

Broken Fasces:  
Historical Perceptions  
On The Failure Of Fascist Italy

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ii
<i>List of Tables</i>	iii
Introduction	1
1. Italy Embarks on the Second World War	13
2. Germans and Italians: Commanders and Battles	30
3. The Allies and Their Italian Opponent	60
Conclusion	80
<i>Notes</i>	89
<i>Bibliography</i>	93

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## List of Tables

Table 1: Total Industrial Potential	15
Table 2: Military Expend. As A Per. Of GDP	16
Table 3: Italian And British Inf. Divs, N. Africa	20
Table 4: Italian And British Arm. Divs, N. Africa	21
Table 5: Comparative Perf. of Tank Weaponry 1941-42	23

# Introduction

At first glance, it may appear that all possible research about the Second World War, its consequences and events, has been thoroughly exhausted. However, a closer look shows that quite the opposite is actually true. Despite this body of scholarly research, there are still numerous misconceptions of the Italian army which have not been covered in any great detail. By considering these issues from various perspectives, we can gain a more accurate portrayal of the events which transpired. This research project deals directly with this diversity of viewpoints by exploring the range of Allied\* and German interactions with Italians. These interactions influenced the way in which they – the Allies (the Commonwealth will be included under the term British for expediency), and Germans – perceived the Italians and their military. By investigating how perceptions changed due to interaction, more insight will be gained on the lingering contemporary perception of the Italians as weak-willed, cowardly, and poor fighters.

The Italian army during the Second World War has been much maligned and misunderstood by historians who have typically tackled the topic from the perspective of their enemy's distrustful ally. For over sixty years, the performance of Italian Army units has been ridiculed, especially in American military history circles. One reason is the American love affair with German military thinking which has led to a reliance by American military scholarship on German ideas and theories of war and a deference to German attitudes and assessments of the Italians. Because of the Italian disasters in the Greek and early North African campaigns, the perception emerged that Italian soldiers

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\* The Allies referred to here in this paper will consist of the Western Allies, the United States and the United Kingdom. The Soviet Union has not been included for reasons which will become clear in this paper.

fought poorly, surrendered readily, and were generally unwilling to fight. However, this is in large part untrue, and there are many examples of bravery and courage under fire from individual soldiers and, indeed, whole units. While the many debacles in these campaigns stand out, they were not due *in toto* to the actions of individual soldiers.

Unfortunately, the Italian soldier has borne the brunt of Western criticism, yet there were more fundamental issues which account for the poor overall performance of the Italian Army during the Second World War other than the fighting ability of Italian soldiers. Three of the main elements the Italian military lacked during their offensive campaigns were effective modern weaponry, quality leadership, and desire to achieve the ideological goals of Mussolini's Fascist worldview. One has to better understand where the Italian soldier was coming from and under what circumstances he was operating to more fully comprehend his performance on the battlefield. Such analysis has escaped many who have passed judgment on Italian performance during and after the war, and only more recently has better analysis appeared from isolated, but excellent, studies such as MacGregor Knox. This analysis will focus on how German and Allied interactions with the Italians colored their view of the entire Italian military and nation which has led to a distinct historiographical bias. Prior to the main discussion, a brief analysis will be offered on Italian deficiencies and the contemporary state of research covering Italian interaction with the Germans and Allies.

Italian units, when working in concert with their ally Germany, were typically assigned, by the Germans, flank positions or fronts that were deemed less important or "quiet," which meant that the Italian units would preferably not see any action. As the war progressed, the Germans increasingly used the Italians as stop-gap troops in order to

fill holes in the line, or merely as cannon fodder to blunt attacks by their opponent. In Russia especially, the German use of Italian troops led to almost the complete destruction of the Italian army which had been sent to southern Russia. The Soviets, for their part, took advantage of the thinly spread Italian forces during a few of their large-scale offensives, especially the one that surrounded Stalingrad in early 1943.

Much of that contemporary belief in Italian military weakness stems from British and German perceptions of Italian failures in Ethiopia and Greece. While there, the Italian Army faced difficulties winning battles against what Europeans perceived as inferior enemies. The roots of this conviction in Italian incompetence went much deeper though. The foundations of such beliefs stem from centuries of co-existence on the European continent, yet for the purposes of this paper, issues arising from Allied and German experiences with the Italians during the Second World War will be studied. Stereotypes of the Italians in British and German press during and after the First World War, and propaganda at the very beginning of the Second World War, fed into the mindset of the generation that fought the Second World War. Unfortunately, it is outside the scope of this study to deal directly and completely with Italian stereotyping prior to the war, yet it is a topic which should be studied and analyzed in depth.

### **Historiography**

A brief discussion of a small section of the available works which deal with the Italians and their army either directly or indirectly is necessary to better understand the contemporary state of research into the attitudes held about the Italians and their role in the Second World War. English language histories which deal specifically and wholly

with the Italian Army are few and far between. With the notable exception of scholars such as MacGregor Knox and James J. Sadkovich who have taken great pains to further the understanding of the Italian military, there is relatively very little work done exclusively on the Italian role and impact during the Second World War. When the Italian Army is discussed, it is typically either an afterthought, or a sideshow relegated to the German army's shadow or the prisoner camps of the Allies. The Italians are typically subsumed in the greater events around them, and their place in history becomes distorted due to a number of factors. Some of these factors include, but are not limited to, the American and British historiographical focus on their own respective militaries and the German military, the German "takeover" of Italian theaters of war, and the Italian early exit from the war. There is also a large dissonance of opinions between those who directly came into contact with Italian soldiers and those who "led" them from afar or only dealt with the Italian leadership.

Individual exceptions notwithstanding, German generals were typically harshly critical of the combat performance of the Italians. Hitler sent Field Marshal Albert Kesselring to Italy early in the war in large part because Kesselring was seen as an Italophile. Despite his love for the Italian people and culture, in *The Memoirs of Field-Marshal Kesselring*, he makes the snide comment that the Italians were "trained more for display than for action."<sup>1</sup> F.W. von Mellenthin in his memoir *Panzer Battles* is more forgiving in his assessment of the Italians and their efforts, especially in the Yugoslavian theater. John Terraine's work, *A Time For Courage*, completely dismisses the Italian air force as "a fringe activity in the march of war." The British were able to gain the initiative, and most importantly to him, moral ascendancy over the Italians early in the



fighting by acting aggressively. According to Terraine, one British Hurricane fighter in the Western Desert Air Force in 1940 worked alongside the outmoded Gladiators and served as an effective deterrent against the *Regia Aeronautica* (Italian Air Force). He gives credit to a few courageous pilots and some effective aircraft; however, the *Regia Aeronautica* proved to be wholly ineffective.<sup>2</sup>

MacGregor Knox, as mentioned previously, is one of the eminent scholars on the Italian Army, and Italy in general, during the Second World War. His essay “The Sources of Italy’s Defeat in 1940: Bluff or Institutionalized Incompetence?” concludes, as may be presumed from his title, that institutionalized incompetence was the culprit. Knox built his essay on the memoirs of Italian generals and admirals and also delved into official Italian histories of the war. This is apparent in Knox’s quoting of General Ubaldo Soddu as saying to a member of his staff, “when you have a fine plate of pasta guaranteed for life, and a little music, you don’t need anything more.”<sup>3</sup> Knox also authored the essay “The Italian Armed Forces” for volume III of *Military Effectiveness* edited by Alan Millet and Williamson Murray. In this essay, Knox is highly critical of the rigidity and refusal to embrace change within the Italian military establishment. The “intellectual parochialism” and “nationalist arrogance” inherent within military circles were due to Fascism. One of Knox’s major works, *Mussolini Unleashed, 1939-1941: Politics and Strategy in Fascist Italy’s Last War*, contains an extensive bibliography of Italian language sources and will be discussed in more depth later in this essay.

Italian scholar Lucio Ceva rejects the common notion that Italians did not fight well due to their hearts not being into the war. Rather, while he does not dispute the lack of Italian ideological fervor, he says that despite the lack of enthusiasm, Italian units such

as the armored division *Ariete* and the motorized *Trieste* along with the German-trained *Folgore* parachute division fought extremely well given their circumstances. What made the difference for these units was not that they were more ideologically motivated than the rest of the Italian army but that they had proper leadership, combat experience, and what he phrases as the “German example.”<sup>4</sup> The British author Ian Cameron has no patience for scholars who dismiss the Italians, specifically sailors, as “arrant cowards.” Such comments in his view belittle the efforts and heroism of those who fought against them. Cameron goes on to praise the courage and daring of the Italian human torpedoes who badly damaged the two British battleships *Valiant* and *Queen Elizabeth* in the harbor at Alexandria in December 1941. He even makes the claim that some squadrons of the *Regina Aeronautica* actually pressed home their attacks more forcefully and skillfully than any other German unit with the exception of Fliegerkorps X.<sup>5</sup> Continuing with naval opinions of the Italians, French Admiral Raymond De Belot addresses the question of the Italian navy’s fighting spirit in his work, *The Struggle for the Mediterranean 1939-1945*. He brings up the important proposition that Allied propaganda led the world to believe that the Royal Navy won an easy and largely uncontested victory in the Mediterranean. The two British successes at Taranto and Matapan were blown out of proportion by a propaganda machine hoping to prop up a populace familiar with defeat. While he recognizes the inherent cautiousness and overall defensive stance of the Italian naval high command, De Belot rejects the notion that Italian sailors were poor fighters or lacked fighting spirit.<sup>6</sup>

James J. Sadkovich is a revisionist historian who has dedicated a large amount of his scholarship towards understanding how the Italian military has been viewed by

Western scholars since the end of the war. He has attempted to shine new light on the accomplishments of the Italian military while breaking down all the various reasons for their failures. He has charged that Anglo-Saxon racism permeates the historiography and argued in his 1994 essay, "German Military Incompetence Through Italian Eyes," that Anglo-American historians have presented history from the German point of view to the detriment or exclusion of the Italian perspective. Sadkovich even goes so far as to reject the commonly held view that the Germans were the more competent partner in the Axis and portrays them as "cautious," "timid," "careless," and "inept."<sup>7</sup> He has also argued in various essays and monographs that Italian combat performance in the Mediterranean theater has been acutely underestimated. His essay, "Reevaluating Who Won the Italo-British Naval Conflict, 1940-1942," concludes that the naval battle in the Mediterranean in fact ended in "a draw rather than a convincing win for either side." He argues that the combat performance of the Royal Navy was not appreciably different from that of the *Regia Marina*.<sup>8</sup> Expanding on his revisionist scholarship, in *The Italian Navy in World War II*, he rejects the "myths" which have arisen around the performance of the Italian navy. He asserts that the victories of the British were due to ULTRA, radar, and "luck," and that the stunning victory at Taranto "owed something to a storm" that apparently tore loose the barrage balloons protecting the Italian battleships.<sup>9</sup>

Rex Tyre, an American historian who details more of the minutiae of the Italian military, also talks about the way in which the Italians have been handled historically. In his work, *Mussolini's Soldiers*, he attempts to redress some of the misconceptions about the fighting capabilities of the Italian armed forces. As he says, the fact that many of these misconceptions have survived into the post-war generations shows, in his opinion,

the effectiveness of anti-Italian wartime Allied propaganda. Rather than viewing the negative perception of Italians as due to the actions of the soldiers or those who interacted with them, Tyre sees Allied propaganda as the instigator of the contemporary negative view of Italian fighting capabilities. Unfortunately, Tyre only briefly discusses these misconceptions and how they can be rectified, instead focusing on a survey history of the Italian army at war. But there are a few items of note that pertain to this work as Tyre also attributes Italy's logistical problems and the quick succession of conflicts which drained Italy to at least partially explain their failures during the Second World War. One great anecdote is his description of a monument near El Alamein which is inscribed with the words "Luck was missing, not valour" to which Tyre adds that while the Italian soldier was often subsumed in the conflicts around him, his individual bravery was not found to be lacking.<sup>10</sup>

In an interesting cultural study, Bernard F. Dick writes in his study, *The American World War II Film*, that the Italians were impossible to dislike even when they were allied with Hitler. Hollywood never actually treated Italy as an enemy, instead preferring to vent its rage against Mussolini rather than the Italian populace. The fact that Italians constituted the majority of Rommel's force in North Africa made little difference in American propaganda films and shows how marginalized they had already become. Italians were portrayed in films as either harmless such as the general in *Five Graves to Cairo* (1943) or expressing regret over the war such as Giuseppe in *Sahara* (1943) who begs not to be judged by his insignia: "Only the body wears the uniform."<sup>11</sup>

Primary sources will be important to this study as memoirs, diaries, letters, and official correspondence will help to illuminate when and where, and to what effect,

interaction with Italians had on German and Allied perceptions. Hans von Luck's memoirs, *Panzer Commander* (or in German, *Mit Rommel an der Front*), is a very good memoir overall and details his experiences in North Africa fighting alongside the Italians. He is one of the few Germans, such as Kesselring, who felt some form of camaraderie with the Italians. He also discusses how other officers felt about the Italians and explains his own sentiments which were that they were good fighters but were poorly led and equipped. Liddel Hart's *Rommel Papers* is an excellent source for insight into how Rommel used Italian units and his thoughts on their performance and utility. Perhaps most importantly, it sheds light on his actual feelings about his co-belligerents not only while in North Africa but also as he prepared later to lead a German army into Italy in 1943. As mentioned earlier, memoirs are another source of important information because they penetrate the minds of the commanders and at times the soldiers themselves. Granted, memoirs should be taken with a grain of salt and are always slightly suspect because they are typically written with an agenda. However, there is still much of worth in them if used carefully and with a skeptical and analytical eye. This is only a sampling of the types of sources which exist on the campaigns in which the Italians participated.

There are many more works which deal with the Italian army in some capacity which will be used in this discussion, yet a brief snapshot has been presented which should give some insight into the way in which the Italian military has been presented in English language military history. The conclusions range from the ability of one British fighter to demoralize the entire Italian military to the assessment that the Italian navy fought the British to a draw in the Mediterranean. The current reputation of the Italian military among British, Germans, and Americans is obviously not very high based on

current research. Those who stand up for the Italians and their accomplishments during the war are quickly labeled historical revisionists by scholars, which is typically meant with the negative connotation of one who purposefully distorts history rather than a critical reexamination of a historical paradigm. James Sadkovich states it best when he says that this kind of Anglo-Germanic bias, which always interprets the war from a British or German context,

...contains tacit assumptions about the Italians that are essentially racist. There is a stress on the putative military incompetence and cowardice of the Italians, who are depicted as being overly fond of luxury and having little stomach for such manly activities as battle.<sup>12</sup>

The end result is that most historians treat Italy in their analysis of the Second World War as if it were not a major belligerent, which is to seriously misconstrue the events of 1940-41. Often Italy's contribution is reduced to a minor event in a greater Anglo-German war which not only distorts Italy's role, but also those of Germany, Britain, and America. For the early years of the war, it was Italy, not Germany, who fought the British in theaters surrounding the Mediterranean.

Italy was obviously the weakest of the great powers during the war and was able to claim few outright victories while suffering more than their share of devastating defeats. After the early disasters, the Italians were overshadowed by the Germans, yet the war which raged around the Mediterranean basin was in fact Italy's war. More precisely, it was Benito Mussolini's war since it was his dream to expand Italy's "empire\*," and it was he who had decided to declare war on Great Britain in 1940. His decision to invade Egypt in 1940 began the North African campaign which ended so

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\* Mussolini's empire ambitions included the acquisition of further African colonies in North and Eastern Africa, annexation of the Dalmatian coast including Albania. Sphere's of influence were to be created along the Levant and in Spain and Greece.

disastrously in 1943. Mussolini was the primary initiator of conflict in the Mediterranean theater and yet, it is surprising how often they are overlooked in discussions on these campaigns. Despite the war raging across Italian colonial territories and Italians making up most of the Axis forces including logistics, Italians are rarely afforded sufficient attention especially in those works which begin with the period after the German intervention. This remains the case regardless if the work examines the campaigns from an Allied or Axis viewpoint. There are very few works which specifically concentrate on the Italian military in Greece and North Africa.\*<sup>13</sup>

In all the English-language works which deal with the Allied and German involvement in the campaigns, the Italians remain, in the words of Ian Walker, “a shadowy presence.” Yet, their troop strength numbers and orders of battle make them all too obvious to ignore completely. Their contribution to the fighting is usually dismissed in a few sentences or paragraphs which prefer to focus more on their deficiencies. After such treatment, they are then relegated to the background with exceptions made to point out a defeat or surrender or to give commentary on their failures. As Walker asks pointedly, “was this really the full extent of their influence on the North African campaign?”<sup>14</sup> To best answer his question, it is necessary to understand Italy’s situation going into the war and how she was perceived her contemporaries.

This study attempts to present a slightly positive revisionist reexamination of the way the Italians were viewed by their contemporaries. Rather than just assume the reason for the large negative discourse on Italian fighting capabilities was due to the Italian soldier or their lack of some innate warrior quality, this study will seek to better

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\* MacGregor Knox, James Sadkovich, and Ian Walker have made a point of detailing Italy’s military in Greece and North Africa.

understand the reasons underlying the negative discourse. The British, German, and American portrayal of the Italians in propaganda, post-war memoirs, and historical monographs is not as uniform as might be assumed. The loudest voices have shaped the contemporary view of the Italians in a negative way, but there are those who knew the Italians better than most due to first hand experience and often times held a positive view. Historians have also held Italy to a far higher criterion than the Italians often held themselves by judging Italy's performance through the lens of German or Allied standards of success. In order to better understand why those judgments should be considered inaccurate, if not unfair, it is necessary to first take a look at the status of Italy's war machine and populace as it entered into the Second World War.



## Chapter 1

# Italy Embarks On The Second World War

When Hitler decided to invade Poland on September 1939, Italy was in no way ready for a general European war. In fact, as is often forgotten, Italy chose not to join the war until June 1940, after France had already been thoroughly brought to the brink of defeat. The state of Italy's industrial-military complex was extremely weak and in need of major overhaul and reform; however, Mussolini, despite understanding this, was less concerned with Italy's ability to wage war than he was with being left out in the cold within Hitler's shadow and being able to accomplish the reanimation of a pseudo-Roman Empire. Italian industrial capacity was only a fraction of other European powers such as Britain and France, much less their partner Germany. Italy was in no state to mass produce the weapons, ammunition, artillery, and other materiel required for modern war, nor was what it was producing sufficiently modernized. When the Italian Army entered the war, its forces were prepared to fight the First World War again rather than embark on the Second.

### **Italian Economic, Leadership, and Military Weaknesses**

A brief discussion of the Italian industry is necessary in order to better understand the difficulties the Italians had in supporting their various campaigns while attempting to hold onto their empire in North Africa. The Ethiopian campaign and subsequent sanctions by the League of Nations created within Italy a considerable extension of

governmental control over industry.<sup>15</sup> This furthered a trend of the concentration of Italian industry into officially sanctioned cartels or *consorzio* which exerted a monopolistic influence on the market, further damaging Italian industry. There is a document dated much later on 12 June 1941 which helps to illustrate this point. Italy actually considered producing German Panzer III tanks for itself and for Germany. The idea behind this offer was that Germany would give Italy 160% of the required material, essentially garnering Italy “profit” for every tank built and extra material for her war machine. There were three possible benefits to this proposed arrangement, namely, that it made use of German knowledge and assistance, it could be done rather quickly, and the Pz III had proven itself to be a successful design, especially relative to Italy’s offerings. Ultimately, this path was not chosen due in large part to the monopolistic duopoly that Fiat and Ansaldo held over tank design and production with the government’s blessing. Other companies had tried to break into this monopoly but failed, and there was a large amount of bribery behind the scenes. Cavallero (who incidentally was a former executive officer with Ansaldo) was given instructions on 4 February 1942 to refuse the German offer with the result that business continued as usual and the monopoly in tank production continued.<sup>16</sup>

Prior to the Second World War, Italy was commonly rated among economists as a poor country with a very low endowment of natural resources.<sup>17</sup> Industrial development had been less marked than any other European great power, and the predominant occupation remained agriculture which was carried on “with comparative ineffectiveness.”<sup>18</sup> The First World War only served to hamper Italian economic development when Italy took on debilitating amounts of credit and saw inflation of its

currency. Unfortunately for Italy, only extraordinary skill, energy, and leadership could have guaranteed Italian economic recovery prior to the Second World War, qualities Italian leaders sorely lacked according to Walter B. Kahn.

Table 1: *Total Industrial Potential* (as a percentage of Britain in 1900)

	1913	1928	1938
<b>Italy</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>46</b>
Germany	138	158	214
Japan	25	45	88
France	57	82	74
Britain	127	135	181
Russia/USSR	77	72	152
USA	298	533	528

Source data: Paul Bairoch, "Europe's Gross National Product, 1800-1975," and "International Industrialization Levels from 1750 to 1980," *Journal of European Economic History* 5:2 (1976), p. 297, and 11:2 (1982), pp. 302, 299.

Italy also attempted to achieve autarky in the years preceding the Second World War dating from the early 1920s. However, by the beginning of the war, Italy still imported roughly 79 percent of the raw materials needed to sustain its industries in the event of war.<sup>19</sup> Stockpiles were extremely low and could only provide for 40 percent of the requirements for one year at war. As may be expected, shortage of petroleum was the most serious issue. In order to function properly, Italy needed roughly 8 million metric tons of petroleum a year just for military operations excluding civilian activities.<sup>20</sup> After the acquisition of Albania in 1939, oil fields under Italian control still only produced around 170,000 tons a year. Romania could only supply Italy with roughly 600,000 tons, and Hungary and Germany made up another million tons.<sup>21</sup> Due to this amazing shortage, by the beginning of the war, the *Regia Marina* (Royal Navy) held only 1.7 million tons in reserve, the *Regio Esercito* (Royal Army) 200,000 tons, and the *Regia Aeronautica* (Royal Air Force) 130,000 tons.<sup>22</sup> Italy's economy and industrial capacity

was in no way sufficient to effectively fight a prolonged war against the combined weight of the Allied powers.

Italy expended massive amounts of money without clear strategic direction on various armament programs in the mid to late thirties. Much of what was produced ended up going to the Navy and the Air Force rather than for making up for the horrible shortages of the Army (not to say the other two branches did not have their own problems). Spending on the Navy and Air Force may seem sensible for a country surrounded by water and mountains, yet, for Mussolini’s aggressive foreign policy which required considerable manpower and material from the Army, such spending seems short-sighted. Then, with the advent of the Ethiopian War and the Spanish Civil War, most of the available money went into supporting those conflicts. Neither conflict strengthened Italy’s strategic or domestic situations and stole money from the meager rearmament and modernization programs of the military. The Italian Army was the last to obtain funds in the long line of projects.<sup>23</sup>

Table 2: *The Contenders: Military Expenditure As A Percentage Of GDP* (at current prices)

	1939	1940	1941	1942	1943	1944
<b>Italy</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>21</b>	-
Germany	23	40	52	64	70	-
Japan	22	22	27	33	43	76
Britain	15	44	53	52	55	53
USSR*	-	17	28	61	61	53
USA	1	2	11	31	42	42

\* at constant prices.

Sources: Italian GDP and expenditure from Vera Zamagni, “Italy: How to Lose the War and Win the Peace”; all other powers from Mark Harrison, “the Economics of World War II: An Overview,” both in Harrison, ed., *The Economics of World War II* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 179 (Table 5.1), 199 (Table 5.13), 201-03 (Table 5.14), 21 (Table 1.8).

Despite Mussolini’s decision to prioritize Naval spending and the financial drain of the Ethiopian and Spanish adventures, the Army managed to begin in 1937 a ten-year

plan for artillery replacement. In July 1938, Mussolini provisionally ordered five billion lire towards the production of a new line of artillery cannon and appropriate support vehicles. However, the inadequacies of the Italian manufacturing base regarding the lack of foreign exchange, machine tools, required steels, and the difficulties in retooling the necessary factories delayed the program until 1940-41.<sup>24</sup>

Priorities and industrial issues hampered the modernization and proper equipment of the Italian Army, but deficiencies in Italian armored fighting vehicles were “the consequence of deliberate choice” in the words of MacGregor Knox.<sup>25</sup> The Italian generals, forged in the First World War battles on the Carso and in the Carnic Alps, were more at home with the rifle and pack mule than the tank. Marshal Badoglio wrote in 1926 that “the nature of our terrain limits considerably the use of tanks, and thus the lack, and even total absence of them, does not have the same consequences which it would...for France and Germany. We can thus wait calmly.”<sup>26</sup> The Army’s intention to reinforce Libya quickly from the mainland at the outbreak of war led to a unproductive search for a vehicle which would perform well in both the mountainous terrain of Italy and the desert conditions of Libya. Despite the desperate need for increased motorization and mechanization of the Army, the Army staff deputy chief, General Mario Roatta, remained “decisively opposed” to the abolition of horse cavalry as late as the fall of 1940, though cavalry were useful in mountainous terrain.<sup>27</sup>

Despite such conservative and traditionalist views, two Fascist Generals Federico Baistrocchi and Alberto Pariani were given permission by Mussolini between 1934 and 1939 to reinvent the predominantly infantry based Italian army along new lines. This new army would be based on a mix of mechanized units coupled with motorized infantry

operating under the Italian quick maneuver doctrine of *Rapido Corso*. Though some promise was seen from Italian units participating in the latter stages of the Spanish Civil War, the experiment itself ended in complete failure. The light under-armed and armored tanks and insufficient numbers of trucks produced by Italian infantry contributed to the failure. The new two-regiment “binary” divisions created by Gen. Pariani lacked sufficient firepower and mobility. The maneuvers of August 1939 were intended to cement the new ideas into a coherent Army doctrine but it quickly turned into a fiasco. The August maneuvers exposed how the new concepts and ideas were far beyond Italy’s present capabilities in production and training.<sup>28</sup>

The lack of motorization in the Italian Army was an acute issue throughout the entire war. In Italy’s most visible theater North Africa,\* the ratio of motor vehicles to men was almost 1 : 21 on June 1, 1940. Italy was unable to bridge that gap significantly during the successive years as the ratio was still 1:19 in early 1942. Comparatively, the DAK enjoyed a ratio of vehicles to men of 1:3.6.<sup>29</sup> Italian infantry divisions and corps could not move at more than walking pace nor effectively attack British units. The British three-brigade division had a 2.5:1 manpower advantage over the Italian binary division. The Italian motorized divisions operated under the same disadvantages. Gambara was forced to explain to the Germans that the *Trieste* Motorized Division could only fight on foot, unlike a German light division, and was at the mercy of “any idiot armored car” while the infantry were mounted in their trucks.<sup>30</sup>

Compared to the other powers in Europe and the United States, Italy had an incredibly minor supply of motor vehicles. In 1939, Italy could draw upon only 469,000

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\* A *Comando Supremo* memorandum in early 1941 stated that in North Africa “our flag is committed before all the world.”

vehicles against 1.99 million in Germany, 2.25 million in France, and 2.42 million in Britain. Such lack itself was suggestive of military-economic weaknesses. The details are even more enlightening. For every thousand people in Italy there were 11 vehicles compared to 25 vehicles to every thousand Germans (who's population was two and a half times more numerous), 54 per thousand in Britain, 51 per thousand in France, and an eye-opening 227 per thousand in the United States that had a population over twenty times more numerous than Italy.<sup>31</sup> As MacGregor Knox points out, "the Italian armed forces could not take even drivers, much less mechanics, for granted" due to the small vehicle base.

The Italian military suffered not only from industro-economic problems, but also socio-military ones as well. Italians, as a generality, were not prepared for the long struggle which ensued after they entered the war. There was a distinct lack of domestic wartime propaganda about the need for national sacrifice or "Total War" themes. Few Italians were willing to die for Mussolini's "imperial" objective of creating a second Roman Empire. Field Marshal Kesselring remarked "there was insufficient propaganda for the war and its aims."<sup>32</sup> Another German observer of the "embryonic, muddled, and mismanaged" 1939 Italian maneuvers said the Italian Army of the Po's armored doctrine *Guerra di Rapido Corso* was in "children's shoes."<sup>33</sup> Yet, despite all of Italy's weaknesses, Mussolini's pride and ambition would not allow him to let the country stand idly by while Germany won victory after victory in Europe.<sup>34</sup>

Lieutenant David Belchem, a British tank officer posted to an Italian armored regiment in May 1938, was appalled at the lack of training and the age and inadequacy of the equipment "with which the Italian units were supposed to prepare for war."<sup>35</sup>

Belchem continues his observation, saying that Mussolini sent his men into action completely ill equipped, improperly trained in armored operations, and quite often “lacking in competent assured leadership.” One of the colonels in the armored regiment made a noteworthy confession to Belchem: “You know, if only we could combine Italian fighting guts with the backing of British money, we could sweep through Europe!”<sup>36</sup> Such a statement is quite enlightening in regards to the Italian perspective about themselves. Obviously, they felt, if given the right tools and circumstances, the Italian soldier could defeat any power in Europe. True or not, it’s telling about the confidence the Italians had about their own fighting capability despite their obvious materiel inferiority vis-à-vis the other European powers.\* This Italian confidence gives credence to Rommel’s and others’ statements and theories about the possible effective use of Italian soldiers within German units under German command with German equipment to make good Germany’s manpower shortage. There were examples of ad hoc command structures in North Africa such as during the battles of Gazala when Italian divisions were under a German general and Italian units frequently used 88mm guns on long term loan from the Germans, but this was the extent of the integration.

Table 3: *Italian And British Infantry Divisions, North Africa* (table of organization strength; actual combat strength was invariably lower)

Italian infantry division type A.S.42		British infantry division, 1941-42
7,000	Officers and men	17,300
72	Anti-tank rifles	444
146	Automatic rifles	819

\* This inferiority was primarily numerical (except in tank designs which were always woefully inadequate in construction and combat ability). Italy fielded a few weapons of worth during the war such as the later versions of the Macchi C.205 fighter and the Semovente M42 75/34. Yet, weapons such as these were produced too late and in insufficient numbers to offset Italy’s materiel inferiority compared to the other powers (not to mention Italy’s inadequate armored doctrine). A good discussion of the deficiency of Italian models can be found in J.J. Sweet’s *Iron Arm*.



92	Machine Guns	48
-	Light mortars	162
18	81mm/3" mortars	56
60	Field guns	72
72	Anti-tank guns	136
16	Light anti-aircraft guns	48
142	Trucks	1,999
35	Other vehicles	268
-	Trailers	197
72	Artillery tractors	159
147	Motorcycles	1,064
-	Tracked ammunition carriers	256
-	Armored cars	6

Source: Adapted from Mario Montanari, *Le operazioni in Africa Settentrionale* (Rome, 1984-93), vol. 3, p. 707.

Table 4: *Italian And British Armored Divisions, North Africa* (table of organization strength; actual combat strength was invariably lower)

Italian armored division (Ariete)		British armored division, 1942
8,600	Officers and men	13,235
18	Anti-tank rifles	348
900	Machine guns	868
-	Light mortars	60
9	81mm/3" mortars	18
70	Field guns	64
61	Anti-tank guns*	219
34	Light anti-aircraft guns	88
918	Trucks	1,415
205	Other vehicles	374
-	Trailers	134
54	Artillery tractors	53
504	Motorcycles	956
-	Tracked ammunition carriers	151
-	Other armored vehicles	37
40	Armored cars	60
189	Tanks	280

Source: Adapted from Mario Montanari, *Le operazioni in Africa Settentrionale* (Rome, 1984-93), vol. 3, p. 710.

\* The source's implausible figure of 250 Italian anti-tank guns has been adjusted downward by subtracting the 47mm main guns of the *Ariete's* tanks. (MacGregor Knox, *Hitler's Italian Allies*. Cambridge, 2000. p. 126. Footnote 35.).

Italy's military leadership also suffered from an array of issues, due to poor quality training and parochialism. Not to say that there were not individual exceptions within the officer corps and command structure; however, the general quality of those who led the Italian armed forces was not at the same level as her ally and adversaries. One major reason (there were many<sup>\*</sup>) for this disparity lies in the funding available for military expenditures which limited the amount and quality of training. Engrained social attitudes towards class and status compounded the deficiency in talent, allowing many who were severely underqualified to remain in their posts due to their high class status.

It is not surprising that accounts have surfaced about an Italian inferiority complex when Italians compared themselves to other nations. Rommel spoke about this Italian state of mind in North Africa, saying they had acquired a very serious inferiority complex due to their circumstances. Having to fight without anti-tank weapons and obsolete artillery in the face of what appeared to them as overwhelming British superiority only increased their sense of inferiority. In Rommel's opinion, Italian deficiencies in training meant that they were unlikely to overcome such neurosis through leadership and were continuously dealing with serious mental breakdowns. He also chided their officers as thinking of war as little more than a pleasant adventure and were having to face bitter disillusionment after battlefield defeats.<sup>37</sup> Rommel summed up Italy's weaknesses quite well, stating that her defeats had their roots in the whole Italian

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<sup>\*</sup> Other reasons for the disparity were educational standards, parochialism, and a military doctrine not interested in teaching initiative among junior officers.

system, both state and military. Their poor armaments and the “general lack of interest” shown by many Italian leaders both civil and military often hampered the Axis cause.\*

Table 5: Comparative Performance of Tank Weaponry 1941-42

<i>Vehicle</i>	<i>Armament</i>	<i>Penetration @ 1,000yd</i>	<i>Armor</i>
<b>Italy</b>			
M11/39	37mm	20-25mm	30mm
M13/40	47mm	33-41mm	40mm
M14/41	47mm	33-41mm	40mm
<i>Semovente da 75/18</i>	75mm	40-45mm	50mm
<b>Great Britain</b>			
Matilda	2pdr (40mm)	46-57mm	78mm
Crusader II	2pdr (40mm)	46-57mm	49mm
Stuart	37mm	43-50mm	44mm
Valentine II	2pdr (40mm)	46-57mm	65mm
Lee/Grant	75mm	65mm	76mm
Crusader III	6pdr (57mm)	77-83mm	51mm
Sherman	75mm	76mm	76mm
Churchill II	6pdr (57mm)	77-83mm	102mm

Source: Ian Walker, *Iron Hulls Iron Hearts: Mussolini’s Elite Armored Divisions In North Africa*, Crowood Press: Wiltshire, 2006. Appendix II.

Even soldier’s rations were poor compared to their ally and opponents due to industrial inefficiencies and ineffectiveness. In one example, Rommel states that often Italian soldiers “had to ask his German comrade for food.” As mentioned before, there was a equality gap between Italian officers and their men which had a detrimental effect on unit cohesion. While the men usually made due without field-kitchens, most of the officers refused quite adamantly to forgo their customary several course meals. Many officers did not even participate in battles and considered it unnecessary to “put in an appearance” as Rommel phrases, which set a very poor example for their soldiers.<sup>38</sup>

\* For a more thorough discussion of the military debates concerning motorization and mechanization in Italy up to her declaration of war in 1940, see J.J. Sweet’s *Iron Arm: The Mechanization of Mussolini’s Army, 1920-1940*.

Considering all the circumstances, it is no wonder that the Italian soldier, who “was extraordinarily modest in his needs,” developed an immense feeling of inferiority relative to the other powers around him and which accounted for his, as Rommel puts it, occasional failure in moments of crisis. Despite efforts by some officers who tried to address the various issues, the problem was too endemic to eradicate completely in sufficient time. The Italian soldiers themselves were actually aware of the multitude of problems which plagued their system and felt that as soon as the war was over, they would settle accounts with those at the top.<sup>39</sup> Rommel obviously has very colorful and forceful opinions about many topics and much more will be discussed about Rommel’s views of his Italian compatriots later. However, it is worthwhile to get a glimpse into an example of a general Western attitude and assessment of Italian arms going into and during the Second World War.

As late as the summer of 1943, training had to be cut due to footwear shortages, and coastal artillery units in Sicily were limited by a measly nine thousand yard range. Italian foot soldiers during the battle for Sicily in July-August 1943, surrendered by the thousands, or ditched their uniforms and attempted to fuse with the streams of refugees. A German high command assessment on June 30 concluded “the kernel of the Italian army has been destroyed in Greece, Russia, and Africa.... The combat value of Italian units is slight.”<sup>40</sup> The reason for this assessment stemmed from the virtual destruction of the *Regia Aeronautica* in Libya earlier in the year in May, and that two-thirds of the Italian army in Russia had been completely decimated during the previous winter. As a further example of Italian deficiencies, forty percent of the Italian forces guarding Crete were without boots, and three-quarters of the merchant fleet had been sunk attempting to

supply North Africa. Almost all raw materials were now provided by Germany who were even supplying the fuel for Italian warships. Roughly 1.2 million Italian soldiers served on various fronts and there were 800,000 in Italy; however, “few had the stomach to defend the homeland, much less fight a world war.”<sup>41</sup>

### **WWI And Interwar Italy**

It is worth noting how Italy fared in the First World War in order to better understand Mussolini’s mindset and the foundation of Italy’s global position economically and politically at the outset of the Second World War. At the beginning in 1914, Italy had been allied with the Central Powers of Germany and Austria-Hungary and had naturally gravitated towards Germany as both were new states who had both struggled for unification in the 1860s. Germany had been instrumental in securing certain concessions from Austria-Hungary, and this link was the primary reason for Italy’s alliance with the Central Powers considering there was no love lost between Italy and Austria-Hungary. The weakness of the alliance became apparent when war erupted and Italy chose to remain neutral, yet the stalemate on the Western Front caused the Great Powers to reconsider Italy’s position. In May 1915, Britain and France succeeded in gaining Italy’s allegiance due to a secret treaty which promised Italy territory from the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Italy then suffered through three years of brutal war and 650,000 dead including a disastrous defeat at Caporetto and a stunning victory at Vittorio Veneto.<sup>42</sup>

After the war, Italy was able to gain some territory as a result of the Versailles settlement, but it fell far short of what was promised by the Allies prior to Italy’s entry and what most Italians felt they deserved relative to their sacrifice. There was much

national resentment against the Allies, leading to a nationalist uprising which occupied Fiume, and it was quietly absorbed into Italy. Here was the first sign of Italian discontent with the post-war settlement and proof that at least a radical minority of Italians were prepared to take matters into their own hands if necessary. More nationalist resentment was fomenting over Italy's inability to secure worthwhile colonial possessions for itself. She had also been humiliated in 1896 in Ethiopia which stopped Italy's African expansion. Her conquest of Libya gained her little in the way of resources and would actually become a huge drain on the treasury. These issues rankled with many Italians who felt they had been denied the riches which African colonies were supposed to bestow.<sup>43</sup>

Inter-war Italy's ambitions remained unfulfilled and led to discontent with the international status quo. While this did not necessitate an automatic alliance with Germany and Japan, they did share a common dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs. When Italy and Germany sent troops to aid General Franco and his Nationalist cause, their troops worked in close proximity and developed close, but not necessarily friendly, relations.<sup>44</sup> As Italy began to draw closer to Germany, France and Britain failed to make any substantial moves to reign her back over to their side. To do so, they would have had to part with portions of their African and Mediterranean empires which Italy coveted. They were unsure if such concessions would in fact actually secure Italy's allegiance, nor did they particularly fear Italy's power. Anthony Eden, the British Foreign Secretary, remarked that "we are not in a mood to be blackmailed by Italy.... If Mussolini thinks he has only to beckon and we will open our arms, he is vastly mistaken."<sup>45</sup> France and Britain were also not convinced of the utility of Italian

assistance against a rising Germany though the full gamut of Italy's weaknesses would not be made evident until after the first years of the war.

Italy's involvement in the war was essentially political opportunism in which Mussolini sought to gain advantages for Italy at the expense of the other powers. Unfortunately, this opportunism carried over into Italy's management of the war and led to inconsistency in planning and prosecution of constantly changing war aims due to Mussolini's lack of a clear strategic direction. The by product of this opportunism was that the ordinary soldier rarely had any understanding of why – or for what – they were fighting the war. Some of their inconsistency in battle can be attributed to this lack of understanding and subsequent lack of do-or-die fervor more commonly ascribed to the German fighting man. As Walker notes, “the ordinary soldier found himself fighting the French, British, Greeks, Soviets, Americans, or the Germans, usually with no clear idea of the reasons.”<sup>46</sup>

Mussolini's lack of a definitive strategic vision for Italy and clear ideological direction created a weakened psychological state for his soldiers. Most Italian soldiers fought for the sake of their country and Italy's officers fought out of a sense of pride, honor, and tradition.<sup>47</sup> Being less ideologically driven also meant that, in general, Italians were less willing to die to kill their enemies than their more indoctrinated allies Germany, and Japan.\* Italians, by their own admission, were more willing to surrender as long as they had felt their duty had been completed and the odds were utterly stacked

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\* Italian attitudes towards those they conquered in Africa and Albania were completely different from those they held about their European counterparts. The Italians treated Arabs and the Albanian Muslims with heavy contempt. Regarding Europeans, from many secondary sources and from the Italians themselves, one gets the impression that the Italians were “fence-sitters” who, perhaps surprisingly, were more or less neutral in their feelings about their fellow Europeans and the Americans prior to Italy's collapse. The Italians could both hate and love a people as paradoxical as that may sound.

against them destroying any hope of victory. Their fanatical and more indoctrinated allies, in contrast, fought on when the odds were entirely against them, even if for little gain.<sup>48</sup>

For their part, the Italians were not always very fond of the Germans, which is another story completely, yet for the purposes of this paper, one anecdote is worth noting. Rommel never got on very well with his Italian superiors, especially Marshal Cavallero and General Gambara. Gambara was eventually replaced with General Barbassetti by Cavallero due in large part to a statement Gambara had made in the presence of some officers. He had declared that he wanted to at least live till the day when he would be granted the privilege of leading an Italian army against the Germans.<sup>49</sup> Tensions went both ways, and studies of Axis cooperation from Rich Dinardo and Mark Axworthy are enlightening on the subject.

The Italians wanted no German divisions in what they perceived as their sphere of the war. Marshal Badoglio hoped that the harsh desert conditions would deter the Germans – who themselves had very little desire to fight in North Africa – from trying to send whole manned divisions to North Africa. The Italians wanted German equipment but not soldiers and on October 4, 1940, Mussolini did admit to Hitler that he needed heavy tanks, trucks, and dive bombers but did not want nor need whole German divisions. As an example, Hitler had already prepared the 3<sup>rd</sup> Panzer Division for deployment to North Africa including repainting them with desert camouflage, yet they were reassigned elsewhere due the intransigence of the Italians.<sup>50</sup>

By 1942, Italian soldiers were also not pleased with the way the war was being conducted by their superiors. Soldiers felt that despite their own best efforts, experience,



and combat improvement, *Comando Supremo* back in Rome continued to mismanage the war. Italy's operational victories in North Africa – having pushed the British back across the border into Egypt – were seen as the result of sending better trained troops, combat experience gained, and “the example” of the Germans.<sup>51</sup> The equipment was largely the same still for the Italians, but an effort had been made to improve leadership in certain areas. At the unit level, there was actually a “spirit of revenge” against the government and the Italian High Command for their disorganization and the continued design and building of such inferior equipment.<sup>52</sup> They also felt they were being forced to fight a “poor man’s war” where the Germans were assumed to be gaining all the spoils from the war. The Italian soldiers’ mindset at this point in November 1941 was essentially “first win this war, then rendering all accounts” meaning, in stereotypical Italian bravado, that at the conclusion of the war, German “mistreatment” of her Italian ally would be addressed, forcefully if necessary.<sup>53</sup>

## Chapter 2

# **Germans and Italians: Commanders and Battles**

One of the hardest things to do in the chaos of war is taking the time to understand an ally on a deeper level than “this man fights beside me, therefore, he is my friend.” The relationship between Germans and Italians was complex and multi-layered with each side often not understanding the decisions or actions committed by the other. The Germans brought into the alliance many long-held prejudices against the Italians dating back through centuries of European history but also, more recently, from their experiences during the First World War. Many of these negative German opinions of the Italians outlasted, and were even reinforced, by Italian actions during the Second World War. But there were those, both Allied and Axis, who were able to interact with Italians on a deeper level and therefore give a more detailed perspective of the Italian soldier during the Second World War. This chapter will explore the beginnings of the German and Italian wartime relationship and what German perceptions were of their ally as the war progressed.

In early November, 1940, Hitler sent General Ritter von Thoma to assess the Italian situation in North Africa and the feasibility of sending German troops into the theater. After invading Egypt and then stopping only a few miles in, the Italians were routed and were being driven back through Cyrenaica (eastern Libya) all the way back to Tripoli in western Libya. Von Thoma returned to Hitler discouraged at the prospects of salvaging the Italian territories in North Africa. He dismissed the Italian military

leadership as severely lacking in quality, especially Graziani, who made a poor Commander-in-Chief. The logistics, climate, and terrain were all horrible and were not compatible to the success of a German relief force. Based on these circumstances, von Thoma recommended either sending a strong force of at least four German divisions or sending nothing at all.<sup>54</sup>

General von Thoma went so far as to tell Hitler that, based on his own experience in Spain during the Civil War, Italian troops were useless, that “one British soldier was better than twelve Italians.” “Italians are good workers,” he stated, “but not fighters: they don’t like the noise!” Admiral Erich Raeder also placed little faith in the Italians when he had presented his Mediterranean plan earlier to Hitler on September 26, 1940. In it he stated that the Italy was becoming the target of opportunity for the British who always sought to “strangle the weaker.” Italy was refusing German help because they had yet to realize the danger they were in and alone were unable to secure both Gibraltar and the Suez Canal. Presciently, he knew that Great Britain, along with the United States and Free France, would use North Africa as a staging base of resistance in order to defeat Italy first.<sup>55</sup>

The Germans were also less than ecstatic about the results of the various Italian campaigns thus far into the war. They had offered the Italians assistance of various kinds, but the Italians had refused out of a valid fear that the Germans would begin to dictate strategy. However, the scale of the Italian defeats had created a sense of urgency in Germany over the possible military and political collapse of Italy if she lost her foothold in North Africa. Hitler, perhaps mirroring his own political fear of military defeat, worried that Mussolini’s Fascist government would fall if Italy lost her North

African holdings thereby exposing Germany's southern flank. Mussolini reluctantly accepted German help because, as he knew, he was in no position to decline it. In January 1941, Hitler established the Afrika Korps and chose as its commander his friend the up and coming General Erwin Rommel.

The German force began unloading at the Tripoli docks on February 12<sup>th</sup>, 1941. Rommel brought with him common German prejudices against the Italians. The Italians were widely believed by the Germans to be weak, lazy, cowardly, and militarily incompetent. In Rommel's own experience, such prejudices had been reinforced fighting against the Italians during their collapse at Caporetto in 1917. As shall be seen here, his prejudices would find frequent expression in his outbursts against the Italians and would consistently single them out for blame even when German troops shared equally in a defeat or setback. However, despite his strong negative feelings, Rommel's view of the Italians became more nuanced than the typical German's.

Hitler, in typical fashion, raged against the Italians, shouting about the lunacy of the Italians to be "screaming blue murder" and lamenting their shortage of arms and equipment only to be so "jealous and infantile" that they hold the possibility of German assistance in soldiers and materials "quite repugnant." After working himself into a fine lather, Hitler roared that Mussolini would probably prefer it if German soldiers fought in Italian uniforms and German aircraft flew with the Italian Fasces on their wings.<sup>56</sup>

Germany finally did get into the North African campaign mainly out of a fear that if Italy lost her North African territories, she might try to get out of the war. Hitler was worried that if Tripoli fell, Mussolini might also fall with it and Fascism would be done in Italy. He therefore decided to send a *Sperrverband*, or blocking formation, on a

defensive mission to help the Italians. Also, by sending German troops to secure North Africa for the Italians, Hitler believed it would help protect his Southern European flank and the precious Romanian oil fields. The war in North Africa would remain primarily Italy's war, but there would be enough German troops and material to block any further Commonwealth advance on Tripoli while the greater war would be decided, in Hitler's view, on the vast Russian steppes.<sup>57</sup>

Hitler also viewed Africa as a tertiary theater, and a minor one at that, only to be given assistance to help his weak Italian ally. He was afraid as well to carry out the invasion of Malta which arguably would have cleared up the central Mediterranean due to his doubts over the ability of the Italians to give proper support, primarily naval, to the German paratroops once they attacked.<sup>58</sup> Malta would have been a tough battle regardless, and the Germans had their own not inconsiderable misgivings about any operation especially after the quasi-disaster at Crete were the German paratroopers survived only because of British tactical mistakes.

Colonel von Luck's account in his memoir *Panzer Commander* of his time in North Africa with the Italians portrays the Italians as more than pawns in the German war-machine and brings out a great deal of their humanity. His experiences began just as General Bernard Montgomery commenced his El Alamein offensive to drive the Axis out of Egypt. Monty had just regrouped his forces and during the night of November 1-2, 1942, he launched his second offensive with 400 tanks, strong artillery, and plentiful air support. He launched the attack on a narrow sector of the northern front of Rommel's line which was held by an "unfortunate, inferior Italian division" against which Monty was able to achieve a breakthrough.<sup>59</sup> The division was completely destroyed, but von

Luck notes that this did not happen until after the majority of the Italians had been killed or wounded. This is in distinct contrast to the mass surrenders which plagued the colonial Italian army in North Africa in 1941 against the first British offensives.

Von Luck's direct interaction began when he was ordered to fill the gap left by the 21<sup>st</sup> Panzer who moved up to fill the gap left by the destroyed Italian division. Von Luck was to support the XX Italian Corps which had been left on its own owing to the reassignment of 21<sup>st</sup> Panzer. When planning for a retreat became necessary, Von Luck chronicles that Rommel was most concerned over his non-motorized Italian units\* and did everything in his power to prevent their complete destruction.<sup>60</sup> Yet, while plans were being made, the British concentrated their forces against the XX Italian Corps, which owing to its poorly equipped defensive weapons, stood no chance of halting the British advance. Unfortunately, despite von Luck's best efforts, owing to his own inferiority in equipment because he was commanding only a light reconnaissance group, any help he could offer was "more moral than effective."

For von Luck it was "heart-rending" to have to witness the destruction of the Ariete Armored Division and remains of the Trieste and Littorio Motorized and Armored Divisions first hand. He called them "our most loyal allies" who fought with "death-defying courage" whose tanks (or "sardine tins" as von Luck and his men called them and admitted they mocked) were shot up and left to burn on the battlefield.<sup>61</sup> Ariete's last radio message to Rommel at 1530 hours was "we are encircled, the Ariete tanks still in action." By evening they had been destroyed, and von Luck offers a brief eulogy to

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\* Some of these non-motorized infantry divisions were either garrison or territorial units with even more inferior training and equipment and compounded the problem of moving them in a timely manner across a battlefield, especially without radios and during a retreat.

the Italian fighters in his memoir saying that “we lost good, brave friends” from whom more was demanded than they were in a position to give.<sup>62</sup>

Soon afterwards, von Luck was sent more Italian troops in the form of an armored reconnaissance battalion, the Nizza. He admits that at first he was not pleased due to his own negative opinion of Italian weapons or morale and seems to contradict his earlier statements of affection for the armored and motorized Ariete, Littorio, and Trieste divisions. These divisions constituted the best Italian armored, and motorized divisions in the theater and their destruction went a long way in thwarting Rommel’s ability to hold North Africa for the Axis. Most likely, his general opinion of the Italian military remained unchanged despite his positive previous experience. Many say first impressions are everything, and the Italian first impression during the early British offensive through Cyrenaica in 1941 left an immensely bad influence on German minds which were already prepared, due to preconceived notions, to see the worst in their ally. Von Luck makes the interesting observation that most of the men in the unit were from the north of Italy from Piedmont and Venice. The reason this is striking is the Italians themselves make the distinction between Italians from the north, around Milan and Turin, and those from the south, around Naples and Sicily. Northern Italians are seen as more urban and industrial while the Southerners tend to be viewed as agriculturists and less educated. Von Luck states they were “proud Piedmonts and Venetians” and perhaps he is showing his own bias against those who came from Southern Italy. He appears to be at least slightly more relieved about his position in accepting the Italian’s help once he learns that they are from Northern Italy. Without explicitly saying so, he appears to have valued their fighting quality more than those from the South.

He talks about how anxious they were to prove that they could fight, again bearing witness to the idea of an Italian inferiority complex vis-à-vis the Germans, and an understanding by them that they were so poorly viewed by the Germans. They asked to go on patrol with von Luck's units as they felt that was the best way they could learn. In a testament to the Italian fighting spirit, von Luck notes that the Italians wanted to be sent into action at the front despite the fact that their equipment, "more sardine tins," did not even approach the "standard of that which [the Germans] had had at the start of the Polish campaign."<sup>63</sup> He says his own feelings towards these men wavered over the next few weeks between pity and admiration for these brave men who, despite heavy losses, never gave up and "remained to the end, our good friends."<sup>64</sup>

Even more pertinent to this work, von Luck says at one point that without a doubt the Germans had often done their allies an injustice by mocking them as mere "spaghetti-eaters" and were considered, on account of their combat performance, as more of a burden than a help. He says that his fellow countrymen failed to consider that Italian equipment and weapons were far from the equal of those employed by the Germans and British in North Africa.\* Despite this, the Italians continued to want to fight and do what they could, and for this they should have received more praise instead of the vitriol which frequently condemned their efforts. Von Luck then takes a moment to discuss the Italians themselves and their culture, outside of a pure military judgment. He notes that the Italians have a cheerful and amiable disposition which contrasts sharply with his assessment of his own German mentalities. He states that it is said of the Italians that

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\* For a complete list/table of comparison between German, British, and Italian equipment see Table 5. What frequently does not show up on the charts, however, is the complete mechanical unreliability of Italian motorized equipment and machine guns, especially in desert conditions.



they “work to live” whereas the Germans “live to work,” showing another good example of stereotyping, though for both sides in this instance.<sup>65</sup>

Showing his cosmopolitan nature, and his nature as a traditional German officer, von Luck takes a moment to describe the culture of the Italians and how it affected their soldiering positively and negatively. For von Luck, there was no doubt that the Italians were outstanding engineers, designers, and road-builders who have given the world some of the most beautiful operas and classical music. He remarks that past Roman culture still marks the Italians today, as it has most of Europe, as charm, gaiety, and a Mediterranean climate have become an integral party of Italians. As he states, all these qualities and characteristics determine the features of the Italian soldier.

Von Luck perceptively notes that the Italian soldier did not take war as deadly serious as his German counterpart. The war, battle, and conflict ends for the Italian when “he considers it to be hopeless.” Hitler’s “pathetic” cynical maxim, “the German soldier stands or dies,” is to the Italian, “profoundly alien.”<sup>66</sup> Within this context, von Luck urges his contemporaries to judge the active service and performance of their ally. In contrast to this “Italian lifestyle,” von Luck so much more valued the service of the Nizza Battalion who fought, in his estimation, most bravely and until the bitter end. Von Luck held a less than stellar opinion of Italian forces in general, and was that much more impressed when individual units bucked his perceived notion.<sup>67</sup>

### **Rommel And His Experience With The Italians**

The man who arguably interacted the most with Italian soldiers and their leaders during the entire war was General Erwin Rommel who commanded the Deutsches Afrika

Korps (later the Panzerarmee Afrika in 1942) in North Africa from 1941 to 1943. When Rommel arrived, he was less than impressed with the Italian force he saw attempting to hold on to Tripolitania (western Libya). The worst feature of the Italian army in North Africa was that the majority of it was non-motorized. In the desert, poorly-motorized troops are essentially useless because the enemy can strike from any side with almost no natural barriers to act as defensive bulwarks. This lack of natural bottlenecks creates opportunities for flexibility and fluidity for those who can exploit them. Non-motorized formations which are only effective in prepared defensive positions are able to impede such operations very little. The advantage then obviously lies with the side which is, as Rommel puts it, “subject to the least tactical restraint on account of its non-motorized troops.” The great disadvantage of the Italians against the motorized and therefore much more mobile British was due to the greater part of the Italian force being non-motorized.<sup>68</sup>

As Rommel was summing up the Italian performance thus far prior to his arrival, he discussed parts of the early British counter-offensive against the Italians. He said that an Italian Black Shirt Division\* laid down arms after a short battle “in which the Italians had fought with great courage.”<sup>69</sup> Despite the surrender of the unit, Rommel gives this small praise which will vividly contrast with his statements about the rest of the Italians under his command during the early phases of the North African campaign. His praise is also one of the only of its kind for the Black Shirt Division. They are usually regarded as

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\* Black Shirt or Fascisti Divisions were composed of the more dedicated members of the Italian Fascist party. This does not equate them with the Nazi party SS divisions, actually far from it. Members of Black Shirt divisions often were looking for ways to climb the party ladder or seeking an easy assignment, as North Africa was viewed prior to the war. Members received little actual training and the units were formed on the assumption that their high morale and party fanaticism would make them effective in combat.

completely ineffective soldiers who were pulled from the worst ranks of the Fascist party for colonial duty. It is simply interesting to note Rommel's brief praise as he gives no other justification for it nor does he provide any real context other than as part of the history of the campaign to that point. If his comment seems more like an afterthought than a genuine expression, perhaps he was intending it to soften the blow of his criticisms which were soon to follow.

Rommel's first impression of the Italian army in North Africa was provided by Lieutenant Heggenreiner, Liaison Officer of the German General in Rome to the Italian High Command in North Africa (General von Rintelen). Rommel was greeted with the news that General Graziani, leader of the Italian forces in North Africa, had just given up command to his chief-of-staff, General Gariboldi, and was heading back to Italy.

Heggenreiner then informed Rommel as to the disposition of the Italian troops in Africa, and as Rommel stated, "described some very unpleasant incidents." The retreat had become a rout where Italian troops were throwing away their weapons and ammunition and climbing aboard overburdened vehicles in vain attempts to get back west towards Tripoli. Apparently, this had led to many ugly scenes including a couple of instances of shooting. After such events, morale was extremely low amongst the military circles in Tripoli where most of the Italian officers had already begun packing their bags hoping for a quick recall to Italy.<sup>70</sup>

During an early phase of his first offensive against the British, Rommel instructed Lieutenant Alfred Ingemar Berndt, an official of the Propaganda Ministry attached to his force, to get out to the Italians in an armored car as quickly as possible to find out exactly what was going on. Berndt later reported that he had been told by an infantryman that the

British had attacked their position with tanks. Berndt then moved out a few hundred yards to the east only to find a company of Italians being herded away by a British scout car on which he opened fire in the hopes of giving the Italians the chance to run.

Unfortunately, according to his report, the Italians did run, but east, into the British lines where a British armored car took them over.<sup>71</sup> Incidents and reports like this began the process of souring Rommel's overall opinion of Italian forces despite some magnificent performances at times. At this point, Rommel came to the conclusion that there was no use in continuing the attack against the enemy defenses with the forces he had due in large part to the "poor state of training and useless equipment of the Italian troops."<sup>72</sup>

Despite such pessimistic assessments, Rommel appears to have gotten on very well with the Italian troops he interacted with just after arriving. He immediately flew to Sirte to inspect a regiment of troops holding the line. He said they were well led by Major Santa Maria and Colonel Grati, not something you would expect after the rout described by Heggenreiner. In a letter to his wife, he notes that he is getting on very well with the Italian Command and "couldn't wish for better co-operation."<sup>73</sup> Considering his legacy of complaints against the Italian High Command, this early letter is enlightening. Again, it would appear that Rommel was willing to give the Italians the benefit of the doubt early in the campaign despite his inherent distrust of Italian fighting capabilities.

As another of Rommel's offensive counter-strokes began to wind down due to casualties and time-table snafu's, the 90<sup>th</sup> Light Division's war diary on July 2, 1942, dejectedly noted that it was up to the Italians to save the day. The "last hope" remained in the Italian divisions who the 90<sup>th</sup> Light believed had "seen but little action so far" despite being involved in some of the heaviest fighting across the front. They placed

little confidence in the Italians, writing “from such comrades there is little to be hoped.” Such pessimistic statements most likely stem from their own frustrations following their defeats and failures and by their ingrained German contempt for the Italians.<sup>74</sup>

Rommel wrote a rare tribute on June 6, 1942, albeit a reluctant one, to the Italians after a stubborn defense, noting that “in the weeks of fighting around Knightsbridge, the *Ariete* – covered, it is true, by German guns and tanks – had fought well against every onslaught of the British, although their casualties had not been light.” His grudging praise highlights the importance of the Italian role in holding their positions along the eastern half of “The Cauldron.” Their success protected Axis supply lines and allowed the Germans to punch through the center of the British line at Gazala.<sup>75</sup> Later at Mersa Matruh, Rommel tore into the Italian XX Corps and lost his patience with its commander De Stefanis. The circumstances were far from normal as XX Corps had been reduced to fourteen tanks, thirty-eight artillery pieces, and less than 2,100 men. Rommel, “exhausted, tense, and increasingly desperate,” demanded of the Italians “that your Corps should carry out the attack, destroy the enemy...[who] is under orders to withdraw.” He became even more terse an hour later in another message: “Trust your Corps will now find itself able to cope with so contemptible an enemy.” Such a rebuke was both unnecessary and unfair as XX Corps managed to push the 7<sup>th</sup> Motor Brigade aside and continue east later that morning.<sup>76</sup>

Rommel’s Adjutant, Major Schraepler, wrote a letter to Rommel’s wife on April 22, 1941, in his stead due most likely to Rommel’s constant place at the front of his troops. Schraepler gives an account in his letter of Rommel’s frustrations and his own in not being able to take Tobruk. He blames the paucity of German forces available and the

complete uselessness of the Italians despite their number. The Italians apparently were unwilling to come forward to battle at all, or when they were willing, ran at the first shot. His frustration reaches a peak and he states, “if an Englishmen so much as comes in sight, their hands go up.”<sup>77</sup> Most likely, the Italians became the scapegoats for Rommel’s failure to push his minimal forces to capture a well defended, almost fortress-like city, from a well-trained and motivated enemy. Rather than speak ill of tactical or strategic decisions, the weaknesses of the Italians becomes the catalyst for failure and the object of ire.<sup>78</sup>

On April 23, 1941, Rommel, in another letter to his wife, spoke of the Italians again, but this time let slip something of his past prejudices and experience with them. During the fighting at Tobruk, he was once again pushing his forces to the utmost and at one point the situation became, as he says, “highly critical.” After restoring the situation, he began to vent against the Italians. It is apparent that the situation becoming critical must have been the fault of the Italians, at least in Rommel’s estimation, despite his not explicitly saying as much. He says there is little reliance to be placed in Italian troops who are overly sensitive to enemy tanks and just like in 1917, “quick to throw up the sponge.” Here, for one of the first times, Rommel compares the Italians of the Second World War with those of the First. He gives no great dissertation in his papers on his experiences with the Italians during the First World War, but brief aside comments such as given here shed some light onto the feelings he brought into his North African command.<sup>79</sup>

There were times and moments when Rommel was more than willing to give praise to individual Italian units which had proved themselves in battle. As mentioned

previously, Rommel's views of the Italians were more nuanced than simple racism allowing him to judge individual soldier's based on their performance. It was also helpful if a particular offensive or defensive had gone well, putting Rommel in a better mood. During the battle for Halfaya Pass, an Italian artillery battalion gave a good account of itself and was well led by Major Pardi. Due to the actions of this unit, Rommel declared that Italian troops could be effective and useful on the battlefield when they were well officered. Despite all the bitterness which Rommel frequently flung at the Italians, when there was the possibility that even one Italian division might be taken from his command, he flew into a fit. General Bastico was worried about a retreat of Axis forces from East Cyrenaica and wanted to move an Italian division to cover the Agedabia area. On December 12, 1941, Rommel got into a "very stormy argument" with Bastico during which Rommel threatened to retreat with the German forces alone and leave the Italians to their fate, because he "did not intend to have a single Italian soldier removed from my command." After such an outburst, Bastico apparently became "more amenable" to Rommel's plans.<sup>80</sup>

On December 4, 1941, the Germans attacked El Duda but were repulsed which led to Rommel fearing a British outflanking maneuver if Bir El Gobi fell. A decision was made to abandon the eastern side of the siege of Tobruk and move all mobile forces to the south. A famous anecdote arose from this fluid situation. The Ariete and Trieste Divisions were ordered to join the DAK (*Deutsches Afrikakorps*) but Gambaro, who was commanding the Italian forces, received the orders late. The Ariete was continuously harried by British columns and air attacks, and the Trieste was slow in assembling. Additionally, the Italians had to cover twice as much ground than the DAK and, like the

entire Axis force, they were short of fuel and ammunition. The official Italian historian, Montanari, wrote that the divisional commanders of both Ariete and Trieste “lacked energetic initiative” which coupled with the poor status of communications and the inefficiency of the Italian command structure “led to the slow arrival and execution of orders.”<sup>81</sup> General Cruewell, who felt that the destruction of the enemy forces could only be achieved with the co-operation of the Italians, repeatedly radioed: “Where is Gambarra?” Gambarra, however, did not appear on the battlefield at the expected time and Cruewell’s signal became, in the words of Rommel, “a stock witticism with the troops in Africa.”<sup>82</sup>

Early 1942 saw a difficult period in terms of battle and supply for Rommel, and it showed in the increase of vitriol which he showered on the Italian leadership back in Rome. Trust was becoming a serious issue between the Germans and the Italians, the former believing that the latter were giving away secrets and troop movements to the Allies by using lax security with their encrypted communications. The truth was that Ultra was decoding the German transmissions, but it sowed further discord between the Axis and fit into Rommel’s view of the Italians as indolent and unreliable. Mussolini’s reluctance to reinforce North Africa in order to send more troops to Russia further complicated relations between the Axis partners. Kesselring came to visit Rommel in February and, for once, was not very cheerful. He complained of the immense bureaucracy that epitomized the Italian command structure and of a lack of understanding the fundamentals of modern warfare.<sup>83</sup>

Rommel’s greatest qualms about the Italians were due mainly to his supply problems in the desert which constantly hampered his operations and kept cutting him



short of his goals. What Rommel wanted in Rome was a “real personality,” someone who could take charge when needed and the drive to solve all the problems which come up in war. It would have led to a certain amount of friction in Italian circles according to Rommel, meaning that such a person would go against the grain of Italian sensibilities, but he believed this could have been overcome from authority not encumbered by other political functions. Rommel correctly assessed that Germany’s “weak policy” towards Italy and her shortcomings seriously prejudiced the Axis cause in North Africa.<sup>84</sup>

Rommel proceeded to give a detailed account of the main reasons for all the supply failures he experienced in North Africa, specifically who and what was to blame for the lack of fuel. Many of the authorities responsible did not put their whole effort into supply organization mainly because they were not the ones with their lives on the line. Peace “reigned in Rome” where there was no immediate threat of disaster or death even if problems went unsolved. He also claimed that there were many in Italy who did not understand that the North African campaign was reaching its climax as he drove on the British forces in Egypt. Those who did understand the urgency, for reasons beyond Rommel, did not put that urgency into their work. They were more willing to shrug off problems with “rows of statistics” and declare his problems completely insoluble. Rommel declared that these kind of people should have been sent packing before it was too late and replaced by those with the drive and urgency needed for such important work.<sup>85</sup> However, it should be noted that such comments should be understood in the context that Rommel lacked strategic vision and misunderstood the true complexities of supply.

The Italian Navy also faced Rommel's ire concerning the supply situation and their performance in the Mediterranean in general. The protection of German and Italian convoys crossing to North Africa was the primary responsibility of the Italian Navy at this juncture of the war, mainly because it was the only role it could effectively carry out due to fuel shortages and a lack of training, skill, modernized equipment, and poor grade ammunition. Rommel makes the claim that a great number of the Italian naval officers, "like many other Italians," were not supporters of Mussolini and "would rather have seen our defeat than our victory."<sup>86</sup> While the former may have been true, that many Italians, especially late in the war, were turning against Mussolini\*, the idea that throughout the war Italian naval officers were more for a German defeat than a victory is slightly absurd. Italian military officers understood that once Italy had hitched her line to Germany, she rose and fell with German forces and would have to fight all of Germany's enemies. To root for a German defeat meant rooting for their own defeat of which there is no evidence in any of the sources come across in my research. Perhaps Italian sources would paint a different picture, but that is unfortunately outside the scope of this paper.

Rommel goes so far as to believe that these same officers sabotaged whenever and whatever they could and that Germany failed to draw the "correct political conclusions" from these actions.<sup>87</sup> What those actions were Rommel does not specify. However, the reluctance of the Italian navy to risk its battleships in escort duty, or at all, played an important role in the supply situation. Basically, it would appear that Rommel had grown so frustrated with the Italians as he saw them that he would rather have Germany occupy Italy and take over directly the supply situation to North Africa. He is

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\* The Italian Navy remained the bastion of monarchist sentiment in Italy and many of its officers were not strong supporters of Mussolini and his Fascist party due to this.

correct in his statements about some of the higher Fascist authorities claiming they were too corrupt or too pompous to effectively carry out their jobs. Corruption was, and still is, an immense problem in the Italian bureaucracy and economy.<sup>88</sup> Once again, Rommel claims they wanted little if anything to do with the North African campaign, and to some extent there is truth in what he says. The North African campaign was seen as a colonial war and was viewed as a war of the previous century where only small amounts of units were needed to fight against vastly inferior forces. Many Italian and German leaders did not understand the strategic significance of controlling the entire Mediterranean basin, especially when your enemy was Britain.<sup>89</sup>

Rommel was always very suspicious of his Italian ally's ability to handle secrets. This was mainly the fault of ULTRA as it was able to provide the British with oftentimes detailed information regarding troop movements, convoys, and planned offensives. Ironically, after 1941 ULTRA, could not read the high grade Italian army cipher whereas the Luftwaffe's was easily decrypted, and read, and is where the British obtained most of their information. What is also worthy of note was that despite Gambara's comment mentioned earlier\* about wanting to lead an Italian army against the Germans, by the spring of 1942, he supported Rommel in most areas, was in good contact with him, and actually approved of Rommel's style of conducting war. Despite Rommel's suspicions of the Italians, he seems to have held Gambara in some faith as he was informed of offensive operations even when Kesselring or the Italian High Command were not. Gambara was also responsible for supplying the Germans with trucks and fuel and was therefore that much more important to Rommel on a daily basis.<sup>90</sup>

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\* See page 24.

Rommel sincerely believed in at least some form of constant Italian treason throughout the war. The defeat at the battle of Alam Halfa was one which really stoked Rommel's ire and made him believe further in Italian treachery. He would later recall that his plan had been handed over to the British by an Italian officer (the moniker "superior" would be added in later revisions).<sup>91</sup> Only thirty years after the war, once ULTRA had been revealed, would it become apparent what had actually taken place. At the time, however, *Comando Supremo* (Italian military high command) requested that the minutes from *Deutsch-Italiensch Panzerarmee* HQ interrogations of British soldiers be sent to Rome for review. *Comando Supremo* wanted to make joint interrogations with *Panzerarmee* HQ of any British soldier who declared Italian treason as the source of Allied information. Mellenthin did indeed bring minutes of an interrogation to Rome, though it was only relating to a very standard interrogation of a British NCO. Cavallero hounded Rommel and also complained to OKW, yet, within the ranks of both Axis partners, there was now a willingness to believe in treason. ULTRA had planted the poison within the Axis that now had German officers believing that Italian officers were readily giving information to the Allies while the Italians believed the same about their German counterparts.<sup>92</sup>

As the British continued their offensive along the coast after El Alamein, Rommel was less than pleased with the resistance which the Italian units put up. At one battle, it became apparent afterwards that the battery commanders had failed to fire on the approaching enemy simply due to a lack of orders to do so. Then Rommel says that the Italians left their line in extreme panic, ditching their arms and ammunition "with no attempt at defending themselves" and fled into the open desert.<sup>93</sup> The Italians here

belonged to the reformed Sabratha Division, an amalgamation of rear area troops (reserve units, non-essential bureaucratic personnel, etc) and not a tightly knit unit.<sup>94</sup> Their poor state of training and inadequate supply of equipment even for a non-motorized unit contributed to their collapse. Yet, other sources do not mention a wild panic taking place amongst the Italians of the Sabratha Division, instead noting that they were subjected to the “most intense artillery bombardment since World War I” and were attacked by two fresh British divisions.<sup>95</sup>

The British strategy of attacking the Italian formations while avoiding the Axis armor and mobile forces at all cost was starting to take its toll on Axis forces. The German forces were too weak to stand alone, and the Italians were unable to match the equipment and training of the British. Rommel desired that German and Italian units should be alternated to mitigate each other’s weaknesses in a process called “corseting.” Rommel was familiar with the concept due to his experiences fighting with the Austro-Hungarians against the Italians during the First World War. After the Germans and Austro-Hungarians had established a joint command, a similar structure of “corseting” had been implemented.<sup>96</sup>

The collapse of the Sabratha and the destruction of the bulk of the motorized Trieste Division led Rommel to the conclusion that the Italians “were no longer capable of holding their line.” Even when taking pity on them, Rommel is derisive in his comments, saying that such ineffectiveness should have been expected because he had demanded far too much of them by Italian standards and as such the current battlefield strain had proven too great. He does give credit to some outstanding officers who made the utmost effort to sustain their men’s flagging morale. One officer in particular, a man

by the name Navarrini, Rommel singles out for praise as being held in the highest regard for having done everything in his power.

Despite Rommel's continued skepticism of Italian fighting formations' ability to stand against the British, he offers praise for the individual Italian soldier. As mentioned, the strain on the Italians was particularly high during the early summer months of 1942, and many of the formations had collapsed due to sheer exhaustion and overwhelming enemy superiority in number and equipment. Rommel felt compelled by "duties of comradeship" and as their Commander-in-Chief to state "unequivocally" that the Italian failures at El Alamein in July were "not the fault of the Italian soldier."<sup>97</sup> To him, Italian soldiers were willing, unselfish, a good comrade, and considering the inadequacy of his circumstances, "had always given far better than the average." Rommel must have been in a nostalgic or emotional mood when writing about his Italian soldiers because he started to speak in hyperbole and said of the Italian units, especially the motorized ones, that they had "far surpassed anything that the Italian Army had done for a hundred years." After all the condemnation Rommel had thrown at the Italians, he was still able to say that many of the Italian generals and officers had "won our admiration both as men and soldiers."<sup>98</sup>

Rommel would say of Colonel Montemurro, on whom he had conferred the Iron Cross First Class, "the German soldier astonished the world, but the Bersaglieri astonished the German soldier."<sup>99</sup> During Operation Brevity in mid-May 1941, Axis

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\* Bersaglieri have a rich tradition in Italian Army lore. Created in 1836, they were, and still are, elite, highly-mobile infantry units distinguished visually by black capercaillie (wood grouse) feathers in their helmets. During the Second World War, the Bersaglieri were expanded to three battalions but no more for fear of diluting the high quality of the men in the units. They were trained to march further and faster than other units and equipped with bicycles to facilitate movement. They were distinguished marksmen and endured tougher training than their regular Army counterparts. Only after the war were they motorized.

forces defeated the Commonwealth forces; however, Axis losses were at least twice as severe and the Italians alone lost just under 400 men. Despite the losses, the Italians gave a good account of themselves throughout the action which the official Italian historian, Mario Montanari, attributes to better training, superior officers, higher level of *esprit de corps*, and the experience of previous victories. Additionally, they were inspired by Rommel's leadership and had more confidence in their Axis partner's equipment, some of which was allotted to them for use.<sup>100</sup>

The Italian High Command and most Italian officers, however, did not garner Rommel's affection or respect in the slightest. He considered the general Italian officer class "contemptible" and was especially horrified to learn that the Italian army practiced a strict three tiered ration scale. Rommel recognized that the Italian military operated under a very stratified class system where, in general, officers came from the nobility and soldiers from the peasantry. The officers had no sympathy for their men due to their lack of "military tradition," yet such was not an excuse for their complete reluctance to acquire one. He was willing to make an exception for the Regina Aeronautica who produced some fine pilots. He was nominally under Italian command despite his own high rank and so disputes with his superiors were common, especially due to his tendency to ignore or disregard their orders.<sup>101</sup> Rommel hated dealing with his Italian superior officers and hated when they would take away Italian formations from his command. He referred to General Bastico, who was known by many to be "difficult, autocratic, and violent," as "Bombastico," and both Generals Bastico and Gambara as "shits."<sup>102</sup> The Axis partners were not, in the words of Desmond Young, "the best of bedfellows," yet, in summing up the Italians to his son Manfred, Rommel made a not ungenerous and

refreshingly un-German remark: “Certainly they are no good at war, but one must not judge everyone in the world by his qualities as a soldier: otherwise we should have no civilization.”<sup>103</sup>

Relations between the Axis partners ebbed and flowed during the tough years in North Africa and prior to the invasion of Italy. The Italian General Roncaglia remarked after the war that relations between the Axis partners were correct, but it was often difficult for Germans to take orders from Italian territorial headquarters. Between the troops, relations were never very good or cordial. The Germans always displayed an “irritating sense of superiority” who were able to see “and this was true, our shortcomings in many fields.” After the defeats at El Alamein, one Italian general wrote that relations were often correct between commands and tactical collaboration was willing and fruitful but that there was no comradeship between the soldiers. Much of this ill-will between soldiers may have been due in large part to the disasters of El Alamein and the Russian front as many reports show that relations were actually at a peak while riding high on success during the summer of 1942.<sup>104</sup>

Towards the end of the year on December 14, 1942, the remnants of the Ariete/Centauro Battle-Group who were in retreat with the rest of the Axis forces were attacked by the 8<sup>th</sup> Armored Brigade near El Agheila. Despite being severely weakened from the retreat and preceding battles, the Italians put up a stiff defense. Their stubborn defense elicited strong praise from Rommel that “the Italians put up a magnificent fight, for which they deserved the utmost credit.” Later, as the Axis forces struggled to survive in Tunisia, the new commander of the *DAK* Assault Group, General Bulowius, also praised the Italians for their efforts against the Americans. The elite 5<sup>th</sup> *Bersaglieri*



regiment, after a great struggle, took Djebel Semmana despite losing their commander in the process. General Bulowius complimented the unit on its élan and told them they had contributed greatly to the Axis success in breaking through the US forces and opening the road up to Thala and Tebessa in Western Tunisia.<sup>105</sup> The highly trained and elite *Bersaglieri* were the only Italian unit to consistently receive praise from German commanders.

Rommel never understood the appellation given to him of being an “Italian-hater.” He had talked with Field Marshal von Richtofen about the possible inclusion of Italian soldiers within existing German units and the possible effectiveness of such a move. When the campaign finished in North Africa, Rommel was sent back to southern Europe to eventually take command and lead the German force preparing to help the Italians defend the mainland or occupy it as the situation dictated. Hitler, however, would not allow Rommel to himself enter Italy as it was feared this move would be seen as “tantamount to a declaration of war” between Germany and Italy. Cynically, Hitler told Rommel the Italians held it against Rommel that he was the only General “who has led them to victory.”<sup>106</sup>

As time wore on and it became more apparent that the Italians were stalling the Germans while they negotiated with the Allies, Rommel’s frustrations with the Italians was reaching a peak. On August 9, 1943 he flew to Hitler’s HQ to discuss the situation in Italy. Rommel considered the situation “extremely unpleasant” with the increasingly “unreliable Italians” who to his face protested their deepest loyalties for the Axis yet were causing all kinds of difficulties and who, Rommel presciently noted, seemed to be negotiating with the Allies. Rommel desired nothing more at this point than to be

allowed to go into Italy so he could meet with them face to face and speak “to the blighters openly.”<sup>107</sup>

By August 11, Rommel and Hitler were on the same page concerning the Italians whom they had discussed at length at Hitler’s HQ. Rommel felt like he was finally going to get the chance to move into Italy and was expecting the order to come from Hitler soon. He told Hitler he considered it time to begin making clear demands on Italy as a way to ascertain a common view for continued prosecution of the war together. The Italians had been lax in setting up defenses for the invasion which was becoming more obviously imminent by the day, and Rommel was chomping at the bit to begin construction of such defenses. Hitler apparently told Rommel that the Italians were just stalling for time so they could get out of the war. They discussed the Churchill-Roosevelt meeting (the Quebec conference or QUADRANT) together. The probable purpose, other than their belief that the Italians were taking part, was that it was to persuade the Italians to turn traitor against the Axis for the reward of easier surrender conditions.<sup>108</sup>

For six weeks after the Axis surrender in Tunisia in May 1943, Kesselring anticipated that the Allied blow would fall on Sicily. Kesselring believed, unlike most German generals – Rommel included -- that all of Italy was defensible if the Italians would fight. He believed they would fight, though as Rick Atkinson says, Kesselring’s Italophilia was tempered “with sardonic disdain.”<sup>109</sup> According to Kesselring, “the Italian is easily contented...he actually has only three fashionable passions – coffee, cigarettes, and women.” The Italian warfighter was “not a soldier from within,” echoing similar statements given by von Luck about the difference in attitudes which Germans and Italians fostered about war. Kesselring understood that most of the Italian soldiers

guarding Sicily were second rate coastal defense units, and in late spring had dismissed them as “pretty sugar pastry.” Yet when he received reports on July 10, after the invasion, that entire divisions were melting away, he was disheartened despite the colossal optimism that he was.<sup>110</sup> Little was expected of the Sicilian coastal units and as Atkinson says, that expectation was fully met.

An example from the Germans (of all groups) highlights the degree to which some Italians did at least take pride in their honor and were not as quick to surrender as some Germans have lead many to believe. Wehrmacht troops, following Kesselring’s contingency plan to disarm the Italian military after the armistice, burst through the Italian coastal division General’s door at Salerno, wherein a German major demanded his pistol. General Don Ferrante Gonzaga stepped back from his desk and attempted to unholster his pistol with the intention of shooting the German intruders and shouted “Viva Italia!” A quick burst of fire from the German’s submachine guns quickly silenced him, yet the major said of the General, “he died as a great soldier.”<sup>111</sup>

Even Kesselring, the eternal optimist and Italophile, who had so steadfastly held to pledges of loyalty by Rome, saw in retrospect that “every event was like a flash of sheet lightning, more foreshadowing than clearing the atmosphere.” After the Italian armistice with the Allies in September 3, 1943, Italy became simply a “card missing from the pack” for Kesselring to which he added, “I loved these people. Now I can only hate them.”<sup>112</sup> It may sound a bit melodramatic, but Kesselring had placed a great amount of faith in the Italians and had worked closely with their leadership for years as the war in North Africa was fought.

When Italy officially surrendered to the Allies on September 3, 1943, the Germans put into effect their contingency plan for occupying as much of Italy as possible to defend against the Allies. During this occupation, the Germans killed thousands of Italian troops and officers who showed any resistance, especially in Northern Italy. Overnight Italian partisan movements sprang up who would suffer immensely from German retaliatory massacres. \* Italian soldiers who refused to collaborate with the German occupying forces were killed or carted off to concentration camps and became heroes of the *Resistenza* as the Italian resistance came to be known. The Italian garrison in Cefalonia is the best known example of Italian troops courageously defying the Germans. In September 1943, the garrison refused to surrender their base despite overwhelming German forces and paid the ultimate price. The Germans forcibly captured the town and killed six thousand Italian prisoners by firing squad. In another example, the 103<sup>rd</sup> Motorized Division Piacenza was completely annihilated fighting against the Germans near the French border in Northern Italy in September 1943. Anecdotes such as this serve to highlight Italian courage in the face of certain defeat.

### **German Impressions Regarding The Italians**

Desmond Young relates some very engaging stories about the Germans and Italians in North Africa and the tales which arose from their constant interaction and mutual distrust and dislike. Rommel related many stories back to his son Manfred, and many of them shed some insight into what kind of light Rommel held the Italians. These stories also show to what degree Rommel was willing to believe negative stereotypes

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\* For a detailed account using extensive primary sources see Maria de Blasio Wilhelm's *Other Italy: The Italian Resistance in World War II*.

about the Italians which often reinforced his own beliefs in their inefficacy in modern war. One such story concerns the Italian attack of Tobruk. As they advanced and reached half-way between their starting lines and those of the enemy and were out of reach of the Germans, they immediately began to surrender by laying down their arms and putting their hands up. However, they suddenly turned around and came running back to their lines. "Mamma mia!" they exclaimed, "those aren't English, they're Australians!" In another story, Rommel was visiting the Italian trenches during an Australian attack. Immediately, the Italians cried "Sancta Maria!" and fell to their knees whereby Rommel told the Italian officer in command: "I'm going to give you a bit of advice. Stop them praying and persuade them to shoot.... This is where I leave you. Good-bye!"<sup>113</sup> Such stories were embellished and when repeated ad nauseam (facilitated by the German willingness to readily believe such stories due to ingrained prejudices) created the sense that the Italians truly were terrible soldiers more willing to surrender than to fight.

Desmond Young questions the veracity of many of these stories citing their similarity to stories he himself heard during the First World War. One particular story stands out to him about an incident where the Australians had sent back Italian prisoners with the back of their pants cut out and a message to the Germans to replace them with the same number of Afrika Korps members. Young remembers that the Germans were said to have done almost exactly the same thing themselves with the Italians after a failed Italian raid at Merville in 1918. The difference was that in this case, the Italians had their butts painted blue and the message from the Germans was that if they wanted specimens, they would come and collect them, therefore, the British need not send them over

unnecessarily. To Young, these stories are much too similar to be anything but myth and legend, and he would not be surprised if “they are as old as war itself.”<sup>114</sup> Many “soldiers’ stories” concerning Italians were apocryphal in nature or distorted to such an extent as to make any grain of truth within impossible to discern.

In a general sense, Rommel agreed with what one Italian soldier told him: “Why don’t you Germans do the fighting, General, and let us Italians build the roads?” Young states, and is backed up by Rommel himself and other scholars, that Rommel never thought that all Italians were cowards. The Ariete had shown that they were capable of fighting very well during the battle at El Gubi, and Brescia had shown flashes of competence on the battlefield. The pioneers showed their usefulness and worked well even when under fire. With the proper equipment, good officers, and – importantly but hardly ever mentioned – the prospect of home leave, Rommel believed that Italian troops could have been very successful. The prospect of home leave is vital to a soldier’s morale. General Speidel related to Young that the Italian divisions which hailed from the north of Italy and fought under General Garibaldi’s 8<sup>th</sup> Italian Army in Russia fought well under much worse conditions than found in North Africa.<sup>115</sup>

The reality in North Africa, however, was that the Germans felt Italian equipment, like their officers, were worthless (the ubiquitous “sardine-tins” mentioned earlier). Most of the tanks and armored cars the Italians fielded were without radio sets and had to communicate by flags, which was less than ideal even in the best conditions. For their part, the Italian Bersaglieri had extremely positive things to say about Rommel in their reports to Mussolini. He related some of their comments in a meeting of his Council of Ministers on February 7, 1942. While possibly embellished for his audience, Mussolini

said that the Bersaglieri gave Rommel “their feather (*they wore distinctive feather plums in their helmets*) and carry him in triumph on their shoulders,” positive that he will lead them to Alexandria. Rommel seemed to have a paternal affection with Italian “other ranks” which garnered him an amount of affection in return.<sup>116</sup>

After the failures of 1940 and 1941, Germany was in control of the entire war effort and strategy even within Italy’s theater of operations. The Italian collapses had convinced Hitler, who had always been skeptical of the usefulness of Italian membership in a racially reorganized New Order, that Italy’s services would no longer be required after ultimate victory in Russia. Germany need not “have further regard for Italy” who was inhabited by a people who were “merely eaters, not fighters.” He was confident that Rommel would be able to move on towards Alexandria and that German thrusts through Turkey and Transcaucasia would bottle up the Middle East. The vast resources of the Russian steppes would place world mastery at Germany’s fingertips without the need of Italian assistance.<sup>117</sup> Thus were Hitler’s and Germany’s attitude toward her staunchest ally summed up.

## Chapter 3

# The Allies And Their Italian Opponent

Concerning the British viewpoint, many contemporaries of the Second World War are familiar with newsreels and Allied propaganda showing mile long lines of Italian prisoners being escorted by a single British soldier. Such images were reinforced by newspaper accounts of Italian military disasters and incompetence which were often deliberately contrasted with images of German military efficiency and might. Many of these reports about the Italians were laced with racial stereotypes and produced a very strong negative image of the Italians early in the war for British subjects.<sup>118</sup> The Germans reinforced such an interpretation through their reports and accounts which were often openly hostile and contemptuous of their co-belligerent. All of these factors have left a powerful negative tradition in English-language histories of an Italian nation full of dilettantes, utterly lacking in military acumen, and absent of courage. A reexamination of this contemporary negative view is necessary to understand what, if any, truth lies behind it and from where it originates.

As early as 1941, Italy's military reputation was shattered due to the disaster of the Greek campaign, the stunning British attack at Taranto, and the mass surrender of Italian forces in North Africa to the British in 1940. As a consequence, the British became "openly dismissive" of Italy's military capabilities and regarded them thereafter as only third-rate opponents "worthy of little more than sympathy or contempt."<sup>119</sup> This attitude towards the Italian military would subsequently influence the British into



dismissing Italian units and their impact on events. This dismissive attitude played into some of the poor British strategic and political decisions regarding military priorities such as their intervention in Greece which took valuable troops away from North Africa.

During an attack on the Egyptian frontier in 1941, the Italians came across a strong Australian artillery barrage and suffered heavy casualties before having to fall back. Rommel claimed there was widespread and immediate panic among the Italians which only he was able to halt. However, the Australians, who captured seventy-five Italians, “failed to notice any sign of this general panic.”<sup>120</sup> Meanwhile, the British were planning their own attack which would take the British armor right past the Italian Ariete Division. The British were not overly concerned despite the danger it posed to their left flank and virtually ignored its presence. Their low opinion of Italian troops formulated during the easy victories of 1940 clearly influenced their planning. In reality, the existence of Ariete astride their line of advance proved to be a large hindrance to British operations and brought their offensive to an early conclusion.<sup>121</sup>

The successful defense by Ariete effectively stymied the course of the British offensive, yet it went almost completely unnoticed by both Rommel and the British at the time. The British remained ignorant of the situation at Bir el Gubi where the Italians had held and assumed that Ariete had been decisively defeated. The 1<sup>st</sup> South African Division was ordered to secure the area with the understanding that they only had to walk in and occupy an area already abandoned by the Italians. Before the South Africans arrived, they received notification that the area was indeed strongly held by enemy forces, yet British prejudice against the Italians won out and only a single brigade from was sent to dislodge the Italians. The British commanders were clearly not used to such

Italian stubbornness and felt that the Italians must have been decimated by the attack of the British 22<sup>nd</sup> Armored Brigade that there was minimal risk to the South Africans.<sup>122</sup> However, when the South Africans moved up to attack they were met with fierce Italian artillery fire and made the decision to halt before a serious clash took place. The 1<sup>st</sup> South African Brigade then moved to mask the *Ariete* position rather than attempt an assault without support from the 22<sup>nd</sup> Armored Brigade. The end result being that the Italians held their position and secured the Axis flank during a tense and important battle around Bir el Gubi.<sup>123</sup>

*Ariete* would later inflict an important defeat on the New Zealanders near Tobruk in late 1941 at almost no cost to themselves. The New Zealanders at first thought the Italians were their supporting troops and realized their mistake too late and were overrun. The New Zealanders are still embarrassed about this incident to this day. The *Official History* of the 21<sup>st</sup> Battalion relates the battle in detail yet refuses to name the enemy unit involved or to acknowledge that it was Italian. It would appear that the relentless propaganda about the Italians have made the New Zealanders reluctant, even as of 1953 when the *Official History* was written, to acknowledge that the “incompetent” Italians were behind their embarrassing defeat.<sup>124</sup>

On December 4, the 11<sup>th</sup> Indian Brigade was preparing a dawn attack on some supply dumps at Bir el Gubi where *RECAM* (*Raggruppamento Esplorante del Corpo d'armata di manovra* or Armored Maneuver Corps Reconnaissance Group) was located. The plan was to surprise the Italians, whom British intelligence predicted “would not put up much of a fight” by approaching from the west.<sup>125</sup> The Indians, though, were in for a rather unpleasant surprise due to the two *Giovani Fascisti* – Young Fascists – battalions

attached to the formation.\* They were volunteer battalions composed of fanatical Fascist students who were both well trained and well equipped. They differed in just about every respect from the overage and overweight Blackshirts who had defended Libya in 1940. The Italians had been preparing for an attack since the previous day when intelligence reports indicated an attack was imminent.<sup>126</sup>

The successful two-day defense by the Italians against superior forces became one of the epics of the campaign and a total surprise to the British. The 11<sup>th</sup> Indian Brigade was completely decimated with the added intervention of the *DAK*. What this battle illustrates is that individual Italian units in precipitous circumstances could prevail and could be as effective as their German counterparts. Had those circumstances – and a great many were necessary – worked in Italy’s favor perhaps British and Commonwealth forces would not have defeated the Italians in North Africa as often as they did. Yet, in reality, the shortcomings of the Italian situation prevented such positive outcomes.<sup>127</sup>

While fighting in early July at El Alamein, the XX Corps suffered a major defeat while their opponent, the British 19<sup>th</sup> Battalion, only suffered two killed and twenty wounded. The British described the captured Italians as “a dirty, greasy, unkempt mob, without fighting spirit” which, considering that they had seen continuous action since May 26 is not all that surprising.<sup>128</sup> The disastrous setback suffered by Ariete is typically

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\* The *Giovani Fascisti* or *GGFF* were not members of the Fascist Militias or *MSVN*. The *GGFF* was a regular army unit whose members were recruited from the Fascist university or *GUF* (*Gioventù Universitaria Fascista*). Originally, 19,000 *GUF* students were recruited into 24 battalions but due to power struggles between the Army and *MSVN* and fears from the Army over where the *GUF* students loyalties, the *GGFF* battalions were reduced in number to two. However, these two remaining units maintained a very high *Espirit de corps* and were able to select from the best commanders and recruits from the original 19,000 volunteers. The *GGFF* battalions were sent to Libya in July 1941 and served under *RECAM* during the operations around Bir el Gubi in November and December 1941. For further information including order of battle, please visit <http://www.comandosupremo.com/Giovanifascisti.html>

used to illustrate the poor performance of the Italians and confirm existing attitudes about them.

An Australian soldier, Sergeant Major Robert Donovan of the 16<sup>th</sup> Battery 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion 2<sup>nd</sup> Australian Field Regiment, Royal Australian Artillery, 6<sup>th</sup> Australian Division, recalled a couple of episodes where he and his unit encountered the Italians. Their first encounter was actually while on a troop ship heading to the Middle East before Italy had entered the war. His troopship passed an Italian troopship in the Red Sea at close proximity and as he said, there was “an exchange of ‘insults.’” He stated that his comrades and he thought badly of the Italians because of their invasion and occupation of Ethiopia. Despite much of the animosity towards Italians which was common among British and Commonwealth troops, there were examples of either compassion or acceptance of the enemy.

One Italian POW captured by the Australians wandered into their vehicle dispersal area and asked for water and the cooks obliged. Donovan goes on to say that since the Italian soldier showed no desire to join his comrades in the POW compound, he was put to work in the kitchen and happily went about his business. The soldier was quickly accepted by the Australians and began to do all manner of tasks. Due to his training as a diesel mechanic, he even repaired several captured vehicles for service with the Australians. Most likely, since he could hear the cries of the other Italian POWs for water in the compound a few kilometers away, he remained with the Australians until they moved to Tobruk. At this point, Donovan was ordered to send the soldier to the POW compound and as he left, the soldier continuously shouted pleas that he be allowed

to stay which made Donovan feel “lousy, but he went, I still wonder what happened to him.”<sup>129</sup>

Donovan on at least two more occasions interacted with Italian soldiers both of which left a good impression on him. During the attack on Tobruk, Donovan surprised an Italian soldier in a pre-dawn assault. Donovan drew his pistol, and the soldier’s hands went straight up. But Donovan had left some cleaning cloth in the muzzle of his pistol, and the sight made both men laugh. They both sat down and shared photos and as much of a conversation as could be done between two different languages. Donovan’s impressions of the soldier were that he was a nice man, and the two even shook hands as the soldier was led off into captivity.

The third incident involving Donovan and an Italian soldier occurred when an artillery officer was placed into his custody. The soldier apparently spoke good English and was willing to talk about the war and fascism. The Italian, who had been a journalist before the war, mentioned that if one wanted to survive in Italy, one had to join the party. He was worried about how he would be treated as a POW, and Donovan replied that his “treatment would be humane.” To the soldier’s surprise, Donovan saluted him as they were about to part, and the both shook hands. Donovan notes that “the Italians that I met [were] ordinary men doing a job that they did not enjoy.” After his encounters with the Italians first hand, Donovan’s feelings towards Italy and her fighting men softened, and he better understood their position in the war as individuals.<sup>130</sup>

The British at this juncture made a serious strategic mistake. One assumption among the many complexities involved in their decision was that the Italians in Tripolitania could be disregarded because the Germans would not risk sending large

bodies of troops to North Africa. The Italian Navy, Britain felt, would not be up to the task of transporting safely the necessary German troops into Tripoli. Britain therefore decided to send “maximum support” to the Greeks to attempt to prevent their collapse.\* Rommel decided to take advantage of this shift in British priorities and ordered an immediate offensive into Cyrenaica despite protests from his superiors. During this first offensive, Rommel was surprised to find that the Italians had turned and were fleeing west in a “wild rout.”

The British at this same time were definitely thinking they could take advantage of the “weak” Italian units making up most of the Axis line opposite El Alamein. Auchinleck was seeking to exploit this and produce a crack in Rommel’s line by striking directly at the Italians. Auchinleck’s chief assistant at this time, Dorman-Smith, was an advocate of the indirect approach and had been instrumental in formulating the plan to defeat Graziani’s forces in 1940 at Sidi Barrani.<sup>131</sup> Over the next month of July, the British would continue to strike at the Italian positions engaging in battle with the X Italian Corps, the Brescia, Trento, Trieste Divisions, and the remnants of the Sabratha Division. As Rommel mentions in a letter to his wife on July 17, the British were destroying “the Italian formations one by one.”<sup>132</sup>

In a night attack against the X Italian Corps, the British took particularly heavy losses including 200 prisoners among which was Brigadier Clifton, commander of the 6<sup>th</sup> New Zealand Brigade. As Rommel relates the story, Clifton was ashamed at having been taken prisoner by the Italians. He had actually been in the process of getting the Italians

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\* The British decision as presented here has been overly simplified in order to highlight the effect of Italian military defeats on overall British Mediterranean strategy. For a more detailed examination of the British decision to send troops into Greece see Winston Churchill’s *Volume 3 of The Churchill War Papers* edited by Martin Gilbert.

to surrender and had succeeded to the point where many Italian soldiers were removing the bolts from their rifles when a German officer came along and rallied them. Clifton actually told Rommel that he would like to become a prisoner to Germany and not be sent to Italy.<sup>133\*</sup>

During Crusader, November 18 to December 30, 1941, the British 22<sup>nd</sup> Armored Brigade, led by Brigadier Gott, attacked the Ariete which was deploying near Bir El Gubi. The reasons for the attack have never been fully explained; perchance he wished to “blood” the newly arrived 22<sup>nd</sup> on a seemingly “weak” Italian unit and to strengthen his left flank. As it was, the strength of Ariete was overestimated by the 22<sup>nd</sup> due to not all units of the Ariete having yet arrived. The British were defeated in this action, and their accounts afterwards show the level of disdain they had for the Italians. Their accounts either state that they unequivocally won the battle, which they did not, or the Italian unit was officered by Germans, or amazingly in one account, that Panzer IV tanks fought alongside the Italian M13’s and German infantry were present. The Germans of course were not present and in fact, Rommel was completely unaware the battle had taken place until several hours later.<sup>134</sup>

The New Zealanders finally linked up with the garrison at Tobruk during the night of November 27, 1941. After a fierce battle which achieved the final breakthrough, the New Zealanders took a moment the next morning to identify their opponents. Their official history describes the plumed hats of the fallen as having belonged to the 9<sup>th</sup> Regiment Bersaglieri from the Trieste Division. Many of the men who fought through

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\* Concerning Rommel, the Italian historian Emilio Faldella made an important point in stating that the myth of Rommel was in large part created by the English who wished to justify their defeats in the desert during 1941 at the hands of a mythically talented general rather than recognize the actual fighting capabilities of the Italian and Germans.

the night and had occasion to see their dead opponents in the morning “had occasion to sharply revise their opinion of Italians as fighting men.” The elite *Bersaglieri* regiment surprised the New Zealanders in the sense that they showed much greater determination “than is usually found among Italian troops.” The positions of the dead also showed that the Italians had continued to man their guns to the last, and it was actually reported by the New Zealanders that the first to break during the attack were the German troops where the Bersaglieri were “the last to yield.”<sup>135</sup>

The British continuously attributed their losses in battle to German activity rather than acknowledging that the Italians were often the victors of such battles. During Operation Aberdeen over the days of June 4 and 5, 1942, the British made a poor attack against prepared Axis positions which were supported by anti-tank guns. The Italians received the brunt of this attack, yet the British official history and historian Michael Carver refer to the attack as an attempt to pierce one of Rommel’s rearguards. That the defense was primarily manned by Italians was conveniently ignored by the British.<sup>136</sup>

The success of Wavell and O’Conner’s well planned operations against the Italians in North Africa during the winter of 1940-1941 gave a false sense of security to the War Office. They began buying into Churchill’s policy of peripheral warfare where the British would pick off the “second-class forces” of Hitler’s weaker ally while attempting to bring the United States into the war. O’Connor was able to handily defeat the Italians, taking 38,000 prisoners at Sidi Barrani, 25,000 prisoners at Tobruk, and another 25,000 at Beda Fomm. The total prisoner count for O’Connor was roughly 130,000 Italians, with 500 tanks and 800 guns for the loss of less than 2,000



Commonwealth casualties out of which only 500 were killed. Churchill was overjoyed and O’Conner gained a knighthood.<sup>137</sup>

The excellent British historian Nigel Hamilton buys wholeheartedly into the concept of Germans as the ultimate saviors of the bungling Italians. As he describes it, the German “way of making war was quite, quite different from the Italian,” and Britain would suffer for her pride in performance against the Italians. German forces were able to extract the Italians from their own disaster within three weeks of the first German forces being committed in the spring of 1941. Greece was conquered, the Balkans were cleared, and Rommel overran Cyrenaica with the DAK capturing the British hero General O’Connor. Hamilton forgets to mention the newly arrived Italian *Trento, Brescia, Pavia*, Motorized Divisions and the *Ariete* Armored Division which made up not only the majority of Rommel’s new force but also his vanguard into Cyrenaica.<sup>138</sup> To Hamilton, the Germans were solidified as the saviors of the bumbling Italians through the quick work Germany had made of Italy’s opponents especially in North Africa.

At the very beginning of the conflict in North Africa in 1940, the British were just crossing into Italian Libya – or in British parlance, “going over the Wire” – when they engaged an Italian column. To the complete stunned astonishment of the British, the Italians, who were three miles distant on a flat plain totally devoid of cover, had marshaled their forces into a formed square. The sight of this mix of Wellington’s infantry at Waterloo and the Hollywood prairie laager where the Italian L3 “tanks”<sup>\*</sup> patrolled outside made the Italians look like “the Indians and Palefaces had joined

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\* The Italian L3 armored fighting vehicle was commonly referred to by contemporaries and officially listed by Italy as a tank (CV or *Carro Veloce* “fast tank”). However, it relates more closely with what would now be called a tankette. Sporting only two 8mm machine guns and a crew of two its obsolescence was readily apparent to outside observers even before the war began.

forces.” The British historian Barrie Pitt states that two thoughts crossed the mind of Lieutenant-Colonel John Combe: “who do they think they’re fighting, and do they have any concealed artillery?”<sup>Ψ</sup> Eventually, the British decided to answer both of those questions in the process defeating the Italians in detail, not least in part because of the terrible equipment of the Italians, especially the L3 tank. Pitt describes the L3 as “probably the most ineffectual fighting vehicles ever put into production.”<sup>139\*</sup>

During the early conflict in North Africa in late 1940 and early 1941, most of the documents, diary entries, and many of the interviews which have been researched by historians typically come not from the British themselves, but their Commonwealth allies. After the fall of the Nibeiwa camp, the Sepoys of the 11<sup>th</sup> Indian Brigade took the time to inspect the booty they had won. The Italian garrisons themselves were poorly supplied and not given very efficient equipment with which to defend themselves, but the officers lived a lavish lifestyle all the way until the final surrender of the camp. The Sepoys were stunned to discover underground tunnels to various grottos where superbly cut uniforms hung covered in gold lace and silver epaulettes. Dressing tables were covered in silver-mounted toilet sets, each emblazed with regimental or Fascist embossed crests. There was enough military finery, says historian Barrie Pitt, to hold a grand pageant and parade in St. Peter’s Square “and all the exquisite niceties to set it off.”<sup>140</sup> Such extravagance displayed the lack of preparation or seriousness with which the Italian officer core perpetrated the war effort. The presence of so many luxuries also showed to

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<sup>Ψ</sup> The Italians at this juncture were more used to fighting tribal bands in Libya and the tenacious but poorly outfitted Ethiopian army.

\* Unfortunately for the Italians, despite a slight physical resemblance to the Commonwealth Bren Carrier armored transport vehicle, the L3 tank shared none of its positive characteristics. The L3 could not ferry troops into combat, was not as fast (30mph compared to 26mph on road), had almost half the operational range of the Bren Carrier (78 miles to 150 miles), and almost half the horsepower (43hp to 85hp).

what extent the stratified class system in Italy carried into the military to the detriment of the common soldier.

Those same officers, even non-commissioned ones, lived in such luxury at the front due to being “supplied by a generous but unwise command.”<sup>141</sup> The Italian corporals in Nibeiwa as well as the other camps along the line, lived far more leisurely and comfortable lives than their British and Commonwealth counterparts like O’Connor and his Western Desert Headquarters. Pitt describes the scene admirably as if one was opening “Aladdin’s cave,” and one would have assumed the discipline of the “tired, hungry, thirsty but still exhilarated” Indian troops and Scottish Highlanders would have broken down. The orgy of feasting and broken discipline never took place, instead replaced with curiosity and “a rather pitying affection for a race which apparently needed such luxuries even in war” became the mood of the moment among the soldiers.<sup>142</sup>

As the defeats mounted up, a sense of depression began to permeate the leadership and their staffs in the desert. General Gallina was trapped along with a number of forces against the sea near Sidi Barrani in an enclave which measured roughly ten miles long and about five miles deep. During the afternoon of December 9, 1940, Gallina signaled to Graziani that the entire area of his command was “infested by a mechanized army against which I have no adequate means.” Stragglers and survivors from the southern battles had been feeding his depression with their reports of the growing disaster to the south. This black attitude became a rot which set in early with the 4<sup>th</sup> Blackshirt Division and spread quickly destroying their will to defy the next British attack. Despite the fact the Italian artillery was still prepared to show their “gallantry and

resolve” by beating off a midnight attack by the 6<sup>th</sup> Royal Tank Regiment, it was quite apparent that the Italian infantry were no longer willing to fight.<sup>143</sup>

The action the next morning proved that the Italian infantry indeed had had enough. It is not known whether any instructions were sent out from Gallina’s HQ during the night, but as soon as the British guns opened fire on the morning of December 11, the advance infantry were greeted along the entire line with white handkerchiefs waved “by apathetic soldiers, tired of battle, weary of separation from their homes, no longer interested in the promises of Fascism or its posturing leadership.” The lack of morale and enthusiasm for Mussolini’s personal goals for Italy truly affected the Italians from the British point of view, and many contemporary observers noted that if the Italians had been better motivated and better equipped they might have made formidable opponents, unfortunately, such was not the case.<sup>144</sup>

After the third day of Operation Compass, December 11, 1941, the British in their advance into Cyrenaica had captured 14,000 prisoners, 68 guns, and numerous trucks. All the war material was welcomed by General O’Connor who could use all he could get to make good his deficiencies, but the enormous number of prisoners “were an acute embarrassment.” What was embarrassing was due to the Italians “native charm, their friendliness and their willingness to help.”<sup>145</sup> Colonel Alec Gatehouse, second-in-command of the 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Brigade, related that “no defeated army has ever cooperated with its opponents to the extent that the Italians did on this day.” They went so far as to gather their own lorries, refueled them from their own stocks, and drive them back *full of their own prisoners* to Maktila, “and they came back for more” without the need of escort or guard. Barrie Pitt makes the sarcastic remark that such activity was one

way of making good on Mussolini's promise that his army would spend Christmas in the Delta.<sup>146</sup>

During the attack on Bardia on January 3<sup>rd</sup>, the Australians faced an unexpected menace to their left flank in the form of an Italian tank attack.\* At first the cavalier Australians believed the tanks were British until Captain Hutchinson noticed they were painted grey, not British khaki. This realization was followed by a burst of fire from the lead Italian tank which killed Hutchinson's runner and shot out the rifle from his own hands. Meanwhile, one of his lieutenants was walking casually towards the tanks which he also believed were British only to realize his mistake, empty his revolver into an open turret, and dive into the shelter of a nearby sangar.<sup>147</sup> The Australians had hardly expected the Italians to mount an attack due to their estimation of Italian abilities.

The Italian tanks, however, pressed their attack against the surprised Australians. The tanks moved off as a group towards about 500 Italian prisoners whom they freed, then sent one of the Australian guards to a nearby post with the suggestion that all the Australians there surrender. Their reply was a concentration of rifle and machine-gun fire and the tanks moved off in another direction, leaving their newly freed countrymen to be recaptured by the Australians. Their presence was reported to a couple of Matildas lying on a rise out of sight. However, the idea of Italian tanks going into action was so absurd to the tank crews that they dismissed the reports as a product of "Antipodean [Australian] technical ignorance." The M13s almost made it to one of the battalion headquarters had not three 2-pounder truck-mounted anti-tank guns arrived and knocked out the group of tanks.<sup>148</sup>

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\* Italian M13/40's led the charge during this attack.

As briefly mentioned, most of the damage incurred during this attack was due to the already ingrained belief in British forces that the Italians simply would not put up much of a fight much less make a counterattack with armored forces. Granted, much had lead them to this belief during their dash into Cyrenaica considering the relative ease of their advance and the incredible amount of prisoners taken. Yet, it is interesting to note how quickly this Italian reversal, which was but a month old at this point, completely colored or influenced the way the British went about their day to day activities and planning. The British tank crews must have been feeling particularly smug in order to brush off completely the Australian reports of the Italian tank attack, though their prejudices against not only the Italians but also their Commonwealth brethren attributed to their response.

On the third day of fighting, the Australians had reached the town of Bardia and had taken over 40,000 prisoners, many of whom were marching in back to the south in columns soon a mile in length. The columns were led by “dapper officers” who were still wearing their swords and “Mussolini caps” all the while looking immaculate, “shaven, and scented.” The Australians, once halted for lunch, rummaged among the abandoned Italian dugouts and found bottles of champagne which they proceeded to drink from enamel pannikins. One trooper from the Support Group was reported as saying: “what we want is more Wine, Women, and War with the Wops! – the bloody songs!”<sup>149</sup>

Another report from an Australian tank commander provides another example of the state of the Italian troops against which the Australians were fighting and helped form Commonwealth opinion of Italian troop quality. Barrie Pitt mentions that many of the prisoners that the Italians had taken had actually exchanged roles with their captors at

their captors' request. Indeed, one Australian tank commander had been taken prisoner in the north due to his isolation from the support of the French Marines, yet the Italians in turn surrendered themselves to him and he had to look after the entire group as the nearest Australian formation could handle no more prisoners. In all, he, by himself, had to look after roughly 1,500 Italians.<sup>150</sup> From experiences like these early in the war, many Commonwealth soldiers began to form an opinion of Italian soldiers and their fighting capability which was, to say the least, not very flattering.

Some isolated incidents also lent their impact on the way Commonwealth troops viewed their Italian adversary. One Italian soldier, concealed within a group who were surrendering to an Australian force, threw a grenade which killed a soldier walking towards the group. The Australians immediately responded with Bren-gun fire and cut down the entire group before an officer was able to stem the rage of the soldier's comrades. Pitt notes that the Australians were already finding it difficult early in the war to restrain their anger after having fought extremely bitter battles, yet in their final charges "over the last ten yards," they would be met with a cessation of fire. Their opponents would then rise up, hands in the air, and "as often as not, a deprecating smile of welcome on their faces." Such incidents quickly affected how the Australians fought against the Italians.<sup>151</sup>

Throughout the campaign towards Tripolitania, the British were constantly worried about the numbers of prisoners who were flooding into their lines and rear areas simply for their potential logistics impact. Amidst so many prisoners there were obviously large amounts of Italian officers who in the western tradition were the ones who should have continued in roles of responsibility within prisoner camps or at least

until separation by the occupying force. In the British experience though, General O’Conner and his staff received little to no help from any of the Italian officers who were recorded as never protesting their separation from the men. In most instances they were more than happy to climb aboard transports and leave their soldiers behind “with some degree of relief.” While the Geneva Convention allows for the separation of officers from their soldiers, Barrie Pitt observes that perhaps the readiness of the Italian officers to be separated is one reason why Italian soldiers often lacked enthusiasm and motivation during battles. Needless to say, the British were negatively impressed by such poor officer conduct.<sup>152</sup>

Not every British soldier felt the same way towards the Italians and oftentimes were overwhelmed by a sense of indifference towards the struggle, in much the same way one would approach a less than pleasant nine-to-five job. Near Benghazi in February 1941, a British tank crew member, Trooper “Topper” Brown, illustrated his feelings towards fighting the Italians in a letter written after the battle. His tank approached a couple of M13s during the night and closed within fifteen yards without firing a shot. At that point, the tank operator, Taff Hughes, was ordered by the tank commander to take the crews of the two M13s prisoner. Brown sardonically offered to “get them out with my 2 pounder” but the commander, Lt. Plough, rejected his offer as it would have given away their position. Taff Hughes then went over to the M13s, and astonishingly, simply knocked on the outside armor with his pistol and immediately seven Italians got out of the two tanks and were herded away. Apparently, there should have been eight according to Brown who offered to get the last one out with his 2 pounder and was once again



rejected by Lt. Plough. He says of his feelings that they were “of complete indifference” and he “was just utterly fed up” with having to struggle through continuous battles.<sup>153</sup>

After the battle for Cyrenaica had ended and the British were moving up to the frontier with Tripolitania, an incident occurred which affected at least a portion of the British troops who had been fighting the Italians to this point. The first patrols began scouting into Tripolitania looking for the enemy, but all they found were signs of abandonment. One remount depot was full of unfed and unwatered horses, some wounded, and all exhibiting indications of extreme neglect. The British soldiers’ heart-strings were pulled and as Pitt says the “demands of duty were forgotten” such that the soldiers spent the afternoon making up feeds and leading horses in groups to a nearby well. The members of the 11<sup>th</sup> Hussars were so affected by what they saw that they “lost some of the affection they were beginning to feel for their Italian enemy.” Their requests to carry on the fight into Tripolitania now carried a new edge according to Barrie Pitt.<sup>154</sup>

When the Allies decided to pursue a Mediterranean strategy, possibly fueled by Churchill’s estimation of Italy as the “soft-underbelly of Europe,” there were 300,000 Axis troops defending Sicily. An American intelligence officer described the two German divisions as “strictly hot mustard” but the bulk of the troops were Italians of “doubtful pluck,” whom if one could just “stick them in the belly and sawdust will run out.”<sup>155</sup>

While the Allies were pursuing their Mediterranean strategy, soldiers began to incorporate bits of Italian they had heard into their lexicon with typically racist outcomes such as “prego, dago” (you’re welcome, Italian) and “grazie, Nazi” (thank you, Nazi) with dago being a condescending or racist epithet for an Italian. Various sources place

the origin of “dago” from the old use of American and British sailors as a reference to Spanish sailors under hire on their ships as “Diego’s” due to the commonality of the name much like John or Jack for Americans and British. The term was then modified by the 20<sup>th</sup> century to refer primarily to Italians in a pejorative sense. The other origin, though less likely, is from American soldier’s attitudes about perceived notions of Italian quickness to flee the battlefield which made soldiers remark “there they go” which was then shortened or corrupted to “dago.” Whatever the origin, it is obvious that the Allied leaders used the term often to refer to their dealings with the Italians. During a visit to the White House, Churchill, upon hearing of the lack of progress on negotiating a peace with Italy, remarked, “that’s what you would expect from those Dagoes.”<sup>156</sup>

The Italians had been wavering on whether or not to officially leave the war, and after Eisenhower completed one of his dictations for a cable to be sent to the Italian leadership, he commented to his aide, “I always knew you had to give these yellow bastards a jab in the stomach before they would work.” Eisenhower’s remark may have been rhetoric meant for consumption by his aide and anyone else within earshot, but it also highlights his view of the Italians after having fought them in Tunisia and Sicily. For Rommel’s part, Italy’s treachery had become “official” after the signing of the agreement with the Allies and said that “we sure had them figured out right.” Such a statement for Rommel comes as no surprise considering the rancor with which he held the Italian leadership. A Free French newspaper observed sardonically at this time that “the House of Savoy never finished a war on the same side it started, unless the war lasted long enough to change sides twice.”<sup>157</sup>

The American view of the Italians just prior to the invasion of the Italian mainland is exemplified by statements and decisions made by the head of the 36<sup>th</sup> Division, General Walker. He elected to forgo a preliminary naval bombardment of the landing beaches because he saw no point “to killing a lot of peaceful Italians and destroying their homes.” His decision to forgo the bombardment was also based on the two other factors of a hope to achieve surprise and the assumption that only Italian troops would be defending the beaches. Not only were the Italians considered soft at this point, but the secret peace negotiations could take effect at any moment and place the Italians out of the war and enable the Allies to simply walk ashore. As history would prove they were sorely disappointed by the reality which confronted them. Upon hearing of the announcement of peace between Italy and the Allies, there were reports of Italians dancing deliriously in the streets and celebrating past nightfall. One Royal Navy officer watched near Messina as Italians lit fireworks and danced in the piazza. “Seldom in history can a people have celebrated so hilariously the complete defeat of their country,” he observed.<sup>158</sup> After the rejoicing on both sides which followed the armistice announcement, many Allied troops felt let down especially as the battle for Italy intensified. One soldier remarked, according to reporter Don Whitehead, “maybe it would be better for us to fight without an armistice.” Not only would the Allies have then fought with a bit more determination in his mind, but they would also have faced Italian soldiers instead of purely German units which in their opinion would have led to easier fighting.

## Conclusion

It is no exaggeration to state that the Italian army faced one disastrous defeat after another throughout the Second World War. The Italian soldier, due to circumstances outside his immediate control, was extremely unprepared materially and psychologically for battle. His leadership was antiquated, unfit, and not up to the task of fighting a modern war against enemies of greater economic and political strength. Italy's fate was sealed the moment she hitched herself to the fortunes of Hitler's *Grossdeutschland*. Italy's ultimate catastrophic defeat in her "parallel war" alongside Germany deprived Mussolini of the opportunity to implement his form of Lebensraum or "spazio vitale" in the Mediterranean.

The object of this paper is not to create an *apologia* for the failures of the Italian military during the Second World War\*, but to begin a reexamination of the lingering attitude of dismissal of the Italian military's significance during the war, whether positive or negative. The Greek and North African campaigns have become battles between the British and the Germans (and to some extent the Americans in North Africa) to the almost complete exclusion of the original belligerents of the campaigns. The Italians and Greeks fought for months before the involvement of other powers, and the same is true in North Africa between the Italians and the British. Even after the arrival of Rommel in North Africa, it is often conveniently forgotten that the majority of his troops were Italian. The Italian military's reputation after the Second World War has faced an uphill battle due to the massive amounts of Allied propaganda during the war, the dismal

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\* To clarify, Italy lost her side of the war due to her own failings. Some hypothetical's have been posited throughout this paper as to the possible outcome of Italy's war if circumstances had been different. These have been presented simply as historical curiosities for the sake of historical discussion and examination.

performance of the Italian military command structure, and the lingering effects of generations of western historical retellings from a German and Allied perspective. Especially within American military history circles, there has been a deference to the accounts of German generals concerning the performance of their Italian ally during the war.

The Italian soldier and Italy's military in general has borne an inordinate amount of the blame and criticism from western scholars for Italy's mediocre performance and defeat in the war. Their reputation for quick surrender, cowardly nature, and uselessness in a fight were due to circumstances greater than themselves and not simply to the average Italian man being a "poor soldier." Economic and ideological issues immensely influenced the overall ability of the Italian soldier to wage war effectively, and it is a lack of understanding (with rare exception) of these circumstances which has led contemporaries and historians to quickly label and dismiss the Italian soldier. With the boat listing so heavily to port, only counter-flooding to starboard can at times right the ship, and such is the case when reexamining the thoughts and interactions of contemporaries with the Italian military. There were many instances of bravery and courage under fire, and even success, despite the bevy of circumstances weighed against the Italian soldier. Only by seeking these out and exploring them can the ship, and historical judgment, be brought to an even-keel.

British and German perceptions of Italian soldiers and their fighting ability was influenced in part by Italian efforts to eek out a colonial empire in the cast off regions of Africa.\* While ultimately successful, they often faced serious setbacks which then and now are laughed at considering the "technological superiority" the Italians should have

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\* Primarily Italy's tactical defeats during the Ethiopian war.

had over what was considered by Europeans as completely backward tribal societies. British historians quickly forget their own country's difficulties in defeating these "inferior" kinds of forces as they colonized Africa. The British suffered major defeats in their wars against the Sudanese and Zulus at Khartoum and Isandlwana respectively. Yet, the British defeats, such as Khartoum, have been immortalized in films and the battles themselves, if not worthy of outright praise, have become worthy of admiration for the soldiers involved or more commonly, the officers attitudes and actions during the battles. While this may seem like a slight tangent from dealing with the Italians in the Second World War, it is important because it highlights the inconsistency with which the Italians have been handled historically at the hands of the vast majority of Western historians. Rather than seek to understand the fatal flaws that led to Italian defeats and the behavior of their soldiers on the battlefield, historians have relied on the overall defeat to speak for itself and so attribute battlefield failure to some kind of character flaw on the part of the Italian people.

Unfortunately, this paper cannot possibly cover the entire range of interactions of major belligerents with the Italian military. The most notable absence is any discussion of the Russian view of the Italian army which sat across from it in Southern Russia as the Germans advanced towards Stalingrad. This absence is due primarily to the dearth of subject matter covering the Italian army in Russia from either perspective. The contribution of the minor Axis powers in Russia has been subsumed in the historical record by the titanic struggle between German and Russian forces. There is one good Italian written book on the Italian army in Russia worth noting, but even then, for the purposes of this study, Russian thoughts and interactions with the Italians are absent. The

inaccessibility of Russian records, or rather, non-tainted Russian records, still hinder historical research on the much larger campaign on the Eastern Front much less something as specific as Russian-Italian interactions.

What has been overlooked in this paper has been the more traditional operational histories more commonly found in monographs on Mediterranean campaigns. They have been eschewed here in favor of a more specific look at the opinions and various thoughts of the soldiers themselves. The history of the various Mediterranean campaigns has filled volumes and has been and continues to be admirably covered from an operational and strategic standpoint. What is currently lacking are more histories that deal with how belligerents interact with each other during war. This is not to mean actual fighting, which has been well chronicled and dissected, but how soldiers view the other side, how, once contact has been made, do opponents view each other from the soldiers' perspective rather than a statesmen's propaganda view of an enemy. These are some of the issues which need to be further explored and discussed to better understand how these interactions affect modern day belligerents, especially when dealing with a nebulous enemy or a multi-faceted belligerent whose members may not all share the same opinion about their enemy.

### **Regarding German Perceptions**

It is no secret that the Germans, in general, were not enthusiastic about working alongside their Italian ally. Italian military capabilities were held in great disdain in conjunction with German dismissal of Italian social attitudes and characteristics. Many Germans felt the Italians were not fighting men who were incapable of winning battles much less a war regardless of the quality of their materiel. Von Luck was also a bit of an

exception for the German side as he actually felt some form of sympathy for the Italians and understood their deficiencies. He was able to judge their performance based on what could be expected given their military circumstances as well as their socio-cultural background. His best quote on the subject was when he wrote that Italians work to live whereas the Germans live to work.

If one may risk a generalization, Germans often find it difficult to understand others who do not share their same passions, and German officers were particularly harsh in their judgments of others who did not share their strength of ideological fervor in performing their military duties. Von Luck understood the position of the Italians better than almost any other German officer, perhaps due to his cosmopolitan lifestyle prior to the outbreak of war. Many of the Germans who eventually held strong opinions about the Italians one way or another were at one point subordinates or colleagues of Rommel in North Africa. Rommel's opinions of the Italians have held much more historical weight than perhaps any other German, possibly barring Hitler himself, as he was involved with the Italians for almost two years in the North African desert.

Within the German-Italian relationship, the Germans have propagated the belief that there was an inferiority complex among the Italians when Italians compared themselves to their German ally. The Italians understood the inadequacy of their weapons, yet while they did feel a sense of resentment against their own government for not properly preparing them for modern war, they hardly felt they were not as good soldiers as their German ally. What the Germans picked up on and interpreted as an inferiority complex was perhaps in reality more envy or jealousy over the quality of German arms and training than a true sense of inferiority. Von Luck addresses the



problem of Germany's view of Italian soldiers and says the Italians should have been praised for their willingness to continue to fight despite their dismal circumstances.

Kesselring was perhaps the most optimistic about Italian fighting capabilities and enthusiasm, though as has been mentioned, he suffered a severe disillusionment towards the end of the war. Though optimistic, Kesselring flavored that optimism with a sardonic disdain which did not prevent him from believing, alone among German generals, that the entire Italian peninsula was defensible if the Italians would fight to defend it. He also held socio-cultural views of the Italians similar in nature to those held by Von Luck. Kesselring described the Italians as a people who were easily contented with the luxuries of life and were not born soldiers whereas Germans had an image of themselves as bred for combat. Despite understanding the limitations of the Italian soldiers guarding Sicily, when the Allies landed and began advancing against little effective resistance from Italian units, even Kesselring became disheartened. By the end he acted like a jilted lover, declaring all that was left in him was hatred for the Italians whom he had loved.

### **Regarding Allied Perceptions**

The British prior to the war were still largely undecided what to think about the Italians. There were those who were in favor of trying to win them away from an alliance with Hitler and those who saw Italy's surface level weaknesses and were unwilling to compromise with a perceived non-threat. In the late 1930s, the British went so far as to send military missions to Italy to assess her potential as a world power in the looming confrontation with Hitler. Based on reports, Britain concluded that while Italian morale was high in British company with a detectable level of antipathy towards the Germans,

the Italians were wholly unsuited to fight in a modern conflict which negated their usefulness as an ally. The British knew the Italians were woefully led by men who were completely unsuited for such high level positions which they had attained through 19<sup>th</sup> century methods of privilege and ancestry rather than any mental acumen.

British propaganda had a large effect on the general population of Britain and certainly helped to mold the initial attitudes of British soldiers about to face Italians in North Africa. However, once British soldiers had faced Italian soldiers over two years of fierce fighting, their opinions of their adversary were much more varied and complex than portrayed through propaganda. The British, in their albionious way, were oftentimes gentlemanly towards Italian POWs and felt more pity and sympathy for their counterparts than hostility, analogous to the praise and honor showered on their German adversary. Rather than pure hostility, British attitudes encompassed a breadth or gamut of emotions perhaps due in part to the heterogeneous nature of British forces often originating from around the Empire. More often than not, post-war British accounts of their Italian opponent were influenced, not by lingering state propaganda, but by German accounts of their own time with the Italians. In much the same way you would expect a biased opinion if asking modern Libyans for their opinion of America, German generals being asked for their opinion of the Italian army bares the same fruit. The British have leaned heavily on German accounts of the war for a plethora of reasons, such as German generals ready willingness to share their side of the story for a captive audience, but one of the main reasons being the paucity of Second World War Italian historians in Britain or anywhere. This lack of historians willing to dissect the Italian history has created a

very lopsided historical record of the events surrounding Italy which transpired during the Second World War.

Eisenhower never held the Italians in very high regard; the reason for his initial hostility is unclear, but his obvious impatience with the Italian leadership as the war progressed furthered his dislike. Eisenhower was deeply involved with the Italians as they were debating among themselves whether to leave the Axis and the war and often made snide remarks about the Italians to his aide after dictating letters.

Despite a history in America of poor relations with Italian immigrants, the American media never truly vilified Italians the same way they did Germans even after American GIs' first encounter with Italian soldiers in Sicily. Often the media distinguished between Mussolini and his Fascist cohorts from the at-large Italian civilian population. The Germans were granted no such luxury. In the films produced during the war, the Italians were portrayed almost as victims or in the least, unwilling fighters in a forced war. General Walker, commander of the 36<sup>th</sup> Division, as he prepared to land in Italy, decided to forego the preliminary bombardment as to not kill unnecessarily or destroy "innocent" Italian's homes and property.

### **Epilogue**

English language books dealing with the Axis powers during the Second World War invariably focus their efforts on the actions of the three Western major powers to the detriment or total exclusion of Italy. As historian Ian Walker has stated, the Italians become no more than a "shadowy presence" in the annals of history about the campaigns which they started and fought in for three-quarters of the war. If possible, it appears they

would be completely ignored, yet their strength of numbers makes their presence all too obvious. Italy's efforts in her campaigns, disastrous or not, one quickly relegated to the background and dismissed with a quick paragraph or brief inclusion of a unit name and number. To get an idea of the way the Italian military of the Second World War is still viewed today, one need look no further than the currently popular late-night show "The Daily Show" hosted by Jon Stewart. In a wonderfully historically inaccurate statement, he says of Italy:

Sure Chrysler just entered Chapter 11, but under restructuring, it will soon be run by Italian car maker FIAT; bringing Detroit much needed leadership from the country, that with Hitler's help, once fought Ethiopia to a draw.<sup>159</sup>

The remark was followed by laughter as would be expected. This is not to reprimand Stewart or his show, which is quite good, but just to provide an example of the low status Italy and her military have occupied since the end of the war.

A question every historian of Axis history and the Mediterranean campaigns should ask themselves is one Ian Walker pointedly asks: Is the summation of English language history on the Italian military effort during the Second World War as presently constituted really the full extent of their influence on events which shaped the course of the war? It is a question which needs to be explored and given a proper answer and which, in answering, will shed light on further history concerning the entire propagation of the Mediterranean and other theaters of war during the Second World War.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> C.F. Baxter. The War In North Africa, 1940-1943: A Selected Bibliography. 1996. Westport, Conn., Greenwood Press. pg. 37.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid., 37.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid., 37.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid., 38.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid., 39.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid., 39.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid., 38.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid., 40.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid., 40.
- <sup>10</sup> Rex Tyre. Mussolini's Soldiers. 1995. Shrewsbury, England: Airlife. pg. 7.
- <sup>11</sup> Baxter, 40-41.
- <sup>12</sup> James Sadkovich. "Anglo-American Bias and the Italo-Greek War of 1940-1941." The Journal of Military History. Vol. 58, No. 4. October 1994. pp. 617-642. pg. 627.
- <sup>13</sup> I. W. Walker. Iron Hulls, Iron Hearts : Mussolini's Elite Armoured Divisions In North Africa. 2006. Ramsbury: Crowood Press. pg. 6.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid., pg. 6.
- <sup>15</sup> Fausto R. Pitigliani. "The Development of Italian Cartels Under Fascism." The Journal of Political Economy. Vol. 48, No. 3. June 1940. pp. 375-400. pg. 377.
- <sup>16</sup> J. Green and A. Massignani. Rommel's North Africa Campaign: September 1940 – November 1942. Conshohocken, PA.: Stackpole Books, 1999. pg. 327.
- <sup>17</sup> Walter B. Kahn. "The Italian Economic Situation." The Review of Economics and Statistics. Vol. 3, No. 4. April 1921. pp. 88-91. pg. 88.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid., 88.
- <sup>19</sup> MacGregor Knox. "The Italian Armed Forces." Military Effectiveness: Vol. II The Interwar Period. Ed. Allan R. Millet and Williamson Murray. Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1990. pg. 183.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid., 183.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid., 183.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid., 183.
- <sup>23</sup> MacGregor Knox. Mussolini Unleashed, 1939-1941: Politics And Strategy In Fascist Italy's Last War. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1986. pg 26.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid., 26.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid., 26.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid., 26.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid., 26.
- <sup>28</sup> John Gooch. Mussolini and His Generals: The Armed Forces and Fascist Foreign Policy, 1922-1940. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2007. pg. 313.
- <sup>29</sup> MacGregor Knox. Hitler's Italian Allies: Royal Armed Forces, Fascist Regime, and the War of 1940-1943. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2000. pg. 124.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid., 124.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid., 30.
- <sup>32</sup> Green, pg. 12.
- <sup>33</sup> Knox, Unleashed, 27.
- <sup>34</sup> Green, pg. 12.
- <sup>35</sup> Walker, 42.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid., 42.
- <sup>37</sup> E. Rommel and B. H. Liddell Hart. The Rommel Papers. 1988. Norwalk, Conn.: Easton Press. pg. 134.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid., 262.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid., 262.
- <sup>40</sup> R. Atkinson. The Day Of Battle : The War In Sicily And Italy, 1943-1944. 2007. New York: Henry Holt. pg. 138-139.

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- <sup>41</sup> Ibid., 138-139.  
<sup>42</sup> Walker, pg. 10.  
<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 11.  
<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 17.  
<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 17-18.  
<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 25.  
<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 25.  
<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 25.  
<sup>49</sup> Rommel, pg. 187.  
<sup>50</sup> Green, pg. 29-30.  
<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 105.  
<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 105.  
<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 105.  
<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 28.  
<sup>55</sup> Desmond Young. Rommel. 1957. London: Fontana Books. pg. 85-87.  
<sup>56</sup> Green, pg. 43.  
<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 44.  
<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 146.  
<sup>59</sup> Hans Von Luck. Panzer Commander : The Memoirs Of Colonel Hans Von Luck. 1989. New York: Praeger. pg. 117.  
<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 117.  
<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 118.  
<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 118.  
<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 122.  
<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 122.  
<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 122.  
<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 122.  
<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 122.  
<sup>68</sup> Rommel, pg. 91.  
<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 93.  
<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 100.  
<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 127.  
<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 128.  
<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 103.  
<sup>74</sup> Walker, pg. 140.  
<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 124.  
<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 137.  
<sup>77</sup> Rommel, pg. 130.  
<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 130.  
<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 131.  
<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 173.  
<sup>81</sup> Green, pg. 124-125.  
<sup>82</sup> Rommel, pg. 171.  
<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 187.  
<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 192.  
<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 243.  
<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 243.  
<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 244.  
<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 244.  
<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 243.  
<sup>90</sup> Green, pg. 142.  
<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 214.  
<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 214.  
<sup>93</sup> Rommel, pg. 253.  
<sup>94</sup> Green, pg. 197.

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- <sup>95</sup> Walker, pg. 144.  
<sup>96</sup> Green, pg. 200.  
<sup>97</sup> Rommel, pg. 261.  
<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 261.  
<sup>99</sup> Green, pg. 70.  
<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 70.  
<sup>101</sup> Young, pg. 155.  
<sup>102</sup> Green pg. 76.  
<sup>103</sup> Young, pg. 159.  
<sup>104</sup> Green, pg. 200.  
<sup>105</sup> Walker, pg. 187.  
<sup>106</sup> Rommel, pg. 437-438.  
<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 439.  
<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 440.  
<sup>109</sup> Atkinson, pg. 93.  
<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 93.  
<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 203.  
<sup>112</sup> Rommel, pg. 440.  
<sup>113</sup> Young, pg. 153.  
<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 154.  
<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 154.  
<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 154-155.  
<sup>117</sup> Knox, Unleashed, 289.  
<sup>118</sup> Walker, pg. 6-7.  
<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 67.  
<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 73.  
<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 80.  
<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 85.  
<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 86.  
<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 101.  
<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 105.  
<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 105.  
<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 105.  
<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 141.  
<sup>129</sup> Rex Tyre. Mussolini's Afrika Korps : The Italian Army In North Africa, 1940-1943. 1999. Bayside, NY.: Axis Europa Books. pg. 144-147.  
<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 151.  
<sup>131</sup> Rommel, pg. 253.  
<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 257.  
<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 281.  
<sup>134</sup> Green, pg. 105.  
<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 120.  
<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 160.  
<sup>137</sup> Nigel Hamilton. The Full Monty: Montgomery Of Alamein, 1887-1942. Vol. 1. 2001. London: Allen Lane. pg. 386.  
<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 386.  
<sup>139</sup> Barrie Pitt. The Crucible Of War: Western Desert 1941. 1989. New York, NY.: Paragon House. pg. 36-37.  
<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 108.  
<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 109.  
<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 109.  
<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 115.  
<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 116.  
<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 120.  
<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 120.

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- <sup>147</sup> Ibid., 136.  
<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 136.  
<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 140-141.  
<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 141.  
<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 153.  
<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 159.  
<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 175.  
<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 192.  
<sup>155</sup> Atkinson, pg. 54.  
<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 194.  
<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 196.  
<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 200.  
<sup>159</sup> “The Daily Show With Jon Stewart.” Comedy Central. May 05, 2009. Episode #14061.



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