate this arose in 1924 when an Italian-sponsored local chieftain, Ahmed Zog, managed to take power in Albania on Yugoslavia's southern border. The Fascist government supplied Zog with money, encouraged Italian companies to invest in the Albanian economy, and employed Italian officers as advisers to the Albanian army. By the time a Treaty of Friendship was signed in 1926 Albania was little more than an Italian **satellite state**.

Italy was clearly a potential military threat to Yugoslavia, a threat emphasised by Mussolini's funding of those ethnic minorities, notably the Croats, who wanted to break away from the Yugoslav state. Yugoslavia responded by doing its best not to antagonise Fascist Italy, but it also refused to be intimidated into subservience. Throughout the 1930s the *Duce* maintained his aggressive posture and eventually occupied much of Yugoslavia during the Second World War, after that country's defeat at the hands of Nazi Germany, Italy's ally (see map on page 128).

Relations with Britain and France

While the *Duce* was meddling in the Balkans, he was careful not to antagonise the two dominant European powers of the 1920s, Britain and France. Mussolini recognised that the main British and French interests lay in Western Europe and here he was determined to play the part of a moderate statesman. Italy remained in the League of Nations, signed the Locarno Treaties, which confirmed the permanence of Germany's western borders, and entered into the Kellogg–Briand Pact of 1928, outlawing war.

Italy and Britain also came to an agreement over the location of the border between their North African colonial territories, Libya and Egypt. However, Mussolini had little interest in the details of such treaties and pacts, and rarely took the time to read them through thoroughly. But he did see the advantages of participating in these diplomatic spectacles. He enjoyed being taken seriously as a European statesman, hoped that his apparent moderation would lead to concessions of some sort from Britain and France, and, perhaps above all, saw an opportunity to enhance his prestige and power at home. He organised dramatic entrances to international conferences, as when he raced across Lake Maggiore in a flotilla of speedboats to Locarno. Italian press coverage was always extensive, suggesting that the *Duce* was being treated as an equal by the leaders of the great powers and that Mussolini's presence and contributions had been crucial in reaching such momentous European agreements. This was gross exaggeration – at Locarno, for instance, he attended only one session of the conference and

Key term
Satellite state
A country that is very heavily influenced or virtually controlled by another state.

Key dates
Treaty of Friendship increased Italian influence over Albania: 1926
Locarno Treaties: these agreements between the European powers enabled Mussolini to pose as a major European statesman: 1925

Key term

Key dates

did not even bother to read the final draft of the treaties – but it created a powerful impression in Italy.

Increasing ambitions

Mussolini posed as a good neighbour for the eyes of Britain and France but, by the late 1920s, he was increasingly determined to revise the peace settlement and make Italy 'great, respected and feared'. However, in order to do this he needed friends and stronger armed forces.

Italy signed a friendship treaty in 1927 with Hungary, another **revisionist** state, and Mussolini funded right-wing groups in Germany in the hope that a pro-Fascist government might come to power there. He even went so far as to train German military pilots in Italy, a clear breach of the Treaty of Versailles. As for military power, the dictator told the Italian parliament in 1927 that he would create an airforce 'large enough to blot out the sun'. And when he signed the Kellogg–Briand Pact of 1928 outlawing war, he immediately dismissed it in a speech to that same parliament. By the early 1930s, the Fascist regime was clearly ready to do more than meddle in Balkan affairs; it was now prepared to challenge the European status quo directly in pursuit of a 'greater' Italy. The 1930s were to see Italy becoming increasingly aggressive not only in the Balkans but in Western Europe and Africa too. What had prompted this development?

It can be argued that the regime adopted a more aggressive policy in an attempt to distract public attention away from problems at home. Mussolini certainly recognised that foreign successes would bolster his regime and, perhaps, felt that he needed new, dramatic successes now that domestic policies, such as the corporate state (see pages 85–7), were producing disappointing results, but his aims had always been expansionist and aggressive, even if circumstances had caused him to disguise this. Fascist foreign policy became increasingly belligerent, partly as the result of frustration with the limited gains won by Italian diplomacy in the 1920s, but mainly due to the recognition that the rise to power of the Nazis had transformed the European situation and opened the way for Italian ambitions. For a fuller discussion of historians' views see the Key Debate on pages 132–3.

Key question

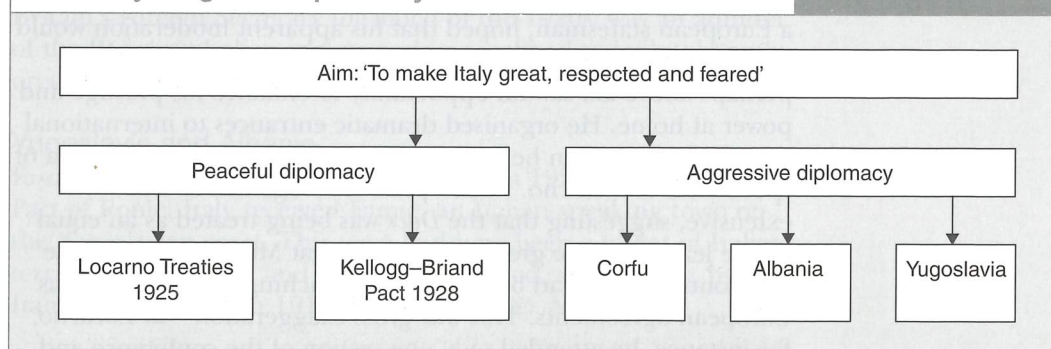
Why did Fascist policy become more ambitious and aggressive from the late 1920s?

Revisionist

A state that wanted to change the peace treaties signed after the First World War.

Key term

Summary diagram: Diplomacy 1922–32



3 | German-Italian Relations 1933-5

Mussolini realised in the 1920s that a strong, resurgent Germany, seeking revision of Versailles, would frighten Britain and France and make them more amenable to Italian demands. Indeed, neither wanted Italy as an enemy and it would, therefore, be able to play off the two camps against each other to its own advantage. Mussolini had probably funded the Nazis, along with a number of other right-wing groups, in the Germany of the late 1920s. On the face of it, therefore, he should have been delighted about Hitler's accession to power in 1933. But, in fact, early relations between the two regimes were rather difficult.

Mussolini enjoyed claiming that 'his creation', Fascism, was spreading through Europe, but he was a little apprehensive lest Germany be seen as the centre of Fascism and he be overshadowed by the new *Führer*. A more concrete concern was that this new German regime might take over Austria, thus creating a powerful 'greater Germany' that would share an Alpine frontier with Italy. If this were to occur, Italy would have lost the security of its northern border guaranteed by victory over Austria-Hungary in 1918, and might even be pressured into ceding those German-speaking areas in north-eastern Italy gained at the peace conference.

The danger of an Austro-German union (*Anschluss*) was even more apparent to the Austrian government in Vienna. Any union of the two countries would not be a merger, it would effectively be the takeover of the weaker (Austria) by the stronger (Germany). Consequently, Dollfuss, the Austrian Chancellor, looked for outside support and he visited Rome three times during 1933. He was relieved to be told that he should suppress the Nazi Party in Austria and that Italy would protect Austria from any German aggression.

In February 1934, Mussolini encouraged Dollfuss to set up a right-wing authoritarian regime which would be partly modelled on Italian Fascism, but which would be anti-Nazi. The Chancellor attempted to do this but was assassinated by Nazi sympathisers in July 1934. Mussolini was outraged and immediately despatched troops to the Austrian border to deter Germany from attempting an armed *Anschluss*. Relations between the two Fascist regimes had not got off to an auspicious start. Indeed, in 1933 Mussolini had described his fellow dictator as:

an ideologue who talks more than he governs ... a muddle-headed fellow; his brain is stuffed with philosophical and political tags that are utterly incoherent.

On hearing of Dollfuss' assassination the *Duce* went further and called Hitler a 'horrible sexual degenerate'.

Stresa Front 1935

Relations reached a low in March 1935 when Nazi Germany revealed that it had developed an airforce, the *Luftwaffe*, in breach

of Versailles and announced that it was introducing military conscription to create an army five times the size permitted by the peace treaty. In the face of this challenge, Mussolini agreed to meet the British and French in the Italian town of Stresa to organise a joint response to the apparent German threat. The result was a declaration that the three powers in the 'Stresa Front' would collaborate to prevent any further breaches in the treaties that might threaten peace.

Nevertheless, although Mussolini certainly feared and distrusted Nazi Germany, he realised that Britain and France had just as much, if not more reason, to fear Hitler. A rearmed and hostile Germany reminded the Western allies of the horrors of the First World War. The *Duce* was shrewd enough to make use of this. The 'Stresa Front' gave him added protection against an *Anschluss*, but it also indicated to him that the Western powers were anxious to avoid Germany allying with other states to revise the peace settlement. Mussolini was convinced that the thought of a German–Italian friendship would horrify Britain and France. To avoid such a possibility they might be more sympathetic towards Italian ambitions and more tolerant towards Italian adventures overseas. Mussolini saw this an ideal opportunity to expand his colonial empire at minimal risk. His chosen area for expansion was to be Ethiopia.

4 | War in Ethiopia 1935

Mussolini's aims

The *Duce* believed that Italian colonies should be developed and expanded, not for commercial motives such as to secure markets or to extract raw materials, but because a growing empire would enhance Italy's claim to be a great power. Colonies were also part of Italy's historic destiny. After all, Italy was the descendant of the Roman Empire that had controlled huge areas of North Africa and had dominated the Mediterranean. The possession of new African territories would provide another benefit: large numbers of colonial troops to enhance Italy's military might. Furthermore, an adventure in Africa offered the prospect of securing military glory on the cheap, impressing the great powers and propping up the regime's prestige at home. With the corporate state a disappointment, and the battles for grain and births (see pages 90 and 103) losing momentum Mussolini needed a new adventure to capture the public imagination.

Ethiopia was an ideal target for Mussolini's ambitions (see map on page 128). It was a large country uncolonised by Europeans, but it lacked the means to fight a modern war. The neighbouring Italian colonies of Eritrea and Somaliland provided convenient avenues of attack, while the uncertain location of Ethiopia's borders with these colonies might provide 'incidents' between the two countries' armed forces that could be used as a justification for war. Furthermore, a successful conquest would avenge Italy's humiliating defeat by Ethiopia in 1896. This, of course, would lend enormous prestige to the Fascist regime at home, proving

Key question

What was the impact of the war on Mussolini's foreign policy?

Italian invasion of Ethiopia: 1935

Key date

the *Duce's* claim that he, and he alone, could restore Italy to international grandeur.

The pretext for war

The Fascist government had taken an interest in Ethiopia since the early 1920s. Italy had sponsored Ethiopia's membership of the League of Nations in 1923 and had even signed a Treaty of Friendship in 1928. Despite these acts of a supposed 'good neighbour', the Fascist regime was, by 1929, drawing up plans to **annex** the country. In fact, in that year, Italian soldiers began to occupy disputed border areas. It was in one of these areas that, in December 1934, the incident occurred that gave the *Duce* an excuse for war. At the oasis of Wal-Wal a skirmish took place between Italian and Ethiopian troops, in which 30 Italian soldiers were killed. Mussolini immediately demanded a full apology and hefty compensation. The Ethiopian government replied by requesting a League of Nations investigation. The League agreed and set up an inquiry.

Mussolini had no interest in waiting for the results of such an investigation, as he had already issued a secret order for the 'total conquest of Ethiopia' in December 1934, and was intent on building up his military forces in the area. A huge army, together with civilian support, totalling half a million men, was transported to Africa. The announcement of German military conscription and rearmament did cause the *Duce* to pause to consider whether he was leaving himself exposed in Europe, but the Stresa conference assured him that he had nothing to fear. In addition, his conviction that Britain and France were too preoccupied with Germany to oppose him seemed to be confirmed. Talks with their Foreign Ministers during the first half of 1935 showed that both countries were prepared to accede to Italian control of at least part of Ethiopia. Britain might well object to a full conquest, but its protests would be confined to disapproving notes sent by British diplomats.

Military victory

In October 1935 Italian armies attacked Ethiopia. On the previous day the *Duce* had justified his invasion to the Italian public:

It is not only our army that marches to its objective, 44 million Italians march with that army, all united and alert. Let others try to commit the blackest injustice, taking away Italy's place in the sun. When, in 1915, Italy united her fate with the Allies [in the First World War], how many promises were made? To fight the common victory Italy brought her supreme contribution of 670,000 dead, 480,000 disabled and more than one million wounded. When we went to the table of that odious peace they gave us only the crumbs of the colonial booty [in the peace treaties].

The Ethiopian forces were disorganised and armed with antiquated weapons. They were soon forced onto the defensive and suffered the full effects of modern war. The Italians used

Key term

Annex

Take over or seize a country.

Key date

aerial bombing and poison gas in their campaigns. In April 1936 the Ethiopian army was heavily defeated at Lake Ashangi and, in the following month, the capital, Addis Ababa, was occupied. The Ethiopian Emperor, Haile Selassie, fled to Britain and organised opposition ceased. However, sporadic guerrilla attacks continued and the Italian forces began a ruthless campaign of suppression that Mussolini was keen to encourage. He sent the following telegrams to his commander in the field:

5 June 1936 – All rebels made prisoner are to be shot.

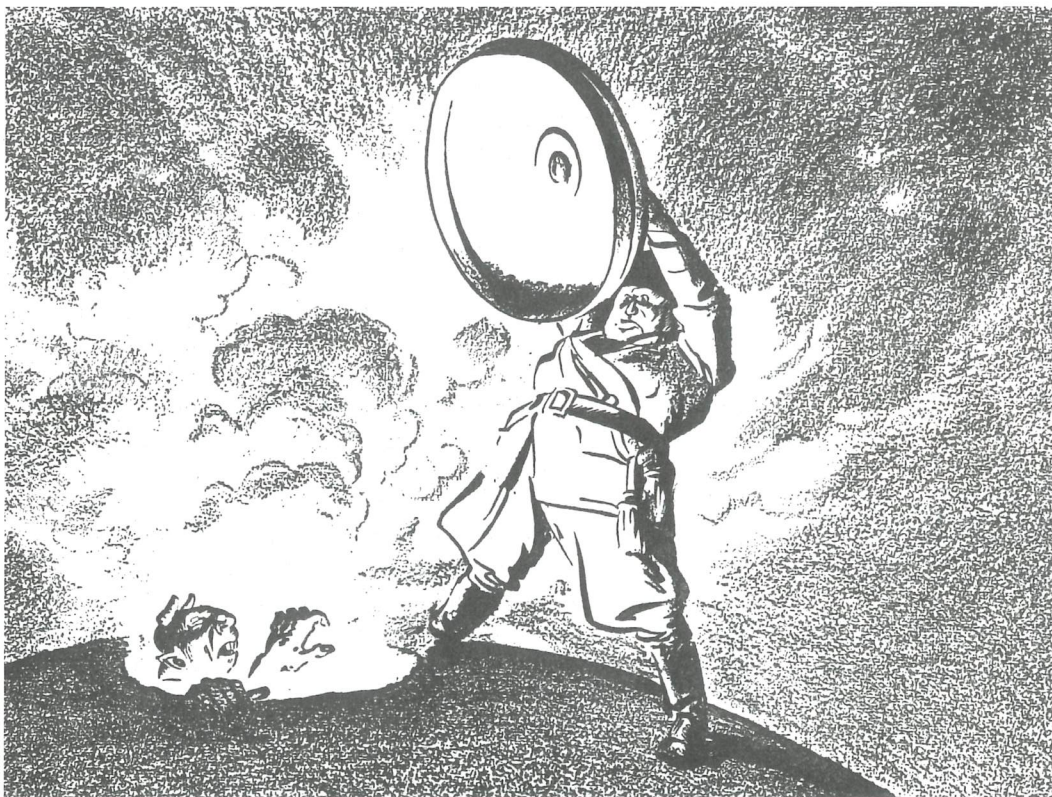
Secret – 8 June 1936. To finish off rebels as at Ancober use gas.

Secret – 8 July 1936. I repeat my authorisation to initiate and systematically conduct policy of terror and extermination against rebels and populations in complicity with them. Without the law of ten eyes for one we cannot heal this wound in good time. Acknowledge.

21 February 1937 – Agreed that male population of Goggetti over 18 years of age is to be shot and village destroyed.

21 February 1937 – No persons arrested are to be released without my order. All civilians and clerics in any way suspect are to be shot without delay.

These brutal tactics did succeed in pacifying Ethiopia, but they did nothing to reconcile the people to Fascist rule.



'The man who took the lid off'. A David Low cartoon from the *Evening Standard*. What does the cartoonist see as the significance of Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia? David Low, *Evening Standard* 4th October 1935/Centre for the Study of Cartoons and Caricature, University of Kent.

Key question

How far did the war increase domestic support for Mussolini?

Italian public opinion

As the war began the mood of the public was uncertain. Some Italians, no doubt, had been taken in by the orchestrated press campaign stressing Italy's right to an East African empire and suggesting the presence of enormous quantities of valuable resources, such as precious metals, in Ethiopia, but many remained unenthusiastic. It was the condemnation of the invasion by the League of Nations that caused the public to rally round the regime in order to defend the honour of Italy. When the war was won quickly and with only around 1000 Italian casualties, Mussolini's popularity soared. The Fascist philosopher Giovanni Gentile claimed that 'Mussolini today has not just founded empire in Ethiopia. He has made something more. He has created a new Italy'. For Gentile and for many Italians, Italy was now indisputably a great power – it had proven military strength and a sizeable colonial empire, and demanded to be considered an equal to Britain and France.

Key question

Why did the war damage relations with Britain and France?

Impact of the war on relations with Britain and France

Public opinion in Britain and France was outraged by the invasion and the Italian tactics such as the use of gas. There was widespread support for the League of Nations' imposition of economic sanctions – no arms were to be sold to Italy and member nations were to ban the import of Italian goods. However, these measures were little more than symbolic: there was no ban imposed on the strategic commodities of oil, coal and steel and the Suez Canal (see the map on page 128) was not closed to Italian ships. Had Britain chosen to close this canal, Italy's vital supply route to its forces in East Africa would have been cut off.

These sanctions irritated Mussolini without hindering his war effort. He was convinced that Britain and France, the leading powers in the League, were timid and weak. His opinion was confirmed by the Western powers' reluctance to use the forces at their disposal and by their efforts to bring the conflict to an end by diplomatic means, culminating in the ill-fated **Hoare-Laval Pact** of December 1935. This agreement between the Foreign Ministers of Britain and France would have handed over the greater part of Ethiopia to Italy, leaving the Emperor Haile Selassie with only a small, unviable independent state. A public outcry in Britain and France put paid to this agreement, but it appeared to the *Duce* that the governments of both countries were desperate to avoid having Fascist Italy as an enemy.

Mussolini despised such apparent weakness. He increasingly saw the Western democracies as cowardly. The 1933 Oxford University Union debate in which the supposed cream of British youth had argued that they were no longer prepared to 'fight for King and Country' had probably encouraged such a notion. Mussolini thought that Britain and France were decadent, interested only in money-making and a comfortable life. His Fascism was, in contrast, dynamic and contemptuous of material

Key term**Hoare-Laval Pact**

An Anglo-French attempt to find a compromise peace, giving Mussolini most of Ethiopia.

comforts. It might even replace 'bourgeois democracy' as the dominant force in Europe.

Mussolini remained willing to negotiate with Britain and France if he could see some advantage, but relations never fully recovered.

5 | Alliance with Germany 1936–9

Mussolini now looked towards Nazi Germany with more favour – here was another vibrant Fascist regime, one which had played no part in the sanctions and which, like Italy, had grievances against Britain and France dating back to the 1919 peace conferences. Mussolini thought that Italian friendship, and the prospect of a military alliance, with Nazi Germany would terrify Britain and France and would allow him to prise concessions out of them. He was still not sure exactly what these concessions might be, but he could now see the possibility of realising his dream of Mediterranean domination.

Rome–Berlin Axis 1936

A reconciliation between the two Fascist regimes had begun as early as January 1936 when Hitler agreed not to carry out an *Anschluss* and, in return, Mussolini dropped his objection to Nazi interference in Austrian politics. Europe became aware of the warming of relations when Ciano, Italy's Foreign Minister, visited Berlin in October and in the following month Mussolini proclaimed the existence of the 'Rome–Berlin Axis'. This public declaration of friendship was cemented by a secret understanding that Italy would direct its expansionist energies towards the Mediterranean while Germany looked towards Eastern Europe and the Baltic, thus ensuring that they did not compete with one another. Hitler even went so far as to suggest that he was preparing his country to be at war in three years' time.

Hitler's talk of war did not frighten Mussolini. In fact, he revelled in such bellicose phrases and saw war as the 'supreme test' both of the individual and of the nation. Italy was rearming and, although he certainly had not committed himself to taking the country into a European war, he was prepared to risk such a conflict in pursuit of his foreign policy goals.

Intervention in the Spanish Civil War 1936

From 1936 the accommodation with Germany was the central fact of Italian foreign policy. German and Italian forces fought on the same side in the Spanish Civil War that had begun in July 1936. They supported the attempts of Spanish conservatives and Fascists to overthrow the elected Republican government. Mussolini had been reluctant to get involved, at first lending only transport planes to the rebels. However, when two of these planes crashed in French-controlled Morocco, Mussolini's involvement was heavily criticised in the French press. Angry at the French reaction and determined to maintain Italian prestige, the *Duce* decided to help ensure a 'Fascist victory' in Spain. Without any

Key question

Why did Mussolini ally with Nazi Germany?

Rome–Berlin Axis:
November 1936

Key date

Key question

Why did Mussolini commit Italian troops to the Spanish Civil War?

Italy sent troops into the Spanish Civil War:
September 1936

Key date

real planning or thought for the political and economic consequences, Mussolini committed over 40,000 troops. Officially these were volunteers but it soon became apparent that regular Italian army units were involved. Italian troops were withdrawn only in 1939 after Republican resistance had collapsed. It had been the anti-Republican Spanish who had borne the brunt of the fighting, but the conflict had still cost 4000 Italian lives and the expenditure of over eight billion lira. It had also done nothing to improve relations with Britain and France, both of whom remained neutral during the war.

Key question
How did the *Anschluss* affect relations between Italy and Nazi Germany?

Closer Italo-German relations 1937–8

In November 1937 the 'Rome–Berlin Axis' was further strengthened when Italy joined Germany and Japan in the Anti-Comintern Pact. In practice, this was a declaration that the three countries would work together against Soviet Russia. However, the relationship between the two European Fascist states cooled somewhat in March 1938 when Hitler finally carried out the *Anschluss* without consulting the *Duce*. In response, Mussolini signed an agreement with Britain guaranteeing the status quo in the Mediterranean. But the two dictators were soon reconciled. The *Duce* had no interest in maintaining the status quo and, despite his annoyance at not being informed about the *Anschluss*, his admiration for German dynamism only increased.



Mussolini and Hitler in Munich, 1937.

on
Mussolini ally
Germany?

Axis:
1936

Key date

on
Mussolini
troops
Civil

into
Civil War:
1936

Key date

In September 1938 Hitler's demands over the **Sudetenland** seemed likely to lead to a general European war. The British Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, asked Mussolini to act as a mediator at the conference, which had been called at Munich, to seek a diplomatic solution to the crisis. Mussolini enjoyed the favourable publicity he received in the British and French press, but he was not even-handed as mediator. In fact, he secretly colluded with Hitler to find a compromise favourable to Nazi claims. The Sudetenland was handed over to the Third Reich.

Territorial demands 1938–9

The *Duce* was hailed in Europe as an architect of peace. But, in his view, Munich had only confirmed the weakness of Britain and France, a weakness on which he was determined to capitalise. In November 1938 the Italian parliament was recalled and Mussolini instructed it to demand the annexation of Nice, Corsica and Tunis from France. In the same month he told the Grand Council of Fascism:

I announce to you the immediate goals of fascist dynamism ... Albania will become Italian. I cannot tell you how or when. But it will come to pass. Then, for the requirements of our security in this Mediterranean that still confines us, we need Tunis and Corsica. The [French] frontier must move to the [river] Var ... All this is a programme. I cannot lay down a fixed timetable. I merely indicate the route along which we shall march.

Key question

What were Mussolini's territorial demands in Europe and Africa?

Sudetenland

The area of Czechoslovakia with a substantial German-speaking population. Hitler used this as a pretext to wage war against the Western European powers.

Key term



Mussolini taking centre stage at the Munich conference in 1938.

At last Mussolini was beginning to clarify those vague expansionist ideas that he had held for well over a decade.

By 1939, with France rearming and French opinion outraged by Italian territorial claims, the *Duce* was very aware that if he was to realise his ambitions war was almost inevitable. However, he hoped and believed that he could win a war with France, particularly if he had a military alliance with Germany. As for Britain, he had seen Prime Minister Chamberlain's desperation to avoid war at Munich and believed it would keep out of such a conflict. In February 1939 the dictator presented his most candid analysis of his foreign policy aims and made it clear that he was even prepared for confrontation with Britain, if need be. He told the Grand Council,

Italy ... is bathed by a landlocked sea [the Mediterranean] that communicates with the oceans through the Suez Canal, ... [which is] easily blocked ..., and through the straits of Gibraltar, dominated by the cannons of Great Britain.

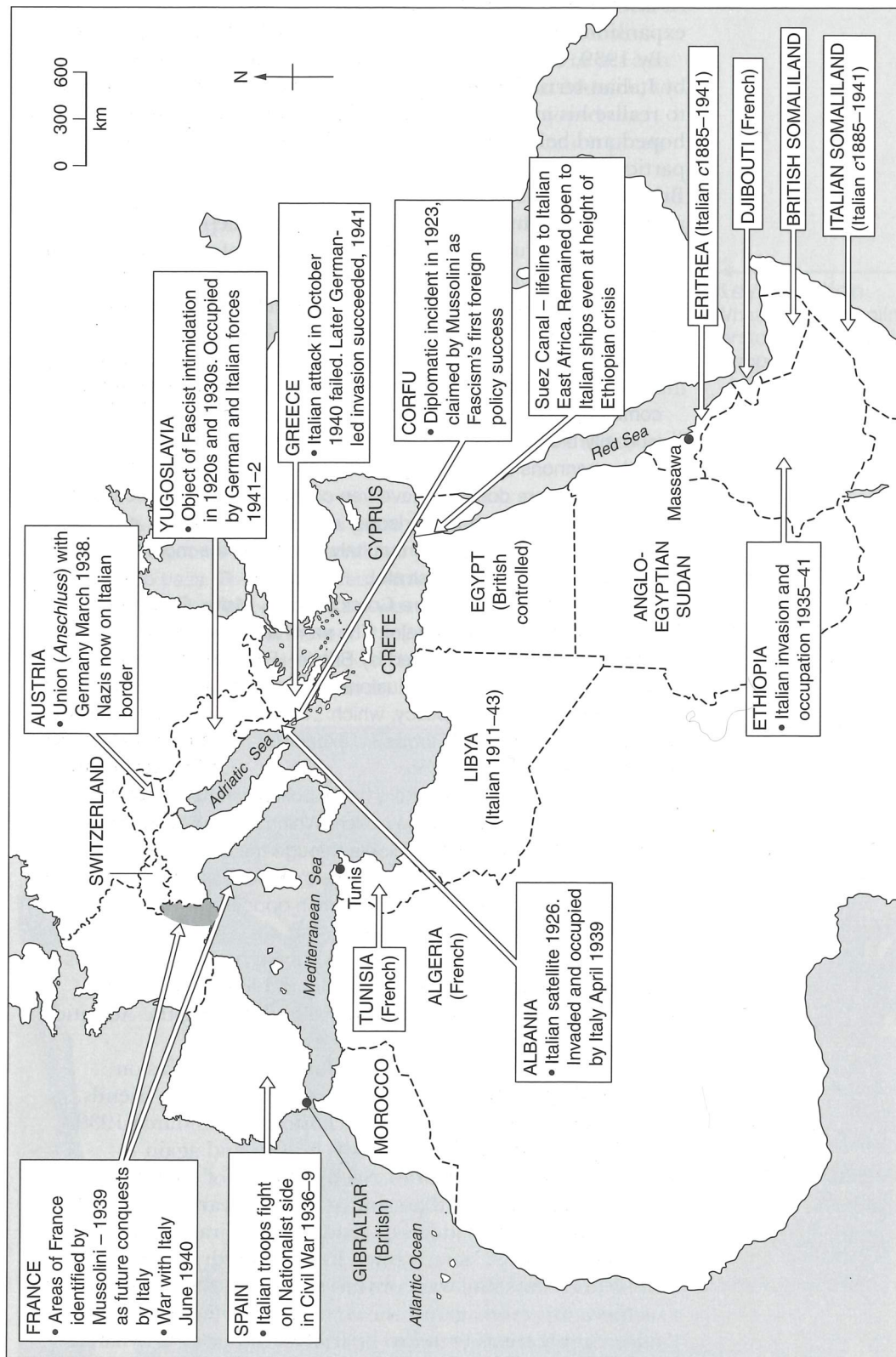
Italy therefore does not have free connection with the oceans. Italy is therefore in truth a prisoner of the Mediterranean, and the more populous and prosperous Italy becomes, the more its imprisonment will gall [frustrate].

The bars of this prison are Corsica, Tunis, Malta, Cyprus ... [all occupied by France or Britain]. The sentinels of this prison are Gibraltar and Suez [controlled by Britain]. From this situation ... one can draw the following conclusions:

1. The task of Italian policy, which ... does not have ... territorial [ambitions in mainland Europe] ... except for Albania, is to first of all break the bars of the prison.
2. Once the bars are broken, Italy's policy can have only one watchword – to march to the ocean. Which ocean? The Indian Ocean, joining Libya with Ethiopia through the Sudan, or the Atlantic, through French North Africa. In either case, we will find ourselves confronted with Anglo-French opposition.

That this was not mere bravado was shown by his instructions that detailed plans be drawn up to invade and formally annex Albania, thus intimidating Yugoslavia and making the Adriatic virtually an 'Italian sea'.

While preparations were going ahead for this invasion Mussolini received a second shock from his German friends. German troops marched into Czechoslovakia in March 1939. Again, as over the *Anschluss*, he was furious and again contemplated changing sides. Such thoughts of a major switch in policy lasted no longer than similar ideas a year earlier. Real fear of Germany was now added to grudging admiration for its successes. The Nazi state seemed intent on redrawing the map of Europe and Mussolini was convinced it had the military resources to achieve this even against the combined armies of Britain and France. Surely it was better to be friends with such a dynamic regime and pick up some of the spoils of victory?



Fascist foreign policy in the Mediterranean and Africa 1922–43.

Invasion of Albania 1939

The Italian invasion of Albania finally took place in April 1939 and put the *Duce* back in the limelight. Fascist Italy was also realising its destiny by taking over weaker and 'inferior' states. The Italian regime conveniently ignored the fact that Albania had been a satellite for over 10 years. Victory was won without any major fighting.

Key question

Why did Mussolini sign a military alliance with Germany?

Pact of Steel 1939

If Mussolini was delighted with his success, he was angry that his Albanian adventure had caused Britain and France to give guarantees of military assistance to Greece and Turkey should they, too, be attacked. To the *Duce* these guarantees were an aggressive move against legitimate Italian interests: he had long considered Greece as within Italy's sphere of influence and had been trying to emphasise this point in 1923 when he had bombarded Corfu.

These guarantees may have finally convinced Mussolini to conclude a military alliance with Germany but, in any case, such an alliance was the logical conclusion of Italian actions since Ethiopia. The 'Pact of Steel' was signed in May 1939. It committed each nation to join the other in war even if that other country had caused the war by an act of aggression. In short, if Germany were to provoke a war with Britain and France, Italy would be duty-bound to enter the war on Germany's side.

It is uncertain why Mussolini agreed to such terms. Indeed, it has been suggested that he took no notice of the precise wording of treaties, regarding them as simply pieces of paper that could be discarded whenever it suited him to do so. Whether or not Mussolini understood the full consequences of the agreement when he signed it, his government soon realised its meaning and took fright. Ciano, the Foreign Secretary, seems to have persuaded his *Duce* that Italy should make its position clear to its German ally. Consequently, at the end of May the Fascist government told the Germans that, although there was no doubt about Italy's willingness to go to war, any war should be postponed for at least three years to allow it to rearm fully. An angry Hitler ignored this appeal, and did not even bother to reply.

Key dates

Invasion of Albania:
April 1939

Pact of Steel, military
alliance with
Germany: May 1939

Nazi invasion of
Poland started the
Second World War:
September 1939

Key question

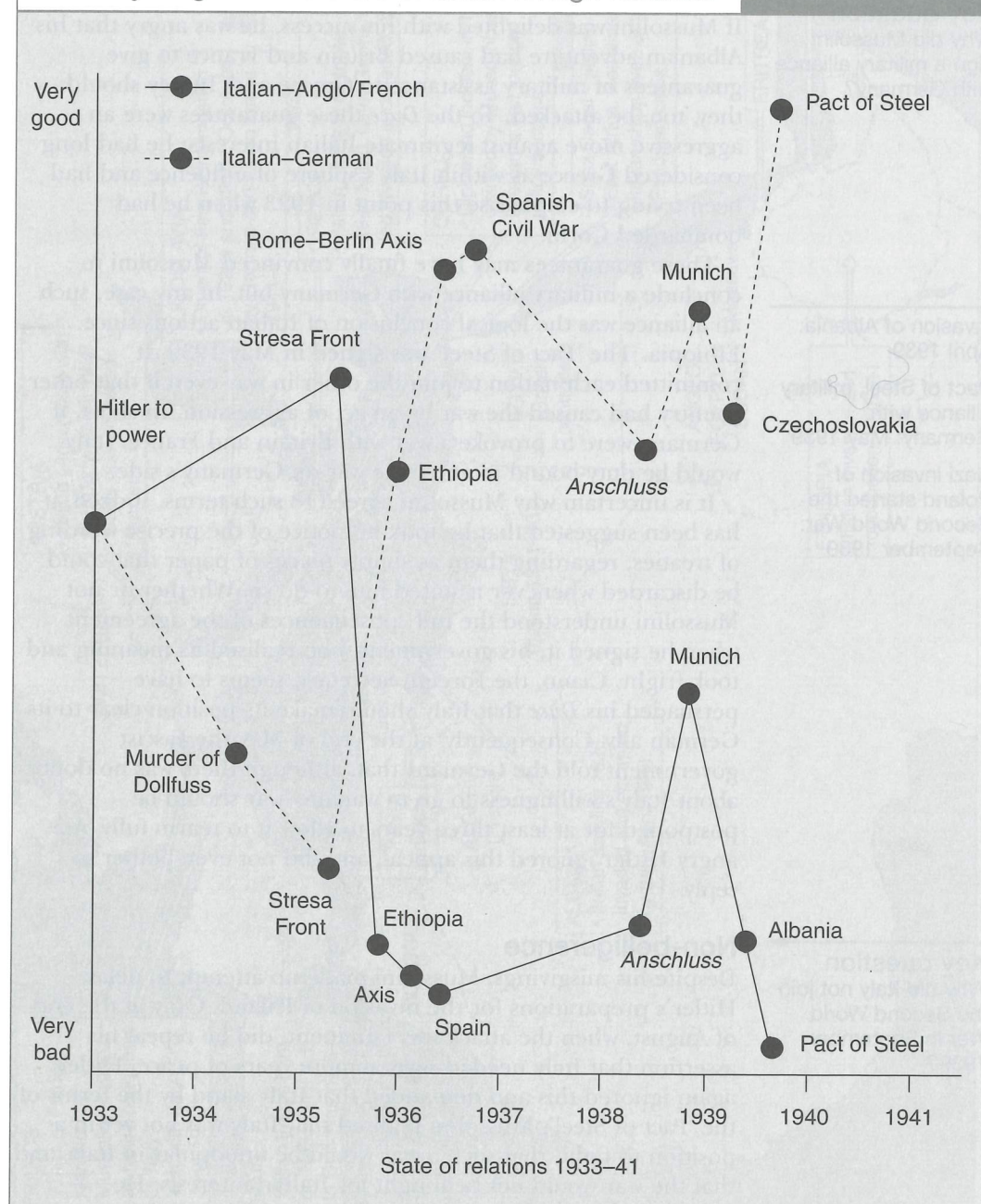
Why did Italy not join the Second World War in September 1939?

Non-belligerence

Despite his misgivings, Mussolini made no attempt to delay Hitler's preparations for the invasion of Poland. Only at the end of August, when the attack was imminent, did he repeat his assertion that Italy needed several more years of peace. Hitler again ignored this and demanded that Italy stand by the terms of the 'Pact of Steel'. Mussolini realised that Italy was not yet in a position to fight, that such a war would be unpopular in Italy, and that the war would not be fought for Italian interests. He therefore attempted to wriggle out of his obligations by arguing that Italy would join the war only if it was supplied with

enormous, and unrealistic, quantities of war material. When Germany and the Western democracies went to war over Poland in September, the *Duce* declared that his ally had been 'treacherous' and had thereby made the Pact defunct. It was then announced that Italy would be a 'non-belligerent'. The overwhelming majority of Italians were greatly relieved.

Summary diagram: The state of Italian foreign relations



Key question

Why did Italy join the Second World War in June 1940?

Key dates

Nazi invasion of France: May 1940

Italy entered the second World War on the Nazi side: June 1940

Key term

Blitzkrieg
'Lightning war' tactics employed by Nazis very successfully in the early years of the Second World War. Involved co-ordinated use of aircraft, tanks, and infantry.

6 | Entry into the Second World War

Mussolini was embarrassed by Italy's neutrality. It made him look rather pathetic after all his bellicose talk. However, he realised that the risks of intervention, both for his country and consequently for his regime, were too great. Throughout the winter of 1939 the supposedly dynamic, decisive *Duce* could not make up his mind what policy to pursue. He still favoured Germany, but was also jealous of Nazi successes and, at one point, even considered acting as a mediator to bring the sides to the negotiating table.

On 10 May 1940, Hitler launched his *Blitzkrieg* against France and the low countries, catching the Allied forces by surprise and throwing them into disarray. The Netherlands surrendered within five days and within another week the German armies had reached the Channel coast. Belgium surrendered and, by the end of May, the British Expeditionary Force had left the continent after a desperate evacuation from Dunkirk. German forces were sweeping through France and were meeting only disorganised opposition.

It appeared to Mussolini, and indeed to the watching world, that the Western allies were on the brink of total defeat. France would almost certainly collapse within days and Britain, left to fight the war alone, would probably follow within a few months or else seek a humiliating negotiated peace. The view from Rome was that if Italy remained neutral it would be faced with a Europe dominated by Germany, a Germany angry at Italy's refusal to honour its treaty obligations. Italy would have gained nothing, would lack great power status, and would be under physical threat from its Nazi neighbour. On the other hand, if Italy now committed itself to the Axis cause, Germany would be a friend and not a potential enemy. Italy and Germany would share Europe, with the Italians possibly having a free hand in the Mediterranean. In June 1940 Mussolini, therefore, decided to seize what he thought was the opportunity to redeem his lost honour and to win military glory. He declared war on Britain and France.

7 | How Successful was Mussolini's Foreign Policy?

From a Fascist perspective, Mussolini could certainly claim some successes by 1940: the empire in Africa had been expanded, Albania had been seized, a pro-Fascist regime had taken control in Spain, and Britain and France had accorded Italy some respect as a great power. Foreign policy, particularly the war in Ethiopia, had also generated greater domestic support for the regime.

On the other hand, Mussolini's foreign policy goals had been far too ambitious. It was wholly unrealistic to imagine an Italy simultaneously dominating the Mediterranean militarily, expanding its colonial empire, and exercising economic and even political control over the Balkans. To have achieved even one of

these aims Italy would have required far-sighted leadership, efficient and modernised armed forces, a committed populace and, above all, an advanced industrialised economy geared for war. The Fascist state possessed none of these assets.

The events of the 1920s and early 1930s had proved that Italy was not strong enough to prise major concessions from Britain and France by diplomatic means. Italy had established political control over Albania, appeared to be Austria's protector against a German-imposed *Anschluss*, and had played a highly publicised part in international conferences, but this was far from being 'great, respected and feared'.

Certainly, Hitler's rise to power did make Britain and France more tolerant towards Italian ambitions, but Mussolini was unable to adopt the role of the 'balancing power', able to exact concessions from both sides. The Western democracies would have preferred Mussolini as an ally or, more probably, as a moderating influence on the Nazi dictator, but Fascist Italy's aggressive behaviour in Ethiopia and the Spanish Civil War seemed to indicate that the *Duce* had little interest in keeping the peace. The Western powers continued to deal with Mussolini, hoping that he might restrain his Nazi friend, but by the end of 1938 they had learned to expect very little from him. It was clear to them that he was temperamentally disposed towards Germany and that whatever his territorial demands were, they were impossible to concede.

As for Germany, Hitler preferred Italy as an ally but did not take it seriously as a military power. Italian neutrality or hostility would not have deflected the *Führer* from his foreign policy goals. Indeed, both the *Anschluss* and the seizure of Czechoslovakia showed an insensitivity towards Italian interests, and when Germany went to war against Britain and France in September 1939, the Nazis were neither altogether surprised nor overly concerned by Mussolini's 'non-belligerence'.

Diplomatic methods had not succeeded in realising the *Duce*'s ambitions and the events of 1940–3 were to prove that war could not lead to the permanent expansion of the Fascist state. In fact, it would cause its destruction. Admittedly, in June 1940 Italy did appear to be in an advantageous position, with France on the brink of defeat and Britain severely weakened. However, Italy's armed forces and economy were ill prepared for a major war, as the following chapter will explain.

8 | Key Debate

How similar were the foreign policies of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany?

Many historians have seen similarities between Fascist foreign policy and traditional Liberal policy pre-1922 – the desire for great power status, influence in the Balkans and Mediterranean and the drive for empire in Africa. Richard Bosworth, for example, sees strong parallels between Mussolini's war in

Ethiopia and the Liberal war in Libya just prior to the First World War. Bosworth argues that Mussolini's 'empire in Africa was of the old-fashioned, ramshackle, costly variety, familiar from the nineteenth century, and very different from the racial [empire] Hitler ... [wanted] ... to construct in the East on the ashes of the USSR and European Jewry'.

Bosworth raises here the controversial issue of how close Fascist foreign policy was to that of Nazi Germany. Renzo de Felice, a very prominent Italian historian, argues strongly that the two policies had little in common, and Fascist actions did not contain the racial obsession that drove Hitler into a genocidal war in Eastern Europe. Macgregor Knox, however, identifies an 'Italo-German revolutionary alliance against the west': the relationship with Nazi Germany was not just a tool for prising diplomatic concessions out of Britain and France; it was a recognition of a shared ideology, and war was its inevitable and welcomed outcome. Knox cites Fascism's brutality in Ethiopia, its adoption of Nazi racial ideas, and its aggressive territorial demands as evidence.

Bosworth, and the British historian Denis Mack Smith, have argued that neither of the two interpretations is completely accurate. Certainly, Fascist territorial demands by 1939–40 were increasingly extreme and racial policies were adopted, but Mussolini was too inconsistent to pursue a deliberate policy aimed at securing a German alliance and a general European war. For example, the *Duce* was prepared to listen to British suggestions about how to improve relations in 1937, and was non-committal towards German proposals for a military alliance in 1938. His own Foreign Secretary, Ciano, was far from supportive of the German alliance when it was signed in 1939, and the vast majority of Fascist leaders, including Mussolini himself, did not want to join the Second World War in September 1939. Neither a Fascist ideological crusade nor a skilful manipulation of the international situation for Italian advantage, Mussolini's foreign policy was characterised by uncertainty, inconsistency, opportunism and blundering.

Some key books in the debate

R.J.B. Bosworth, *Mussolini* (Arnold, 2002).

Nicholas Farrell, *Mussolini: A New Life* (Phoenix, 2004).

Macgregor Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed* (Cambridge University Press, 1982).
