

# Hitler and Mussolini: A comparative analysis of the Rome-Berlin Axis 1936-1940

Written by Stephanie Hodgson

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## Hitler and Mussolini: A comparative analysis of the Rome-Berlin Axis 1936-1940

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Nazi Germany and fascist Italy have often been depicted as congruent cases[1] during the period in discussion in which their supposed inherent links formed the basis of their relationship. These inherent links include their common ideology, albeit there are minor differences,[2] their similar foreign policy, expansionist aims and finally common enemies – Britain, France and communist Russia. Furthermore, they shared parallel leadership principles and referred to as Duce and Führer (both mean leader), and additionally both held great hostility towards parliamentary democracy.[3] Although these factors hold a great deal of truth and certainly some weight, it is difficult to argue that the Rome-Berlin axis was established purely on this basis.

This paper will predominately argue that Germany and Italy had little in common but common enemies and more significantly the shared aim of both wanting to assert themselves as revisionist powers of the interwar period. Thus, their alliance was one of more convenience than anything else in that both powers were aware that they needed an ally within Europe as a means of achieving their ambitious and aggressive foreign policies. Therefore, they manipulated their superficial common links to establish a relationship that was based on the considerations of *Realpolitik*. [4] The relationship between Italy and Germany, and also the Mussolini–Hitler relationship is complex and intricate; both nations even flirted with the enemies at times as a means of maximising their own political interests.

This paper will analyse the years 1936-1940 and will be divided into five sections with a chronological structure. 1936-37 reviewing the impact of the Abyssinian crisis, remilitarisation of the Rhineland and Spanish Civil war, followed by 1938 which will consider the effect of the Anschluss, Munich Agreement and Anglo-Italian agreement, ensued by 1939 with the creation of the Pact of Steel and Italy's subsequent non-belligerency. This will be followed by Italy's introduction into the war in June 1940 and finally this essay will evaluate Italy's failed invasions in Greece and North Africa in late 1940 and the repercussions this had on German-Italian relations and the Axis war effort.

The Rome-Berlin Axis was formally announced on 1<sup>st</sup> November 1936 by Mussolini in a speech in Milan, yet the extent to which this alliance was based upon durability and fraternity is somewhat questionable.

Italy and Germany were drawn together by the effects and consequences of Mussolini's conquest of Abyssinia, Hitler's march into the Rhineland and their joint endeavour in the Spanish Civil War, however relations maintained to be formal and cautious during this period. Yet as a direct result of these events, Hitler and Mussolini found comfort in each other as they became increasingly ostracised from the international community. Thus, in essence the alliance was based on the considerations of *Realpolitik*, [5] rather than a durable and fraternal association. Yet, this is not to necessarily ascertain that that *Realpolitik* and a durable alliance cannot co-exist in a wider sense, however for the purpose of this alliance, Germany and Italy found it very difficult to gage any fraternal link. A.J.P. Taylor also reaches a similar conclusion in which he argues that Mussolini was no more than an empty headed opportunist ready to reach agreement with whichever side offered the greatest concessions. [6] Whilst Mallet regards this argument as illogical and precedes to note that Mussolini *chose* to align with fascist Italy with Nazi Germany and such an alignment formed part of Mussolini's geopolitical ideology. [7] Although A.J.P Taylor's 1961 thesis is sometimes regarded as out-dated, his argument still retains a great deal of prevalence, and thus this essay will draw many of the same

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conclusions as Taylor, in that the Rome-Berlin axis had little common but common enemies. Thus, common ideology was not a fundamental component within the making of the alliance, although the concept of ideology may have been superficially manipulated for public purposes. However in essence, the relationship was based on common enemies and similar aggressive foreign policies. Yet it is also important to briefly note here that Hitler-Mussolini relations are somewhat different to Rome-Berlin relations.[8]

Relations became steadily more intimate in early 1936, most notably following Mussolini's conquest of Abyssinia. After war broke out in Abyssinia in October 1935, Mussolini was keen to suggest an improvement in German-Italian solidarity with regard to the creation of a closer alliance. Furthermore, the rapprochement of the British-French bloc, as a consequence of the Abyssinian crisis and exposure of the Hoare-Laval pact, prompted the Nazi and to an even greater extent, the Italian Fascist regime, to join forces, even if it was on an opportunistic or limited basis.[9] This increased intimacy was demonstrated in Mussolini's public speeches and in private meetings, 'between Germany and Italy there exists a community of destiny'.[10] Furthermore, Mussolini manipulated the concept of ideology to forge a common link between the two countries; as he professed that their relationship was 'dictated by destiny and which was bound to become stronger and stronger'.[11] This manipulation of ideology illustrated that Italy wanted to forge an alliance to serve the short term interests of Italy, and not because an alliance with Germany was a natural progression Italy's foreign policy. Thus, it was the ostracism implemented by Britain and France in reaction to the disastrous Hoare-Laval pact that provoked Italy to be drawn into an alliance with Germany.

In addition, Germany's role in Abyssinia is reflective of Hitler's attitude towards Italy; whilst it supplied the Italians with weapons and coal; she also secretly supplied arms to the Emperor Haile Selassie for defence against the Italian invasion.[12] By lengthening the war and installing a double policy, Hitler could distract Britain and France away from his own aggressive foreign policy plans (to remilitarise the Rhineland) and also possibly distract Mussolini from his ambitions with regards to the forthcoming Anschluss – something the Italians had vehemently opposed. Furthermore it gave him additional time to conquer Italy's markets within the Balkans.[13] However quite ironically Hitler also wanted Italy to be victorious in the war so Britain and France would isolate Italy and thus drive Mussolini into the arms of Hitler's Germany[14] and as a consequence increase Italy's dependence on Germany as an ally. Thus in this vein, the conquest of Abyssinia arguably benefited the Führer more than the Duce. Hitler gained a great deal from the war in Ethiopia; the exposure of the Hoare-Laval pact meant Ethiopia became a trump card for Hitler as it substantially weakened the Stresa front – the association of Britain, France and Italy in 1935 and freed him from 'encirclement' within Europe.[15] However, Mussolini also used Hitler in his own power game as he undertook a double policy of assuring alliances with both Britain and France and that of Germany. When Germany complained of his double policy, Mussolini begged them not to be too offended if he had to tell lies to London.[16] However, the degree of formality in which Mussolini pursued with Britain and France can be questioned as late as 1936 London and Paris were unwilling to publicly break a deal with Italy when she had so overtly dishonoured the League of Nations. Thus, Britain and France were enemies for both Germany and Italy, although privately, Britain in particular, appreciated the importance of having one of these nations as an ally; however Britain was aware that an alliance with Italy or Germany was not publicly feasible. Therefore, Italy and Germany were first and foremost drawn together due to their failed diplomatic ties with Britain and France.

The appointment of Count Ciano (Mussolini's son-in-law) had an important effect upon Italian politics as he strongly advocated an alliance with Germany, rather than Italy being the pendulum between one power group and another.[17] He argued that Italians were surely clever enough to be able to exploit German power without being exploited, which they would then eventually reach a position where they could dominate Europe.[18] Thus, it illustrated that they used each other as instruments in each other's power game.[19] When the Italian victory was certified in May 1936, Hitler was prepared to assume a benevolent attitude when the Italian conquest was complete, which Mussolini thanked Hitler for in his visit to German later that year in September 1936: 'We shall never forget this'.[20] Words similar to what Hitler would echo two year later in April 1938 with regard to the Anschluss. Yet, it demonstrates that Hitler was not prepared to support Italy wholly on the basis of their shared fascist connection. The way in which Hitler manipulated the issue of Abyssinia by supplying both Italy and Abyssinia illustrates he was prepared to politically manoeuvre around the international system to maximise German interests. British and French political ostracism of Italy meant Mussolini was thrust into the arms of the Wehrmacht machine, in which the two countries established a genuine link; common enemies.

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Hitler's overt violation of the Treaty of Versailles with regard to the remilitarisation of the Rhineland in March 1936 led Mussolini to an even larger degree to believe that an alliance with Hitler was the most appropriate path for future Italian foreign policy. Although this realisation did not come immediately, by the spring of 1936 Mussolini's attitude wavered as he increasingly understood how treacherous Germany was becoming after two years of rearmament,[21] thus realised that Germany would be more beneficial as an ally than an enemy. However, Wiskemann's disagrees with this argument and proceeds to note that by spring 1936 there seemed no way to reconcile the conflicting interests of Germany and Italy; Austria proved to be a too a decisive issue.[22] However, the success of the remilitarisation of the Rhineland along with Italy's war weariness in Spain alarmed Mussolini. Hitler was now in a powerful strategic position due to his successful and bold challenge of Versailles, in which he could dangle before the Duce the probability of a German recognition of Italy's new imperial quality (Abyssinia) in exchange for Italy's surrender over Austria. Thus, Mussolini slowly begun to grasp that an alliance with Germany, the surrendering of Austria and the recognition of the conquest of Abyssinia were all inextricably linked. Therefore, Mussolini began to admit that the independence of Austria might have to be sacrificed as the price of an entente with Germany.[23]

Furthermore as previously stated, the prospect of an Anglo-Franco-Italian alliance was becoming increasingly futile after the failure of the Hoare-Laval pact which led him to formally cement ties with Nazi Germany in his profound speech in Milan, in which he declared, 'the Rome-Berlin line is not a diaphragm but rather an axis'.[24] Thus, the Rome-Berlin Axis was created on a basis on political pragmatism and manipulation on both sides, and thus does not emulate a sense of fraternity; it proved to be merely two powers exploiting each other to utilise their own spheres of interest.

By 1937, Mussolini depicted himself as a warrior of war which was exacerbated after his somewhat precarious avenge of Abyssinia,[25] and thus felt necessary to plough a great deal of Italian resources into the Spanish Civil War. However, Mussolini only agreed to commit a dozen transport planes initially, yet this would steadily increase when he learned that Nazi Germany was supplying help too. Thus, this insinuates the degree of competition between the two countries. Yet, it illustrates to some extent that the Rome-Berlin Axis had more in common than common enemies. The two nations united over General Franco's Fascist force, thus assimilating together on the foundations of ideology. However, this can be scrutinised from a different perspective too, in that their joint hatred of Communism led them to join forces. Thus this would allude to the notion that joint participation in the Spanish Civil War was on the basis of a common enemy; communism. Mussolini continued to lend support to Spain despite reservations from Italian military advisors, in which they rightly claimed that Italian resources were limited. The Spanish Civil War drained Italian resources to the extent that the war was nicknamed the 'Spanish Ulcer' within Italy.[26]

Thus, a war weary Italy became increasingly reliant upon Germany as an ally, to the extent that the onset of the Spanish Civil War meant he could no longer stand at Brenner alone. The Brenner bypass had become a potent symbol of Italian resistance against the forthcoming Anschluss, however as international circumstances dictated Mussolini thought it would be wise to sacrifice Starhemberg in order to placate Hitler.[27] Italy's war weariness within the Spanish Civil war foregrounds and infers what was to become so potent later on; in that Hitler would supersede over Mussolini and become the more dominant power. Thus, this pre-empts the divergence within relations and illustrates to an even greater degree how little these two nations had in common.

However, Italy's accession into Anti-Comintern Pact [28] in November 1937 was a bold attempt to further cement the Rome-Berlin axis as it proclaimed to be 'the most formidable politico-military bloc that has ever existed'.[29] However, the pact was based not on that of common ideology but common enemies. The pact was 'ostensibly anti-Communist but in reality anti-British'[30] thus the pact made clear their common enemies; Britain and Communism. This is reaffirmed by Denis Mack Smith who noted that the countries might differ on minor points, but they had the same enemies.[31] Therefore, it is difficult to argue that the pact was established on any other basis other than common enemies and similar aggressive aims, however one has to suggest how durable an alliance can be when its foundations is based upon hatred of others rather than genuine affection for each other another.

Therefore, these three significant events changed the dynamism between Italy and Germany to large degree. By the end of 1937, Hitler had established himself as the more politically powerful partner out of the two. However, it is important to remember that Hitler's grasp over Italy was still extremely tenuous and subject to change. In addition, it

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was obvious that the Italians did not feel the same way in this period. Ciano proclaimed after his first successful visit to Germany in October 1936 – which paved the way for the first official declaration of fascism's international dimension: he Axis;[32] 'he had the Germans in his back pocket'.[33] Thus, relations between Germany and Italy became synonymous with struggle, mistrust and suspicion. The period of 1936-37 has illustrated that it was not their common ideology that drew their countries together, although possibly notwithstanding the elements of ideology during the Spanish Civil War, it was the fact that they were the 'have nots'[34] of Europe in which they both wanted to rigorously challenge the legacy of the Versailles system and their share of territory. In essence, they were both revisionist powers that drew together to maximise their own interests and enhance their status within Europe and the world.

The year 1938 was a crucial year for the Rome-Berlin Axis as Hitler completed his longstanding ambition of achieving the Anschluss – something that the Italians had vehemently opposed in the past. Furthermore, the signing of the Anglo-Italian agreement in April 1938 confused relations between Germany and Italy and Mussolini's role as the arbiter at Munich was evidence that the Rome-Berlin Axis was by no means assured at this stage. During this period, it was not the common ideology that drew the two countries together at this point but the international circumstances, which proved more favourable for the Germans in satisfying their hostile foreign policy.

The independence of Austria was the most antagonist issue to divide Germany and Italy. Italy was so keen to 'save' Austria because of the danger posed to the South Tyrol, in that if Germany occupied Austria, Italy would have no buffer zone against an encroaching Nazi force. The buffer zone was of key symbolic significance to the Italians as it was the key victory attained from the end of the 'Great War', thus to lose this would mark Italy's history. However, the desire to maintain this buffer zone is also demonstrative of the tense relationship in which Rome and Berlin shared, in that the former did not wish to share a border with the latter. However as international circumstances dictated, along with Hitler driving a hard bargain, it became increasingly difficult for Mussolini to deny Hitler Austria. As early as January- March 1936 Mussolini was prepared to use Austria as a bargaining tool, in which he proposed to the German ambassador that Germany could make Austria a 'satellite' in return for Germany's acquiescence with regard to Ethiopia.[35]

Although Hitler sought the political union of Germany and Austria to happen as early as possible, there is no evidence to suggest that 1938 was the earmarked year for it to occur, 'if the Fuhrer is still living, then it will be his irrevocable decision to solve the German space problem no later than 1943-45' but there will be earlier opportunities'.[36] Hitler was aware that Italy could be the crucial obstacle in achieving the Anschluss, and thus wanted to take advantage of the fact that Italy had engaged herself heavily within the Spanish Civil War. Thus hoped that France too would be drawn into the Spanish Civil war, and hence in a war with Italy which would leave Hitler 'free' to move.[37] However, by this time Ciano had offered a formal confirmation that Italy would keep out of Central Europe.[38] Furthermore, Mussolini decided to give up his role as the protector of the post-war settlement in Austria and thus to a great degree endorsed closer relations between the two German states.[39] Therefore to a large degree, Italy had accepted the fate of Austria and it seemed she could and would do very little to prevent the political union to the extent that Robson argues that Mussolini even had admiration for German dynamism.[40] Hitler formally decided on the 13<sup>th</sup> March 1938 that Austria would become an integral part of the Third Reich. The Fuhrer solicited the approval of the Duce, to whom, in return for his acquiescence, he would be forever grateful,[41] as Hitler professed; 'Tell Mussolini, I will never forget this'[42]. Although Rome-Berlin relations improved, it was Hitler-Mussolini relations that witnessed the greatest improvement as a result of the Anschluss. Hitler deeply respected Mussolini for not moving over the Anschluss issue and this gratitude for the Duce would stay with Hitler predominately throughout the war years.[43]

The Anschluss had a significant effect on Rome-Berlin relations too as it strengthened Germany's position as the more powerful senior partner and as a consequence the Italian dictatorship continued to move gradually into the control orbit of its German counterpart.[44] Hitler had managed to accomplish a feat that prior to 1936 would have been unattainable. It became apparent that Nazi Germany the once 'beneficiary' of fascism from its exporter 'Italy' was now leading the way for the future of fascism.[45] The issue of the Anschluss was not necessarily one of common enemies, but it illustrated how the relationship was beginning to change. In 1936 there were on an equal platform, however by 1938 Germany began to politically ascend over Italy further accentuating how little they had in common.

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However, Italy's signing of the Anglo-Italian agreement in April 1938 illustrated that Italy was not going to be regarded as Hitler's puppet. Although the extent to which this agreement was futile from its beginnings appears to be likely. Britain attempted to drive a wedge between the axis forces;[46] however a 'wedge' was the best that could be achieved. Mussolini had publicly declared his allegiance to Germany too vehemently in the past to consider a genuine rapprochement with the West. Furthermore from the British perspective, Italy had become too much a radical power, thus diplomatic ties concluded.

However, Mussolini saw himself as somewhat of an arbiter during the Munich conference, and the key line of communication between the Allied and Axis forces and heightened Italy's influence. The conference only proceeded because the British appealed for him to use his influence with the Germans, and hence he seemed to hold the scales between peace and war.[47] Yet, the degree to which this role was more of a concoction of Mussolini's ego is debatable. Furthermore, the extent in which he as was genuine arbiter can be questioned as he gave Hitler advance warning that he would support the German claim.[48] This can be possibly accounted partly to his allegiance to Hitler, but also his inherent belief that the Czechs were racially inferior, and comparable to the status of Slavs.[49] Mussolini received adulation from home and abroad for acting the peacemaker in Europe [50] as he professed to 'have saved Europe'.[51] He was depicted as the more benevolent dictator than Hitler,[52] and the success of Munich gave Italy a preponderant role in world politics for the first time[53] – something that Mussolini thoroughly enjoyed.

However, Mussolini's success was somewhat of a hollow triumph as the Munich agreement would be void a year later, when Hitler annexed the entirety of Czechoslovakia in 1939. Mussolini may have been diplomatically victorious on the day but he was really a victim of a German initiative.[54] This theatrical gesture meant that Italian interests were sacrificed for Germany as Hitler was still adamant upon war. The difficulties in the partnership became apparent when Hitler still did not trust Italy with key military strategies. This was particularly potent with Germany's full occupation of Czechoslovakia. Mussolini was humiliated at the level of distrust within the Axis partnership in which he raged, 'Italians will laugh at me'.[55] Mussolini had failed to capitalise on his success at Munich with the West. He was given a chance to break the shared bond of common enemies with Germany at Munich by realigning with Britain and France, however he decided to formally align himself with Hitler to an even greater extent, to a degree in which Italy unknowingly and rather blindly served the interests of Germany rather than itself. Thus in 1938 Italy and Germany still shared common enemies, and it also seemed they had the public cementing of this uneasy alliance in common and the shared hope that this troubled coalition would reap great rewards for themselves.

The Rome-Berlin Axis was further formalised in April 1939 with the creation of another pact, in which Mussolini, the great phrasemaker, coined the Pact of Steel, after discarding the Pact of Blood. Although the establishment of this agreement should insinuate a greater degree of intimacy between the two nations, the pact was fundamentally flawed and would result in Italy's non-belligerency when war broke out in September 1939. Burgwyn describes the pact as 'one of the most irresponsible offensive alliances in the annals of modern European diplomacy and fascist diplomacy at its sloppiest'.[56] Burgwyn's vehement opposition to the pact is somewhat justified as the pact embedded contradictory objectives; whilst Mussolini desired the pact to prevent Nazi independent course, Hitler needed the agreement to be assured of Mussolini's acquiescence during her aggressive foreign policy ventures.[57]

Furthermore, Hitler's secretness over Prague further reinforced the notion that the pact was built upon unstable foundations. Mussolini only decided to formalise the pact two months later after Germany's occupation of Czechoslovakia because Mussolini believed that Hitler was establishing itself as the hegemonic power within Europe, thus viewed an alliance with Germany more favourably than that of the western powers so as to maximise Italian interests as a world power. Furthermore, Italy's dependence on coal, oil, food, the threat from Britain and France, an apathetic Italian opinion alongside a desperate and underprepared army meant that Mussolini was pushed towards formalising the alliance with Germany with the Pact of Steel in a rather solemn state.[58] Therefore, one could question Philip Morgan's judgement in that as a consequence of the Pact of Steel 'Italy was being dragged along by its stronger ally'.[59] Although, it is undisputable that Germany was the stronger ally, as has been evidenced above, international circumstances dictated that Mussolini was politically inclined to formalise the pact in an attempt to satisfy Italian interests.

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Therefore, the apparent conflicting aims along with an unsteady basis insinuates how the two allies failed to understand each other, and illustrated how little they had in common. It appeared that the only element they shared were their expansionist aims and concern for their own security. This was further evidenced when both Hitler and Mussolini were not prepared to share their military secrets and plans with one another. This lack of communication meant there were fundamental flaws in the alliance that were difficult to correct and would prove to be a continuing antagonistic issue. As soon as the ink was dry on the paper, Hitler told a conference of his top military leaders that the regimes' military objectives were to be kept secret from Germany's closest allies; Italy and Japan.[60]

Despite the fact that Italy signed the Pact of Steel which stipulated that; full military support for one another, Italy was simply not in a position to offer military help in 1939 and resulted in Mussolini rather humiliatingly adopting a stance of non-belligerency when war broke out September 1939. Italy was exhausted after the Abyssinian conquest in 1935-36, and more recently the Spanish Civil War drained Italian resources. Yet, not only did Italy lack resources it also lacked a strong fighting force as the Italian army was neither highly equipped nor a trained elite striking force.[61] Furthermore, intrinsically linked to Italy's deficient military resources was Italy's stagnated economy. Mussolini argued that Italians would not be ready for a full scale European war until the end of 1942 at the earliest.[62] Comparatively, Hitler had built a well trained army equipped for war and did not want his efforts to be let down by a deficient Italian force. Hitler manipulated the concept of their common ideology and common destiny as a means to stimulate Mussolini into war with him; 'destiny will continue to bind us together. If National Socialism is destroyed by the Western democracies, fascist Italy will also face a hard future'.[63] Germany's vision for war continued to loom despite the potential absence of its strongest ally, as Hitler professed, 'Poland must be invaded, defeated, annihilated and annexed.[64] Thus, the ramifications of the Pact of Steel had far reaching consequences and led to an uncertainty in relations.

This uncertainty was further exacerbated by the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact of August 1939 between the Soviets and the Nazis, and further undermined the 1937 Anti-Comintern pact with Italy. Their relations were based on political pragmatism and negated back to *Realpolitik* in which they used each other to secure their own security and interests. Italy felt particularly betrayed by the accession of the Nazi-Soviet Pact; 'they have tricked us and lied to us'.[65] The way in which Hitler was prepared to draw up a pact with the Soviets illustrated how he was prepared to undermine the sincerity of the Rome-Berlin Axis to maximise German interests. Similarly, Italy only signed the Pact of Steel on the basis that Germany was more useful as an ally than an enemy to fulfil Mussolini's aim of Italian living space in the Mediterranean.

Italy's non-belligerency served Mussolini a hard but necessary realisation of the true state of Italy's military capacity. However the success of Hitler's army in Poland, Scandinavia, France and the Low Countries through Blitzkrieg tactics [66] spurred Italy to get involved in the war in hope of short successive victories. In addition, Mussolini refused to be reduced to the status of Switzerland,[67] which transpired weak connotations. Thus, Hitler's and Mussolini's determination for war was a common element that they shared; however their capacity and ability to conduct war diverged a great deal. Italy's introduction to the war, or as Shirer pejoratively phrased, Italy's 'slithering into the war',[68] alludes to the fact Italy intervened in the war in the hope of sharing, if not stealing, Germany's success. However, Mussolini appeared to take Italy into the war on his own judgement as Ciano noted, 'unfortunately I can do nothing to hold the Duce back.[69] Hitler's feelings towards Italy's introduction into the war is slightly ambiguous as Shirer argues that Hitler was most profoundly moved [70] by Italy's entry and claimed, 'the mere fact of you entering the war is an element calculated to deal the front of our enemies a staggering blow'.[71] However, it would appear that this may have only been the projected view and privately Hitler was disdainful of Mussolini's move, interpreting it as a blatant bid to jump onto Germany's bandwagon.[72] However, as has been made apparent Italy's military capacity was fundamentally weak, thus her introduction into the war on 10<sup>th</sup> June 1940 was calculated on political not military lines,[73] yet despite the lack of military muscle Mussolini continued to profess that the Italians sought 'to break the territorial and military chains that suffocate us'.[74] However, Mussolini's late arrival into the war meant he had been relegated to the status of a second-rank dictator,[75] something that Mussolini naturally vehemently opposed, yet the means at his disposal to change this was limited.

Although Mussolini wanted to profit from the success of the German army and attain cheap victories, he was still insistent on launching a parallel and autonomous war to that of the Wehrmacht. Mussolini was keen to demonstrate

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to the international community that the Italian army was a strong and efficient fighting force. However, as events would unfold this would prove to be far from the truth with regard to Italian ventures in Greece and North Africa. By joining the war later, Italy had formally established herself as the junior and inferior partner of the Rome-Berlin Axis. Thus, it is evident that Italy joined the war to exploit and profit from German success, and thus maximise Italian interests. However, the extent to which the Italians gained from the French armistice is debatable. [76] Although counterfactual, it could be argued that if Germany had not experienced such a great level of success then Italy could have maintained her original proposal of joining in 1943, suggesting that Italy's introduction into the war was based on very little other than self-interest. It is difficult to argue that their common ideology and their supposed common destiny played any significant role in Italy's joining of World War II, and it appeared Hitler and Mussolini was fully aware of this.

Mussolini's attempted conquests of Greece and North Africa reaped few political rewards Italian interests and actually served to reinforce the impression that the Italian army was ill-equipped and ill-trained. It illustrated that the Nazis and Fascists were fighting separate wars for their own purpose, and the difference in the state of their armies alongside poor communication plagued the war time alliance with problems. Mussolini decided to launch an invasion of Greece after he learned of the German army's presence in Rumania;

'Hitler always faces me with a *fait accompli*. This time I am going to pay him back in his own coin. He will find out from the newspapers that I have occupied Greece. In this way the equilibrium will be re-established'.[77]

This entry in Ciano's diary explicitly documents the political antagonism between the two military dictators in which it demonstrates the Axis force comprising of two competing nations rather than two co-ordinating allies. Thus it would appear the only element they shared was the, other than common enemies, to serve their own interests independently of each other to retain personal prestige.

The invasion of Greece transpired as a humiliating defeat for the Italians, as they were forced to retreat into Albania.[78] The Italians grossly underestimated their opponent believing that the Greek had an army of 30 000, when the real figure stood at ten times this amount,[79] combined with a gross overestimation of Italian strength capacity. Mussolini's determination for a parallel war formed a thick mirage around his better judgment which as a result became stifled, to the extent that his eagerness for war outshone. One of Hitler's flaws is commonly depicted as his weakness of losing sight of reality, however in the early stages of the war he delegated efficiently and had successfully built a sound and loyal army, and the momentous victories in France and surrounding areas provide evidence of this. However, Mussolini defied the advice from his military advisors and most significantly, Ciano, which resulted in the humiliating step of begging the Germans to come and rescue him.[80] He wanted to prevent German domination in the Balkans;[81] however his army's inefficiency actually perpetuated this with greater haste. The failed Italian invasion of Greece not only hurt Italian prestige, but German military strategy. Hitler was furious at the stupidity of such military action in the autumn rains,[82] to the extent that he noted the Italians as 'ungrateful and unreliable friends',[83] however the subsequent meeting between the two dictators proceeded with little animosity. The Greek assault compromised the German position in the Balkans but possibly more importantly delayed the commencing of Operation Barbarossa (the invasion of Russia). This interruption can be outlined as one of the most important reasons contributing to the German defeat in Russia, and subsequently accountable to the 'turning of the tide' in the war. Thus, Greece was not only a huge self-inflicting wound on Italy but also greatly harmed the Axis force. Greece was the first defeat encountered for the Axis powers and thus obliterated the image of infallibility which the Germans had tactically carved, and as a result allowed the allies to exploit this defeat. Therefore, from this Axis defeat it is apparent how different the two allies had become and the sense of frustration with each other is easily felt.

Another military operation that the Italians undertook was in North Africa, and similar to Greece it highlighted the fundamental flaws of the fascist regime and the inadequacy of its army. Italy's futile efforts in North Africa further reiterated how little Germany and Italy had in common. Whilst the Wehrmacht superseded its own expectations with successful campaigns in France, Scandinavia and the Low countries, Italy had little to offer other than a repetitive and tiresome political voice. The fight in the North Africa was one of the most important strategic objectives for the Wehrmacht significant because it was the natural *lebensraum* for Italy, it was an integral part of the British Empire and Mediterranean held strategic importance, hence it was the best way of inflicting damage on to the British.[84]

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Thus, it appeared that victory within Africa was a pre-requisite for winning the entire war. Naturally, Mussolini demonstrated his fighting spirit before the battle commenced and boldly proclaimed to Hitler in July he would take Egypt by the end of the month.[85]

However, the campaign did not even commence until September 1940 and early gains in Egypt were negated after the British launched their successful counter offensive in the following December 1940. The futility of the Italian army was once again forced to be met with the might of the German army, as similar to Greece Hitler had to 'save' Mussolini and save the Axis war effort by sending one of his best generals, Erwin Rommel, to relieve the situation. The failure of the North African campaign in 1940 extinguished Italy's prestige, as Weinberg notes, 'Mussolini's dreams of great power status had turned into a mirage by the light of shell fire at the front'.[86] Thus, the differences in the fascist and Nazi became even more transparent by the end of 1940, whilst Germany had crafted a well-oiled military and economic machine;[87] the Italians could barely muster one well trained division. Italy's incompetence proved she could not act independently of her senior partner, as is evidenced by the Germans being forced to intervene in Greece in April 1941 on behalf of the Italians and subsequently in North Africa in 1941. Thus, one can go as far to suggest that the Italian war effort proved to be an impediment on the German war effort; compromising the Wehrmacht's position in the Balkans, North Africa and most significantly, Russia. Therefore it can be argued that Germany ended up paying for the early alliance, as Italian war aims and Italian futility interfered with Germany's success in war. One has to wonder whether Hitler regretted formalising the Rome-Berlin Axis, as shaky common interests and common enemies were clearly not conducive in creating a joint elite fighting force.

In conclusion, the Rome-Berlin Axis found it difficult to function on the unstable foundations of common enemies and common aggressive aims. On paper, one would think that Nazi Germany and Italian fascism should complement each other; however this theory failed to transpire into reality. After thorough research of this topic one gets a sense of that the Rome-Berlin Axis was an alliance based on mistrust, animosity and suspicion of each other's motives. Each power flirted with the enemy as a means to maximise their own interests, and this was seen most potently with the German signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact and equally with the Italian signing of the Anglo-Italian agreement. Mussolini and Hitler, although held same leadership principles and begrudgingly respected each other's achievements, never gauged a true friendship.[88]

As the alliance progressed, the two powers diverged even further with regard as to what they had in common. Prior to our time period, Hitler was arguably the inferior dictator, (predominately because he had been in power for less time) and so idolised Mussolini's leadership style, yet as the Rome-Berlin Axis was established they became equal partners. The years 1936-1938 was a crucial period for both Germany and Italy to announce themselves as powerful and revisionist nations to the rest of the international community, and thus depended on each other for support. This was the height of Italy's influence over the Rome-Berlin Axis as she could command the role of the pendulum between the Axis and Allied forces, as evidenced at the Munich Agreement. However, as the alliance evolved Italy assumed the role of the inferior partner to a more authoritative Germany, and this was further exacerbated by the Italian army's futility during 1940 comparative to Germany's military success. Italy had too publicly aligned herself with Germany to negate on the coalition and more importantly she felt could gain more with Germany than the supposedly weaker allies, thus reinforcing the notion of *Realpolitik*. Therefore by 1939 to 1940, Germany and Italy to an ever larger extent had little in common but common enemies.

The sentiment of ideology failed to cement the relationship and held very little weight in terms of furthering the alliance. It was their common enemies and common foreign policy aims (i.e. similar determination of war) which drew Italy and Germany as partners. However ideology could have played some role in the initial establishment of relations, yet it is important not to overstate its importance. On the face of their relationship they had seemingly common traits, objectives and enemies but as time and certain events transpired, the veil was lifted and both Italy and Germany were stuck in an alliance that benefited nobody. Germany was stuck in a war with an inferior partner and as a result generated more problems for itself, such as the delaying of Operation Barbarossa and Italy was stuck in a war that it was not ready for, and consequently ruined its opportunity of launching an autonomous war to that of Germany. This divergence in relations since the advent of war can be nicely summarised in an extract taken from Ciano's diary; 'it is Hitler that will always have the last word. This naturally disturbs and saddens Mussolini'.[89] Thus common enemies and a shared determination of glory was the fragile thread holding this unsteady alliance together.



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[2]The differences being predominately that of racial policy, however Mussolini modified his racial policy to conform with that of Hitler's aggressive racial policy – this issue will be discussed in further detail later in the essay.

[3]Philip Bell, *Origins of the Second World War*, (Harlow : Longman, 2007) p74

[4] The definition of *Realpolitik* is defined in the Oxford Dictionary as: 'a system of politics or principles based on practical rather than moral or ideological considerations' – <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/realpolitik?view=uk> [last accessed 24<sup>th</sup> April 2011]

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[6] AJP Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War*, (Penguin, London, 1964) pp144-5

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[20] Gerhard Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany: Starting World War II 1937-1939*, (Atlantic Highlands, NJ : Humanities Press, 1994) p281

[21] Wiskemann, *The Rome-Berlin Axis*, p57 – also Goering was beginning to implement the Four Year Plan, which was a rigorous and ambitious attempt to get Germany ready for war (achieve autarky) within four years.

[22] Ibid; p56

[23] Funke, 171-2, 176; Aloisi, *Journal*, 385 (13 May 1936); *Rassengna Italiana*, July 1936, 489; Schuschnigg, *Austrian Requiem*, 97

[24] Crozier, *The causes of the Second World War*, p121 – also see Macgregor Knox, *Italian Allies: royal armed forces, fascist regime, and the war of 1940-1943*, (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2009) – ‘When Spain is over, I’ll think of something else; the character of the Italians must be recreated through battle’ p12

[25] Denis Mack Smith, *Mussolini*, p201

[26] Crozier, *The Causes of the Second World War*, p123

[27] Wiskemann, *The Rome-Berlin Axis*, p57

[28] Christian Leitz, *Nazi-Foreign Policy 1933-1941 : the Road to Global War*, (London : Routledge, 2004) p11

[29] Knox, *Hitler's Italian Allies*, p13

[30] Ciano, *Tagebuch*, 2 November 1937, p 37 – as cited in Weinberg, 1937-39

[31] Denis Mack Smith, *Mussolini*, p215

[32] Kallis, *Fascist Ideology*, p147

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[43] This was most notable when Germany consistently had to 'rescue' the Italians during the war. This occurred in Greece and North Africa.

[44] Leitz, *Nazi Foreign Policy 1933-1940*, p26 – [This was evidenced when Mussolini decided to introduce racial laws within Italy 1938, similar to Hitler's Nuremberg Laws of 1935, and in deference to Germany attacked Jews as well as black people] Macgregor Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed, 1939-1941 : Politics and Strategy in Fascist Italy's Last War*, (Cambridge ; New York : Cambridge University Press, 1982,) p99 see for further analysis.

[45] Kallis, *Facist ideology*, p148

[46] Overy, *The Road to War*, p170

[47] Denis Mack Smith, *Mussolini's Roman Empire*, p131

[48] DGF, D/2/357, 533; Nuremberg, 2/12-13; Ciano, 1937-1938, 132, 177, 180.

[49] Denis Mack Smith, *Mussolini*, p223

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[53] OO 29/192; Dinale, *Quarant'anni di colloqui con lui*, 161; Dollman, *Roma nazista*, 381; Gravelli, *Mussolini*, 208; Anfuso, *Roma Berlino, Salò*, 100-1

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[64] Burgwyn, *Italian Foreign Policy*, p201

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[66] Hans Adolf Jacobsen, 'The structure of Nazi Foreign Policy 1933-1945' ed Christian Leitz in *The Third Reich: the Essential Readings*, (Oxford : Blackwell Publishers, 1999) p83

[67] Taken from Mussolini's secret report to the king quoted in B. Vigezzi, *Politica Estera e Opinione Publica in Italian Dall' Unita ai Giorni Nostri*, (Milan, Jaca, 1991) p107

[68] William Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany*, (London : Arrow, 1998) p739

[69] Ciano, *Diary 1937-1943*, p249

[70] Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, p739

[71] Ibid; p739

[72] Leitz, *Nazi Foreign Policy 1933-1940*, p30

[73] Bell, *Origins of the Second World War*, p328

[74] OO 29:404-05 – also a comprehensive summary of Italy's non-belligerency found in Knox, *Mussolini* chapters 2 and 3

[75] Ian Kershaw, *Fateful Choice : Ten Decisions that Changed the World, 1940-1941*, (London : Penguin, 2008) p129

[76] Shirer argues that Hitler refused a great deal of Italian demands, (Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*,) whilst Denis Mack Smith argues that Mussolini rejected some territory of the French (Denis Mack Smith, *Mussolini's Roman Empire*)

[77] Ciano, *Diary 1937-1943*, p300

[78] The Italians invaded Albania arguably unnecessarily in April 1939. The invasion was met with minimal resistance, primarily because Albania was already heavily influenced by Italy. Mussolini inflated the success of the invasion as concrete evidence of Italy's military capacity, however the invasion drew comparisons to 'raping your own wife' – M. Donosti, *Mussolini e l'Europa. La Politica Estera Fascista*, (Rome: Leonardo, 1945) p166

[79] Denis Mack Smith, *Mussolini's Roman Empire*, p232

[80] Ibid; p233

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[85] Denis Mack Smith, *Mussolini*, p295

[86] Gerhard Weinberg, *A World at Arms : a Global History of World War II* , (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1994), p212

[87] This was the projected view; there were some issues with amount of resources and often inflated figures.

[88] At least nothing that can be compared to the Anglo-American 'special relationship'. See CJ Bartlett, "*The special relationship*" : *A Political History of Anglo-American Relations Since 1945* , (London : Longman, 1992), p22 Churchill first coined the phrase 'fraternal association' between the two English speaking countries. However Churchill was more keen on its use than the Americans who sometimes distanced themselves from the phrase.

[89] Ciano, *Diary 1937-1943*, p266

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