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Mussolini's Early Diplomacy

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BY ALAN CASSELS

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For Nancy
Preface

Mussolini came to power in 1922 pledged to fulfill a certain task in foreign affairs: to assuage the national pride of those Italians who believed their country had been slighted in the Paris peace settlement after World War I. The conviction that Italy's victory in the war had been "mutilated" at Paris was widespread between 1919 and 1922, and the Liberal ministers of the day were freely denounced as rinunciatori (renouncers). Actually Italy's material interests were not seriously hurt in the peace treaties. For this reason Gaetano Salvemini called Italy, after Molière, the malade imaginaire. But the nationalist grievance was all the more potent for being mythical.

"Our preoccupation is primarily with matters of foreign policy," Mussolini declared in 1921. He was well aware that he had ridden to power on a wave of nationalist dissatisfaction. He seemed conscious, too, of the fact that, if he did not play the patriotic hero, he might be supplanted by another. It was not until 1921 that Mussolini emerged as chief nationalist spokesman. Hitherto, this role had belonged to the romantic poet, Gabriele D'Annunzio, whose legionnaires had for 18 months occupied the town of Fiume, "in the name of the Italian people." Even after gaining office Mussolini kept a wary eye on his rival. He heaped flattery and honors on D'Annunzio and provided him with a gatekeeper to ward off unwelcome tourists. The gatekeeper, in addition, was a Fascist police spy who reported sedulously to the Duce. In February 1923 Mussolini seized the opportunity to consolidate his position as undisputed nationalist leader by fusing the Nationalist party with the Partito nazionale fascista (P.N.F.).

The difficulty in raising Italy's international stature was to devise a strategy for achieving it. With the opening of this century Italy had begun to gravitate toward the Anglo-
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French orbit, a process that had culminated in the Treaty of London, April 26, 1915, whereby Italy entered World War I. It was a moot point whether Mussolini could gain the diplomatic victories he promised within the framework of the wartime alliance. After all, it was the British and the French who were responsible for the "mutilated victory." The temptation for Mussolini to strike out in new directions would be great. Some sort of collaboration with the defeated powers, eager to revise the 1919 settlement, could not be ruled out. Furthermore, it was problematical whether mere diplomatic successes, if they could be won, would satisfy the Italian hypernationalists. Or would Mussolini resort to military adventures? Ultimately he chose the alternatives of war and alliance with Hitlerian revisionism. The momentous events of 1935-38, when this occurred, have understandably and properly received the lion’s share of attention given to Fascist Italian foreign policy. This book, by contrast recounts Mussolini’s first and relatively unpublicized efforts to bring fresh vigor and perhaps a new direction to Italian diplomacy. The international situation in which Fascist Italy operated in the mid-1920s was patently different from that of a decade later. (The obvious and crucial difference lay in the change from a vanquished Germany in one period to a rampant, nationalistic Germany in the other.) Yet Mussolini was expected to live up to his chauvinist propaganda from the first moment he took office. And he tried to do so. In several of its characteristics early Fascist diplomacy signaled the disastrous course Mussolini would follow in the 1930s.

Something of a subplot to the main theme concerns the permanent officials of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Many observers, both within and without Italy, set great store by the ability of these career diplomats to restrain Mussolini from rash adventures. Hence the degree of fascistizzazione of the foreign ministry served as a rough
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indicator of Mussolini's deviation from traditional Italian diplomacy.

I have divided the narrative of Fascist Italy's early foreign policy into four phases. The first six months or so after the March on Rome in October 1922 were largely taken up with problems left over from World War I, especially the negotiation of a peace treaty with Turkey and the climax of the Franco-German quarrel over reparations. The Duce had his own ideas on these matters, but the old guard at the foreign ministry were able to keep him fairly well in check. Also, in the sensitive Adriatic question Mussolini pleased his diplomats by assuming at the outset a remarkably moderate approach.

The second phase began in the summer of 1923 when Mussolini began to assert himself. The island of Corfu was occupied for a month and Fiume gained outright. In his campaign to win the latter, Mussolini explored the possibility of working with German nationalist elements. Next he turned to schemes to bring about a special relationship with such disparate states as Spain and Soviet Russia. And in the spring of 1924 he set in motion plans which pointed to a colonial venture in Asia Minor. However, all this came to an abrupt halt on June 10, 1924 with the murder of the Socialist deputy, Giacomo Matteotti. The crime, laid at Mussolini's door, paralyzed the Fascist regime.

In its third phase early Fascist diplomacy became passive and conciliatory, which was particularly apparent in the case of Albania, a territory long designated by Italian nationalists as an Italian sphere of influence. Yet for months Mussolini declined to intervene in the Albanian civil war, although it threatened to bring to power an anti-Italian faction supported by Yugoslavia. With his troubles at home Mussolini sought to make friends abroad, not fresh enemies. Thus he made his peace with the League of Nations, whose principles he despised. Similarly, although he regarded
France as Italy's natural rival, he encouraged talk of a settlement of all issues outstanding between Paris and Rome. But it was the British government with which Mussolini established the closest rapport and from which he derived the most comfort. The return of the Conservatives to office in London in November 1924 saw the start of an Anglo-Italian entente focused mostly on colonial affairs. But it also supplied a kind of guarantee that Mussolini would behave like a "good European"; for instance, it was partly to oblige Great Britain that Italy signed the Locarno Pacts in October 1925.

During 1925 Mussolini recovered from the Matteotti affair to fasten a veritable dictatorship on Italy. This freed his hands anew for a forceful foreign policy. A fourth stage of Fascist diplomacy was ushered in symbolically by the appointment of the P.N.F. hierarch, Dino Grandi, as under-secretary for foreign affairs in May 1925. Within the next two years several prominent career diplomats, who had agreed to serve Mussolini in 1922 in order to curb him, resigned their posts in despair. Proclaiming 1926 to be his Napoleonic year, the Duce opened it with a furious altercation with Berlin over the fate of Germans living in the Italian Alto Adige. In the meantime, his position in the Albanian question changed drastically. Mussolini now seized every opportunity to implant Italian influence in Tirana. In this he succeeded to the extent of establishing a virtual Italian protectorate over Albania, albeit at the cost of a grievous breach with Yugoslavia. Elsewhere in the Balkans Mussolini tried vainly to sponsor a novel diplomatic grouping, which would have embraced both the victorious and defeated nations of World War I. Fundamentally Mussolini's purpose in the Balkans was to substitute Italian for French influence. Indeed, on the international scene it was becoming increasingly apparent that he regarded France as the main obstacle to the fulfillment of Italian national-
ism. So in 1926 Franco-Italian relations went rapidly downhill. Especially bitter was the quarrel over the exiles from Fascist Italy (fuorusciti) in Paris. Mussolini’s emphasis on the fuorusciti question was indicative of his growing disposition to see international politics in ideological terms and to think of Fascism as an exportable commodity.

This book ends in early 1927, by which time the years of indecision in Fascist foreign policy were over. During 1926 Mussolini’s foreign policy took firm shape; in both the main and peripheral themes of this book a climax and a resolution were reached. First, the areas in which Italian national prestige would be sought and the general diplomatic strategy followed were mapped out. Second, the permanent officials of the foreign ministry were effectively pushed aside. In about four and a half years, then, Italian foreign policy had assumed a distinct Mussolinian tinge. Within this span the Duce adequately demonstrated his willingness to use unorthodox as well as conventional diplomacy, force and threat in addition to pacific negotiation, and to cultivate traditional allies and new revisionist friends alike. By the new year 1927 the shape of things to come in the 1930s was beginning to emerge.

The prime source of information on Fascism’s early diplomacy consists of *I documenti diplomatici italiani*, series vii (1922-35). The period between the March on Rome and the new year 1927 is covered in the first four volumes of the series; I have also used a few items from Volume V. This documentary collection, still many years from completion, is compiled largely from the archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Rome. The selection and editing is done by the Commissione per la pubblicazione dei documenti diplomatici italiani, a body of Italian scholars working under government auspices. The end product is almost beyond cavil, an indispensable research tool.
One or two other documentary sources deserve mention. A mass of enemy records captured by the Allies at the end of World War II are available in microfilm or photostat form. Most of the Italian records in this category concern Italy in World War II, but do provide occasional information about the 1920s. They may be found in the National Archives, Washington, D.C., and in St. Antony's College, Oxford, where a superior index compiled by F. W. Deakin is attached. The German records, both departmental correspondence and such collections of private papers as the Nachlass Stresemann, have more to say on the twenties and have proved invaluable in examining the vital question of Italo-German relations; they are accessible in the National Archives and the Foreign Office library in London. Central to Mussolini's early foreign policy was the Anglo-Italian entente; useful information on this subject has been obtained from the British Foreign Office files, which include Sir Austen Chamberlain's private papers, and the British cabinet minutes. These are open for scrutiny in the Public Record Office, London.

Memoir material on Fascist Italy's early diplomacy is not plentiful, and some of it is misleading. By far the most comprehensive and honest account is by Raffaele Guariglia, Ricordi, 1922–1946. Other reminiscences fill gaps in certain topics, principally Mussolini's Balkan policy. In addition, I documenti diplomatici italiani contain some revealing extracts from unpublished memoirs concerning Italo-German relations.

With the Fascists' accession to power Mussolini himself took over the post of foreign minister. Consequently nearly all diplomatic correspondence was addressed to him, or went out with his approval. Yet on the score of the limits of human energy alone, much of this paperwork must have been routinely processed by Mussolini's secretariat and not seen at all by the Duce. Obviously this is an important
point in evaluating Mussolini's personal influence on Italian foreign policy. Therefore, I have tried to ascribe to Mussolini only his authentic acts and thoughts, using internal documentary evidence as a guide. Sometimes a telegram was drafted in Mussolini's hand—information helpfully supplied by the editors of I documenti diplomatici italiani—or the aggressive first-person style betokens Mussolini's authorship. To indicate that a piece of correspondence from abroad actually came to the Fascist leader's notice, there is Mussolini's own marginalia or his reply to the document in question. All in all, to isolate and define the Mussolinian touch has not proved an impossible task.

Much of Chapters 6 and 14 has been published in the Journal of Modern History, xxxv (June 1963), and some of Chapter 8 in the American Historical Review, lxix (April 1964). I would like to thank the editors of these journals for permission to reproduce this material here. Of those librarians who have rendered me assistance over the past few years, I express particular gratitude to the staffs of the Public Record Office in London and of the Diplomatic, Legal, and Fiscal branch of the National Archives in Washington, D.C. I am also indebted to the Historical Office of the U.S. State Department for its permission to use certain records when they were classified. Among the several scholars who have extended help, I am especially grateful to Professors Howard M. Ehrmann and Gerhard L. Weinberg of the University of Michigan. Their advice and encouragement at the outset of this study were invaluable. Above all my appreciation goes to my wife, both for her patience and for her more positive contribution in the form of critical appreciation.

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