

BENITO MUSSOLINI, ADOLF HITLER AND  
ITALO-GERMAN RELATIONS: 1933-1938

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## ABSTRACT

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From 1933 to 1938 relations between Italy and Germany underwent a significant change. This was due in no small part to the significant change in the balance of power in western Europe during this period of time. In 1933 and 1934 Mussolini was Hitler's equal, and he even forced the German leader to back down in Austria in July 1934. In the next two years Italo-German relations and the whole relationship between the two Fascist leaders changed dramatically. Italian involvement in Ethiopia and later in the Spanish Civil War isolated Italy from Great Britain and France, and forced Mussolini to turn to Hitler for diplomatic support. Hitler skillfully used Mussolini's weak political position in 1936 to seek a rapprochement with the Italian leader on his own terms. The temporary settlement of the difficult Austrian problem in July 1936 ended the last major obstacle to Italo-German friendship, and in late 1936 the Rome-Berlin Axis was created. From the beginning of the Axis the German dictator dominated Mussolini, and by the end of the Munich Conference in October 1938 the Duce and Italian foreign policy had become

subservient to Hitler. Ironically Mussolini gave the new relationship its name, but from the very beginning Hitler was its leader.

Approved:

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CHAPTER I  
THE EARLY FOREIGN POLICY OF  
BENITO MUSSOLINI: 1922-1933

Italian entry into World War I in 1915 had been a calculated move designed to gain certain fundamental Italian foreign policy aims. These aims included

the liberation of the Italians under foreign rule; the obtention of a secure Alpine frontier; the securing in the Adriatic of sufficient guarantees against the danger of leaving too extensive a stretch of coast in the hands of the Slavs; and finally, the safeguarding of Italy's interest as a Mediterranean Power.<sup>1</sup>

Italy emerged from the war as a member of the alliance of victorious powers, but her treatment at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 made many Italians feel that their victory<sup>2</sup> had been "mutilated" by the Allies.

It will be the purpose of this study to investigate Italian foreign policy from 1922 to show how Italy went about gaining her aims. The impact of Fascism upon Italian aims will also be studied to show how this new political force affected Italian policy in this period.

That Italy was shabbily treated at the Paris Peace Conference by her allies is "generally acknowledged" by historians.<sup>3</sup> Italian treatment at the peace conference heightened

the discontent of the Italian people with postwar democracy,<sup>4</sup> and its handling of foreign policy. Blame was placed, however, both upon weak Italian statesmen and upon Italy's wartime Allies. The result was that in October, 1922, a new<sup>5</sup> political force was swept into power in strife-ridden Italy.

The accession of Benito Mussolini to power in 1922 signaled the rest of Europe that a completely new approach to the handling of Italian foreign policy would be forthcoming in the future.<sup>6</sup> To a large degree Mussolini and his Fascists had been swept into power "on a tide of resentment at the alleged mutilation of victory in general and suspected injuries in the Adriatic in particular."<sup>7</sup> In his first major foreign policy speech on November 16, 1922, Mussolini clearly outlined his approach toward foreign policy putting Italy squarely in the revisionist camp:

The fundamental lines of our foreign policy are these -- treaties of peace, whether good or bad, must be carried out once they have been signed and ratified. A self-respecting state cannot hold any other belief. Treaties are not eternal or unchangeable; they are chapters in the history of the world, not the epilogue. To execute them is to put them to the test; if in the course of their execution they are proved to be absurd, then that provides the reason which opens the way to a revision.<sup>8</sup>

As a man of action Mussolini was not content simply to express his views on such issues as treaty revision. Mussolini

came to power promising action in the field of foreign policy, but in the first few months of his leadership the Duce re-<sup>9</sup>strained himself. In the Ruhr crisis of January, 1923, Mussolini took a surprisingly low-key approach. Italy only gave temporary support to France in the beginning of the crisis and thereafter "was a fairly consistent advocate of leniency toward Germany."<sup>10</sup> Basically Italy's only concern during the crisis was the continuance of its coal reparations from Germany, and the Germans, despite their policy of passive resistance, maintained their shipment of coal to Italy as long as possible. German public opinion reacted negatively to the Italian involvement in the Ruhr, but the German government had anticipated Italian reaction and believed that Italy had<sup>11</sup> been forced by circumstances to act as she did.

In the Ruhr crisis Mussolini acted with marked restraint, but in the summer of 1923 another crisis occurred in which Mussolini was not content to remain in the background. On August 27, 1923, the Italian members of a commission surveying the Greek-Albanian frontier were ambushed and murdered<sup>12</sup> near the Greek town of Janina. Mussolini reacted quickly and on August 31 sent his fleet to bombard and occupy the island of Corfu. In addition Mussolini demanded a sizable indemnity from the Greek government. In the end the Greek government was forced to pay the indemnity to Italy, and

under international pressure Mussolini eventually was per-  
 suaded to evacuate Corfu on September 27, 1923.<sup>13</sup> When the  
 crisis was finally resolved, neither Italy nor Greece was  
 satisfied with the settlement. Mussolini had been unable to  
 annex Corfu as he had wished, and Greece was forced to pay  
 a large indemnity, which it could not afford.<sup>14</sup> The Corfu  
 incident, however, was much more important than it appeared  
 to be at first. Its real importance was in showing the true  
 nature of Fascist Italy's foreign policy, which was clearly  
 militant.<sup>15</sup>

In addition the Corfu incident clarified Mussolini's  
 view of the League of Nations and its relationship with  
 Fascist Italy. Italy came out of the Paris Peace Conference  
 a dissatisfied nation, and looked upon the League with a  
 jaundiced eye since Italy wanted a revision of the peace  
 settlement which the League in part was designed to protect.<sup>16</sup>  
 The advent of Fascism in Italy only heightened this feeling.  
 Mussolini also believed "the League of Nations stood for in-  
 ternationalism and pacifism, the very negation of the virile,  
 self-interested nationalism Fascism claimed to embody."<sup>17</sup>  
 Thus when the League had contemplated involvement in the  
 Corfu affair Italian reaction had been abrupt and negative.<sup>18</sup>  
 According to Alan Cassels,



Briefly the Italian practice, until the Italo-Ethiopian dispute arose at the end of 1935, was to support League policy rather indifferently as long as it did not contrast with her own, but to give absolute precedence to national interests when the latter were not exactly in conformity with the principles of the League, as also to place Italy's prestige as a Great Power above that of the League as an international institution.<sup>19</sup>

If Corfu had shown the true nature of Fascist foreign policy, the unsettled Fiume issue between Italy and Yugoslavia over ownership of the city was certainly one of the most dangerous problems which faced Italy immediately after World War I. The Italians had made the acquisition of Fiume one of their main goals at the Paris Peace Conference, and for five years thereafter the issue weighed upon Italian foreign policy.<sup>20</sup> The Fascist government realized how passionately the Italian people desired the acquisition of the city, and Mussolini put a favorable solution to the question at the top of his list of priorities.<sup>21</sup> The Fiume issue, however, was such a volatile one for both Italy and Yugoslavia that negotiations for a permanent settlement proceeded cautiously and slowly. On January 27, 1924, Italy and Yugoslavia signed the pact of Rome which gave Italy the city of Fiume while Yugoslavia received nearby Port Baros.<sup>22</sup> The acquisition of Fiume, even without Port Baros, was a

major foreign policy victory for Mussolini.

Since the beginning of the summer of 1923 and the Corfu issue Mussolini had taken an active and forceful role in the development of Italy's foreign policy. This forcefulness came to a temporary halt when the "Matteotti crisis" burst upon the Italian nation.<sup>24</sup> Giacomo Matteotti had been a leading member of the Socialist Party in Italy and an outspoken critic of the Fascist government. On June 10, 1924, Matteotti was abducted and later found murdered. Before long most Italians felt that the Fascists had been responsible for the terrible act.<sup>25</sup> The resultant anti-Fascism was expressed not only in Italy, but also throughout Europe.<sup>26</sup> Mussolini's regime eventually survived the crisis

mainly because the opposition lacked strong leadership. This in turn was due to the refusal of either the monarchy or the Vatican to lead a united anti-Fascist front. In short, the majority of the Italian power structure, which had countenanced Mussolini's accession to office in 1922, were loath to desert him.<sup>27</sup>

The crisis, however, affected the conduct of Fascist Italy's foreign policy for the last half of 1924. The impetuous foreign policy of the past year was replaced with a genuine concern for Fascist Italy's image. Thus "caution and concern" were uppermost in Mussolini's mind.<sup>28</sup>

In early 1925, as the storm over the Matteotti affair

subsided, Mussolini and his Fascist leaders began establishing a true dictatorial regime in Italy. The gradual suppression of dissent left Mussolini free to "pursue his own idiosyncratic policies" both at home and abroad in the following year.<sup>29</sup> For Europe the most important foreign policy event of 1925 was the convening of the Locarno Conference in October.<sup>30</sup> Mussolini, who felt uncomfortable at international gatherings, decided to attend at the last minute,<sup>31</sup> and did so only for reasons of prestige and national pride. In the end the Locarno Conference achieved remarkable success. Arbitration treaties between Germany and her neighboring states were signed, as was a Treaty of Mutual Guarantee involving Britain, France, Germany, Belgium, and Italy.<sup>32</sup> In a speech presented to the Italian Senate in May, 1926, Mussolini justified Fascist Italy's involvement by stating

that not to have underwritten the Locarno guarantees would have been a colossal blunder. Had we abstained, we should have had no part in the agreement which is at the basis of the relations between the great European Powers; in the second place, we should have been isolated; and in the third, we should have lost an opportunity to put ourselves on an equality with England on a memorable occasion.<sup>33</sup>

Another major issue in Italian foreign policy which had not been settled by the war was the problem of colonies for Italy. Of the major powers at the peace conference only



Italy did not receive sufficient compensation in the form  
of colonies to satisfy the desires of her people.<sup>34</sup> After  
the Fascists gained power Mussolini devoted considerable  
time and bombast to this touchy problem.<sup>35</sup> Mussolini and  
the Fascists based Italian claims for colonies on the premise  
that Italy needed them to help absorb the nation's excess  
population, and to provide raw materials for Italian in-  
dustry.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, in his early years as the leader of  
Italy Mussolini was more concerned with establishing his own  
authority, consolidating the Fascist regime, improving the  
morale of the Italian people, and reasserting Italy's posi-  
tion in European affairs than in pushing Italian colonial  
demands.<sup>37</sup> Thus the colonial problem remained an unsettled  
issue in Italian foreign policy in the 1920's, but the issue  
was far from dead.

In the interwar period the problem of disarmament was  
one in which all of the major European powers and the United  
States were deeply concerned. Under Fascist rule the Italian  
attitude toward this emotional issue was to remain constant  
until the last stages of the Disarmament Conference in the  
early 1930's.<sup>38</sup> Basically the fundamental principles which  
guided Italian disarmament policy were the demand for "parity  
with the most highly armed Continental European Power, and



reduction of armaments to the lowest possible level."<sup>39</sup>

The Italian view then was based more upon political grounds<sup>40</sup> than upon juridical or technical ones.

Italian relations with other European nations were troubled in the postwar era, and France was a case in point. In fact with no other great power were Italy's relations so<sup>41</sup> consistently difficult and uneasy. The first World War destroyed the vast Austro-Hungarian Empire, and in the process left a tremendous political vacuum in eastern Europe. France and Italy both had ambitions and interests in the area after the war, and the differences between their goals often led to severely strained relations between the two<sup>42</sup> nations. France's main interest in the region "arose from her desire to foster associations of smaller States which should support her efforts to maintain the frontiers estab-<sup>43</sup>lished by the Peace Treaties." France was mainly concerned with protecting the status quo established by peace treaties, and with forming a bloc of smaller states to prevent a re-<sup>44</sup>vival of German expansion to the southeast. Italian policy, however, was based on the desire to prevent the replacement of Austria-Hungary by any one country or group of nations<sup>45</sup> which could dominate the region politically or economically. The potential for conflict between Italy and France in the

area was very great.

Franco-Italian rivalry in eastern Europe quickly surfaced when the Little Entente, consisting of Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Rumania, was "formed in 1921 to combat revisionism."<sup>46</sup> The close ties which slowly developed between France and the states of the Little Entente were regarded in France as an insurance policy against Italy. As a result the link between France and the Little Entente became one of the principal factors in Franco-Italian estrangement in the years after the war.<sup>47</sup> Mussolini came to the conclusion that by destroying the Little Entente Italy could in the process check French influence in the region. Mussolini's tactic backfired however.

The more Mussolini endeavoured to disrupt the Little Entente, the closer the latter was brought to France; and the more the French Foreign Office was disturbed by Mussolini's threats, the more it regarded the Little Entente as the cornerstone of French security on the European continent.<sup>48</sup>

It is no surprise, then, that in Italy the view developed<sup>49</sup> that the Little Entente was the blind servant of France.

Another potentially dangerous area in international relations was Albania. Since the end of World War I Italian nationalists had never ceased to criticize the withdrawal of<sup>50</sup> Italian troops from Albania at the end of the war. Italian

interest in Albania, in certain respects, can be compared to the importance of Belgium to English continental policy. Italians believed that an independent Albania, or one under Italian influence, would guarantee Italy's position in the Adriatic, much as the British believed that the independence<sup>51</sup> of Belgium helped to protect England. Thus when the Fascists came to power they inherited the problem of Albania in Italian foreign policy.

With the Duce in power Italian policy toward Albania began to take on a more consistent tone. In 1924 a commercial treaty was signed between the two nations which Mussolini believed reinforced "the links of friendship between<sup>52</sup> the two countries." Negotiations continued in the following years, and on November 27, 1926, Italy and Albania signed<sup>53</sup> a "Pact of Friendship and Security." Mussolini believed the treaty was important because it guaranteed Italy's position in the Adriatic, and at the same time made Albania more<sup>54</sup> dependent upon Italy.

The reaction to the treaty in France and Yugoslavia, however, was sharp and produced much indignation in Rome. The Italian press retaliated by bluntly telling France that the treaty was not her concern, and that French meddling was<sup>55</sup> causing Yugoslav hostility as well. France and Yugoslavia

were not content just to voice diplomatic disapproval and on November 11, 1927, an exclusive Franco-Yugoslav accord<sup>56</sup> was signed. The treaty between Paris and Belgrade was a relatively harmless document, but it was met in Italy with<sup>57</sup> nothing short of intense fury. Within eleven days of the signing of the treaty Italy countered the French move by signing a second treaty with Albania on November 22, 1927. This new Italo-Albanian pact in effect established a defensive alliance between the two nations, and in addition formal-<sup>58</sup> ized commitments which had been implied in the first pact. The price for Albania was a renewal of Yugoslav hostility toward Italy in the years to come, but for Mussolini the<sup>59</sup> Albanian coup had been worth the cost.

As has been shown, the relations between Italy and France and the Little Entente in the 1920's were strained at best. Tension was especially prevalent concerning their respective foreign policies in eastern Europe. And Fascist Italy moved even farther away from France and the Little Entente in this period as Mussolini gradually developed his views on revisionism, disarmament, and the need for a new "equilibrium" in<sup>60</sup> Europe. This trend in Italian policy probably could not have been helped because at this time Mussolini considered "Franco-Italian discord" as a basic principle in his diplo-



matic vision. French leaders, however, never seemed to have realized Mussolini's true attitude toward France.

Cassels writes:

The French persistently underestimated the depth of Mussolini's Francophobia. Paris held firm to the conviction that sooner or later Italy would have to turn to France for protection against pan-Germanism. The logic of this view was buttressed by the record of Italian diplomacy since 1900 and, above all, by Italy's intervention on the Entente side in World War I. Unfortunately for these calculations, Mussolini was no traditionalist. Rather than join France against Germany, he was ready to turn German nationalism against the Rhine in order to allow Italy to usurp France's position in the western Mediterranean and the Balkans. Mussolini thus felt no compulsion to resolve outstanding differences with France, while French policy was based on the misconception that he did.<sup>62</sup>

In the period right after the end of World War I sympathy for Germany and its plight surfaced in Italy. This feeling did not end when Fascism took over in Italy. Instead, as a result of Mussolini's first speech in which he called for possible treaty revision, and of Italian dissatisfaction with the peace treaties, Italo-German relations remained friendly.<sup>63</sup> Italy, in fact, was the first great power to sign a commercial treaty with Germany after the war. Mussolini believed the 1925 agreement was not only an economic document but also a political one underscoring the cordial relations between the two nations.<sup>64</sup> There were, however, certain issues upon

which Italy and Germany did not see eye to eye. The two most important ones were Italian control of the Alto Adige and the possibility of Anschluss between Austria and Germany. On  
65  
both issues Mussolini had very definite views.

Speaking to the Senate in May, 1925, Mussolini made quite clear his attitude toward Anschluss in the foreseeable future:

On this point I wish to make the opinion of the Italian Government perfectly plain, especially in the face of the propaganda which is being made in favour of the Anschluss in both Austria and Germany. It cannot be permitted. It is true that the German Government declares that this propaganda is being carried on most actively in order to create a public opinion on the subject which will then be declared to be 'irresistible.' I think that I shall carry the whole of the Senate with me when I declare that Italy would never tolerate such a patent violation of the treaties as the union of Austria and Germany. This union, in my opinion, would render the Italian victory valueless, would increase the population and the territory of Germany, and would create this paradoxical situation, that the only nation to increase its territories and its population, making the most powerful block in Central Europe, would be Germany!<sup>66</sup>

Thus from 1925 on Italian policy was firmly against Anschluss between Austria and Germany.

In 1919 the Peace of St. Germain transferred the southern portion of Tyrol to Italy and established the new boundary between Austria and Italy at the Brenner Pass. The result

was that over two hundred thousand German Austrians were included in the new boundaries of Italy. This "created the problem of the South Tyrol (or the Alto Adige as the Italians preferred to call it) and the greatest stumbling-block in the way of an Italian-German alliance..."<sup>67</sup> In the same speech in which he spoke out against a possible Anschluss, Mussolini also outlined his policy toward Italian control of the Alto Adige and the Brenner Pass. The Duce emphatically announced that the Alto Adige must remain a part of Italy,<sup>68</sup> and that he regarded the Brenner frontier as unalterable. If necessary Italy would fight to maintain its control over those areas since they were too vital to Italian security to lose or to change in status.<sup>69</sup> The result of this inflexible stand was that the Alto Adige issue became "the key to all of Mussolini's German policy. German national consciousness was to be encouraged to express itself on the Rhine, not in the Alps."<sup>70</sup> In Mussolini's eyes, if Germany "became embroiled in the Rhineland, Italy stood to profit both by France's embarrassment and by Germany's distraction from the Alto Adige."<sup>71</sup>

The issue of the Alto Adige was central to Italian policy toward Germany in the 1920's, and its importance even extended to Mussolini's view of the Weimar Republic's future



and to those forces which were likely to succeed it. As early as 1923 Mussolini

was prepared to regard Stresemann and the Weimar Republic as temporary phenomena. After them might come the day of true German nationalism, and it seemed necessary to provide insurance against this contingency.<sup>72</sup>

In the 1920's Mussolini began to develop contacts with various right-wing German groups which claimed to represent and "em-<sup>73</sup>body a national revival." The key to Mussolini's approach to these groups, which were growing in Weimar Germany, was the issue of the Alto Adige. Only those groups which would renounce future German control of the region were to be favored by Fascist Italy. But in the 1920's the only German nationalist group to renounce the region was the Bavarian<sup>74</sup> right-wing Nazi party.

By encouraging German nationalist circles in Weimar Germany, Mussolini hoped to gain future security for Italian control of the Alto Adige as a reward.<sup>75</sup> After Hitler's abortive putsch in 1923 "Goring and other prominent Nazis<sup>76</sup> were granted comfortable asylum in Italy." Hitler never forgot Mussolini's help in a time of need and he even sought an interview with Mussolini in the 1920's, but this was not<sup>77</sup> granted. Hitler remained firm in his belief that Alto Adige must remain under Italian control, and as a result it



was the Nazi chief who came to enjoy a special position in Mussolini's eyes. It was one promise Hitler was to keep in the future.<sup>78</sup>

Even though there were issues which were a source of friction between Italy and Germany, relations between the two states did gradually improve after the signing of the Locarno agreements. In the late 1920's French hegemony in central Europe represented more of a danger to Italy than did any German desires.<sup>79</sup> In 1931 an attempt to set up an Austro-German customs union was announced, and France immediately declared that the union was merely the first step toward Anschluss. France demanded the projected union be cancelled and Italy, after vacillating at first, eventually supported the French counteraction.<sup>80</sup> In the final analysis the German leaders did not have any significant political or economic gifts to present Mussolini to gain his support, and he thus swung his support over to France.<sup>81</sup> The customs union plan was eventually dropped, but the Anschluss issue had reared its ugly head once again in European diplomacy.<sup>82</sup>

Italo-German relations until the accession of Hitler to power in 1933 were basically cordial, but such issues as the Alto Adige and the Anschluss question did continue to cause friction between the two nations.<sup>83</sup> Mussolini believed

that the Weimar Republic would not last long, and to provide insurance for Italian aims in the future, the Duce nurtured<sup>84</sup> contacts with right-wing German nationalist groups.

Mussolini's price for support was the Alto Adige and only Adolf Hitler and the Nazis were willing to pay in this period. Thus the Alto Adige was the key to Italo-German relations in<sup>85</sup> the 1920's.

Italy's relations with the other two major European powers in the 1920's were not nearly as well defined as those with Germany and France in the same period. Except for the Corfu affair Italy's relations with Great Britain in this<sup>86</sup> period were friendly. Jealousy of the British Empire, however, was very much a part of Mussolini's view of the island kingdom, and this jealousy was occasionally allowed to sur-<sup>87</sup>face in Italian policy. Italy's relations with the Soviet Union in the same period were characterized by a brief rapprochement which then degenerated into mutual distrust. In February, 1924, a commercial agreement between the two<sup>88</sup> nations was signed. Ideological differences between Fascist Italy and Communist Russia, however, eventually destroyed the brief agreement between the two nations. As time passed distrust of each others' motives became more and more<sup>89</sup> pronounced.

Another important aspect of Fascist Italy's foreign policy in the 1920's concerned the Catholic Church.

Mussolini inherited years of hostility between the government and the papacy, and his desire for reconciliation was not easily attained. After lengthy and tortuous negotiations the Italian government and the Church finally signed a treaty on February 11, 1929, which ended the formal hostility between<sup>90</sup> the two groups. In Italy the agreements were hailed as a truly remarkable achievement by Mussolini for

he had sacrificed no substantial Italian interest; and indeed so far as material things were concerned, and these were what interested the ordinary man, he could show that it was the Pope who had made the principal sacrifices.<sup>91</sup>

In addition to its effect upon Italy the agreement

had enormous repercussions throughout Europe and the Catholic world: the thesis that Mussolini was essentially a moderate and constructive statesman now seemed to have found irrefutable confirmation. The Duce had conducted the whole negotiation himself.<sup>92</sup>

In time both sides were disappointed with the actual operation of the agreement, but neither was willing to push its differences to the breaking point. Thus even with the agreement, relations between the Fascist government and the Church remained difficult although the benefits to both parties outweighed the disadvantages.<sup>93</sup>

Until 1933 and the accession of Adolf Hitler to power

in Germany, Mussolini exhibited two contradictory policies and attitudes in foreign affairs. First there was the conciliatory policy exemplified by the Locarno agreements and other accords beneficial to Italy irrespective of the states<sup>94</sup> or ideologies. Then there was the policy of Mussolini who was

the ideologue and trafficker in revisionism, and spokesman for discontented, aggressive nationalism. The latter characteristics, which were firmly implanted in Fascist diplomacy by the close of 1926, made the verdict 'a decade of good behavior' a relative one at most.<sup>95</sup>

This dualism in Mussolini's foreign policy manifested itself in the mid-1920's in two points which became basic parts of the Duce's policy:

In Europe, France--and by extension France's allies in central and southeastern Europe--emerged as Italy's chosen enemy and prey. In the colonial world, national glory and living space for Italy's surplus population were to be won on the shores of the Mediterranean and in East Africa.<sup>96</sup>

In Mussolini's early foreign policy then there always existed a conflict between the pull of Italian self-interest and that of a supranational Fascist ideology. To Italy's ultimate sorrow, it was to be the latter which would prevail in the era of the Rome-Berlin Axis.<sup>97</sup>



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## CHAPTER II

### THE DEVELOPMENT OF ITALO-GERMAN RELATIONS: 1933-34

In January 1933, Adolf Hitler became the Chancellor of Germany. Mussolini welcomed this event not only because he was pleased with the triumph of Fascism in another country, but also because it gave Italy bargaining power in its dealings with Great Britain and France. Hitherto these two western nations had not needed Italian diplomatic support. Mussolini now believed, however, that the bargaining position of Italy<sup>1</sup> had been greatly improved. Adolf Hitler also believed that his assumption of power would be welcomed in Italy, and he was not disappointed. But the reason was based more upon<sup>2</sup> cold Realpolitik than upon ideological similarity.

Hitler came to power with pre-conceived ideas concerning the direction of future German foreign policy. As the French ambassador to Germany said:

Hitler's ultimate goal was to obtain his revanche, to wipe out the 1918 defeat, to cast off the shackles of Versailles, to restore Germany to her rank as a great power, and to win for her the position which was rightfully hers as a superior race, in other words the leading position in Europe.<sup>3</sup>

Hitler wanted a strong Germany united by National Socialism at home, and militarily powerful enough to act as a bulwark<sup>4</sup> against the expansion of communism into central Europe. The

German leader's desire to block communist expansion was reinforced by his desire to see his nation expand to the east-<sup>5</sup>ward at the expense of the Soviet Union. To the east and only to the east would Germany find her desperately needed<sup>6</sup> Lebensraum.

Another important aspect of Hitler's perception of future German policy was his view of France. Hitler thought that France was the "German people's irreconcilable mortal enemy" whose aims in foreign policy included keeping Germany weak<sup>7</sup> and divided. In order to protect Germany from this potential threat Hitler believed that all sentiment would have to be subordinated to his goal of finding suitable allies with which Germany could join and thus isolate France. The European<sup>8</sup> allies Hitler had in mind were England and Italy.

In Mein Kampf, the German leader described the advantages which Germany could reap from an Anglo-German-Italian alliance:

The most important is first the fact that an approach to England and Italy would in itself in no way evoke danger of war. The only power which would come into question as opposing the alliance, France, would not be in a position to do so. The alliance, however, would give Germany a chance to make quite calmly those preparations which, one way or another, must be undertaken within the bounds of such a coalition for a reckoning with France. For the momentousness of such a type of alliance lies precisely in the fact that Germany would not suddenly on

concluding it be abandoned to a hostile invasion, but that the opposing alliance itself collapses, that Entente to which we owe such unending misfortune dissolves itself, and thereby the mortal enemy of our nation, France, is left in isolation. Even if this result had at first only a moral effect, it would suffice to give Germany a degree of freedom of movement which today can hardly be imagined. For the initiative would be in the hands of the new European Anglo-German-Italian alliance, and no longer in those of France.<sup>9</sup>

Hitler thus favored an alliance with Italy on purely  
<sup>10</sup>  
 pragmatic grounds. The Fuhrer believed that German expansion eastward was not necessarily incompatible with Italian  
<sup>11</sup>  
 designs for expansion in the Mediterranean Sea. In Hitler's view "The divergent expansions of Italy and Germany constituted a potential tie between them; they would not bring the two powers in conflict with each other, but both could be  
<sup>12</sup>  
 achieved only over the opposition of France." Both nations felt they needed to expand in order to protect their interests, and Hitler firmly believed their diverse interests could be  
<sup>13</sup>  
 the basis for an agreement between the two nations.

There were, however, areas in which Hitler knew there was the potential for acute and even violent Italo-German disagreement. One such issue was the problem of the South Tyrol or, as the Italians preferred, the Alto Adige. But Hitler was determined not to allow this issue to become an  
<sup>14</sup>  
 obstacle to the possibility of an Italo-German alliance.



As early as his writings in Mein Kampf the Fuhrer said that a war to regain the South Tyrol with its 200,000 Austrian Germans could hardly be justified while 7,000,000 other<sup>15</sup> Germans were allowed to languish under foreign rule. As noted, Mussolini was adamant in maintaining Italian control over this area, and Hitler concluded that surrendering the Tyrol was a price he was willing to pay for an Italian alliance. On other issues, including the Austrian problem, Mussolini was to find that Hitler was not nearly so agreeable.

One of the most important issues which faced Hitler after he assumed power was the disarmament settlement which relegated Germany to an inferior military position. Hitler had to move cautiously, however, in his first few months in power because he needed to consolidate his own position at home. Diplomatically Germany was isolated and looked upon with suspicion by her neighbors. Militarily the nation was decidedly inferior<sup>16</sup> to the rest of Europe. Even so, Hitler was not above at least warning the rest of Europe that Germany expected changes in the near future. In his famous "Peace Speech" before the Reichstag on May 17, 1933, Hitler stated that his nation sincerely wanted peace, but that the states of Europe must realize that Germany had a legal basis to demand a revision of the

Versailles Treaty to end his nation's military inferiority.

As time would show, Hitler's warning did not produce the desired effect.

In the first few months, Italian foreign policy supported the efforts of Germany to regain a position of military equality with the other great powers in Europe. By doing so, Italy weakened the position of France and the closely allied Little Entente, and thus improved her own position. <sup>18</sup> Mussolini's proposal in March 1933, for a Four-Power Pact between Britain, France, Germany, and Italy to deal with European problems never fully materialized because it became clear

from the Duce's public statements on the subject that the Pact was intended to give these Powers a sort of Directorate of European Affairs, and that their policy was to include territorial revision. The proposal met, not unexpectedly, with violent opposition from the Little Entente and Poland. This opposition caused France to demand emendations in the Pact, which, when finally signed, lacked practical value.<sup>19</sup>

Thus frustrated by France, Mussolini became more pro-German

<sup>20</sup>

in his outlook in the next few months. This pro-German position was not to last long.

As the months in 1933 passed by the pro-German orientation of Italy began to change. Germany's increasingly isolated position in European affairs made Mussolini and some other Italians feel that Germany was weak, and thus a dangerous



friend to have. The German ambassador to Italy, Ulrich von Hassell, described German-Italo relations in October 1933, as being based upon two conflicting views:

One of them proclaims a German-Italian front, calls Mussolini our only friend and expects both the possible and the impossible of him; the other writes off the Italians as demonstrably unreliable people, criticizes their duplicity, highlights the discrepancy between certain statements by Mussolini and the actual conduct, e.g., of his delegates in Geneva, and shows sensitivity in regard to occasional, mostly naive, Italian arrogance. In my opinion both are wrong. What is in question here is neither complete and emotional love of Germany nor conscious duplicity and unreliability. The political fact with which we have to do is a German-Italian community of interests in a decisive point of grand policy, a community of interests which, however, is hampered and impaired by the present balance of power in Europe and a number of other circumstances discussed above. In my opinion it is possible even today to exploit this community of interests for ourselves if we recognize the dangers which threaten it and develop political activity on the basis of this realization.<sup>22</sup>

Some of Hassell's advice may have been taken seriously in Berlin, for in the same month Hitler decided that Mussolini would be the only foreign statesman informed in advance of Germany's intention of quitting the Disarmament Conference<sup>23</sup> and the League of Nations. On October 14, 1933, the Fuhrer<sup>24</sup> issued the formal proclamation to this effect. A few days later in a discussion with the American ambassador to Germany, William E. Dodd, Hitler gave his reasons for the action. He

insisted that the major powers in Europe had failed to keep their promises to disarm, and at the same time had kept<sup>25</sup> Germany in a state of permanent military inferiority.

Mussolini, however, was not entirely pleased with Hitler's move, even though he appreciated being notified beforehand.

"The withdrawal took place at a time when in his opinion there was a tactical need, precisely from the German point of view, for continuation of the negotiations."<sup>26</sup> Though worried about the timing of Hitler's move, Mussolini did not attempt to re-<sup>27</sup>proach him or to lay down the law to Germany.

After the shock of Germany's abrupt action passed, Hitler moved to improve relations between Germany and Italy. In November he addressed a letter to Mussolini and sent it to Rome by way of his personal representative, Minister President<sup>28</sup> Hermann Goring. The Chancellor's letter, according to Hassell, made a good impression upon the Duce and helped to "clear the atmosphere between Germany and Italy" which had become "clouded in the past few months."<sup>29</sup> It would take more than a personal letter, however, to clear the air between the two leaders on one particular issue which was rapidly becoming the focal point for their entire relationship. This issue was the future status of Austria. The rise of Hitler to power had added a new factor to the Anschluss problem which Mussolini had faced before.<sup>30</sup>

From the beginning, control over Austria was a prime goal<sup>31</sup> in the foreign policy of Hitler and the Nazi expansionists. After assuming power Hitler speculated on the possibility of the Austrian government collapsing and being replaced by a Nazi regime. In any case, as he told the Italian ambassador to Germany, Vittorio Cerruti, in March 1933, he could not under any circumstances support the present regime led by Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss.<sup>32</sup> But Mussolini did not want to see Austria united with Nazi Germany because an enlarged Germany would be Italy's northern neighbor and "might thus endanger Italy's hold on the South Tyrol."<sup>33</sup> Statements like Hitler's only further convinced the Duce that an independent Austria free of German influence must be a cardinal principle in future Italian foreign policy. By the spring of 1933 Mussolini was<sup>34</sup> once again actively opposing a possible Anschluss.

In the winter of 1933-34 Italy became more and more<sup>35</sup> alienated from Germany over the status of Austria. In the meantime, with the active aid of Italy, Austrian politics took on a decidedly fascist and authoritarian tone. The idea began to develop in Italy that National Socialism was "not at all the legitimate sister or daughter of Fascism" but was something different and Germanic.<sup>36</sup> This reasoning went even further and suggested that not much could be expected



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from National Socialism, and that real Fascism was developing  
 in Austria and other parts of Europe.<sup>37</sup> By the end of 1933,  
 therefore, a serious rift was developing between the two  
 nations over the small state of Austria.

Hitler naturally viewed the Austrian situation from a  
 different perspective than did Mussolini, but Hitler was deter-  
 mined to have both Austria and a German-Italian alliance.<sup>38</sup>

"He was ready," he announced, "to divide Europe with Mussolini  
 at the Brenner, the frontier indicated by geography -- a few  
 'unredeemed' Germans to the south of it could be ignored."<sup>39</sup>

This was precisely what Mussolini feared the most. Hitler,  
 however, was persistent in his goal to absorb Austria into  
 Germany, and his desire caused him to become more reckless than  
 normal. There were two compelling reasons for his lack of  
 caution over the Austrian problem. First, since August 1926,  
 the Austrian Nazi Party had been an integral part of the  
 German Nazi Party, and thus there was considerable Austrian  
 pressure for Anschluss, and second, the Fuhrer believed that  
 the Dollfuss government in Vienna would give in easily and  
 compromise with the Nazis.<sup>40</sup> The Fuhrer wanted Austria and  
 he wanted it soon.

The pressure from the Austrian Nazis on the Vienna gov-  
 ernment soon reached such a level that Austria officially

appealed to Great Britain, France, and Italy for help against the outrages being committed. In response the three states declared that they viewed Austrian independence as a fundamental necessity.<sup>41</sup> Mussolini was particularly worried about the situation because he wanted "satellite regimes in Austria and Hungary as the nuclei in a Fascist bloc against German penetration and expansion southeastward. At the same time, without sacrificing Italian interests, he wanted to appease the Nazis."<sup>42</sup> But the pressure from the Nazis continued, and in the spring of 1934 Mussolini felt he must act again. Negotiations were opened between Italy, Austria, and Hungary, and resulted in the signing of the Tripartite Protocols reaffirming the "'independence and rights' of each State as a fundamental hypothesis."<sup>43</sup> Germany had been warned twice, but as time passed it became evident that both warnings would be ignored.<sup>44</sup>

It was clear that a direct meeting between the two dictators would be necessary to solve the Austrian problem, which was plaguing the foreign policy of both nations.<sup>45</sup> Negotiations for such a meeting were successful and on June 14, 1934, Hitler flew to Venice for talks with the Duce. It was the Fuhrer's first foreign visit since assuming power as well as his first face to face encounter with his Italian counter-

part.<sup>46</sup> Hitler was treated very shabbily by Mussolini. At the height of his power and splendor Mussolini "patronized the worried Hitler, who appeared in a raincoat and a soft hat."<sup>47</sup> Officially the meeting and subsequent talks were declared to the world to be a success. The conversations between the two dictators were carried on in a frank manner even on such a touchy issue as the Austrian problem, and this was a considerable achievement in itself.<sup>48</sup> No real solutions, however, came out of the meeting.

It soon became evident that each dictator had misinterpreted the views of the other, at least on the Austrian issue. Weinberg writes that Hitler came out of the meeting believing Mussolini would no longer oppose stronger participation of the Austrian Nazis in the Vienna government as long as there was neither an Anschluss nor an entirely Nazi government in Austria.<sup>49</sup> Weinberg continues:

Mussolini, on the other hand, as well as Suvich, were of the opinion that it had been made clear to Hitler that negotiations to accomplish what Hitler had postulated were not to come during the present conditions of conflict in Austria, during which Italy still backed Dollfuss. If there were to be changes, they lay in an indefinite future.<sup>50</sup>

Hitler became aware of these differences in interpretation,<sup>51</sup> but elected not to have them clarified. Meanwhile the

struggle within the Austrian government over the problem of  
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 Nazi participation continued.

Hitler had scarcely returned to Germany after his Venice trip when he demonstrated to the world how he dealt with his political opponents. On June 30, 1934, he violently purged Ernst Rohm and the S.A. of all elements hostile to his poli-  
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 cies. Hitler's harsh settlement of his internal political problems was looked upon with quiet disfavor in Rome. Mussolini kept official press criticism of the event to a minimum, but it was felt in Italy that Germany's position had been weakened  
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 by it. In addition the continuing political crisis and terrorism in Austria were forcing Italy and Germany still farther apart. Italian irritation at alleged German interference in Austrian affairs was rapidly destroying what small progress in Italo-German relations the Venice meeting had managed to  
 55  
 accomplish.

On July 25, 1934, all the political turmoil in Austria came to a head when Chancellor Dollfuss was murdered in an attempted putsch by Austrian Nazis. The putsch failed, but in the eyes of the world Hitler was seen as a conspirator  
 56  
 in the sordid event:

Among the Western governments Mussolini was the only one who took active countermeasures....  
 During the afternoon of 25 July Mussolini ordered that four divisions, consisting mainly of artillery



and numbering about 100,000 in all, and which were already training not far from the Austrian border, should be moved right up to the Brenner and the Corinthian border.<sup>57</sup>

In the end military intervention was not necessary, but the murder had had a tremendous impact on Mussolini. The Duce was violently aroused and in a conversation with the Austrian Vice-Chancellor Prince Ernst Starhemberg he accused Hitler of  
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being a sexual degenerate and the murderer of Dollfuss.

In the coming months, as Wiskemann notes, Mussolini continued his attacks upon Hitler and German foreign policy:

The climax of his anti-German campaign was reached at Bari on 6th September, when, speaking from a tank at the inauguration of the fifth Fiera del Levante, he said: 'Thirty centuries of history allow us to regard with supreme indulgence certain doctrines taught beyond the Alps by the descendants of people who were wholly illiterate in the days when Caesar, Virgil and Augustus flourished in Rome.'<sup>59</sup>

At the height of his anti-German feeling Mussolini made a crucial decision concerning one area of future Italian foreign policy: Abyssinia was now marked for conquest by Italy in  
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From 1930 to 1933 official Italian interest in Abyssinia had waned. In fact in this period there was no firm estab-  
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lished policy on the small African state. The Austrian crisis in July 1934, and Mussolini's subsequent decision changed this. The Duce reasoned that it would take one year

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to conquer Ethiopia and then the Italian Army would have to be in Italy to guard the Brenner Pass to prevent any possible German move against Austria.<sup>62</sup> "It was thus to a large extent as an anti-German action that he contemplated the subjection of Ethiopia."<sup>63</sup>

While Mussolini was making some important policy decisions, Hitler was attempting to straighten out the mess created by the abortive July putsch. His tactics toward Austria underwent a radical change. German policy was "to avoid any appearance of meddling in Austria's internal affairs," and the German and Austrian Nazi parties, it was said, were to be completely separated.<sup>64</sup> Hitler had not changed his ultimate goal of incorporating Austria into the German state, but instead he now opted for a more gradual long-term policy. It was a decision which was difficult for Hitler to make and for his followers to accept,<sup>65</sup> but recent events had left him little choice.

In the last months of 1934 Italo-German relations remained distant and cold at best. In August the German ambassador reported that the pro-French group in the Italian foreign ministry was gaining ground daily while the pro-German faction was losing influence.<sup>66</sup> Mussolini, at the height of his oratorical blasts against Germany, was also under pressure from the pro-French group.<sup>67</sup> The crucial issue

for Mussolini, however, was Germany's attitude toward Austria.

Italy had always looked upon the Austrian question as a sort of barometer of the state of German-Italian relations, and to Italy the latest development afforded proof that Germany was hereby declining an understanding with Italy, who must henceforth direct her policy accordingly. Italy would never bow to German pressure but would oppose to the uttermost all German attempts to lay hands on Austria.<sup>68</sup>

In the eyes of the Italian leaders German hegemony in Europe could be more dangerous to their interests than French hegemony.<sup>69</sup>

For the remainder of 1934 Italo-German relations remained strained. The German government attempted to stymie Italy's gradual turn toward France, but without success.<sup>70</sup> Rome did not end all of its ties with Berlin, but "there was nevertheless an unmistakable reorientation of Italian policy to a closer relationship with France."<sup>71</sup> Hitler's desire for an Italo-German alliance was dead for the time being.



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### CHAPTER III

#### THE FORMATION OF THE ROME-BERLIN AXIS

1935-1936

By the end of 1934 Italo-German relations were virtually in cold storage, and Mussolini began to investigate the possibility of developing closer relations with France to counter his disenchantment with Germany. In France Mussolini found a willing ally in the French Foreign Minister Pierre Laval, who also desired to improve Franco-Italian relations because he wanted to gain Italy as an ally against Germany.<sup>1</sup> The agreement between the two nations seemed to be within the realm of the possible, and as 1935 approached Mussolini pursued this objective.

In early January 1935, the Italian dictator played host to the French Foreign Minister. Laval arrived in Rome on January 4 and

between January 5 and January 7 he had four meetings with Mussolini. Three of these were held in the presence of official advisors, and one behind closed doors. On January 7 they signed the so-called Rome agreements...<sup>2</sup>

In the agreements the two heads of state settled several outstanding problems in Africa which existed between the two nations. Agreements were also reached on the status of Italian

nationals in the French protectorate of Tunisia, on economic collaboration in East Africa, and on support by both nations of Austrian independence in the future.<sup>3</sup> "Finally, a joint declaration announced the settlement of all claims outstanding between the two nations, especially those stemming from the Treaty of London in 1915."<sup>4</sup> The successful conclusion of the negotiations between the Duce and Laval was intended to be the starting point for future collaboration between the two nations on international problems.<sup>5</sup> It soon became apparent, however, that on the issue of Italian influence in Ethiopia the two statesmen had not seen eye to eye.

As has been earlier noted, Mussolini had already decided by 1935 to conquer Ethiopia one way or another. As time passed it also became evident that he believed that Laval had given him a "free hand" in Ethiopia.<sup>6</sup> Laval insisted otherwise, but in the final analysis it mattered little to Mussolini, for the January agreements had given him the necessary diplomatic preparation he needed to move against Ethiopia.<sup>7</sup> In France the Rome agreements continued to play a major role in the formation of French policy toward Italy long after the Italo-Ethiopian crisis had developed in early 1935.<sup>8</sup> It slowly became evident to French leaders, however, that Mussolini was obsessed by his desire to acquire colonies, and that if it



meant sacrificing the possibility of closer relations with France or other nations, the Duce was willing to accept this<sup>9</sup> as the price for his dreams of national glory.

Mussolini's desire for colonies in general and Ethiopia in particular stemmed from domestic as well as foreign pressures. By 1934 Mussolini had come to the conclusion that Italy's "prestige lay in a powerful militaristic state that<sup>10</sup> could pursue an aggressive foreign policy." The Duce was also influenced to pursue his goal of African imperialism as a means of occupying the Italian peoples' minds in a great foreign adventure, thus channeling their attention away from<sup>11</sup> Fascism's failure to produce a stable economy in Italy. And as stated before the Duce believed by the end of 1934 that he must take Ethiopia soon in order to be ready to thwart Hitler's Austrian designs, which were all too well known. The Italian dictator realized that a rearmed Germany would soon become a major threat to peace in Europe, and that if he desired a colonial victory he could not afford to de-<sup>12</sup>lay.

The Duce's domestic problems and his fear of the rapidly rearming German state thus impelled him to push his nation toward action in East Africa. There were other reasons, however, for Mussolini's obsession with a quick colonial victory.

Mussolini believed the conquest of Ethiopia would allow Italy to avenge its shameful defeat at the hands of the Abyssinians at Adowa in 1896, and that it would greatly increase the Italian people's patriotism. He also hoped that "Ethiopia would become a land of settlement for Italian farmers and a source of wealth, of raw materials and food, for Italy."<sup>13</sup>

In the final analysis, though, his most important motive was political: his concern for Italy's national prestige and power<sup>14</sup> drove him toward his dream of a colonial empire.

Chabod writes:

More and more his eyes turned to the outer world and his mind to Italy's power and prestige, which was bound up with his own personal power and prestige. This is the inevitable law of dictatorships: success abroad is made to compensate for the loss of liberty at home.<sup>15</sup>

As early as January 1935, when Mussolini was becoming involved in the developing Ethiopian crisis, Hitler was receiving some very welcome news. In that month a plebiscite was held in the Saar and the outcome of the vote was a resounding call for reunification with Germany. In Hitler's eyes this vote was not only important to him as a means of improving his diplomatic stature, but was also important in his plans for rearmament.<sup>16</sup> Hitler was determined to go through with his program of rearmament, and the return of the Saar coal made this

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policy much more practicable. On March 9, 1935, the German Air Force was officially declared activated, and on March 16<sup>18</sup> conscription was officially reintroduced into Germany.

Hitler was proving then that his willingness to negotiate on plans for disarmament was simply a smoke screen to cover his real intentions. There "might be negotiations, but there would be no agreement in any way limiting the extent of German armaments or imposing international controls or inspection."<sup>19</sup>

In the spring and summer of 1935 the Ethiopian problem and its domination of Italian foreign policy became increasingly clear to the other major powers in Europe. During this time German policy toward Italy remained neutral in its tone, and this was appreciated by Mussolini more and more as the Western Powers hardened against his designs in Africa.<sup>20</sup> This German policy resulted in Mussolini adopting a friendlier attitude toward Germany as 1935 passed and the Ethiopian dispute became more acute.<sup>21</sup> Among German leaders and diplomats, however, there was no illusion as to the reason for the improvement in Italo-German relations. In May, 1935, Ambassador Hassell expressed this cautious view in a dispatch to Berlin:

We should, however, cherish no exaggerated ideas about the extent or the stability of the atmosphere thus created. Italy's most immediate aim is to demonstrate to the Western Powers that she can manage without them and can revert to the old



position of balance between them and Germany -- possibly with a bias towards the latter. On the other hand, Mussolini will not lightly surrender the position of 'solidarity' with Britain and France so laboriously built up at Stresa, as long as the nightmare (cauchemar) of the 'German danger' in Austria weighs upon Italian policy.<sup>22</sup>

Realizing why Mussolini wanted to improve Italo-German relations did not blind German officials to the advantages that such a rapprochement would give to Germany's position and policies in Europe. The benefits which Germany could reap from Italian involvement in Ethiopia, and the corresponding apprehension created in France and Britain, became clearer with time. Weinberg states:

First, it made it easy for Germany to postpone and eventually evade agreement on all of the various pact proposals that had once been the subject of such great international interest. The same reluctance of the Western Powers to antagonize Germany while they were in difficulty with Italy also enabled Germany to proceed essentially undisturbed with the process of rearmament and military planning. A third benefit for Germany was that the concentration of Britain, France, and Italy on the Mediterranean gave Germany a greater opportunity to extend its influence in the Balkans...<sup>23</sup>

It was plain then that Germany benefited from Italian involvement in the Ethiopian crisis.

In the fall of 1935 the Ethiopian dispute began to move toward the point of no return. Every attempt at mediation failed and Mussolini moved his nation steadily toward war.<sup>24</sup>



Finally on October 3, 1935, Italian troops invaded Ethiopia,  
<sup>25</sup>  
 and war became a reality. Baer says:

The response of the League was swift and uncompromising. Within a week Italy was declared an aggressor state, declared to have violated its obligations under the Covenant and thereby 'to have committed an act of war against all other Members of the League.' Involved in accepting this verdict was the legal duty of each member state to apply the sanctions against Italy needed to restore the peace. The testing time of the League had come.<sup>26</sup>

Sanctions against Italy if implemented quickly and generally could have had a decisive impact upon Italian conduct of the war in Ethiopia. Some sanctions were eventually enforced against Italy, but on the crucial matter of exports of coal, steel, and oil to Italy the leadership of the League  
<sup>27</sup>  
 delayed, and this delay proved to be very costly. And as Baer states:

In London and Paris the horror of broadening the conflict and the fear that Mussolini might be provoked into reacting violently against them overrode British and French commitments to the system of collective security. While the other sanctionist nations awaited the strong leadership they expected, Laval and Hoare hedged and, contrary to their obligations at Geneva, in December negotiated a secret plan for the partition of Ethiopia that they thought would appease Mussolini. When the Laval-Hoare plan was divulged to the public, the hopeful spirit of Geneva was destroyed and the belief that Britain would stand by the Covenant evaporated.<sup>28</sup>

Thus those sanctions which were finally enforced only angered

the Italian population, thereby giving Mussolini an excellent propaganda weapon with which to incite the Italian people  
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against the Western powers.

The Italo-Ethiopian conflict placed the German leader Adolf Hitler in a very difficult position diplomatically. Germany had benefited from the smouldering political crisis which had preceded war, but Italy's actual declaration of war upon Ethiopia created a separate diplomatic problem in itself for Hitler. Toynbee writes that:

If he were to leave his Italian counterpart to his fate he would be running the risk of allowing the principle of collective security to score a perhaps decisive success, and at the same time be allowing the legend of the invincibility of dictators to suffer a perhaps fatally damaging exposure. On the other hand, if he were to intervene in a way that would ensure Signor Mussolini's triumph, Herr Hitler would be deliberately fortifying, and not simply preserving, the most serious obstacle to the realization of his own darling ambition: the Anschluss of Austria to the Third Reich. The divergent pull of these two almost diametrically contrary considerations resolved itself into a policy of neutrality under which Germany refrained on the one hand from participating in the League sanctions and on the other hand from expanding her trade with Italy much beyond the volume at which it had stood before the sanctions were imposed.<sup>30</sup>

As noted after the abortive putsch in July 1934, Hitler had outlined a new policy towards Austria. He had decided on a long-term policy which he hoped would eventually land him

his coveted prize. Even a full year after the ill-fated attempt at Anschluss in 1934, this disastrous event was still playing a major part in Italo-German relations.<sup>31</sup> Mussolini had been so incensed by the act that he had attempted a rapprochement with France in early 1935 in which a major principle had been the guaranteeing of Austria's independence. And Italo-German relations had correspondingly soured during this period.<sup>32</sup> The outbreak of the Italo-Ethiopian war not only destroyed the brief Italo-French rapprochement but also isolated Italy from the Western powers in general, leaving her vulnerable to German pressure. Though officially professing a policy of neutrality, German leaders were quick to exploit Mussolini's precarious situation.<sup>33</sup> This exploitation of Mussolini was aimed at his Austrian policy.

German pressure on Italy soon appeared in the form of demands for a change in Italian policy towards Austria. German leaders argued that by helping Italy diplomatically with her policy of neutrality that some reward in the area of the Austrian issue should be forthcoming from the Italian side. Essentially what German officials wanted was "to obtain from Italy a guarantee of non-interference in the internal affairs of Austria under all circumstances" which would leave Austria in effect isolated.<sup>34</sup> Mussolini had very little room



to maneuver under this kind of pressure, and by January 1936, it was beginning to take its toll. The German ambassador in Italy reported that month that the Italian dictator was be-  
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 ginning to show signs of reassessing his Austrian position.

In a report to Berlin, Hassel stated

that Mussolini's attitude can be assessed as a sign of weakness. But that does not get us much further as far as our own attitude is concerned. It is abundantly clear that today, surrounded as she is by enemies and by difficulties, Italy must attempt to create as favourable 'weather conditions' as possible around her and to eliminate friction wherever this appears possible. It is also the case, as Mussolini himself has admitted, that the influence exerted in Vienna by an Italy in conflict with the League of Nations and with Britain cannot in any case be as strong now as it once was.<sup>36</sup>

By the end of 1935 Germany had gained one more important diplomatic triumph which stemmed from European concern with the Italo-Ethiopian conflict. Prior to the actual opening of hostilities in October 1935, Germany had managed to negotiate an Anglo-German naval agreement which in effect allowed  
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 Germany to continue her naval armaments program unchecked. Concluded in June 1935, the agreement allowed Germany "to build up to 35 per cent of British strength in capital ships  
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 and to build submarines virtually without restriction." To Hitler the agreement was important because it left France isolated even more than before, pleased the Italian govern-



ment, and left Germany more powerful politically and mili-  
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 tarily than before the agreement.

By the end of 1935 some significant changes had occurred in the political atmosphere and diplomatic posture of both Italy and Germany. The Ethiopian crisis which had finally crystallized into war left Italy at odds with both France and Great Britain, and at the same time initiated a slow,  
 40  
 but steady, revision of Italy's relations with Germany. Meanwhile Germany had used the Italo-Ethiopian conflict, and the Western Powers' preoccupation with it, to improve Germany's political and military position in Europe. By the beginning of 1936 German leaders were applying pressure on Mussolini to reassess his policy towards Austria. Thus Italy found herself locked in a diplomatic struggle with France and Britain over Ethiopia, while Germany rearmed at a rate which  
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 made her progressively stronger and more secure diplomatically. In 1936 Mussolini would have to make a choice between the Western Powers and Germany, but once committed to a policy of imperialism, the Duce would find it difficult to turn  
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 his back on his desires and his past.

Italy entered the new year fully committed to the ongoing war in Ethiopia. But the war was not proceeding as the Italians had expected. In fact, in Italian military circles

there were many who were seriously worried over the progress of the campaign. Fresh reinforcements had been demanded by local commanders and were promptly sent, but problems between bickering officers and the generally poor level of discipline and morale among Italian troops threatened the success of the campaign.<sup>43</sup> As a result, criticism of Mussolini's policy was increasing in Italy even though the majority of the Italian people were still solidly behind their leader. But it was not an enviable position for a national leader.

By the middle of February Hitler had come to the conclusion that resistance in Ethiopia would soon be crushed and that the Italian army would then be free to pursue other objectives.<sup>45</sup> Thus Hitler decided to move up his anticipated goal of remilitarizing the Rhineland from the spring of 1937 to a much earlier time.<sup>46</sup> In late February the German ambassador Hassel reported to Berlin that in a recent conversation with Mussolini the Italian dictator had indicated that his nation would remain aloof from any German reaction to ratification of the Franco-Soviet Pact of 1935.<sup>47</sup> In any case, according to Wiskemann, Hitler had already "decided that the Western Powers and the League were weak enough, and Mussolini sufficiently vacillating," to permit him to move<sup>48</sup> in the Rhineland.

On March 7, 1936, to the astonishment of the world Hitler ordered his troops into the Rhineland, demilitarized<sup>49</sup> by the peace settlement of 1918. Hitler justified this breach of the Versailles Treaty by proclaiming that the recently completed Franco-Soviet Pact and Treaty of Alliance between the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia made it imperative from a purely defensive standpoint for Germany to remilitarize<sup>50</sup> the area. A storm of criticism followed Hitler's move, but, once committed, the Fuhrer could scarcely afford to retreat without suffering a terrible loss of face. Later, Hitler was to admit that the next forty-eight hours were the most nerve-racking of his life as he awaited the formal response of the<sup>51</sup> other European powers.

Hitler was particularly concerned whether Mussolini would support his move into the Rhineland. In the end, however, he had little to worry about. As Weinberg states:

Still the object of sanctions, Italy was not about to join in sanctions against Germany. The Italian government was indeed upset over the way in which Germany had acted... Mussolini himself, after a few days of sulking, returned to his line of tacit support for Germany. The advantages to Italy of Germany's coup were too obvious to overlook: attention shifted from Ethiopia to the Rhineland...<sup>52</sup>

With Italy at least grudgingly secure, the scene now shifted to London as the world waited to see what the English reaction

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would be to Hitler's surprise move.

France was especially concerned with how Great Britain would react to Hitler's blatant violation of the peace treaties. Acceptance by France of the remilitarization of the Rhineland would mean the collapse of the whole system of continental security, and the biggest loser in such an occurrence would definitely be France.<sup>54</sup> French leaders quickly turned to Britain for support for possible French counter-action, but "the British government flatly refused to engage<sup>55</sup> in either military or economic sanctions against Germany." The French could still have acted alone, but the majority of<sup>56</sup> that nation's leaders lacked the will to do so. Hitler's<sup>57</sup> daring gamble had been a brilliant success.

Hitler's success in the Rhineland signaled the collapse of the post-World War I security system, and each European power was forced to reassess its policies in the light of the<sup>58</sup> recent German move. This reassessment also occurred in Germany. Weinberg writes:

Hitler, who had acted against the counsel of his military advisors, was now all the more confident that he could assume even greater risks, disregard cautious advice, and triumph by bluff until he could conquer by force. His one worry at the beginning of his rule had been that France might be led by statesmen who would act before he could take the road of military conquest; he was now confident that there was no



such danger. He knew as well as foreign observers that for some time at least Germany could only grow stronger and less vulnerable as it continued to rearm and fortify its western border.<sup>59</sup>

Mussolini fully realized the importance of Hitler's successful move into the Rhineland and what it meant to the future balance of power in Europe. In a conversation with Prince Ernst von Starhemberg of Austria, Mussolini indicated that Germany would continue to rearm, and in a few years would be powerful enough to threaten the whole of Europe.<sup>60</sup> But Mussolini could not help but admire Hitler's method of obtaining his goal, which was in direct contrast to the "wavering between firmness and compliance" exhibited by France and Britain throughout the Ethiopian crisis. The imposition of sanctions against Italy by the Western Powers had only increased resentment of these nations in Italy, and this problem still affected Italian foreign policy as late as the spring of 1936. At the same time, Italo-German relations began to improve as a result of several exchange visits which culminated with the visit of Mussolini's daughter to Berlin in June 1936.<sup>62</sup> There was still one major obstacle between the two nations, however, which would have to be settled before relations could really become close and cordial. This obstacle was Austria.

The final conquest of Ethiopia by the Italian army rendered the policy of sanctions by the Western Powers meaningless. In June and July, Great Britain and France attempted to heal their wounded relationship with Italy, but their efforts were to no avail.<sup>63</sup> On June 10 Mussolini made some important changes in the government of Italy which indicated a future change in Italian foreign policy. On that day Mussolini removed Suvich as head of the Foreign Ministry, and named his son-in-law Count Galeazzo Ciano as the new foreign minister. Ciano came into office with the belief that it was time for the Foreign Ministry to take on a more Fascist outlook in foreign policy, especially towards Austria.<sup>64</sup> Weinberg writes:

Suvich had been a strong defender of Austrian independence, while Ciano, whatever his later views, started out determined to do everything differently. In the field of German-Austrian relations this policy would quickly bear fruit; under Italian urging and German pressure, Schuschnigg moved toward a settlement with Berlin.<sup>65</sup>

With Mussolini's support guaranteed, Kurt von Schuschnigg, the Austrian Chancellor, once more attempted to negotiate an agreement with Germany to end the persistent tension between the two nations. On the German side negotiations were handled by the official representative in Vienna, Ambassador Franz von Papen,<sup>66</sup> and continued throughout June and into early

July. On July 11, 1936, Schuschnigg and the German ambassador<sup>67</sup> finally signed the so-called Gentlemen's Agreement. Weinberg states that the agreement

provided for German recognition of Austrian independence and for Austria to follow a course closer to Germany in international affairs. A variety of other provisions covered both some accommodation on outstanding issues and mechanisms for the preparation of further economic and cultural agreements, but the real significance of the event is not evident from the texts to which Schuschnigg affixed his name. The Austro-German agreement marked a major triumph for Hitler in supplanting Italian influence in Vienna and in heralding a new role for Germany in Southeast Europe....

As for German adherence to the promise not to interfere in Austrian internal affairs, that would continue only as long as Germany found it in its own interests to do so, regardless of any agreement.<sup>68</sup>

The Austro-German agreement of the summer of 1936 proved to be a turning point in the whole relationship between Mussolini and Hitler. With the conclusion of this agreement "the clash between the two fascisms in Austria came to an<sup>69</sup> end. Mussolini had left the field to Hitler." In a discussion with the German ambassador on the day the agreement was signed

Mussolini expressed lively satisfaction over the event, which would bring to an end the unhappy situation of Austria as a football of foreign interests and, above all, would finally remove the last and only mortgage on German-Italian relations.<sup>70</sup>

Both dictators felt that they had gotten what they wanted out of the agreement. Gehl states:

Hitler had postponed the Anschluss, which he could not achieve anyhow for the time being, and gained Mussolini's friendship in return; Mussolini had renounced a policy which he found impossible to continue and maintained Austria's independence at the same time.<sup>71</sup>

Whether Mussolini realized it at the time or not, the July<sup>72</sup> agreement "made the Anschluss a foregone conclusion."

Europe had barely had time to comprehend the importance of the Austro-German agreement when on July 17, 1936, civil<sup>73</sup> war broke out in Spain. Mussolini, fresh from his success in Ethiopia, had become convinced that Italy must have hegemony in the Mediterranean, and he saw the conflict in Spain as a means of increasing his influence and power in the Western Mediterranean. In addition Mussolini interpreted the civil war in Spain as a conflict between opposing political ideologies in which he sincerely believed that Fascism<sup>74</sup> must defeat Communism at all cost. Within a few weeks the conflict threatened to divide Europe into opposing camps with Italy and Germany supporting the insurgents and the Soviet Union and possibly western Europe supporting the gov-<sup>75</sup>ernment.

From the beginning Mussolini intervened openly in Spain,<sup>76</sup> giving Franco as much aid as he possibly could. Germany,



however, did not throw its weight into Spain as quickly or as openly as did Italy. According to Kirkpatrick, Hitler's aim was to

prolong the civil war in the hope that Spain would become the focus of trouble, that attention would be drawn away from his machinations in central Europe, and that Italy would gradually become enbroiled with the Western powers and so gravitate towards Germany.<sup>77</sup>

Thus Hitler looked at the Spanish Civil War in terms of how it could be used to further his own plans, while Mussolini entered the conflict whole-heartedly and soon found himself involved in a long struggle "which was eventually to rob him of all liberty of movement."<sup>78</sup> In Hitler's view, then, the "longer the civil war lasted, the more difficult it would be for Italy to leave the German orbit again."<sup>79</sup> Germany would help Franco in his fight, but only enough to keep him from losing.<sup>80</sup>

Regardless of the fact that Hitler and Mussolini intervened in Spain for different reasons, true German and Italian friendship, which eventually manifested itself in a formal alliance, dates from their mutual involvement in this war.<sup>81</sup> As summer passed into fall in 1936, this new Italo-German friendship became stronger and stronger. In August Count Ciano indicated to the German ambassador his concern over the division in Europe between Communists and anti-Communist

groups. Ciano further noted that

the greatest vigilance and closest collaboration between Germany and Italy were necessary in order to avert dangers that were arising.... As far as Italy was concerned, she was entirely available, if Germany should have any wishes in implementing her defense measures for any eventuality.<sup>82</sup>

Ciano's statement had actually been a "plea for German help disguised as an offer of assistance."<sup>83</sup> Mussolini did not want Italy to be saddled with the problem of intervention in Spain without strong support from Germany, and Ciano's remarks had been designed to encourage German involvement.<sup>84</sup> At the same time Mussolini was worried about German intentions in Spain. In September Hitler secretly sent Hans Frank to Italy to soothe the Italian leader, and to explain German motives in Spain. Frank told Mussolini and Ciano that Germany was giving aid "to the nationalist parties solely because of solidarity in the field of political ideas, but that it has neither interests nor aims in the Mediterranean."<sup>85</sup> Furthermore, Frank told the Italian statesmen that Hitler regarded the Mediterranean as an Italian sea, while Germany looked at the Baltic Sea as her Mediterranean.<sup>86</sup> Frank also informed the Italians that Germany was ready to recognize Italy's Ethiopian Empire at any time, and Germany was anxious for even closer collaboration with Italy.<sup>87</sup>

The closeness of Italo-German relations was further indicated in early October when, as instructed, Hassel extended a formal invitation to Count Ciano to visit Germany later that month. Ciano accepted the invitation in due course, concerned only with making it as impressive as possible.<sup>88</sup> Such was the extent to which Italy and Italian foreign policy had already swung over to the German side.

Ciano's visit to Berlin was preceded by weeks of intensive negotiations between German and Italian leaders so that all differences of opinion could be straightened out beforehand. These negotiations were successful and on October 23, 1936, Ciano arrived in Berlin for a much publicized state visit.<sup>89</sup> The highlight of the visit was his meeting with the German Fuhrer, Adolf Hitler. Weinberg states:

The meeting between Hitler and Ciano provided an opportunity for mutual admiration. Matching this admiration in intensity was their common dislike of Britain. Ciano fed Hitler's antagonism by giving him some British diplomatic documents, stolen in Rome, that contained nasty but accurate evaluations of the National Socialist regime, its leaders, and its aims. The German dictator and the Italian foreign minister agreed not only in their hostility to the English but on the use of antibolshevism as a screen for the process of rallying other countries to them, thereby paralyzing England while the two powers continued their armaments programs. . . . The one potential stumbling block to German-Italian cooperation was brought in by Hitler in a manner as spectacular as it was discreet: he showed his



Italian guests the window of his Berchtesgaden residence through which one could see Austria clearly and close by. But nothing was allowed to spoil the exchange of pleasantries.<sup>90</sup>

Ciano's state visit put the finishing touches to the new found German-Italian friendship, but it was Mussolini 'who with his colorful use of words gave the name to the Rome-Berlin Axis. . . .'<sup>91</sup> In a speech on November 1, 1936, in Milan Mussolini said:

'The Berlin conversations have resulted in an understanding between our two countries over certain problems which had been particularly acute. But these understandings which have been sanctioned in fitting and duly signed agreements, this Berlin-Rome line is not a diaphragm but rather an axis around which can revolve all those European states with a will to collaboration and peace.'<sup>92</sup>

Mussolini may have given the name to the new relationship, but it was Hitler who had forged the alliance by successfully exploiting situations in which Mussolini found himself.<sup>93</sup> From 1936 onwards Berlin and Rome marched together.<sup>94</sup> But Halperin states that because of

the enormous disparity in strength between Italy and Germany, Mussolini was predestined to be the junior partner. Although continuing as before to profess great veneration for Mussolini, Hitler was henceforward to treat him more cavalierly. The Italian dictator naturally resented this. But driven by hatred of the western democracies, whom he was determined to despoil, and beguiled by the spectacle of German military might as well as by his own grandiose mirages, he never broke the relationship.<sup>95</sup>



By the end of 1936 then Hitler had established his long  
hoped-for alliance with Italy, and he had also maneuvered<sup>96</sup>  
himself into the leadership of that alliance.

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CHAPTER IV  
HITLER BECOMES SENIOR PARTNER  
IN THE AXIS: 1937-1938

As the leader of the German nation Adolf Hitler had every reason to be satisfied with his first four years in power. "The remilitarization of the Rhineland, German re-armament, and the contrast between his own self-confident leadership and the weakness of the Western Powers had greatly increased his prestige both abroad and at home." <sup>1</sup> In addition, by the end of 1936 Hitler had forged an alliance with Italy, had joined his Axis partner in intervening in Spain, and finally had formed a tentative alliance with the Asian <sup>2</sup> nation of Japan. In his first four years of power Hitler had exploited the weaknesses of others to steadily improve Germany's political and military situation in Europe. And Germany's increasing power was rapidly providing the Nazi leader with a powerful base to pursue even more ambitious <sup>3</sup> goals than he had already achieved.

With the conclusion of Ciano's visit to Berlin in late October 1936, Hitler had successfully drawn Italy into a close relationship with Germany. Hitler, however, continued to look elsewhere for other allies to bolster Germany's political position even more. In Japan he found a country which also



needed diplomatic support. Thus on November 25, 1936, the Anti-Comintern Pact was signed by Viscount Mushakoji, the Japanese ambassador to Berlin, and by Joachim von Ribbentrop,<sup>4</sup> the German Foreign Minister. The Pact

consisted of a published Treaty, and a Secret Agreement. The former provided for an exchange of information between the two countries regarding the activities of the Comintern, the latter's purpose, and the true meaning of the Pact, was to provide for a limited alliance between Japan and Germany, directed against the Soviet Union.<sup>5</sup>

For Hitler the importance of the Pact lay in its ability to act as a counterweight to the Soviet Union, which was becoming<sup>6</sup> increasingly hostile toward Nazi Germany in late 1936.

Hitler and the German nation entered the year 1937 in the best political and military situation they had enjoyed since 1914. At the same time Mussolini was attempting to deal with overtures by Great Britain and France to find a solution to the Ethiopian problem which had plagued their relations<sup>7</sup> with Italy for over a year. Negotiations with Great Britain were successful and on January 2, 1937, the so-called "Gentlemen's Agreement" was signed by representatives of Italy and<sup>8</sup> Great Britain. The rapprochement brought about by the agreement was fleeting, however, because the vagueness and generality of the terms gave rise almost at once to disagreements in interpretation. The Italians felt they had maneuvered

the British into an anti-Bolshevist stance in relation to Spain, while Britain insisted that Italian signature of the agreement prevented Italian intervention on behalf of the Fascists in Spain. The result was strained relations between the two countries once again, and Italian leaders once more were disillusioned with their counterparts in Great Britain.<sup>10</sup> As for France, after the German remilitarization of the Rhineland, that nation, according to Cameron, "acquired the habit of insisting that she would pursue no course in which the lead had not been taken by Britain."<sup>11</sup>

As 1937 progressed it became clearer that Italy was deeply committed to the continuing Spanish Civil War. Italian and German interests coincided to the extent that both nations hoped to prevent a victory by the Communists.<sup>12</sup> But beyond this, Italian and German motives in Spain began to diverge. As earlier noted, Mussolini was striving to gain Italian hegemony in the Mediterranean, and he hoped to see a friendly regime come to power in Spain to act as an ally for Italy against France and Great Britain. Germany, however, was content to allow Italy to take the lead in Spain, hoping that the Italians would become bogged down in a protracted war and would become more dependent upon Germany and more alienated from the Western Powers.<sup>13</sup> Throughout 1937 this

German strategy worked well as Italian policy became increasingly dominated by the drawn-out civil war.

The most important event for both Mussolini and Hitler in 1937 was the Italian dictator's four-day state visit to Germany in late September. According to the French ambassador to Berlin, Mussolini received a welcome that was unequalled in its pomp and preparation.<sup>14</sup> Hitler was determined primarily to impress Mussolini as much as possible; hence during the whole four-day visit the two dictators had only one major political discussion and that occurred on the first day. Dr. Paul Schmidt, Hitler's interpreter, states:

All that emerged from this conversation was that both countries were pretty well agreed on a friendly attitude to Japan, the greatest possible support to Franco, and contempt for the western democracies, Britain and France. . . . The 'Festival Programme' left scarcely a quiet moment for really serious discussion. Parades in Munich, manoeuvres in Mecklenburg, inspection of the Krupp works in Essen, and other activities of this kind, followed one another without respite.<sup>15</sup>

The real importance of the trip came in its effect upon Mussolini. According to Wiskemann "the impression Nazi Germany made upon Mussolini was probably the most profound impression of his life."<sup>16</sup> Mussolini witnessed in that four-day tour a display of raw power which astounded him.<sup>17</sup> As for Hitler, Wiskemann states that

long ago he had decided that Mussolini was a genius second only to himself; as time passed he became aware that the Italians did not fit very well into his scheme of things; he convinced himself that only Mussolini could marshal them as he, the Fuhrer, wished . . . . Most important of all, henceforward he knew in his subconscious way that he had not merely reversed the position of June 1934, but that he had established a personal ascendancy over Mussolini.<sup>18</sup>

But despite his subconscious desire to dominate Mussolini, the German dictator's admiration for the Duce was real. The fact that both were men of the people made Hitler feel at ease with Mussolini in a way in which he never did with the traditional ruling classes of Europe. Hitler would use Mussolini in the future, but he never did desert him.

Mussolini's visit to Germany in September, according to Francois-Poncet

set a seal upon the understanding between the two dictators; thenceforward Nazism and Fascism set up their Axis athwart Europe and, while loudly proclaiming their devotion to the cause of peace, developed their armaments more actively than ever.<sup>20</sup>

On November 6, 1937, Italy joined the Anti-Comintern Pact,<sup>21</sup> which had earlier been concluded by Japan and Germany. It was a vivid indication of how cordial Italo-German relations really had become. In his diary Ciano wrote that Italy was now at "the centre of the most formidable political and military combination which has ever existed."<sup>22</sup> Certainly the



ideological significance of the agreement marked "a rapprochement of the three great aggressor nations, and a common threat to peaceful nations."<sup>23</sup>

Mussolini closed out the year 1937 by officially withdrawing Italy from the League of Nations on the eleventh day of December.<sup>24</sup> The cumulative effect of the events of 1937 was to show observers of foreign affairs that unless the democratic nations of the world ended their popular isolationist policies, totalitarian domination of Europe and Asia was a real possibility.<sup>25</sup> Italo-German relations were closer than ever by the end of the year, and even on the touchy issue of Austria, Italy and Germany seemed to have buried the past. In fact in a conversation with Ribbentrop in early November, Mussolini told the German foreign minister that he was "tired of mounting guard over Austrian independence," and that he believed the best thing to do was "to let events take their natural course."<sup>26</sup> On this occasion Wiskemann states that "Mussolini said everything Ribbentrop could have hoped for. Italy, with Sicily now as her centre of gravity, had become too Mediterranean to care about Austria."<sup>27</sup> Mussolini's attitude soon would be tested severely.

Tension between Austria and Germany began to surface shortly after the 1936 Austro-German Agreement went into effect.

The agreement had really been important as a settlement of Italo-German differences over Austria, and not as a final settlement between the two German nations. At first both Schuschnigg and Hitler were satisfied with the settlement, but their basic viewpoints on the matter were different and this quickly became apparent. Gehl states:

For Schuschnigg it was the last concession. A basis for co-existence between the two countries had been found. By Hitler the Agreement was taken to mean that Schuschnigg had after all failed to stop the policy of Gleichschaltung; it was the decisive step in the evolutionary tactic which he pursued.<sup>28</sup>

The result was that pressure on the Austrian government from the Austrian Nazis increased rather than decreased even after Schuschnigg had invoked a very liberal amnesty in late July.<sup>29</sup> Throughout 1937 and in the first two months of 1938 the pressure on Schuschnigg increased as he attempted to deal with the small but very vocal Nazi opposition.<sup>30</sup>

In January and February of 1938 the tension between Austria and Germany reached an almost intolerable level. Finally the Austrian Chancellor agreed to a face-to-face meeting with Hitler to be held at Berchtesgaden on February 12 to discuss their many differences.<sup>31</sup> In agreeing to the meeting, however, Schuschnigg had demanded that three conditions be met beforehand. These were met. These three conditions were

that he receive a formal invitation to a meeting, that guarantees be given to prevent the meeting from being suddenly canceled, and that a formal program be agreed upon beforehand.<sup>32</sup>

But despite the attempt to prevent any sudden surprises, Schuschnigg was stunned by Hitler's attitude at their very first meeting. Hitler immediately unleashed one of his famous tirades against Schuschnigg, angrily telling him: "Don't think for one moment that anybody on earth is going to thwart my decisions. Italy? I see eye to eye with Mussolini, the closest ties of friendship bind me to Italy."<sup>33</sup> The Fuhrer's demands, among others, called for significant political concessions by the Austrian government to the Austrian Nazis.<sup>34</sup>

For Austria and Schuschnigg it was the beginning of the end.

At the close of the conference Schuschnigg realized that he and his nation were in a desperate situation.<sup>35</sup> As for Mussolini, Hitler had analyzed correctly how his Italian friend would react. All Mussolini could hope for was to delay for as long as possible the inevitable Anschluss.<sup>36</sup> Mussolini's realistic attitude did not prevent him from being highly displeased with the way in which Hitler and his associates were handling the Austrian issue. By the end of February the Duce's irritation with the Germans had become pronounced.<sup>37</sup>

The new Austro-German crisis reached its peak in early

March when the Austrian Chancellor announced on the ninth plans for a nationwide plebiscite to be held on Sunday, March 13. Schuschnigg hoped that the plebiscite would show that the Austrian people favored the present constitution to anything the Austrian Nazis were proposing. <sup>38</sup> There is no question that Schuschnigg anticipated a strong reaction from Germany over his decision, especially since the arrangements for it left considerable room for doubt as to its impartial-  
<sup>39</sup> ity. Hitler was outraged and issued an ultimatum with a time limit for response set at noon on March 11. In addition the Austrian Nazis sent their own ultimatum which in essence repeated Hitler's terms. Confronted with two ultimatums,  
<sup>40</sup> Schuschnigg bowed to the pressure and canceled the plebiscite.

Hitler, however, was not satisfied with Schuschnigg's action. Using the threat of a possible invasion he demanded that the Austrian Chancellor resign immediately. According to Noakes and Pridham:

When this too was accepted, he demanded the appointment of Seyss-Inquart as Chancellor. Here, however, he came up against an obstacle in the shape of the Austrian President, Wilhelm Miklas, who refused the request and stuck to his refusal despite the threat of invasion. Finally, however, shortly before midnight, Miklas capitulated; but by then it was too late. Hitler had given the order for invasion at 8.45 p.m. and now refused to cancel it despite a request from Seyss-Inquart. In the



meantime, he had received news of a broadcast by Schuschnigg ordering the Austrian army not to oppose an invasion. This freed Hitler from the odium of spilling the blood of fellow Germans and from the prospect of foreign intervention.<sup>41</sup>

Another reason Hitler decided to go ahead with the invasion was a telephone call he received on the eleventh at 10.25 p.m. from Prince Philip of Hesse, who was in Rome. The prince informed Hitler that Mussolini had acquiesced in the invasion. Hitler was elated at the news and told Hesse to tell Mussolini

that I thank him ever so much -- never, never shall I forget . . . . If he should ever need any help or be in any danger, he can be convinced that I shall stick to him, whatever may happen, even if the whole world were against him.<sup>42</sup>

Thus on March 12 German troops crossed the Austrian border<sup>43</sup> and Hitler's long-hoped-for Anschluss was a reality.

The impact of the Anschluss upon the Italian people was tremendous. According to Kirkpatrick the Italians

unaware of the successive steps by which Mussolini had sold the Austrian pass, were shocked by the extent of Hitler's victory. Not since the murder of Matteotti in 1924 had any event so damaged Mussolini's popularity and prestige, for it was plain for all to see that the roles of the Fascist dictators had been reversed and that the Duce was now the junior partner.<sup>44</sup>

For Mussolini Anschluss was a bitter pill to swallow, es-

pecially since Hitler had left him in the dark throughout the whole crisis. He could not help but feel that he had been badly used. But regardless of his personal feelings Mussolini<sup>45</sup> did not abandon his German connection. The Austrian crisis had proved at least to the Germans that the alliance between<sup>46</sup> Berlin and Rome was real.

In an atmosphere of nervous tension, Mussolini made plans for Hitler's forthcoming trip to Italy, which had been agreed upon before the Anschluss had occurred in March. Italian officials became increasingly concerned with the attitude some German officials were taking on the continuance of Italian<sup>47</sup> control over the South Tyrol with its German minority. This, coupled with a growing irredentist movement among the Germans in that area, caused extreme nervousness in Italian officialdom in the spring of 1938. On April 17, Ciano wrote in his diary:

Since the Anschluss the Germans there have been asserting themselves too much, with a steady increase of irredentist demonstrations which we cannot continue to tolerate. . . . All this, on the eve of the Fuhrer's visit, is serious.<sup>48</sup>

Hitler, however, was not willing to let a few unredeemed Germans in the South Tyrol destroy his relationship with Mussolini, and through his new ambassador to Italy, Hans von Mackensen, the Fuhrer reiterated his earlier stand that the

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South Tyrol must remain in Italian hands.

Hitler left Berlin for Rome on May 2 with an impressive entourage of four special trains, including a whole host of  
<sup>50</sup>journalists. But Hitler's reception in Rome, despite Mussolini's careful preparation, was lukewarm at best until May 7 when the Fuhrer delivered a speech in which, among other things, he declared "unalterable" the frontier now  
<sup>51</sup>shared by Germany and Italy. During the whole of his trip Hitler was deluged with sightseeing trips to every conceivable  
<sup>52</sup>Italian monument and national landmark. Hitler, however, had not come to Italy to vacation, and in conversations with the Duce, he and Ribbentrop pushed Mussolini to agree to a formal, written alliance. But Mussolini and Ciano were not yet ready to go that far in their relationship with Germany, and both brushed aside the suggestions by stating that the close friendship between the two nations made a formal alliance  
<sup>53</sup>unnecessary.

Hitler left Italy on May 9 without his formal alliance, but the trip had pleased him nevertheless. In a telegram sent to Mussolini after his return to Germany the Fuhrer declared:

Above all, Duce, these days have made it possible for me to come to know your people . . . . The community of ideas between the Fascist and the National Socialist Movements provides a secure

guarantee that the loyal comradeship which binds us together will be carried over to both our peoples and unite them, too, for all time.<sup>54</sup>

One reason why Hitler had wanted to establish a formal alliance with Italy was his desire to gain Italian support<sup>55</sup> for his anticipated confrontation with Czechoslovakia.

Hitler's success in gaining Austria so easily had only whetted his appetite for further conquests; hence after his return from Italy in May he began to turn his eyes toward Czecho-<sup>56</sup>slovakia.

Throughout the summer of 1938 the tension between Germany and Czechoslovakia mounted. Germany launched a 'war of nerves' against the latter, and it became evident that Hitler was bent on securing his territorial designs on the Sudetenland, even at the risk of a general war.<sup>57</sup>

As early as May 26, Ciano had indicated to Mackensen that Italy was solidly behind Germany, and that the future of the<sup>58</sup> Czech nation was of no concern to Italy. But as the crisis developed, Mussolini became more irritated at the failure of the Germans to inform him about their plans concerning Czechoslovakia, and about what was expected from Italy in the way<sup>59</sup> of support.

By the middle of September the crisis over the Sudetenland was nearing its climax. Meanwhile, all of Europe and its armies were placed on a war footing as the world waited



to see what would happen.

The British Government tried to halt the threatened catastrophe when Prime Minister Chamberlain went to Germany for several conferences with Hitler, but this effort appeared fruitless as the latter remained inexorable in his demands upon Czechoslovakia.<sup>61</sup>

Mussolini, however, was beginning to have serious doubts about the wisdom of allowing Italy to be dragged into a massive European war. In late September, according to Ripka, "Signs were apparent of the popular resistance in Italy to war, and Italian efforts at mobilization met with considerable difficulty."<sup>62</sup> Compounding the problem was the fact that Hitler had set October 1 as the deadline for Czech acceptance of German demands. If these were not met by that time, Germany would launch an attack against Czechoslovakia with the avowed aim of destroying that state.<sup>63</sup>

All hope of avoiding a massive European war had virtually faded away when suddenly "the heads of government of Great Britain, France, Germany, and Italy agreed to meet at Munich, in a last-minute effort to avoid war."<sup>64</sup> Mussolini, it appeared, had interceded with Hitler for one more conference. During the negotiations at the meeting Hitler depended heavily on Mussolini because of the Duce's ability to converse in English, French, and German. Mussolini thus appeared to be the star in the drama as he used his language skills to hold

center stage. On the surface it appeared that Hitler was playing a mere supporting role whereas in reality the substance of the agreement had been made in Germany and submitted to Mussolini before the conference.<sup>65</sup>

After intensive negotiations an agreement was finally reached among the four delegations at one-thirty in the morning on September 30, 1938. The German demands which had been put forth by Mussolini were accepted with only minor modifications. To the world it appeared that Mussolini had dominated Hitler at the conference, but in reality the Duce's militant swaggering had been more show than fact.<sup>66</sup>

According to Wiskemann:

Superficially Munich might be counted as a triumph for Mussolini. The Duce had shown that he did not fear war but he had proved to be the savior of peace. He returned to Italy perhaps more popular than he had ever been before. For two years now the Italians had felt themselves slipping down a slope into the sea of vassalage to Hitler, but now it seemed that the Duce, alone in the world, could forbid the tide to rise.<sup>67</sup>

For a brief moment then Mussolini appeared to upstage Hitler, but this was not to last for long.

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## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

To the world it had appeared in the early thirties that Mussolini was the leader of the Fascist camp, the senior partner. To some extent world opinion also credited Mussolini with playing an important part in maintaining peace in 1934 and in 1938, but the latter conclusion was not true. Mussolini did much to stay Anschluss in 1934 but in 1938 he acted only as Hitler's mouthpiece at the Munich Conference, and his personal contribution to the subsequent agreements was negligible at best. By October 1938, Mussolini had become thoroughly subservient to the Fuhrer, and Italian foreign policy was an adjunct to German policy.

From 1933 to 1938 the relationship between Mussolini and Hitler also completely changed: the superiority which Mussolini briefly enjoyed had disappeared, and Hitler clearly emerged as the dominant figure. In the first years of their relationship it appeared that the National Socialist movement was an outgrowth of Mussolini's Fascist party, and that Hitler would follow his lead as the originator of the movement and the man of experience in European politics. Hitler at their first meeting in Venice in June 1934 was remarkably quiet and amenable, but he was not to be so easily ruled. Despite

his genuine desire for an alliance with Italy, Hitler could never have been long satisfied to be an understudy to Mussolini, especially when it came to his own future plans for German foreign policy. Hitler realized, however, that his inferior military position in his first two years of power placed him in a difficult position in relation to Mussolini. And this became vividly evident when Mussolini successfully forced Hitler to back down in Austria in the July crisis of 1934. In 1933-34 Mussolini maintained an outward superiority to Hitler, but in the next two years their whole relationship changed dramatically.

In 1935 the change began when the Italian involvement in the Ethiopian war tied down the nation militarily, and diplomatically isolated Italy from Great Britain and France. Meanwhile, in the same year Hitler skillfully used the pre-occupation of the Western Powers with Italy to rearm Germany, openly violating the Treaty of Versailles. By 1936 the increasing military strength of Germany and Italy's continuing involvement in Ethiopia enabled Hitler to achieve additional key foreign policy goals. In March 1936, Hitler successfully remilitarized the Rhineland while France and Great Britain stood by and offered only verbal protests. It was a catastrophic diplomatic defeat for the Western Powers, and for

Hitler a dramatic victory. By the summer of 1936, then, Italy's continuing diplomatic isolation from the West and Germany's radically improved military and diplomatic position had materially improved the status of Germany in western Europe.

In July 1936, the last obstacle to an Italo-German accord on German terms was removed with the signing of an Austro-German agreement. Austria ceased for the moment to be a bone of contention between Hitler and Mussolini. The continuing involvement of Italy in the Ethiopian war forced Mussolini to turn to Hitler for support. Mussolini's dependence upon this support continued even after the successful conclusion of his African venture, because he soon became deeply committed in the Spanish Civil War which erupted in the summer of 1936. The result was that Mussolini's delicate political position throughout 1935 and the first half of 1936 allowed Hitler to exploit the Duce's need for support, and enabled the Fuhrer to pursue a rapprochement with his Italian counterpart on his own terms. In October 1936, Ciano's well-planned visit to Berlin put the finishing touches on the new alliance between the two Fascist states. What Mussolini was loudly to proclaim in late 1936 as the Rome-Berlin Axis was in fact an alliance created, pursued, and eventually established by Adolf Hitler.

And from the very beginning Hitler dominated Mussolini in their new relationship.

From 1936 on Mussolini's increasing subservience to Hitler was illustrated in various ways, and his admiration for Hitler and for his methods of obtaining his foreign policy goals at the expense of France and Great Britain grew as did his own desire to copy Hitler's formula for success. In fact, after 1936 there never really was an independent Italian foreign policy; there was only a prolonged surrender by Mussolini to continuous pressure from Hitler without regard for Italian interests or needs. The tremendous difference between the political and military potential of Germany and Italy virtually predestined Mussolini to an inferior position in his relationship with Hitler. In March 1938, this inferiority was vividly illustrated when the Duce acquiesced to Hitler's annexation of Austria. Both at home and abroad, this event showed how much of a junior partner the Duce had become. Mussolini, however, was a realist and understood that bowing to superior power was a simple necessity.

The relationship between Hitler and Mussolini, despite the appearance presented to the world at the time, was never one which involved any real personal intimacy. Both looked



at the Rome-Berlin Axis in terms of what it allowed each to accomplish. It was an alliance based upon each dictator's need for diplomatic and military support at a time when both leaders were trying to achieve significant foreign policy goals. The Rome-Berlin Axis was twentieth century Realpolitik. Similarities in political philosophy may have helped to strengthen the Axis once it was formed, but it was not the reason for its formation. The Rome-Berlin Axis was a functional alliance providing both dictators with support they needed at specific times and occasions when neither nation was powerful enough to go it alone. Ironically, it was Mussolini who gave the alliance its name, but it was Hitler who formed the Axis as he took advantage of the precarious political situation which Mussolini found himself in by 1936. From the inception of the Axis Hitler dominated Mussolini and by October 1938, his control over the Duce had become vividly clear.

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