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The Italian Army in the Second World War: A Historiographical Analysis

Simon Gonsalves
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Abstract

Classical English language analysis of Italy's role in the Second World War has done poorly in its attempt to accurately the Italian military's contribution to the Axis cause. Basing their analysis on flawed sources, historians in the intermediate post war era got much incorrect. Many of the staples of the World War Two genre still base much of their writing on these writers. This paper concludes by exploring the two most important modern writers who specialize in this area of military history.

Keywords: Italy, World War Two, Historiography, Twentieth century history

Winston Churchill, British Prime Minister, legendary wartime leader, and admired historian was well known by his fellow politicians in the House of Commons for his clever wit and snappy retorts. During a prewar diplomatic conference, with the looming storm clouds of war on the horizon, Churchill sat across from Germany's Minister for Foreign Affairs - Joachim von Ribbentrop. Brimming with confidence, Ribbentrop proclaimed that in the event of war with Britain, the Italians would be a steadfast German ally. Churchill responded with one of his characteristic verbal ripostes; "That's only fair – we had them last time."¹

Churchill was of course referring to Italy's notoriously poor military performance in the First World War. Almost a century has passed since Churchill made his famous remark, and to this day opinion has hardly shifted on the subject. A comical example of the enduring popularity of this perception is the first result of an online image search of the Italian Navy – a pizza floating lamely in the ocean. Throughout the vast academic literature concerning the Second World War, Italy's support for the Axis cause has long been either ignored, misinterpreted, or simply dismissed as irrelevant. The Simon and Schuster Encyclopedia of World War II goes as far as to title the notable 1940 conflict between Greece and Italy under "Balkans, German Invasion of."²

Italy's role in the Second World War has often been reduced to mere footnotes, though Italy's armed forces participated in some of the most heavily contested theatres of the war, such as the North and East Africa, the U.S.S.R., Greece, the Balkans, and France. Italy's early surrender and factional re-alignment during the war stands in stark contrast to Nazi Germany's unforgiving struggle to the last magazine - climaxing at the grim last stand at Berlin, and Imperial Japan's

¹ Crawford, *Five Minutes in Berlin*. (Edinburgh: Murry McLellen, 2015.)
Digital Edition: <https://books.google.ca/books?id=L8waCwAAQBAJ&pg>.

² James Sadkovich, Anglo-American Bias and the Italo-Greek War of 1940-1941. *The Journal of Military History*, Vol. 58, No. 4 (1994), 620.

fanatical resistance across the Pacific. Historians of the Second World War have, more often than not, allowed the plentiful, deeply negative tropes regarding Italy's actions during the World War Two to continually permeate their works.

The objective of this essay is to examine the origin as well as the substance of these common historical narratives concerning the *guerra fascista* (the period between 1939 and 1943) which have circulated in academia and popular culture since the country's ignoble exit from the Second World War. Furthermore, it aims to document the fascinating historiographic debate in English language literature regarding the source of Fascist Italy's military failures from 1940 to 1943. Since the army was the most important service, as it possessed the most financial and political power, it will be the centre of analysis.

Historical Context

During the scramble for Africa, Italy was the only European state to have its colonial ambitions in Africa dashed on the field of battle by a non-European state. Driven out of Ethiopia in 1895, the country's participation in the First World War was equally catastrophic.³ Stalemated by the Austro-Hungarian army for years, the furthest Italian advance was only ten miles into Austrian territory.⁴ The Italian Army was routed by the German offensive at Caporetto in 1917, where the considerably outnumbered Central Powers took approximately 300,000 prisoners.⁵ In the interwar period, Italy's Imperial ambitions led to the invasion of a series of nations far weaker and significantly less developed than themselves. While these proved ultimately successful for Italy, they did little to repair the reputation of Italy's armed forces.

³ Vandervort, Bruce. *Wars of imperial conquest in Africa, 1830-1914*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 43.

⁴ John, Gooch. *The Italian Army and the First World War* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014), 3.

⁵ Gooch, *The Italian Army and the First World War*, 4.

It was Italy's participation in the Second World War that shaped contemporary perceptions of the Italian military the most. The results of Italian foreign policy between the years of 1940 and 1943 are almost uniformly perceived as dismal. Declaring war on the Allied powers in the summer of 1940, the Italian Fascist Benito Mussolini unleashed his country's military with the ambition to become a Roman Empire of the 20th century. The Italian strongman aimed to conquer the Mediterranean and "make Italy a world power with an empire from Gibraltar to the Persian Gulf."⁶ The successful prosecution of the war was vital to the regime's continued existence.

After the German Reich's invasion of Poland, Mussolini was pressured to stay out of the war. However, in the summer of 1940, the situation changed. With French collapse, British vulnerability, and Germany triumphant, a window of opportunity for Mussolini appeared to have opened. However, military stockpiles were still largely depleted because of Italy's involvement in the Spanish Civil War.⁷ Italy decided to enter a war that, by its own admission, it was not prepared to fight until at least 1943.⁸ Within six months, Mussolini's grand vision had burned to ashes around him. His most significant conquest turned out to be a "dusty and useless corner of Africa – British Somaliland."⁹ By the beginning of 1941, the Italian military "faced defeat in the Balkans at the hands of Greece, the loss of the entirety of Italian territory in Africa to the British, as well as total defeat at sea."¹⁰ The German dictator Adolf Hitler snidely commented that the unfolding catastrophe "has had the healthy effect of once more compressing

⁶ Macgregor Knox, *Common Destiny: Dictatorship, Foreign Policy, and War in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 144.

⁷ Brian Sullivan, "Fascist Italy's Military Involvement in the Spanish Civil War," *The Journal of Military History*, Vol. 59, No. 4 (1995), 711.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2944499>.

⁸ Pietro Badoglio, *Italy in the Second World War*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), 1.

⁹ Macgregor Knox. *Hitler's Italian Allies*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), i.

¹⁰ Knox. *Hitler's Italian Allies*. 80.

Italian claims to within the natural boundaries of Italian competency.”¹¹

During the next two years, Italy hardly fared any better, driving the Italians from Africa, Anglo-American forces landed on the beaches of Sicily in 1943. Once news of the Allied landings reached Rome, the “regime crumbled without any real resistance.”¹² Many German officers still smoldered from Italy’s ‘defection’ from the Central Powers to the Allied *Entente* in 1915.¹³ When the new Italian government changed allegiances to the Allied cause, vengeful German divisions rushed to occupy the country. This important change of loyalty had apparently not reached all the troops on the ground. When German units arrived to disarm the country’s military, it came as a shock for much of the army and organized resistance collapsed and never re-organized.¹⁴ In fact, Wehrmacht forces managed to hold much of the northern areas of the country until the very last days of the war.

The Myths of the Immediate Post War Period

There is no doubt amongst historians, strategists, and political scientists that Fascist Italy lost the Second World War, despite abandoning, and subsequently declaring war on Germany in 1943. However, while there is clear consensus over the outcomes of the various battles and campaigns, the explanations for why the war went the way it did for Italy have been argued relentlessly through the years. Historical narratives constructed shortly after the war became incredibly influential. One of the most prevalent historiographical tropes was that the policies implemented by the Fascist government were principally responsible for Italy’s military downfall. In the years following the war, central figures in the Italian military establishment sought to shape the narrative surrounding the calamitous war years. In

¹¹ Know, *Hitler’s Italian Allies*. 18.

¹² Know, *Hitler’s Italian Allies*. 20.

¹³ Correlli Barnett, *World War Two Encyclopedia*. (Westport: H.S. Stuttman Publishers, 1978), 262.

¹⁴ Knox, *Hitler’s Italian Allies*, 21.

an attempt to defend their legacies, honour, and self-interest, they sought to place the lion's share of the blame on a man few would publicly defend: Mussolini. Therefore, Mussolini and his fascist principles provided a practical scapegoat for Italians looking towards future employment within Allied dominated Italy. This is why "it is relatively easy to find Italian memoirs that are sharply critical of opposing figures."¹⁵ Disassociating themselves from the regime's most divisive actions, the country's surviving political figures deflected charges of Italian incompetence and criminality during the war's prosecution towards a figure and ideology already demonized by the Allied powers. Personal responsibility for failure among the surviving military elite was thus mitigated, and the potentialities of criminal trials were also avoided.

The first histories of the war were the personal accounts of the men who fought in the war. While unquestionably an important part of historical study, war memoirs are typically imbued with a normative agenda and should be viewed with caution and a critical eye. Taking an individual's recounting of events as definitive has significant historiographical dangers. This tendency becomes noticeable in Pietro Badoglio's *Italy in the Second World War*. Translated into English in the early 1950's, Badoglio describes his time as Italy's Chief of Staff during the first year of the war. It also includes his subsequent experiences, following his dismissal after the military calamities of 1940, as the figurehead of the nominal Italian government in exile. Badoglio's 1948 book was a character assassination of the Fascist leader. Mussolini was described as a military amateur who constantly meddled in the affairs of professional military men. In an effort to project his own personal failings onto Mussolini, Badoglio branded his former ruler as a narcissistic, incompetent, warmongering tyrant. Mussolini was labelled as a man possessing "an overwhelming belief in his own genius... who believed himself to be immeasurably superior to the rest of mankind."¹⁶ According to the former general, Mussolini bore sole responsibility for Italy's entry into the war. The Duce, and his enabling

¹⁵ Sadkovich, *Anglo-American Bias and the Italo-Greek War of 1940-1941*, 635.

¹⁶ Badoglio, *Italy in the Second World War*, 3.

sycophants, were responsible for Italy's lack of preparation and the abysmal prosecution of the conflict. As the British government saw Badoglio as a strident anti-communist and detached enough from the Fascist regime, he was never tried for the war crimes committed in Africa under his watch.¹⁷

While Badoglio was not the only Italian to popularize this style of narrative, his biased work was one of the few Italian accounts translated into English. This was a consequence of the Cold War, a conflict that significantly impacted the way Western academics perceived Italy's war effort. As the fault line between east and west ran through a divided Germany, Central Europe would certainly become a battleground if the Soviet Union and the Western powers ever went to war. As a ground war between NATO and the Warsaw Pact appeared ever more likely, Anglo-American military planners turned to the only people with real combat experience fighting the Russians; the veterans of the German military. The Wehrmacht spent much of the war locked in a virtual death grip with the Soviet Red Army. Coming close to victory over the Soviet Union on multiple occasions in 1941 and 1942, many architects of future wars were just as anxious for former German soldiers to pass on the lessons learned through four and a half years of war of apocalyptic combat.¹⁸

Due to America's desperate need of actionable intelligence on the Soviet Bloc, war accounts from the German perspective were quickly translated into English. The Italian outlook, demolished as a significant power on the continent and discredited by their military fiasco, was of little interest to the Americans or the British Commonwealth. German military commanders were given a platform to forge their own narrative of the war. Due to Cold War tensions, Russian sources were inaccessible. Lacking the other perspective, Anglo-American historiography during the post-war era placed far too much trust in the

¹⁷ Effie Pedaliu. "Britain and the 'Hand-over' of Italian War Criminals to Yugoslavia, 1945-48". *Journal of Contemporary History*. Vol 9 No 4 (2004), 506.

¹⁸ Sadkovich, "Understanding Defeat: Reappraising Italy's Role in World War II," 44.

authority of German primary sources, often echoing their accounts practically verbatim.¹⁹

Numerous German generals used this opportunity to shift much of the responsibility for the German military's eventual downfall onto the Italian armed forces, a military already popularly discredited. The dominant post-war revisionist narrative to romanticise the German war effort was largely powered by famous Wehrmacht generals such as Erich von Manstein, Friedrich von Mellinthin, and Heinz Guderian. Just as these figures were influential in creating the impressions that prejudiced the American view of the Eastern Front, the German perspective was equally important in the way Italy was viewed in historical accounts published after the war. German writers were instrumental in popularizing the second major Italian historical narrative; that the moral inadequacies and "simple cowardice" of the Italian soldier lost Italy the war. While not always the case, the argument that Italian "hearts were just not in the war" frequently came sheathed in the language of race.²⁰

It should come as little surprise that German writers, conditioned to the overtly racist attitudes of the early twentieth century, would make great use of racial theory to explain Italian defeats during the war. Even by the standards of the era, the National Socialist regime was infamously fond of associating cause and effect with ethnic ancestry. There is no question that the "Germans looked down on their ally as racially inferior, and that this view was shared by the major German figures.²¹ Siegfried Westphal, Chief of Staff of the German/Italian Panzer Army in North Africa, considered that the lack of aggressive spirit among Italians, officers and soldiers alike, was derived from their 'southern tendencies,' which "made them too emotional and unsteady

¹⁹ Sadkovich, "Understanding Defeat: Reappraising Italy's Role in World War II," 42.

²⁰ Ian Stanley Ord Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East, Vol. 1, The Early Successes against Italy (to May 1941)* (1954), 336 ; James Sadkovich, "Of Myths and Men: Rommel and the Italians in North Africa, 1940-1942". *The International History Review*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (1991), 312.

²¹ Sadkovich, "Of Myths and Men: Rommel and the Italians in North Africa", 311.

to be good soldiers.”²² Kesselring, the overall German commander in the Mediterranean theatre, stated that the average Italian was not qualified to even carry a weapon, and was “conceited, saddled with a vivid imagination which made it difficult for him to tell reality from fantasy, and easily contented with coffee, cigarettes, and women.”²³

German military commanders propagated these myths and stereotypes in an attempt to salvage their own reputations. According to German sources, the Italians defending the Don River positions supporting the German advance into Stalingrad disintegrated because of deficiencies in Italian courage. Wehrmacht officers later argued that the unwillingness of the Italian 8th army to hold its ground allowed the German 6th army to be encircled within the city and annihilated. Italian mistakes in North Africa, supposedly caused by faint-hearted and hesitant command decisions, dragged down critical German units that could have been used decisively elsewhere.²⁴ In short, German historiography argued that Italian incompetence was rooted in an inherent biological inferiority and snatched German defeat from the jaws of victory. German writers during this period argued Italy’s defeat was continually postponed by the efforts of the audacious Wehrmacht soldier through his Germanic fighting spirit and leadership. Italy was saved again and again by the “genial Hitler and his superior German war machine, which met its own ruin as a result of its generous aid to its pitiable and ridiculous ally.”²⁵

The Western Allies were receptive to this point of view. Allied press reports regarding the Italians were trivializing, while portraying the Germans in a much more frighteningly proficient fashion. British wartime propaganda consistently highlighted the rout of the Italian 10th Army in Libya by a numerically inferior British force. From the British perspective, Italian failure in North Africa demonstrated the lack of

²² Sadkovich, “Of Myths and Men”, 311.

²³ Sadkovich, “Of Myths and Men”, 312.

²⁴ Sadkovich, “Anglo-American Bias and the Italo-Greek War of 1940-1941,” 626.

²⁵ Sadkovich, “Anglo-American Bias and the Italo-Greek War of 1940-1941,” 626.

ability among Italy's leadership, as well as the absence of popular support for the war among Italian soldiers. After the United States entered the conflict, this attitude was passed on to the Americans by Britain.²⁶

This racist understanding of history was parroted by postwar historians in the first wave of non-biographical works. Writing on the North African theatre regarding Italian retreat and German intervention, Kenneth Macksey in 1972 argued that "the British threw out the Italian Chicken only to let in the German Eagle."²⁷ British General Sir William Jackson, writing a few years later, claimed that the defeat of the Italians on the dunes of the Western Desert in early 1941 opened the way for "two races of equal fighting quality - the British and German."²⁸ Considering intense and widespread German anti-Italian prejudice, the blind acceptance of German sources as an objective source of information is the most serious flaw of early Anglo American historiography.

Macgregor Knox - Foundation of Modern Historiography

The historian Macgregor Knox is the author "whose works have most shaped the views of readers of English on the Italian military."²⁹ Knox is considered an expert on both foreign and military policies of both the Fascist and National Socialist regimes. Having published numerous articles and books on Second World War Italian military history, Knox was the first English writer to present a holistic analysis of the Italian war effort. The writings of Knox have had substantial repercussions for Italian historiography. Comprehensive modern histories of the Second World War base their depiction of Italian involvement primarily on Knox's research. As this kind of history is the most widely

²⁶ Ian Walker, *Iron Hulls, Iron Hearts: Mussolini's Elite Armoured Divisions in North Africa*. (Ramsbury, England: The Crowood Press, 2003), 61-62.

²⁷ Walker, *Iron Hulls, Iron Hearts*, 286.

²⁸ Walker, *Iron Hulls, Iron Hearts*, 286.

²⁹ James Sadkovich, "Fascist Italy at War". *The International Historical Review*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (1992), 526.

read, Knox's influence on both the public at large and military academia has been colossal.

The works of Macgregor Knox do not simply repeat the myths of a dictator unilaterally pushing his nation to destruction or a people's refusal (or ability) to fight. At the beginning of his book, *Hitler's Italian Allies*, Knox writes that the "Italian dictator's sovereign fecklessness and the alleged absence of popular support for the war" are only partial answers at best. Knox's acknowledgment of these long-standing tropes surrounding Italy's bitter military defeat was an important historiographical change. Knox was by no means fond of Mussolini: Mussolini was a "military dilettante."³⁰ Although clearly controlling the nation's foreign policy, Mussolini was "conscious of his own lack of experience and understandably reluctant to damage his aura of dictatorial infallibility."³¹ Furthermore, Knox argues that the "restraints under which Mussolini labored" severely constrained his ability to act unilaterally.³² Mussolini lacked Hitler's totalitarian control, and had to compromise with a deeply entrenched establishment: parliament, monarchy, army, the church, and fascist conservatives. Limited in his power, he only interfered in matters of military professionals when the situation demanded it. The Duce was reluctant to spend his limited political capital infuriating his military. As such, he tended to let his military establishment handle their own house, by allowing them to control their own organization, procurement strategies, and tactical doctrine.³³ As detailed later, this would have serious consequences.

Knox writes that the Italian soldier had two undeniably excellent qualities; "the willingness to suffer... and (if led with anything approaching competency) the willingness to fight and die."³⁴ He

³⁰ Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed*, 7.

³¹ Knox, *Hitler's Italian Allies*, 43.

³² Knox, *Common Destiny*, 111

³³ Knox, *Hitler's Italian Allies*, 47.

³⁴ "The Italian Armed Forces: 1940 – 3" in Allan Millet and Murray Williamson (eds.), *Military Effectiveness, Volume Three: The Second World War*. (Unwyn Hyman: London, 1988),143.

contends that the popular myth, that the Italian soldier considered World War II “a war not felt” is simply not true.³⁵ Despite the claims of wartime propaganda, ‘cowardice’ in the Italian army was no greater than any other major armed force of the time. Knox notes that Italian units were “enduring and fatalistically stubborn” and stood and fought in the vast majority of scenarios. When Italian troops surrendered en masse it was due to encirclement and faced with certain annihilation, not cowardice in pitched battle.³⁶

Mussolini’s “strategic megalomania,”³⁷ ideological convictions, and character flaws effectively tied Italian fortunes to a Third Reich bent on self-immolation. Knox effectively asserts that Germany’s instigation of global war by the end of 1941, barring improbable levels of allied incompetence, “would have destroyed the Fascist regime of Italy regardless of their level of military or economic effectiveness.”³⁸ After Hitler’s failure to win the broader war in 1941/1942, the conflict was essentially over. The scientific, demographic, and financial advantages of the Grand Alliance of Britain, the United States and the Soviet Union would have certainly crushed the Axis though given enough time.

Though his foreign policy blunders had ensured his country’s ultimate defeat, the reason why the Italian army was so remarkably ineffectual was not Mussolini’s cross to bear alone. Italy still could have maintained a degree of dignity in its defeat. Knox makes the innovative argument that Italy’s military humiliation during the Second World War was “first and foremost a failure of Italy’s military culture and military institutions.”³⁹ The troubles of the Italian war effort had longstanding structural roots within the Italian state that can be traced back to its unification in the 1870’s. Comparable flaws were apparent

³⁵ “The Italian Armed Forces: 1940-3”, 143

³⁶ “The Italian Armed Forces: 1940-3”, 141.

³⁷ Knox, *Hitler’s Italian Allies*, 1.

³⁸ Know, *Hitler’s Italian Allies*, 2.

³⁹ Knox, *Hitler’s Italian Allies*, x.

in the Italian “North and South, Left and Right, workers, industrialists, and generals.”⁴⁰

Eschewing racial justifications, Knox uses a cultural lens to explain the disastrous results of Italy’s war. According to Knox’s analysis, the most significant of Italian cultural inadequacies was the enduring resistance to modernity that reached across Italian society. The pervasive narrowmindedness was a widespread cultural trait of mistrust, dividing the nation by language, geography, and social class. Furthermore, there was an ingrained and “fierce resistance to precision and rationale planning.”⁴¹ Knox argues that these cultural factors created a society short on common trust, collaboration, and natural teamwork. In the campaign against British Somaliland, Italian command staff sought to use inter-personal rivalries to their advantage. By placing feuding officers in adjacent attack sectors, they would “put the wind under their feet.”⁴² To the surprise of the staff officers involved, both commanders “concentrated essentially on preventing the other from getting there first.”⁴³ Moreover, inter- service rivalries were endemic. Each branch of the military controlled weapons development and production completely independent of one another, and kept cooperation at the bare minimum.⁴⁴ Tactical integration was no better. There was underlying fear across the Italian military of losing power through apparent subordination to another branch. Without any kind of doctrinal framework or cooperation between ground and air forces, the Italian army’s ability execute offensive operations was effectively hamstrung. As each arm planned their operations independently, the army was deprived of the tactical advantages of close air support.⁴⁵ This development stood in juxtaposition to the Wehrmacht which had mastered cooperation between the service branches and achieved considerable success.

⁴⁰ Knox, *Hitler’s Italian Allies*, 29

⁴¹ Knox, *Hitler’s Italian Allies*, 28.

⁴² Knox, *The Italian Armed Forces: 1940 – 3*, 165.

⁴³ Knox, *The Italian Armed Forces: 1940-3*, 157.

⁴⁴ Knox, *Hitler’s Italian Allies*, 38.

⁴⁵ Knox, *Hitler’s Italian Allies*, 113.

Some of the problems could never have been fully mitigated. Italy lacked a large industrial sector. Still largely agrarian, the country's output was only a fraction of that of its German ally and the smallest of the major industrialized states.⁴⁶ Italy suffered from a lack raw war materials, a situation made worse by the British naval blockade. Even considering these factors, the regime "failed miserably in mobilizing the nation's resources."⁴⁷ An influx of raw materials would not have changed the deeply flawed organizational/ideological structure of the Italian military nor its industrial base.

Italy lacked a well-developed national military culture and tradition. Combined with a lack of national unity, "the absence of altruism in the service of higher national purposes"⁴⁸ created a highly dysfunctional military procurement system. This justifies why industrialists involved in the armaments industry happily swindled the national war effort through "illegal cartels and all manners of deceptive practices."⁴⁹ As leading manufacturers consistently threatened to instigate labour unrest and production stoppages, the Army accepted the continued production of ineffective or useless weapons in fear "of ending up with no weapons at all."⁵⁰ In addition, due to a "culture of stubborn and parochial backwardness," Italian manufacturers failed to update their production and quality control techniques.⁵¹ Clinging to old models of skilled workers "slowly hand crafting obsolete weapons," they refused to adopt standardized models in mass production lines that allowed the U.S.S.R., the United States, and Germany to produce much more efficiently than Italian Industry.⁵² Crippled by self-inflicted injuries, Italy could not produce the large quantities of modern war material that was desperately needed.

⁴⁶ Knox, *Common Destiny*, 148.

⁴⁷ Knox, *Hitler's Italian Allies*, Introduction.

⁴⁸ Knox, *Hitler's Italian Allies*, 28.

⁴⁹ Knox, *Hitler's Italian Allies*, 28

⁵⁰ Knox, *Hitler's Italian Allies*, 42.

⁵¹ Knox, *Hitler's Italian Allies*, 42.

⁵² Knox, *Hitler's Italian Allies*, 45.

Italy's military elite proved "wholly unable to imagine modern warfare," let alone prepare and fight battles that depended on using mechanized, combined arms tactics.⁵³ Instead of accepting that war had now become a contest of machines, the Italian army's conservative and rigid leadership placed its faith in mass formations of infantry. Numerically enlarged the army to the largest possible size, "Italy's eight million bayonets" would overcome all resistance.⁵⁴ However, in the maelstrom of modern warfare "superiority in numbers tended only to produce superior numbers of maimed, missing, killed, and captured."⁵⁵

This attitude also influenced the army's force organization and equipment procurement. Most of the nation's resources went toward basic infantry equipment for the inflated mass of manpower, while critical up-to-date war machines were given low priority as "innovation remained suspect" throughout the army.⁵⁶ Italy thus went into North Africa lacking sufficient armored units and mobile infantry. The mobility and firepower that was critical to success in desert warfare was nowhere to found.

An insightful report was compiled by Italian intelligence on the nature of the German blitzkrieg, or 'lightning war.' This approach to mechanized warfare proved extraordinarily successful in the early years of the war. Badoglio, the army chief of staff, responded to this information by dismissively stating that "we'll study it when the war is over."⁵⁷ The proud ignorance of the Italian general staff prevented the embracement of more effective approaches to warfare that handicapped the army in the field. In addition, the dominant military culture was one that emphasized mind over matter. Marshall Graziani, Italy's 1940 North African theatre commander, boldly stated that "when the cannon sounds, everything will fall into place."⁵⁸ There was a "widespread assumption that in battle, intuition and individual valor

⁵³ Knox, *Hitler's Italian Allies*, Intro.

⁵⁴ Knox, *The Italian Armed Forces: 1940-3*, 162.

⁵⁵ Knox, *The Italian Armed Forces: 1940-3*, 162.

⁵⁶ Knox, *Hitler's Italian Allies*, 47.

⁵⁷ Knox, *The Italian Armed Forces: 1940-3*, 154.

⁵⁸ Knox, *The Italian Armed Forces: 1940-3*, 171.

counted for more than training.”⁵⁹ It should come as no surprise that there was little emphasis on training the reservists and conscripts that formed the vast bulk of the army.

A smaller, more effectively trained, equipped, and mobile army could have taken advantage of the dismal allied situation of 1940/41 by using all of Italy’s might in a short, aggressive campaign. Unfortunately, deep flaws in Italy’s military culture strangled any attempt to build a force composition that harmonized with Italian strengths and strategic objectives. Structural issues in the Italian military culture caused the Italian military industrial complex to produce the “least effective, least numerous, and most overpriced weapons of the Second World War.”⁶⁰ The ethos of the military and the country as a whole led to the deployment of a military thoroughly technologically backward.

Knox finds plenty historical exemplars to support this. Italian Infantry were ordered to engage forces wielding vastly superior weaponry and equipment. The Italian 8th army, marching into the maw of Operation Barbarossa, was even issued boots whose soles were made out of cardboard.⁶¹ Italian tankers were sent into battle in obsolete vehicles that were outclassed in almost every way. The most effective Italian tank produced in any real quantity, the mechanically unreliable M14, could hardly dent British Grants and Crusader IIIs. A single hit by an enemy gun could prove fatal, as thin Italian tank armor “would sometimes shatter like glass.”⁶² Tank crews operated without any form of radio until mid-1941, and the compensated compasses necessary for effective desert navigation were never issued.⁶³ Air support was equally poor. The Italian SM85 dive bombers often “proved more dangerous to their crews than the enemy.”⁶⁴ The fighters of the Italian air force were often underpowered, outgunned, and without electronic navigational aids. Knox states that the most effective machines Italian

⁵⁹ Knox, *The Italian Armed Forces: 1940-3*, 164.

⁶⁰ Knox, *Hitler’s Italian Allies*, 46.

⁶¹ Knox, *The Italian Armed Forces: 1940-3*, 161.

⁶² Knox, *The Italian Armed Forces: 1940-3*, 139.

⁶³ Knox, *The Italian Armed Forces: 1940-3*, 154.

⁶⁴ Knox, *Hitler’s Italian Allies*, 40.

industry managed to create were manufactured too late and in too few numbers to have any noticeable impact.⁶⁵ This dismal and depressingly long list is symbolic on Knox's holistic view on the Italian war effort. In his military analysis, Knox argues that the fact that the Italian Army held together as long as it did was remarkable considering the flaws inherent within its military establishment.

The Revisionist Position

The historian James Sandkovich is one of the more recent historians to attempt a reimagining of Italy's role in the Second World War. A fierce critic of Knox, Sandkovich argues that "Italy's failures have often been overstated, while Germany's have been understated."⁶⁶ When placed in a wider context, Italy upheld its part of the Axis alliance whereas the 3rd Reich did not. Sandvovich argues that Italian economy was an important contributor to the Axis alliance. Italy produced proportionately similar quantities of weaponry compared to Germany. Artillery, aircraft, and armored vehicles were manufactured at around twenty percent of the overall German total; this is similar to the disparity between the overall economic power of the two countries.⁶⁷ This is a remarkable achievement, given Italy's structural economic problems. In addition, Sandvovich asserts that at the war's start Italy's weapon systems performed at the same level as the weaponry of the other major powers.⁶⁸ Italian research and development actually managed to design some of the war's best armaments; the Cannone 90/53 canon and the Macchi C.205 fighter being the most impressive. Even the P.26/40 heavy tank would be a match for most other tanks of its class. The lack of resources, power, and technical expertise depressed production. While Sandvovich acknowledges the Italy's war

⁶⁵ Knox, *Hitler's Italian Allies*, 65.

⁶⁶ Sadkovich. *Understanding Defeat: Reappraising Italy's Role in World War II*, 33.

⁶⁷ Sadkovich. *Understanding Defeat: Reappraising Italy's Role in World War II*, 34

⁶⁸ Sadkovich. *Understanding Defeat: Reappraising Italy's Role in World War II*, 35.

economy was not perfect, the root of the army's operation and technological failings were by no means largely self-inflicted.

According to Sandvovich, the economic and tactical doctrines of the Third Reich were the main cause of Italy's apparent humiliation. Germany was almost as unprepared for total war as Italy was in 1939. The men in charge of fueling the German war economy corrected this deficit by thoroughly plundering Europe of its military and natural resources. Italy, cut off from Soviet and American imports by German declarations of war, desperately needed raw materials to maintain their war economy. German actions ensured these assets were not forthcoming. Germany appropriated Italian sources of coal in Poland and Czechoslovakia, and took the lion's share of Romanian oil. The Germans even appropriated most of the assets from Yugoslavia and Greece, countries supposedly in Italy's sphere of influence.⁶⁹ German bad faith was further demonstrated by Hitler's refusal to honour accords on economic aid.⁷⁰

Additionally, Sandvovich stresses that it was actually the Germans who were disloyal to their ally. Hitler was deeply distrustful of his non German allies, and once claimed that "every second Italian is either a traitor or a spy."⁷¹ The Führer would not provide German weaponry without German soldiers attached to them. Italy, who had sent its finest vehicles and guns to fight and die in Russia, was in essence abandoned by Germany.⁷² Eighty thousand Italians would lose their lives across the Soviet Union; a figure four times as large as the number of Germans who died in North Africa. In the theatre where Italy's survival was to be determined, German support was kept to the absolute minimum prevent total collapse.⁷³

⁶⁹ Sadkovich, *Understanding Defeat: Reappraising Italy's Role in World War II*, 32.

⁷⁰ Sadkovich, *Fascist Italy at War*, 530.

⁷¹ Knox, *The Italian Armed Forces: 1940 – 3*, 161.

⁷² Sadkovich, *Of Myths and Men: Rommel and the Italians in North Africa, 1940-1942*, 290.

⁷³ Sadkovich, *Anglo-American Bias and the Italo-Greek War of 1940-1941*, 641.

Knox may also have an “an anti-fascist bias”⁷⁴ that weakens the strength of his work. Far from the blood thirsty tyrant depicted by Knox, Sandkovich argues that Mussolini was a victim of German duplicity as well as a sensible statesman. According to Sandkovich, Mussolini appears to have signed the Pact of Steel with the objection to stymie German belligerence. Mussolini went to war in 1940 out of fear, not stupidity. Worried that a victorious Germany would turn on Italy for impeding its annexation of Austria and its refusal to enter the war in 1939, Mussolini acted in an attempt to avoid becoming another German vassal state. Disgusted with “German political incompetence, racism, and brutality, and frustrated by his inability to get Hitler to appreciate the importance of the southern theatre,”⁷⁵ Mussolini continually attempted to find a diplomatic resolution to the war. It was Hitler, not Mussolini, who was the irrational ideologue that continually backed his ally into corners which he had no chance of escaping.

No doubt the Italian military had its share of errors in judgement. However, historians caught up in anti-Italian narratives have a tendency to portray the Italians in the worst possible light while giving others the benefit of the doubt. Erwin Rommel, head of the German Afrika Korp, is commonly depicted as “without question, the most outstanding battlefield commander of the war.”⁷⁶ On the other hand, the Italian general Rodolfo Graziani is commonly portrayed as an “ignoramus”⁷⁷ When both men retreated before the British rather than hold isolated, vulnerable positions, Rommel is titled a ‘genius’ while Graziani is labeled a coward who panicked in the face of adversity. This double standard can be found throughout accounts of the North African conflict. Sandkovich argues that in most situations, Italian commanders made reasonably competent decisions

⁷⁴ Sandkovich, *Anglo-American Bias and the Italo-Greek War of 1940-1941*, 618.

⁷⁵ Sandkovich, *Fascist Italy at War*, 530.

⁷⁶ Williamson, Millet. *A War to be Won: Fighting the Second World War*, 100.

⁷⁷ Williamson, Millet. *A War to be Won*, 292.

Conclusion

Although the historiographic debate still rages on, the false narratives of the post war era have begun to fade away. Contemporary experts on the Second World War would intensely disagree that it was “more detrimental for Germany to have Italy as an ally than simply to have fought her as an enemy.”⁷⁸ While clearly incapable of fighting a first class world power by herself, Italy was valuable ally to Hitler. In Bruce Watson’s history of the North African theatre, he writes that the British had to shatter “Rommel’s Panzer Armie Afrika – and its supporting Italian divisions.”⁷⁹ The phrasing of this statement has it backwards. From 1940 to mid-1943 Italy - not Germany - was the primary Axis power in both Africa and the Balkans. Vast amounts of Anglo-American material and hundreds of thousands of men that could have been used against Germany instead was devoted to fighting Italy. Italian assistance held up the Western powers and allowed Germany to concentrate the majority of its strength on the Eastern Front. Even after Italy’s surrender, the collaborationist Italian Social Republic continued the fight for the Axis.

After Italy’s collapse, the Nazi regime was forced to redeploy significant forces to cover the areas once occupied by the Italian army. This forced the German forces stationed on the Russian front to be substantially reduced. By June 1944, there were 52 German divisions in Italy and the Balkans - about 18.3 per cent of Germany's 285 divisions.⁸⁰ When the Russians launched their great summer offensives of 1944, there were simply not enough Germans left to stop them. Additionally, Allied troops previously held down in North Africa were redirected to Operation Overlord. Without Italian support, the Germany Reich's attempt to turn back the Allied advance would prove pointless.

⁷⁸ Williamson, Millet. *A War to be Won*, 31.

⁷⁹ Bruce Watson, *Exit Rommel*, (Praegar Publishers: Westport, 1999).2.

⁸⁰ Sadkovich, *Understanding Defeat: Reappraising Italy's Role in World War II*, 46.

Anglo-Saxon historiography not only overlooks the Italian role in the war, but Germany's other 'minor' allies as well. The 'Third Reich's survival was dependent on the immense effort made by all of the nations that fought beside it. Without the combat troops, logistical support, and occupation forces provided by her allies, Germany could not have fought for so long in as many theatres as it did. German "arrogance, indifference, and ineptitude" concerning their allies led to horrific loss of life. Forty six non-German divisions from Allied Axis Armies were wiped out at Stalingrad alone.⁸¹ Without the contributions of Italy, Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Finland, Germany's collapse would have come much earlier. For a more accurate understanding of the Second World War, the erroneous historiographic predominance of Germany must be corrected.

⁸¹ Sadkovich, *Understanding Defeat: Reappraising Italy's Role in World War II*, 49.