

Mussolini's Foreign Policy in Italy's Transition from Liberalism to Fascism

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When Benito Mussolini, the founding member of the *Partito Nazionale Fascista* (PNF), was appointed prime minister of Italy in 1922, he presided over a liberal state that remained the weakest of the European Great Powers.¹ Italians had become increasingly dissatisfied with their government because the Treaty of Versailles denied Italy the victory it felt entitled to at the end of World War I. Consequently, Italians were politically polarized. Mussolini, or *Il Duce*, used Italians' dissatisfaction to the fascists' advantage. He exploited the idea that *vittoria mutilata* (mutilated victory) was the fault of the liberal government and called for the Treaty of Versailles' revision.² Mussolini finally gave Italians what they had been looking for: a meaning for their wartime sacrifices.³ As a result, Mussolini gained both approval for fascism and fascists' political power. Once his power was solidified domestically, *Il Duce* was able to proceed with a foreign policy agenda that combined elements of both liberalism and fascism. This agenda centered around imperialism meant to bring Italy the prestige it had been historically denied in its earlier liberal regime. More importantly, it was designed to gain the global power that the fascist Mussolini desired.

Before analyzing *Il Duce's* foreign policy, it is important to understand liberalism in two different contexts: first, what liberalism was in Italy, and second, how liberalism was manifested in Mussolini's fascist Italy. Liberalism in Italy was greatly influenced by *Il Risorgimento*, or Italian unification, because of existing political polarization and the government's desire to improve Italy's status. As a result, liberal foreign policy consisted of safe decisions solely through alliances so Italy could heighten its prestige both domestically and internationally. Even though Mussolini was a fascist, at one point his foreign policy closely mirrored liberal policy because his decisions were rooted in alliances. However, when Mussolini's foreign policy

became fascist, it also became risky. Even though *Il Duce* still maintained alliances, he acted more autonomously with a greater emphasis on power over prestige. This rid any liberal elements from his foreign policy, thus making it completely fascist.

In addition to understanding liberalism in different contexts, it is equally important to understand historians' various stances. The two most significant schools of historical thought that study Mussolini's foreign policy are revisionist and orthodox historians. Both schools contest the continuity and coherence of Mussolini's foreign policy before, during, and after Italy's transition from liberalism to fascism. Revisionist historians argue that *Il Duce*'s foreign policy was incoherent because it altered between a liberal and fascist foreign policy. However, revisionist historians also argue that his aims intended there to be a slow transition to solidify Italy domestically before expanding internationally. On the other hand, orthodox historians argue that Mussolini's foreign policy was a coherent continuation of Italy's liberal policy. Unlike revisionist historians, orthodox historians also argue that *Il Duce* did not intend for his foreign policy always to be an extension of liberalism.⁴ In other words, historians do not agree on what Mussolini's initial foreign policy aims were when he rose to power, whether they remained consistent, and if there were a transition from liberalism to fascism, when it occurred. Be that as it may, both schools of historical thought fail to acknowledge the grey area, or the overlap of continuity and coherence, in their arguments. Even historians who belong to the same school often fail to come to an agreement on Mussolini's foreign policy. The ideas of prestige and power, as well as the desire to expand externally, were not unique to fascism. In fact, they were also relevant in liberalism because it had been in Italy's national interest to redeem itself after receiving hardly any rewards from the Treaty of Versailles. However, the idea of expanding externally for

complete and centralized, or totalitarian, power that was reflected in Mussolini's objectives was unique to fascism. *Il Duce*'s foreign policy was both continuous and coherent in the way he addressed the national interest of Italian prestige before transitioning to implement his fascist and totalitarian aims into his foreign policy. It was not until Italy's conquest of Ethiopia, beginning in 1935, that Mussolini's desire to expand for totalitarian power outweighed the national interest of Italian prestige on his foreign policy agenda, which marked the final stage of the transition from liberalism to fascism in Italy.

At the beginning of his rule, *Il Duce* focused more on Italian prestige than problems that originated from the war because of national interests, which his foreign policy reflected.⁵ With the exception of the occupation of Corfu in 1923, in which Italy acted independently, *Il Duce* planned to improve Italy's status by forming alliances with the European Great Powers. More specifically, Mussolini focused on his alliances with Great Britain and France, rather than immediately dedicating his foreign policy to external expansion.⁶ Mussolini's prioritization of Italy's status over his imperialist aspirations shows how important the return on his investment in alliances with other countries was to him. He chose to focus on the safest way to act in Italy's interest in expansion while improving its power status in the name of national interest. Instead, *Il Duce* could have focused on riskier expansion that would have brought him more power through a radical and true fascist foreign policy, but he did not.⁷ Ultimately, *Il Duce*'s initial foreign policy failed to distinguish itself from liberal Italy's foreign policy despite Mussolini still having fascist goals, such as the desire to achieve totalitarian power and thus establish an Italian empire.

Even though Mussolini's initial foreign policy closely paralleled the foreign policy of liberal Italy, it drastically changed direction when his imperialist aspirations took form in Italy's

1935 invasion of Ethiopia.⁸ The conquest was the first foreign policy decision Mussolini made that focused on expansionism without consideration for the national interest of Italian prestige, but only his fascist ideology. Ethiopia was also seen by Italians as Italy's first "civilizing mission" for territorial gains.⁹ Finally, invading Ethiopia required Mussolini to enact a more dynamic foreign policy in the interest of gaining totalitarian power to start building his Italian empire. The empire would centralize and expand his rule across Europe, into the Mediterranean and even Africa. All of the elements of the conquest combined transitioned Italy away from its former liberal foreign policy. Without a trace of liberalism left, Italy became a completely fascist regime. As a result, *Il Duce's* new fascist foreign policy centered around opportunism to become more powerful regardless of the risk, instead of finding the safest way to expand but maintain prestige. Ultimately, it was the same opportunism and the desire for totalitarian power that led Mussolini to an alliance with Adolf Hitler's Nazi Germany, thus introducing prevalent anti-Semitism into Italy along with a true fascist foreign policy.

Mussolini made one foreign policy decision, however, that appears to have strayed from his fascist goals right before he marked the transition from liberalism to fascism in Ethiopia. In 1934, Hitler was prepared to move forward with conquering Austria but ultimately decided not to, partially due to Mussolini's resistance. While the decision to stop Germany may seem uncharacteristic of the opportunist and fascist *Il Duce*, Mussolini had always been an opponent of intervening in Austria.¹⁰ He made Austria an exception in his foreign policy because he believed its independence was "necessary for the balance of power in Central Europe."¹¹ Not only did Austria share a border with Italy, but it was forbidden from forming an alliance with Germany under the St. Germain Treaty without permission from the League of Nations.¹² *Il*

Duce's protection of Austria affected his alliance with Hitler only four years later because of the *Anschluss*, or the complete annexation of Austria. Mussolini was forced to choose between what he believed would maintain peace in Europe or an alliance that would continue to grow his power. Ultimately, *Il Duce* chose power in favor of fascism over liberal prestige.

In order to fully understand why Mussolini's pre-Ethiopia foreign policy was liberal-leaning, the previous regime's foreign policy must be examined. Prior to the rise of Mussolini, Italy was historically a liberal state. Between 1900 and 1914, its domestic politics were greatly influenced by Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti, a member of the Historical Left, and his liberal agenda.¹³ Giolitti's rule followed the nineteenth-century period of *Il Risorgimento* which sought to consolidate Italy while building the country's prestige. To many Italians, unification efforts marked the beginning of Italy becoming "a full and respected member of the industrial nations."¹⁴ In many ways, this would also make Italy one of the European Great Powers. However, there was still a lack of mass support for a single, national, political organization in Italy.¹⁵ Giolitti attempted to solve the lingering problems of *Il Risorgimento* by extending suffrage and reducing taxes on essential goods that burdened many Italians. Nevertheless, Italians were increasingly dissatisfied with liberalism.¹⁶ As a result, the *Associazione Nazionalista Italiana* (ANI) was established in opposition to Giolitti's liberal politics. The anti-liberal organization claimed, "the expansion of Italy's power in the world" was its duty, which appealed to disparate political groups, including liberals, because of its nationalist themes and call for "imperial assertiveness" in Italy's foreign policy.¹⁷ In many ways, the ANI's ideology, specifically its nationalist and imperialist beliefs, was very much like fascism. Indeed, the ANI was later absorbed by the PNF.¹⁸ Giolitti's final attempts to satisfy Italians, particularly

the ANI, by sending Italy to war in Libya in 1911 and reforming Italian society by extending suffrage, ultimately failed.¹⁹ In 1914, Giolitti resigned as prime minister of Italy because the divide he caused threatened the country's stability.

Following Giolitti's resignation, Antonio Salandra, a conservative member of the Right, was appointed prime minister. According to historian Paul Corner, the notable change in the Prime Minister's ideology from liberalism to conservatism, "implied that the reformist road had been abandoned in favour of a return to a more authoritarian stance on the part of government" and its role in the state.²⁰ While the intention of appointing a conservative prime minister may have been to help unify dissatisfied Italians following Giolitti's rule, Salandra only caused further division and dissatisfaction among Italians. As World War I approached, Italy was faced with the decision of whether or not it would join the war or remain neutral. Salandra's decision-making had very little consideration for the majority of Italians' anti-war stance. Simultaneously, Italy left the Triple Alliance, which was comprised of Germany and Austria-Hungary dating back to 1882, because of its neutral stance in the war. Soon after, Italy joined the Entente Powers, comprised of France, the United Kingdom, and Russia, because these nations offered Italy potential territorial gains.²¹ In April 1915, Italy formally signed the Treaty of London to become a member of the Entente with promises of territory, most notably in Africa.²² Despite the majority of Italians favoring neutrality, Salandra defied them and sent Italy to war with the Entente.²³

In 1918, only three years after the formation of Italy's alliance with the Entente Powers, World War I came to an end. Despite Italy being on the side of victory, it made very little gains in the aftermath of the war. According to historian Thomas Row, the idea of *vittoria mutilata*

worsened at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 when the Treaty of Versailles was signed to officially end the war and set the terms of peace. Italy was granted territory in Trent, Trieste, and the Brenner through the Treaty, but Italians did not view this as enough to create an invigorated Italy. Consequently, political polarization also worsened and Italians resented the government more than ever.²⁴ The only solution to stop Italy from crumbling was to give Italians a meaning for their wartime sacrifices, which one man seemingly knew exactly how to do.

Mussolini, like many other Italians, believed Italy had been robbed of the territory it was originally promised by the Entente Powers. He wanted to provide Italians with their long-sought purpose for the war and their sacrifices. Prior to World War I, Mussolini had been a member of the *Partito Socialista Italiano* (PSI) until he denounced socialism and shifted toward an ideology that centered around nationalism and imperialism: fascism. As a result, Mussolini formed the PNF, which became an official party in November 1921, to spread his fascist political ideology. Mussolini was elected to the Italian Parliament along with other PNF representatives. Mussolini used his political platform in Parliament and the increasingly represented PNF to speak out against the Treaty of Versailles as the fault of the liberal regime and call for its revision.²⁵

In October 1922, just over a year after Mussolini was elected to Parliament, he delivered “*Il discorso di Napoli*” (“The Naples Speech”) to the fascists outlining his plans for the March on Rome, which intended to overthrow the existing Italian government. Mussolini also very clearly elaborated on his long term foreign policy agenda, including the formation of a totalitarian state and an Italian empire that would extend from Europe into the Adriatic and Africa. However, before his long term agenda could be implemented, fascism had to be “injected” into Italy first to continue acting in the country’s national interest of prestige.²⁶ Mussolini’s approach to slowly

phase fascism into Italy supports his pre-Ethiopia foreign policy being both continuous and coherent. He clearly prioritized Italian prestige over his own power, similar to liberal Italy. Three days later, on October 27, 1922, Mussolini waited in Milan while the PNF led the March on Rome to overthrow the liberal government. The insurrection was nearly unsuccessful because the prime minister of Italy at the time, Luigi Facta, wanted to use martial law to declare a siege to stop the PNF. However, King Victor Emmanuel III refused to sign Facta's declaration. According to historian Adrian Lyttelton, King Victor Emmanuel III did not want to associate the Italian government with the fascist movement or make matters worse. Thus, the King allowed the March to continue. The next day, on October 29, 1922, King Emmanuel III appointed Mussolini the Prime Minister of Italy as a preventative measure against future uprisings. Therefore, a coalition government was formed that satisfied the growing number of fascists as well as other conservative elites.²⁷

Mussolini, now the prime minister of Italy and for many years the acting foreign minister, believed fascism resurrected *Il Risorgimento* and began the third Italian civilization, following the ancient Roman Empire and the Renaissance.²⁸ By returning to the way of Italian life Mussolini claimed had been destroyed by the liberal regime, he supposedly would use his power to help Italy expand and reach the height of its prestige by finally becoming one of the European Great Powers. However, before *Il Duce* could implement his fascist agenda, he needed to focus on forming alliances with other prosperous countries in Europe. In many ways, Mussolini's agenda at the time was no different than that of nationalist liberals: to establish Italy's status as a European Great Power.²⁹ *Il Duce* acknowledged that alliances were the most effective way for Italy to gain territory and power to advance its position in Europe before it would be able to act

on its imperialist interests independently. Mussolini only strayed from this logic once prior to Ethiopia, in the 1923 invasion of Corfu, when Italy independently attempted to annex Greece while challenging the League of Nations. Italy did not formally recognize Greece as a nation, which created more tension in Italo-Greek relations. When Greece's government was overthrown, government officials, including an Italian general, were murdered. As a result, Mussolini attempted to occupy Corfu, which was conveniently an entrance to the Adriatic, without the assistance of other nations. However, the League intervened and Italy was asked to leave Corfu. Thus, Italy failed to conquer the island and learned that it was not prepared to seek expansion on its own.³⁰

Only two years later in December 1925, *Il Duce* signed the Locarno Treaties with Great Britain, France, and Belgium, as well as Germany which provided the purpose for the pact. The aforementioned European countries wanted to re-instill trust in Germany following the Great War by signing an agreement that would ensure its disarmament. Historian Luigi Villari claims that the treaties were the “first instance of a return to a measure of sanity in international relations” following World War I.³¹ Historian Dino Grandi adds that the Treaties allowed the four powers, including Italy, to “pledge themselves to collaborate and act in concert” over their mutual concern for Germany's disarmament.³² Despite the Locarno Treaties being a significant step toward maintaining peace post-World War I, which was a priority at the time to the liberal foreign policy leaning *Il Duce*, Italy, like Great Britain, grew increasingly concerned that the Treaties would not permanently prevent Germany from rearming. However, because of Great Britain's pacifist tendencies, especially following the war, it was not willing to pursue a more aggressive policy to keep Germany disarmed. As a result, Mussolini stood idle and did not

pursue a more intense disarmament policy with the other powers, despite knowing that the Locarno Treaties would only work to maintain peace for some time, but not permanently.³³ If *Il Duce* was not focused on making foreign policy decisions solely through alliances, the outcome of the Locarno Treaties may have been different. However, because Mussolini chose to follow his allies' lead, the ideas of continuity and coherence to build prestige among the European Great Powers are supported.

Il Duce's next significant foreign policy decision, initially a domestic policy decision to reunify Italians at home, did not come until 1929. Mussolini acknowledged that the Church was the perfect place to start his unification efforts precisely because of its long history of conflict with the Italian state. In February of that year, Mussolini and Pope Pius XI signed the Lateran Pacts to recognize the Vatican as an independent city within Italy. The Pacts primarily ended the disunity between the Catholic Church and Italian state that had divided Italian people since *Il Risorgimento*. Additionally, the Pacts provided funding for the Church and a foundation of support for *Il Duce's* regime because Roman Catholicism was also established as Italy's sole religion.³⁴ Thus, historian R.J.B. Bosworth describes the Lateran Pacts as "a good business deal for each contracting party."³⁵ Furthermore, historian John Whittam considers the Pacts to be how Mussolini consolidated his power at home and "won universal acclaim" from the Italian people, therefore gaining even more support.³⁶ The Lateran Pacts showcase Mussolini making domestic policy decisions to address liberal Italy's failings in unifying the Italian people as well as the Church and state. Consolidating Italy was one of *Il Duce's* goals before transitioning to his totalitarian fascist foreign policy, which he achieved through the Pacts. Even though the Church did not remain supportive of Mussolini's government in the coming years, mainly because of its

acts of racial persecution, its initial support was enough to accelerate the development of his regime.³⁷

Between 1932 and 1933, Italy attended the Lausanne Conference alongside Great Britain, Germany, and France, held to suspend reparations established by the Treaty of Versailles. Simultaneously, Mussolini called for the creation of the Four-Power Pact, which was signed in July 1933, to increase national security in Europe. Mussolini also believed the Pact would contribute to Italian prestige and the advancement of its position in Europe because it would correct the Treaty of Versailles' injustices. However, *Il Duce* also had other motives for starting the Four-Power Pact, specifically in regard to his foreign policy. First, Mussolini wanted to solidify Italy's relationship with France, but this would require the pacifist Great Britain's interference. Second, *Il Duce* wanted to become powerful enough to form a Nazi-Fascist alliance with the reinvigorated Germany under Hitler. An alliance with Hitler would also give *Il Duce* ground to slow down Germany's plan to absorb Austria, which Mussolini saw as essential to maintaining peace in Europe. Mussolini knew that if he was able to achieve his aforementioned goals through the Pact, Italy would be considered one of the European Great Powers and could start seriously considering establishing an Italian empire that expanded into Africa.³⁸ Some historians, including Bosworth, interpret *Il Duce*'s idea of the Four-Power Pact as a way to "cover his back before assaulting Ethiopia," but in many ways, it was also about protecting Austria to maintain peace and permanently shutting the door on liberalism to transition to a fascist totalitarian regime.³⁹

Following the formation of the Four-Power Pact, Italy signed two more agreements: the Franco-Italian Agreement in January 1935 and the Stresa Front with Great Britain and France,

three months later, in April 1935. France and Italy had always had a complicated relationship because of their competing rivalry for power.⁴⁰ Italy felt that France did not understand its mutilated reality following the Treaty of Versailles, but at the same time, Italy acknowledged that stability in Europe could not be achieved until they came to an agreement as European Great Powers.⁴¹ As a result, in January 1935, France and Italy signed the Franco-Italian Agreement, by which Italy acquired French territories in Africa, and most notably, French approval for the occupation of Ethiopia.⁴² The Franco-Italian Agreement was a pivotal moment in Mussolini's foreign policy because it set into motion the conquest of Ethiopia that same year. *Il Duce's* plan was then strengthened by the Stresa Front, which was signed in April 1935 by Great Britain, France, and Italy to establish an alliance intended to work against Germany and its rearmament, and above all, preserve peace in Europe.⁴³ Ethiopia was not addressed at the Stresa Conference because Great Britain and France did not want to create tension that would weaken their alliance against Germany; thereby there was no spoken opposition to the proposed Italian invasion and acquisition.⁴⁴ Now that *Il Duce* had grown Italy's power and prestige both internally and externally among the other European Great Powers, he was finally prepared to prioritize empire-building, and, more generally, a true fascist foreign policy.

Thus, the first decade of Mussolini's rule as prime minister had centered around rectifying the Treaty of Versailles by forming alliances to domestically reunify Italians and heighten Italy's prestige, while strengthening its international power among the European Great Powers. For the same reasons, *Il Duce's* approach to his foreign policy between 1925 and 1935 was both consistent and coherent. Mussolini's focus on the ideas of prestige and expansion through alliances were consistent because they closely mirrored those of liberal Italy. Even

historian MacGregor Knox, who tends to argue that Mussolini's foreign policy differed from liberal Italy, acknowledges that *Il Duce's* policy was continuous in so far as he worked to maintain "great-power allies" like liberal Italy.⁴⁵ On the other hand, *Il Duce's* approach to his foreign policy may not appear coherent, but its execution was. Mussolini knew that without the unification of his people and a seat at the European Great Powers' table it would be impossible for him to begin working toward a totalitarian Italian empire. Knox also supports this idea of coherence. He argues that *Il Duce* aimed to create a "fanatical following" for fascism among Italians in addition to his newly formed alliances to "[consolidate] his own unchallenged power" before implementing his true fascist agenda.⁴⁶

Unlike Knox, who recognizes grey areas in both revisionist and orthodox historians' arguments, other historians dispute aspects of *Il Duce's* foreign policy in the first decade of his rule. Many revisionist historians argue that Mussolini came to power with clear fascist goals, but could not stick to a coherent agenda because it would have "[led] quickly to a disaster."⁴⁷ More specifically, revisionist historians, such as Giorgio Rumi, argue that Mussolini's route was always "mapped—the Paris peace settlement had to be overturned and Italian rights recognized in the Adriatic," to then be followed by expansion in Africa and the Mediterranean.⁴⁸ However, despite being planned in advance, revisionist historians like Renzo De Felice claim that Mussolini was willing to change his policy's direction at any moment because he was a man of "day-to-day improvisation," which would extend into his post-Ethiopia policy.⁴⁹ On the contrary, orthodox historians, such as Ennio Di Nolfo, argue that Mussolini's foreign policy was driven by propaganda in the first half of his rule. In other words, Di Nolfo maintains that *Il Duce* was attempting to promote his agenda without taking much direct action, but his goals were still

coherent.⁵⁰ As demonstrated by Grandi and Villari, Mussolini's early foreign policy was successful without Italy taking much action. Instead, Italy prioritized forming alliances with other states to focus on issues facing not only Italy but the entirety of Europe that would eventually empower it to take action. Each time Italy formed an alliance instead of taking direct action itself, something definite was always achieved that would allow *Il Duce* to pursue a more fascist learning policy over time.⁵¹

Despite having imperialist aspirations, they did not affect *Il Duce*'s foreign policy pre-Ethiopia. Instead, Mussolini focused on continuing the aims of liberal Italy in a coherent way, starting with heightening Italian prestige to consolidate domestic Italy, while forming alliances that expanded Italy's power on the international stage, all to satisfy national interests. Additionally, all of *Il Duce*'s foreign policy decisions leading up to Ethiopia with the exception of Corfu share one commonality: they were all safe decisions. Not one of the decisions Mussolini made when he came to power, except Corfu, involved Italy attempting to externally expand on its own. Yet, within months of the Stresa Front, Mussolini decided to drastically change course from focusing on internal consolidation and the way Italy was externally perceived to prioritizing expansion. As a result, *Il Duce*'s foreign policy radicalized, fascitized, and became anything but safe; thus, the ideas of continuity and coherence did not survive past Italy's 1935 conquest of Ethiopia.

Knox confirms that *Il Duce*'s interest in Ethiopia can be traced back to 1925 and his planning to 1932.⁵² However, the opportunity did not present itself until December 1934, when it was nearly handed to Mussolini by Italy's involvement in a conflict on the Ethiopian-Somali border. Mussolini voluntarily intervened in the conflict to advance Italy's progress in occupying

the African state. From that moment, *Il Duce* confirmed that Italy's immediate goal was "the destruction of the Ethiopian armed forces and the total conquest of Ethiopia" because his empire could not "be made any other way."⁵³ The next year, after "a decade of regime consolidation and diplomatic caution," and more recently France's approval to invade and occupy Ethiopia in the Franco-Italian Agreement of January 1935, Mussolini was ready to move forward with Italy's conquest and an aggressive foreign policy.⁵⁴ Unlike his liberal foreign policy, *Il Duce* did not need to take precautions in his decision-making anymore. Ethiopia had been a member of the League of Nations since 1923, so Mussolini knew that an occupation of the African state was "a gamble ..., a great gamble" because it would be protected by the League against imperial aggression.⁵⁵ Despite *Il Duce*'s concerns over potential consequences, the Italians invaded Ethiopia in October 1935, three years after he began planning, marking the beginning of the Italo-Ethiopian War. Simultaneously, it marked the permanent end of the safe liberal foreign policy that had defined the first decade of *Il Duce*'s rule and initiated a dynamic and true fascist foreign policy.

Historians both share and debate various interpretations of Mussolini's foreign policy that differ in the ideas of continuity and coherence caused by the shift from a liberal policy to a fascist policy. De Felice argues that at the time of the Ethiopian conquest, Italy was at its height of "popularity" in Europe, but because *Il Duce* was unable to "[transform] society at home," he embarked on an "imperial adventure," showcasing a lack of continuity.⁵⁶ Other historians, such as Bosworth, argue the opposite and in support of continuity, seeing Mussolini's imperialist aims that manifested themselves in Ethiopia as "reminiscent of an earlier era of European imperialism, ... especially of Prime Minister Giolitti's conquest of Libya" in liberal Italy.⁵⁷ Essentially, there is

tremendous conflict among historians in regard to Mussolini's motivations, and more generally, his foreign policy.

In addition to debate on Italy's motives for conquering Ethiopia, historians also contest whether Ethiopia marked the final transition from liberalism to fascism in Italy. Corner defines the totalitarian phase, which was simultaneously the end of liberalism, of *Il Duce's* regime as the period between the conquest of Ethiopia in 1935 and Italy's entrance into World War II in 1940. The totalitarian phase, which focused on "fascist objectives" and the "implementation of policies ... [with] risk," supports the argument that Mussolini's desire to expand outweighed his willingness to see to Italy's national interests in his policy, therefore causing the transition from liberalism to fascism.⁵⁸ However, other historians such as De Felice and Giampiero Carocci argue that Italy entering the war did not change *Il Duce's* foreign policy completely. Instead, they argue that the change in Mussolini's foreign policy and push for totalitarianism took place earlier than Ethiopia.⁵⁹ Knox and Cassels refute De Felice and Carocci's argument and embrace Corner's, that the "breakthrough" of Ethiopia allowed *Il Duce* to "translate into practice the militant fanaticism he had hitherto ... concealed" in a totalitarian phase.⁶⁰ The new phase of Mussolini's foreign policy, which was truly fascist, also resulted in a shift to an ideological foreign policy.⁶¹ From historian Emilio Gentile's perspective, Italy's fascist ideology that was interwoven into its foreign policy was also what drove Mussolini to seek to "acquire ever greater internal power and at the same time [be] committed ... to the pursuit of aggrandizement and territorial conquests overseas."⁶² Ultimately, the fascist foreign policy and ideology that resulted from Ethiopia were not only what turned Italy completely fascist, but pushed *Il Duce* to form an alliance with Hitler.

Three months prior to the actual invasion, in July 1935, Mussolini announced his conquest of Ethiopia in an article titled *Il 'dato' irrefutabile* (The irrefutable 'fact') published in *Il Popolo d'Italia* (*The People of Italy*).⁶³ In his work, *Il Duce* states that Ethiopia was the beginning of Italy acting as a European Great Power, and as a result, the beginning of expanding Italy into an empire. More specifically, Italy's geographic limitations would require it to expand eventually, which Mussolini argues "could only be met by expansion overseas."⁶⁴ He also asserts that Italy's actions were legitimized because it had the "supreme historical and human justification" necessary to occupy the African country.⁶⁵ In addition to providing his rationale for invading Ethiopia, *Il Duce*, most notably, addresses the notion of racial superiority that was assumed by many in Europe to be Italy's main motivation when it initially announced it would invade Ethiopia. Mussolini denies the role of racism and states:

We Fascists acknowledge the existence of races, their differences of hierarchy, but we do not propose to present ourselves to the world as the embodiment of the White race against other races, we do not intend to make ourselves the preachers of segregation and of racial hatreds when we see that our fiercest critics are not the Negros of Harlem ... but are most genuine Whites in Europe and America.⁶⁶

While Mussolini's assertions that race was not a motivation in the conquest of Ethiopia may be authentic, many historians believe they are untrue. *Il Duce* may have been unwilling to admit that racial superiority played a significant role in the conquest, but it realistically did. According to historian Emilio Gentile, Italy's occupation of Ethiopia "followed typically colonial and racist criteria" for racially driven imperialism, as well as "perpetuated acts of deliberate savagery" against Ethiopians during the Italo-Ethiopian War.⁶⁷ Historian Lucia Ceci highlights the same horrific war crimes committed by Italy in Ethiopia noted by Gentile, including the "systematic use of chemical weapons" and the massacre of thousands of Ethiopians.⁶⁸ In regard to ideology,

historian Bruce J. Strang emphasizes *Il Duce's* Social Darwinist beliefs, or those of natural selection, which used racial superiority as a justification for expansion, despite trying to claim his motives were purely fascist.⁶⁹ Finally, Whittam notes that distinct racial policies originated in the years, and even in some cases months, following the conquest and as the result of Mussolini's ideology.⁷⁰ Ultimately, historians from both schools of historical thought support the argument that Ethiopia was a foundation for racism in Italy.

At the height of his popularity in Italy post-Ethiopia, Mussolini had two paths toward totalitarianism that would determine the future direction of his foreign policy and regime. Each would not only advance his fascist foreign policy, but Italy's ability to expand into an empire. However, Mussolini had to choose which path would strengthen his power more because either one would most likely be Italy's final alliance. In other words, *Il Duce* was risking his power to completely rely on either Spain or Germany. The first path, or the "German solution," involved the "strengthening of totalitarian controls, and an attempt to end the autonomous power of the King, the Church, and the social and business elites," so that all power was vested in *Il Duce*.⁷¹ The second path, or the "Spanish solution," on the other hand, focused on the reduction of the fascist party's power to give the Church a larger role in the government. Unlike the "German solution," the "Spanish solution" would set Italy on the path toward conservative authoritarianism rather than totalitarianism, the difference being that authoritarianism does not give the ruler complete control over every aspect of public and private life like totalitarianism.⁷² *Il Duce* ultimately proceeded with the former solution, which Knox describes as Mussolini "actively [striving]" for relations with Germany.⁷³ Italy's alliance with Germany defined his foreign policy and rule moving forward. However, Italy's relations with Spain post-Ethiopia,

specifically during the Spanish Civil War, are still critical to understanding his process of radicalizing his fascitized foreign policy and empire aspirations.

In July 1936, Spain experienced a civil war as anti-Republican Nationalist groups revolted against the Republican government. Francisco Franco, a Spanish military general and leader of the Nationalist movement, asked *Il Duce* to intervene because the threat of communism spreading into the western Mediterranean could have potentially affected Italy. As a result, Mussolini sent Italian military forces to Spain to assist in its government's defense. However, *Il Duce* had every intention of making Italy's occupation permanent.⁷⁴ In fact, the primary reason Mussolini decided to intervene was because he was already communicating with the anti-Republican opposition about establishing a "philo-Fascist" puppet government in Madrid.⁷⁵ According to historian Aristotle Kallis, the Spanish Civil War was the first indication of an aggressive and true fascist foreign policy being enacted for empire purposes post-Ethiopia.⁷⁶ The Spanish Civil War ended in 1939. *Il Duce* decided his alliance with Nazi Germany was more advantageous for his expansionist efforts than setting up a puppet government in Madrid. Thus, Mussolini and his forces abandoned his plan to occupy Spain and left to pursue other totalitarian opportunities.

In October 1936, three months after the beginning of the Spanish Civil War, *Il Duce* and Hitler solidified their alliance through the Rome-Berlin Axis. Galeazzo Ciano, Mussolini's son-in-law and acting foreign minister of Italy, described the axis as an "alliance between the two nations ... based on the identity between their political regimes [that] determines a common destiny" and the "most formidable military-political combine that has ever existed."⁷⁷ *Il Duce* was committed to the idea of the shared common destiny between Italy and Germany, despite

their different foreign policy paths that now appeared to converge through their newfound alliance. According to historian Adrian Lyttleton, even though Mussolini chose to ally with Germany, he could have chosen to pursue a foreign policy against it. For example, Mussolini could have allied with the Western Powers to continue defending Austria from Germany. However, Mussolini ultimately chose to ally with Hitler because it allowed him to enact the dynamic fascist policy that had been on his agenda since the beginning of his reign. Additionally, Germany provided Italy with greater opportunities for expansion across Europe. *Il Duce* “had never abandoned his totalitarian aspirations” and acknowledged that they could only be achieved through a relationship with the regime that had surpassed Italy in power.⁷⁸

After the Spanish Civil War and the formation of the Rome-Berlin Axis, Mussolini did not make another foreign policy decision for over a year. However, in November 1937 Mussolini signed the Anti-Comintern Pact. The Pact was initially an alliance formed and signed by Germany and Japan in November 1936 in opposition to the Comintern of the Soviet Union. However, the purpose of Italy joining the Pact was to support not only anti-communism efforts but to establish a binding military pact with Germany.⁷⁹ As a result, Italy withdrew from the League of Nations because Mussolini’s foreign policy was becoming more aggressive, as well as more pro-Germany than it was pro-Italy.⁸⁰

In 1938, the Munich Conference, which permitted Germany to annex the Sudetenland, further solidified Mussolini’s dedication to Hitler. Even though *Il Duce* knew he was still in the prime of his post-Ethiopia power at the Conference, he also recognized that it was the beginning of his power’s “anti-climax.”⁸¹ Mussolini remarked to Ciano that “before the year was over Italy’s destiny would be decided,” referring to whether he would be completely dedicated to

Germany for the rest of his reign.⁸² *Il Duce*'s foreign policy may have already been fascitized with the goal of attaining totalitarian power through his alliance with Germany, but fully committing to the alliance would further influence his policy to closely mirror Germany's.

Austria remained one of *Il Duce*'s focuses post-Ethiopia regardless of his alliance with Hitler, who was still actively trying to persuade Mussolini to let Germany conquer it. *Il Duce* was confronted with choosing between what he believed would maintain peace in Europe or what would continue to grow his power through Germany post-Ethiopia. *Il Duce* chose the latter, and continued to do so until the end of his rule. In March 1938, Mussolini gave his approval for Hitler's annexation of Austria as a way to join the "two dictatorial powers."⁸³ It is evident from *Il Duce*'s willingness to sacrifice Austria to Germany that Mussolini was truly devoted to his alliance with Hitler. Not only did his decision potentially disturb the peace in Europe, but "jeopardize[d] Italy's security" because of its shared border with Austria.⁸⁴ From historians' perspectives, there was no continuity and coherence left in Mussolini's foreign policy since Ethiopia, but his willingness to concede to Hitler on Austria only further proves that his foreign policy had taken an entirely different direction.

Four months after Hitler occupied Austria, his foreign policy continued to be influenced by Germany, which was extremely evident in the 1938 Manifesto of Race. The Manifesto was written in collaboration with Italian scientists and published in various newspapers and magazines including *Il Giornale d'Italia* (*The Newspaper of Italy*) and *La Difesa della Razza* (*The Defense of the Race*).⁸⁵ In the Manifesto, *Il Duce* and the scientists state:

A pure 'Italian race' has by now come into existence ... The time has come for Italians to openly declare themselves racist. All the regime's efforts up to this point have been founded upon racism ... In Italy the question of racism must be approached from a purely biological point of view, without philosophical or religious preconceptions. Italian racism must be conceived of as essentially Italian and as tendentially Aryan-Nordic. In no way

does such an assertion imply either that German racial theories can be introduced into Italy without modification ... It merely singles out for Italians a distinctively European physical, and above all, psychological model that stands entirely apart from all non-European races ... Jews do not belong to the Italian race ... The Jews represent the only population that was never assimilated in Italy because it was comprised of non-European racial elements absolutely different from the elements that gave rise to the Italians.⁸⁶

Essentially, Mussolini claims that the Jews were not biologically a part of the Italian race, and therefore would be discriminated against. Yet, Mussolini shows hesitation about implementing the same racial laws as Germany. While the racist undertones in Mussolini's speech were not unheard of in Italy post-Ethiopia, the anti-Semitism seemed unprecedented. Even after the conquest of Ethiopia in 1935, the regime's relationship with Jews was "good, and in some cases, excellent."⁸⁷ The only allusion to Jews being an enemy of the Italian state had been made by Mussolini a year prior to the Manifesto in a 1937 speech titled "*Il discorso di Berlino*" ("The Berlin Speech"). Here, *Il Duce* acknowledges there were "readily identifiable forces ... at work to provoke war," which historians identify as the Jews.⁸⁸

Many historians to this day are puzzled by the anti-Semitism in *Il Duce*'s regime at the end of the 1930s. Neither Mussolini nor his government showcased clear anti-Semitic values or tendencies prior to the Manifesto of Race. In fact, many Italian government officials under Mussolini were Jewish, many of whom made important contributions to the state. Additionally, *Il Duce* was known to ridicule the extremities of anti-Semitism in Hitler's regime, and as a result, allowed German Jews to escape their persecution by fleeing to Italy.⁸⁹ However, none of Mussolini's words or actions regarding his disapproval of anti-Semitism confirm it did not truly exist, especially with the lack of continuity and coherence in his policy post-Ethiopia. *Il Duce* regularly showed a willingness to adjust his course of action, foreign policy, and, at times, even

his ideology, if it meant he was closer to establishing his empire than before. The same logic and adaptability also could have applied to his decision to implement racial legislation in Italy.

Historians remain divided on whether Italian anti-Semitism and racial laws were a facet of Mussolini's foreign policy under Hitler's influence or a step in his totalitarian phase to establish an empire. De Felice, the leading historian on anti-Semitism and the treatment of Jews in Italy, claims that Italy was one of the "most liberal countries toward the Jews" before Mussolini succumbed to Hitler's influence, therefore resulting in anti-Semitic racial legislation.⁹⁰ Yet, despite De Felice's expertise, an overwhelming number of historians argue that Italian anti-Semitism was a significant part of Mussolini's vision for Italy, regardless of whether Hitler influenced its manifestation into racial legislation. Knox, from the perspective of historian Anthony L. Cardoza, is extremely critical of De Felice for ignoring the similarities between Mussolini and Hitler's "expansionist ambitions, geopolitical obsessions, and worldviews."⁹¹ Historian Franklin Hugh Adler also refutes De Felice by arguing that Italian anti-Semitism cannot be "downgraded to simply an extension of [Italy's] foreign policy," or even as a product of Hitler's influence, because of its severe implications for Italian Jews and society as well as its role in the radicalization of Italy's totalitarianism.⁹² Additionally, it is evident from the work of MacGregor-Hastie that Mussolini wanted to help Hitler persecute the Jews. In November 1937, Mussolini proposed that they move the Jews to Italian territories in Ethiopia and other parts of East Africa together.⁹³ While Hitler may have slightly influenced *Il Duce's* willingness to introduce more prevalent anti-Semitism in Italy, the power-hungry Mussolini had already recognized that it was essential to attain totalitarianism if he was going to work with Hitler.

Other historians support the aforementioned arguments that Italian anti-Semitism was more than just a product of Hitler's influence. They trace Italian anti-Semitism back to as early as 1932 when Mussolini blamed the Jews for issues with international finance.⁹⁴ More notably, they connect Italian anti-Semitism to Italy's relations with nations that defined Mussolini's regime and his foreign policy, including Ethiopia and Austria. From the perspective of historians Robert O. Paxton and Esmonde M. Robertson, Italian anti-Semitism stemmed from racism in its colonies, especially Ethiopia, but could not be implemented at home until there were no more Austrian Jews to protect. Prior to the *Anschluss*, Austrian Jews were Mussolini's largest form of resistance against Hitler annexing their state, dating back to his first attempt in 1934.⁹⁵ However, when Mussolini and Hitler formed the Rome-Berlin Axis, resisting against Hitler no longer mattered, hence why he sacrificed Austria. Essentially, Mussolini would have done anything to achieve the power and empire he desired, especially as the continuity and coherence of his foreign policy were abandoned.

Unfortunately, *Il Duce's* racist motivations were not limited to imperialism in Ethiopia or racial legislation at home. In April 1939, Italian racism was exacerbated by its relations with Albania.⁹⁶ According to Kallis, Italian studies in the 1930s measured the "'racial' and 'cultural' affinities between the [Italians and Albanians]."⁹⁷ Even though Italy's interest in Albania did not originate from an intention to colonize the state, but instead to join them under the same crown, *Il Duce's* racist motivations were still evident in Italy's studies. Mussolini's approach to forming an alliance with Albania was much different than his previous racially motivated decisions because it was made independently of Germany. Not only does this suggest that *Il Duce* was attempting to regain control of his own foreign policy, but his racist motivations in Albania were

not at all influenced by Germany. Ultimately, *Il Duce*'s negotiations with Albania successfully resulted in strengthening his power in the Balkans, thereby solidifying his racist approach.⁹⁸

In May 1939, a month following the creation of the Italian-Albanian alliance, Mussolini and Hitler signed the Pact of Steel. The Pact established a seemingly permanent alliance between Germany and Italy because it would require Italy to enter the Second World War. Any effort Italy had to reinvigorate a foreign policy separate from Germany, such as in Albania, now did not matter, but its anti-Semitism definitely did. World War II broke out less than four months later in September 1939 because of Germany's aggression, and even though Italy knew it would not be prepared for war until 1942, it was only able to remain neutral until June 1940.⁹⁹ Mussolini, who once had a liberal-leaning foreign policy in Italy, sacrificed everything his nation had been for the opportunity that seemed destined to bring him totalitarian power through a permanent alliance with Hitler.

When Mussolini came to power, one of his goals was to expand Italy into other parts of Europe, the Mediterranean, and even Africa, with the aspiration of an Italian empire in mind. However, *Il Duce* recognized that his vision was out of reach because Italy was still just as, if not more, politically polarized as it had been during *Il Risorgimento*. As a result, Mussolini dedicated his first decade as prime minister to unifying Italians and increasing their prestige domestically while forming alliances with the European Great Powers to advance Italy's position internationally. *Il Duce*'s liberal approach to his foreign policy is reflective of liberal Italy's dedication to attempting to unify Italians while still considering external expansion. It is evident that Mussolini was dedicated to the logic of internal consolidation before external expansion in many of his pre-Ethiopia foreign policy decisions, including the Locarno Treaties, Lateran Pacts,

Lausanne Conference, Four-Power Pact, Franco-Italian Agreement, and Stresa Conference. In many ways, Mussolini's foreign policy, in the beginning, was explicitly continuous and coherent of liberal Italy's foreign policy, even if he was aspiring to establish an Italian empire with totalitarian power in the long run.

Yet, the continuous and coherent foreign policy that existed in Italy under *Il Duce* drastically changed in 1935 when Italy invaded Ethiopia. Mussolini no longer prioritized the national interest of prestige. Instead, his desire to expand for totalitarian power became more important. Additionally, *Il Duce* became too reliant on Germany as Hitler's power exceeded his and opportunities to expand their power together arose, regardless of the implications or consequences of using violence and racism. The Spanish Civil War, Rome-Berlin Axis, Munich Conference, *Anschluss*, Manifesto of Race and implementation of racial legislation, and Pact of Steel, were all instances in which *Il Duce* chose to prioritize his alliance with Germany and desire for totalitarian power. Mussolini's alliance with Albania further showed that he made fascist foreign policy decisions even in the absence of Germany's influence.

The majority of historians continue to disagree on the degree of continuity and coherence of *Il Duce*'s policy throughout his entire rule. Even historians within the same school of historical thought have disagreements. However, analyzing Mussolini's foreign policy from his appointment as prime minister to the moment Italy joined the Second World War has shown that elements of his policy both originated and strayed from liberal Italy's policy. Prior to Ethiopia, *Il Duce*'s prioritization of internal consolidation before external expansion closely mirrored liberal Italy's foreign policy, making it both continuous and coherent. Yet, Ethiopia was a turning point for Mussolini and his foreign policy. Even though the continuity and coherence of Mussolini's

foreign policy essentially died with Italy's conquest of Ethiopia, it still existed at one point, contrary to many historians' beliefs. Additionally, the transition from liberalism to fascism as a result of Ethiopia is evident in the complete change of direction and ideology Mussolini's regime took on post-1935. His desire to attain totalitarian power and eventually establish an empire, which he determined could be achieved through imperialism and an alliance with Hitler, outweighed his prioritization of Italy's national interests. There was virtually no trace of Mussolini's previous liberal foreign policy left after Ethiopia. Despite what some historians may say, the fascist *Il Duce*'s foreign policy showcased liberal elements, but Ethiopia rid his policy of them, thus causing the final transition from liberalism to fascism in Italy.

Notes

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