

Mussolini – FOREIGN POLICY

BACKGROUND: Initially Mussolini relied on the foreign office staff he inherited. They shared Mussolini's belief in Italy's right to gain territory and spheres of influence in the Eastern Mediterranean and in Africa.

By the 1930's Mussolini changed the foreign policy to a more assertive one. He believed that the future lay with "young" virile states like Italy and Germany and not the "decadent" ones like Great Britain and France. From the mid-1930's he therefore sought opportunities to establish Italy as a major power.

Notice how Mussolini changed his role in international politics from being a negotiator towards an aggressive leader who refused to cooperate!

Two visible periods: 1922-1935 – Cooperation with Great Britain and France / 1936-1943 – Cooperation with Germany

AIMS:

1. To build national prestige / Increase national pride
2. Increase domestic support for the regime / Consolidate domestic support for the regime
3. Gaining dominance over the Balkans / Control over the Balkan region / dominate the Balkans / Securing influence in the Balkans
4. Achieving dominance in the Mediterranean / Control of the Mediterranean Sea and the acquisition of territory in Africa / Dominate the Mediterranean
5. Establishing an Empire / Re-establish the glory of the ancient Roman Empire by territorially expand Italy / Build an Empire (Gain spazio vitale – "living space"; expand its territories in Africa)
6. Spreading Fascism abroad / foster the spread of Fascism in other countries
7. - / Revision of "the mutilated victory" after World War I / Revise the post-war settlement of 1919-20 /
8. - / At an international level Mussolini's aim was to be considered as a great leader / -
9. - / At times Mussolini used foreign policy to enhance his image politically – and as a distraction from internal problems in Italy / -

EVENTS – 1920's

AIM: Traditional aim of influence in the Eastern Mediterranean – gaining dominance over the Balkans

1923 (August): General Enrico Tellini and four Italians of his staff were assassinated while they worked for the boundary commission of the Conference of Ambassadors (a body set up by the League of Nations to complete the detailed arrangements of the Peace Treaties after WWI) on the border of Greece and Albania (while actually in Greece). Mussolini did not consult the League of Nations – he instead turned directly to the Greek Government and demanded a full apology and 50 million lire in compensation. Greece appealed to the League of Nations which referred the matter to the Conference of Ambassadors. Meanwhile Greece rejected the Italian demands, so Mussolini ordered his navy to bombard the island of Corfu and start an invasion of the island. The Conference of Ambassadors tried to get Greece to apologize. A commission should meanwhile investigate the Italian claim that the assassins were Greek. If so – Greece should pay Italy. Great Britain pressured Mussolini to agree to withdraw from Corfu in exchange for the 50 million lire.

Italy responded to the pressure of Great Britain and the Conference of Ambassadors (withdrew from Corfu) but they also receive 50 million lire from Greece (but no full apology). In the Italian press the event was celebrated as the Italian return to the international scene as a nation that got its way.

1924 – Pact of Rome: Italy received the long-disputed town of Fiume (a signed agreement with Yugoslavia who received the suburb of Susak along with Port Barros).

1924: Italy backed

1926 and 1927: Two treaties with Albania firmly established Italian influence over Albania. It was extended later with military agreements and arrangements for Italy to receive Albanian oil.

AIM: Protection

1927 – Treaty of Friendship with Hungary.

1929 – Italy-Bulgaria: The friendship between Italy and Bulgaria was cultivated. In 1929 King Victor Emmanuel, Princess Giovanna, King Boris.

1930 – Treaty of Friendship with Austria. After Hitler came into power Mussolini provided the arms and money for the Austrian Chancellor's private army – the Heimwehr.

1934 (March) – Rome Protocols: An arrangement for increased trade links and a common foreign policy between Italy, Austria and Hungary. In July the Austrian Chancellor was murdered by Austrian Nazis...

1934 – Dollfuss murder: In February 1934 Austria faced a short skirmish between socialist and conservative-fascist forces. This February Uprising led to a few thousand casualties (several hundred people were killed). The Social Democrats were blamed together with some of the Trade Unions. Engelbert Dollfuss, the Austrian Chancellor since May 1932 (also leader of the Christian Social Party) had already banned the Austrian Nazi Party and the Communist Party in June 1933. Now he completely outlawed the Social Democratic Party and had some leading members of the Socialist "*Schutzbund*" (a paramilitary protection army for the socialists) executed.

Dollfuss had already in 1933 established an authoritarian state much like Mussolini's Italy. The political doctrine of Dollfuss is often referred to as "*Austrofascism*". Even though the Social Democratic Party and the Trade Unions had lost power after this take-over they were big enough to challenge the Austrian government in February 1934. As mentioned - the socialists failed and Dollfuss continued to rule. The political tension grew and in July 1934 Dollfuss was murdered during an attempt by Austria's National Socialist Party to topple the regime and proclaim a Nazi government. The assassination of Dollfuss was accompanied by Nazi uprisings in many regions in Austria, resulting in further deaths.

Mussolini was now very concerned about Hitler and Germany's reaction. Would Germany attempt an invasion of Austria to support the coup? Instead of waiting for an answer Mussolini assembled an army corps of four divisions on the Austrian border and threatened Hitler with a war with Italy in the event of a German invasion. Mussolini now realized that an alliance against German aggression was necessary...

AIM: Cooperation to establish Mussolini as an international statesman

1925: **Locarno Pact** (France, Britain, Germany, Italy, Poland, Belgium and Czechoslovakia met to discuss Germany's new borders; Germany accepted the new western borders; Germany accepted Rhineland as a demilitarized zone and France-Germany accepted to settle future problems through the League of Nations)

1928: **Briand-Kellogg Pact** (The signatories' renounced war as an instrument of national policy...)

1933 (June) – **Four Power Pact (Pact of Collaboration):** Mussolini's initiative. This was a pact between Italy, France, Great Britain and Germany. It suggested:

1. The contacting partners should co-operate for ten years to preserve peace in Europe
2. It acknowledged the principle of "*reasonable revision*" of the previous Peace Treaties

So why did the different countries accept this pact? (according to Morris):

- **Great Britain** saw Italy as the key to peace in Europe. This was in their opinion a traditional balance of power that would guarantee peace.
- **France** shared some of Britain's motives but many people did not see much value in this pact.
- **Germany** (Hitler and NSDAP) needed peace so they could focus on the domestic problems.
- **Italy** - the opinion of Italy's motive varies. Some historians claim that Mussolini's wish for peace was genuine and he came with the proposal of a pact due to the resurgence of Germany. Other historians claim that he acted purely in Italian self-interest. He wanted to separate France from her allies in Eastern Europe which was an area of Italian interest. With Great Britain as one partner in this pact it might also be possible to further separate France from Britain.

No matter what - the pact failed. Why?

- In October 1933 Germany left the World Disarmament Conference in Geneva and the League of Nations. Tension in Europe grew.
- The Four Power Pact was never ratified by the governments in the countries that signed the pact.
- Eastern Europe felt excluded. Some countries therefore tried to influence the Four Powers by making their own alliances with one of the partners: Poland and Germany signed a non-aggression pact in January 1934. The USSR started discussions about a mutual assistance pact with France...

1935 (January) – **Rome Agreements:** Mussolini once again contacted France. The pro-Italian foreign Minister Pierre Laval came to Rome and after having discussions with Mussolini signed a Franco-Italian agreement - also referred to as the Rome Agreements. This agreement defined disputed parts of French Somaliland (now Djibouti) as part of Eritrea, redefined the official status of Italians in French-held Tunisia, and essentially gave the Italians a free hand in dealing with the Abyssinia Crisis with Ethiopia. In exchange for this, France hoped for Italian support against German aggression.

One of the results of the Franco-Italian agreement was that Mussolini began to send large numbers of troops to Eritrea and Italian Somaliland. These were the Italian colonies that bordered Ethiopia to the northeast and southeast respectively. There was little international protest to this build-up.

1935 (April) – **STRESA FRONT:** This meeting and agreement was a reaction to the German re-armament. In Stresa Great Britain, France and Italy agreed to take "*co-ordinated action against any country unilaterally violating existing treaties*" and thereby endanger peace in Europe.

Why did Mussolini and Italy want to form this front?

- Mussolini was concerned about Germany's increasing power and he was suspicious of Hitler's foreign ambitions (especially since he had his own plans for Austria as well as the Balkans)
- Mussolini wanted support for action in Abyssinia

Why did Great Britain and France want to form this front?

- Both of the countries wanted a common front against further German breaches of the Versailles Treaty
- They were concerned that Italy should not get closer to Germany

1935 (June) – **BRITISH ATTEMPT TO APPEASE ITALY:** In June 1935 the British Foreign Minister Anthony Eden tried to make some agreements between Great Britain, Italy and Abyssinia. He proposed a deal where Italy would have received the Ogaden region from Abyssinia and the Britain would compensate them with a piece of British Somaliland which would allow Abyssinia access to the sea. It was a failed mission though, as Mussolini was bent on conquest. Following that, Britain declared an arms embargo on both Italy and Ethiopia on July 25. Many believe that this was a direct result of Italy's decree that supplying Ethiopia would be perceived as an act of unfriendliness. Britain also cleared its warships from the Mediterranean, further allowing Italy unhindered access.

1935 (June) – **ANGLO-GERMAN NAVAL AGREEMENT:** This was a bilateral agreement between Great Britain and Germany. The A.G.N.A fixed a ratio where the total tonnage of the Kriegsmarine was to be 35% of the total tonnage of the Royal Navy on a permanent basis. It was registered in League of Nations Treaty Series on July 12, 1935. The A.G.N.A was an ambitious attempt on the part of both London and Berlin to reach better relations, but which ultimately floundered because of conflicting expectations between the two states. For the Germans, the A.G.N.A. was intended to mark the beginning of an Anglo-German alliance against France and the Soviet Union, whereas for the British, the A.G.N.A. was to be the beginning of a series of arms limitation agreements that were made to limit German expansionism. The A.G.N.A was highly controversial both at the time and since because the 35:100 tonnage ratio agreed to allow Germany the right to build a Navy beyond the limits set by the Treaty of Versailles, and the British had made the agreement without consulting her Stresa allies France or Italy first. The agreement was renounced by Adolf Hitler on April 28, 1939...

RELATION ITALY-WESTERN POWERS (France and Great Britain)

Hostility towards France at first:

Versailles Treaty – humiliation

Italy had claims over the French territories of Corsica, Nice and Sardinia

Mussolini was jealous of French North Africa and he supported opposition movements to French control in Tunisia and Morocco

Mussolini aimed to replace French influence in the Balkans and the territory around the Adriatic

1930's – a certain change in the relationship between Italy and France...

Relation with Great Britain:

Agreement between Italy and Britain was reached over the borders between Libya and Egypt

Discussions on British aid for railroad building in East Africa

General good cooperation, but...

CHANGED COURSE...

1935: Italian invasion of Abyssinia. After border clashes between Italy and Abyssinia (Walwal) in 1934 Abyssinia appealed to the League of Nations for arbitration – the response was meek... Instead France created an agreement with Italy where they gave Mussolini free hands in dealing with Abyssinia. Britain's behavior is also questionable. They declared an arms embargo on both Italy and Abyssinia. Italy had plenty of weapons but Abyssinia did not... They also cleared the Mediterranean of its warships further allowing Italy to unhindered send men and material to Abyssinia and they did not block the Suez Canal from Italian access... This and the previous Crisis in Manchuria showed that the League of Nations did not work... Italy captured the Abyssinian capital in 1936. They now created a bigger state: "**Italian East Africa**". All sanctions from the League of Nations were also dropped...

1936: Italian involvement in the Spanish Civil War. Italy sent substantial forces and material to the Nationalists in Spain (Franco). German also supports Franco while Britain and France remains very strictly neutral. The Soviet Union supports the Republicans and so does most of the population of Europe...

1936: Germany and Italy form the Rome-Berlin Axis (October Protocols). Vague anti-Bolshevik phrases but still the beginning of the cooperation between Mussolini and Hitler. It was signed by the Italian Foreign Minister Count Ciano (Mussolini's son-in-law) in Berlin 1936.

1937: Italy leaves the League of Nations. After the criticism Italy received for the war against Abyssinia and the involvement in the Spanish Civil War Mussolini decided to follow the example of Germany and leave the League of Nations.

1937: Italy joins the Anti-Comintern Pact. In 1936 Germany and Japan founded the Anti-Comintern Pact an attempt to present a united front against Communism. In 1937 Italy joined this Pact.

1939: Italy annexes Albania. Albania became independent after the First Balkan War 1912. It was invaded and occupied several times during WWI. Italian troops remained in the country a few years after the war and the Italian government ensured certain influence over Albania. The country faced several revolt attempts during 1920-1925. A clan chieftain from northern Albania, **Ahmed Bey Zogu**, grabs the power of the country in 1925. He becomes a dictator. In 1928 he was crowned King **Zog I**. During his reign Albania became more dependent on fascist Italy. In the late 1930 there were some minor disturbances between Albania and Italy. Mussolini and Italy then decided to invade and occupy the country. King Zog I fled (with the State Treasure) and Albania was annexed by Italy 1939.

1939: Pact of Steel. This is an alliance between Germany and Italy. They committed to help each other in the event of one of them becoming *involved in warlike complications*. Some historians claim that Italy now lost its own independent foreign policy and Mussolini gave Hitler complete action of freedom (*carte blanche*) to attack Poland.

1940: Italy declares war on Britain and France. After the German success in the campaigns against Poland, Denmark, Norway, Belgium and Holland Mussolini prepared to enter the war. When the German troops reached Paris and the French government was trying to relocate in the Southern France Mussolini decided it was time. At June 10th 1940 Italy declared war against France and Italian troops started a campaign in the south part. Within a few weeks it was over. This was the only planned campaign that succeeded for Mussolini and Italy. Italy was not very well prepared and equipped for the future campaigns...

1940: Italy invades Greece – “turning point”: This campaign ended in an Italian disaster...