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RIVISTA INTERDISCIPLINARE DELLA SOCIETÀ ITALIANA DI STORIA MILITARE

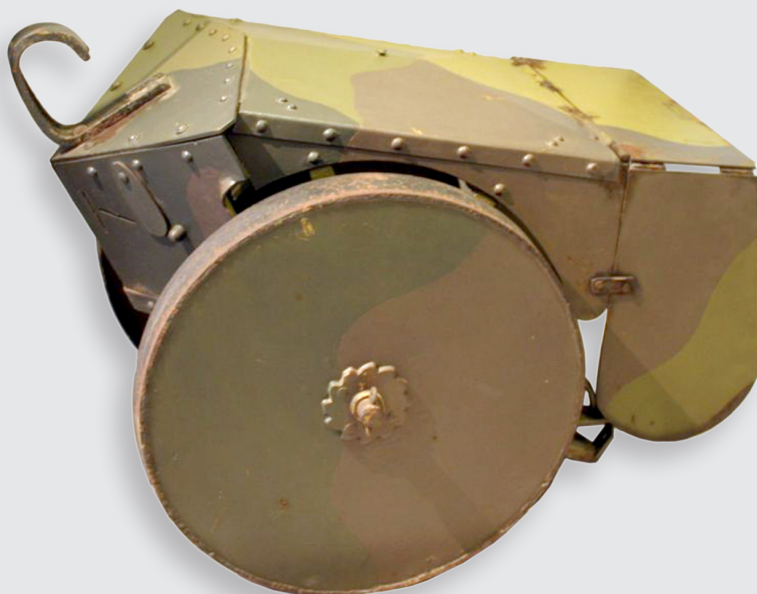
N. 2  
2021

Fascicolo 8. Ottobre 2021

## Storia Militare Contemporanea

a cura di

PIERO CIMBOLLI SPAGNESI



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#### *Nuova Antologia Militare*

Rivista interdisciplinare della Società Italiana di Storia Militare  
Periodico telematico open-access annuale ([www.nam-sism.org](http://www.nam-sism.org))  
Registrazione del Tribunale Ordinario di Roma n. 06 del 30 Gennaio 2020



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For the Journal: © Società Italiana di Storia Militare  
([www.societaitalianastoriamilitare@org](http://www.societaitalianastoriamilitare@org))

Grafica: Nadir Media Srl - Via Giuseppe Veronese, 22 - 00146 Roma  
[info@nadirmedia.it](mailto:info@nadirmedia.it)

Gruppo Editoriale Tab Srl -Viale Manzoni 24/c - 00185 Roma  
[www.tabedizioni.it](http://www.tabedizioni.it)

ISSN: 2704-9795

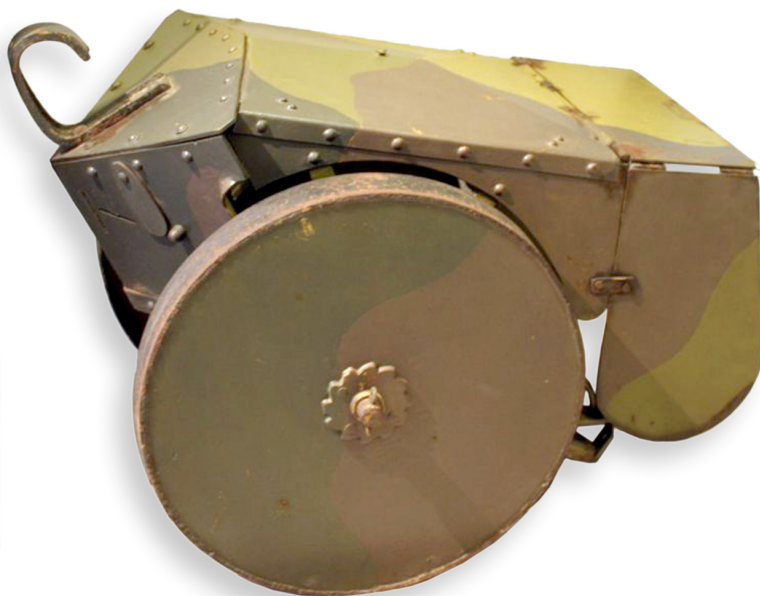
ISBN Fascicolo 8: 978-88-9295-289-8

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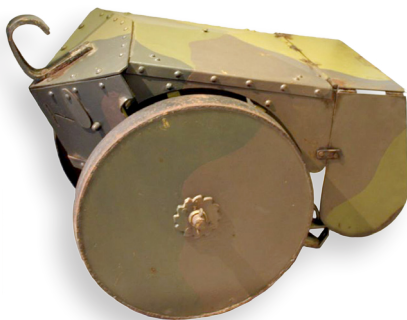
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Bouclier roulant individuel 1914-18  
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# The Italian Army in the Second World War: A Historiographical Analysis

by SIMON GONSALVES  
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ABSTRACT. Core english language analysis of the Second World War has inaccurately judged the Italy's military contribution to the Axis cause. Basing their examination on flawed and severely biased sources, historians in the immediate post war era were far off the historical mark. History on Italy's World War Two military experience often gives a warped misunderstanding of the country's role in the conflict. Using historiographical literary analysis, this paper examines two representative contemporary writers that form the foundation of common historical narratives concerning the *Guerra Fascista*.

KEYWORDS: ITALY, WORLD WAR TWO, HISTORIOGRAPHY, TWENTIETH CENTURY HISTORY.

Originally published in the *Great Lakes Journal of Undergraduate History*, Volume 5, Number 1, pp. 3 – 23. Improved version.

**W**inston Churchill, British Prime Minister, renowned wartime statesman, and admired historian, was well-known by his fellow politicians in the House of Commons for clever wit and sharp retorts. During a prewar diplomatic conference, with the looming storm clouds of war close on the horizon, Churchill sat across from Joachim von Ribbentrop, Germany's Minister for Foreign Affairs. Brimming with confidence, Ribbentrop proclaimed that in the event of war with the British Empire, the Italians would be a committed and indefatigable ally of the Third Reich. Churchill responded with one of his characteristic verbal ripostes - "That's only fair – we had them last time."<sup>1</sup>

Churchill was of course referring to Italy's notoriously poor military performance in the First World War. The better part of a century has passed

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1 Donald CRAWFORD, *Five Minutes in Berlin*, (Edinburgh: Murry McLellen, 2015), 14.

since Churchill made this famous remark, and popular contemporary opinion has hardly shifted on the subject. There is no shortage of variations to the derisive “Italian rifles for sale – never fired, only dropped once” humour that quintessentially captures North American understanding of Italy’s contribution to the Axis cause. Throughout the vast academic literature concerning the Second World War, Italy’s support for the Axis cause has long been either ignored, misinterpreted, or simply dismissed as irrelevant. The Simon and Schuster Encyclopedia of World War II goes as far as to title the notable 1940 conflict between Greece and Italy under “Balkans, German Invasion of.”<sup>2</sup>

Italy’s role in the Second World War has often been reduced to mere footnotes. Histories written in the English language commonly portray the Italian war effort as “vacillating between tragedy and farce.”<sup>3</sup> Numerous writers largely base their analysis on dismal anecdotes of Italian ineptness. Allan Millett’s *A War to be Won*, in its brief section on Italy’s 1940 drive into Egypt, focuses on how the commander of the Italian vanguard failed to pick up his Arab guides as well as necessary maps. Unsurprisingly, Italy’s invasion force ended up losing his way while still within Italian territory.<sup>4</sup> Fortunately, they were spotted by Italian reconnaissance planes just before water supplies ran out. Due to dismissive attitudes, memory of the war tends to focus on non-Italian actors, even in predominantly Italian theatres. Anglo-American histories and media representations overwhelmingly tend to focus on American, Commonwealth, and German units, while Italian forces are pushed to the edges of history.

However, Italy’s armed forces participated in some of the most heavily contested theatres of the war, such as the Eastern Front and North Africa, alongside less well-known campaigns in Greece, East Africa, Southern France, and the Balkans. Italy’s relatively early surrender and subsequent factional realignment during the war stands in stark contrast to Nazi

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2 James SADKOVICH, “Anglo-American Bias and the Italo-Greek War of 1940-1941,” *The Journal of Military History* 58, no. 4 (1994): 620.

3 James SADKOVICH, “Understanding Defeat: Reappraising Italy’s Role in World War II,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 24, no. 1 (1989), 38.

4 Allan MILLETT, *A War to Be Won: Fighting the Second World War, 1937-1945*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2001).

Germany's and Imperial Japan's fanatical resistance. This paper outlines how historians of the Second World War have, more often than not, allowed plentiful, deeply negative tropes regarding Italy during World War Two to permeate their works.

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

### *Historical Context*

In the subsequent decades following Italy's unification in 1861, the new country's leading politicians were concerned over the apparent lack of "unity, discipline, and patriotism" among their citizenry.<sup>5</sup> This is exemplified by the Italian Senator Massimo d'Azeglio quote, "we have made Italy. Now we must make Italians."<sup>6</sup> International colonial conquest seemed an inexpensive and relatively safe vehicle to boost national solidarity and prestige. However, during the Scramble for Africa in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Italy was a distinct outlier - the only European state to have its colonial ambitions in Africa decisively dashed on the field of battle by a non-European state. Driven out of Ethiopia in 1896 after the Battle of Adwa, the chaotically disorganized Italian invasion of Libya in 1911 further cemented international opinion. The French diplomat Paul Cambon even went as far as to comment that Italy was likely to be "more burdensome than useful as an ally."<sup>7</sup>

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5 Dominic LIEVEN, *The End of Tsarist Russia: The March to World War I and Revolution*, (London: Penguin Books, 2016), 44.

6 Charles KILLINGER, *The History of Italy* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002), 1.

7 Christopher CLARK, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914*, (London: Allen

The country's participation two decades later in the First World War was catastrophic.<sup>8</sup> Deadlocked in fierce mountain warfare by well positioned Austro-Hungarian armies, the furthest Italian advance was only ten miles into Austria's alpine territory.<sup>9</sup> The Italian Army's reputation was further diminished by its rout during the German offensive at Caporetto, also known as the Twelfth Battle for the Isonzo, in the Autumn of 1917. During this, the Central Powers took approximately 300,000 Italian prisoners.<sup>10</sup> In the interwar period, Italy's Imperial ambitions led to the invasion of nations far weaker and significantly less developed than themselves. While these adventures abroad into Ethiopia and Albania proved militarily successful for Italy, they did little to repair the global standing of Italy's armed forces. Even before the wider eruption of global conflict, those who would write the history of the next world war already had a dismal opinion of the nation's ability to competently fight.

It was Italian participation in the Second World War that has shaped contemporary perceptions of the Italian military. The results of Italian foreign policy between the years of 1940 and 1943 were calamitously dismal. Declaring war on the Allied powers in the summer of 1940, the Italian Fascist Benito Mussolini mobilized his country's military with the ambition to become the reincarnation of the Roman Empire. Italy's overconfident leadership aimed to conquer the Mediterranean and "make Italy a global power with an empire from Gibraltar to the Persian Gulf."<sup>11</sup>

During this early phase of the conflict, upper echelons of Italy's military and monarchy pressured Mussolini to remain uncommitted. To do otherwise meant the regime would be staking its continued existence on the successful prosecution of a highly uncertain war. However, in the summer of 1940, the situation seismically shifted. With French collapse, Britain vul-

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Lane, 2012), 249.

8 Bruce VANDERVORT, *Wars of Imperial Conquest in Africa, 1830-1914* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 43.

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

10 GOOCH, *The Italian Army and the First World War*, 4.

11 MACGREGOR KNOX, *Common Destiny: Dictatorship, Foreign Policy, and War in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 144.



nerable, and Germany seemingly triumphant, a historic window of opportunity for Mussolini appeared to have opened. Mussolini's ill-fated statement, "I only need a few thousand dead so that I can sit at the peace conference as a man who has fought,"<sup>12</sup> epitomizes his opportunistic mentality. This extremely parochial outlook was certainly not lost on his allies. The German dictator Adolf Hitler remarked that the Italians were at first "too cowardly to take part. Now they are in a hurry so that they can share in the spoils."<sup>13</sup> However, Italy's military stockpiles were still substantially depleted due to Italy's considerable involvement in the Spanish Civil War.<sup>14</sup> By declaring war, Italy decided to enter a fight that, by its own admission, it would not be prepared to wage until at least 1943.<sup>15</sup>

Within six months of Italy's official Declaration of War on 10 June 1940, Mussolini's grand vision had already been burnt to ashes around him. The aims of Mussolini and his followers to turn the Mediterranean into an Italian Mare Nostrum (our sea) had failed catastrophically.<sup>16</sup> Italy's most significant conquest turned out to be a "dusty and useless corner of Africa – British Somaliland."<sup>17</sup> By the beginning of 1941, the Italian military "faced defeat in the Balkans at the hands of Greece, the capitulation of the entirety of Italian territory in Africa to the British, as well as total defeat at sea."<sup>18</sup> Germany's Führer snidely commented that the unfolding catastrophe had the "healthy effect of once more compressing Italian claims to within the natural boundaries of Italian competency."<sup>19</sup>

During the following two years, Italy hardly fared any better. After driving the Italians from Africa, Anglo-American forces landed on the beaches of Sicily in 1943. Once news of the Allied landings reached Rome, the

12 Pietro BADOGLIO, *L'Italia nella seconda Guerra mondiale* (Milano: Mondadori, 1946), 37.

13 "Italy declares war on France and Great Britain", *History*, <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/italy-declares-war-on-france-and-great-britain>.

14 Brian SULLIVAN, "Fascist Italy's Military Involvement in the Spanish Civil War", *The Journal of Military History*, Vol. 59, No. 4 (1995), 711. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2944499>.

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

16 MILLETT, *A War to Be Won: Fighting the Second World War, 1937-1945*, 91.

17 MACGREGOR KNOX. *Hitler's Italian Allies*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), i.

18 KNOX. *Hitler's Italian Allies*. 80.

19 KNOX. *Hitler's Italian Allies*. 18.

“regime crumbled without any real resistance.”<sup>20</sup> Senior German officers still smouldered from Italy’s ‘defection’ from the Central Powers to the Entente in 1915.<sup>21</sup> When a new Italian government changed its allegiance to the Allied cause, vengeful German divisions rushed though the peninsula to occupy the country. This important change of national loyalty had evidently never reached most of Italy’s garrisoned divisions. When German formations arrived to disarm and defang the country’s military, it came as a shock for much of the Italian Army. Organized resistance collapsed and never truly re-organized.<sup>22</sup> The ease of Germany’s takeover allowed the Wehrmacht to hold and delay the Allied drive up the Italian Peninsula much more effectively, evidenced by German battlegroups holding much of the northern areas of the country until the very last days of the war.

### *The Myths of the Immediate Post War Period*

“Victory has 100 fathers and defeat is an orphan”

(John F. Kennedy, President of the United States of America: 1960-1963)

Fascist Italy lost the Second World War, and lost badly. There is no doubt amongst historians, military strategists, and political scientists that the Second World War was an unmitigated disaster for Fascist Italy. However, while clear consensus reigns over the outcomes of the various battles and campaigns, the underlying explanations and causal forces have been relentlessly debated. Historical narratives constructed shortly after the war became incredibly influential. One of the most prevalent historiographical themes was Mussolini’s inept policies were principally responsible for its military downfall. Following the war, central figures in the Italian military establishment sought to shape the narrative surrounding the calamitous war years. To defend their legacies, honour, and self-interest, they sought to place the lion’s share of the blame on a deceased man

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20 KNOX, *Hitler’s Italian Allies*, 20.

21 CORRELLI BARNETT, *World War Two Encyclopedia*. (Westport: H.S. Stuttman Publishers, 1978), 262.

22 KNOX, *Hitler’s Italian Allies*, 21.

few would defend publicly. Mussolini, who was captured and summarily executed near Lake Como in 1945 by Italian Communists,<sup>23</sup> was hardly able to defend himself. Therefore, in a devastated country, Fascist principles and governance provided a practical scapegoat for Italians looking on the horizon towards future employment within Allied dominated Italy. Therefore, it is not difficult to find Italian memoirs sharply critical of key regime figures.

Disassociating themselves from the regime's most controversial actions, the country's surviving political figures deflected charges of Italian incompetence and criminality during the war's prosecution towards a figure and ideology already thoroughly demonized and loathed by the Allied powers. Personal responsibility for failure among the surviving military elite was thus mitigated, and the threat of criminal tribunals were also largely avoided. Those considered to be war criminals by countries such as Yugoslavia, Greece, and Ethiopia never faced anything like the Nuremberg trials.<sup>24</sup>

The first histories of the war were the personal accounts of the men with significant personal involvement. While unquestionably an important part of historical study, war memoirs published within a short temporal span after a conflict's conclusion are typically imbued with a normative agenda and are to be viewed with a critical eye. This tendency becomes noticeable in Pietro Badoglio's *Italy in the Second World War*. Translated into English in the early 1950's, Badoglio transcribed his experiences as Chief of Staff during the war, as well as his figurehead role within of the post 1943 Italian government.

Badoglio's 1948 book was an unsubtle character assassination of the Fascist leader. Mussolini was described as a military amateur, constantly meddled in the affairs of military professionals. Projecting his own personal failings onto Mussolini, Badoglio branded his former leader as a narcissistic, incompetent, warmongering tyrant. Mussolini was labelled as a man possessing "an overwhelming belief in his own genius... who believed

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23 1945: Italian Partisans Kill Mussolini, *BBC*, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/april/28/newsid\\_3564000/3564529.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/april/28/newsid_3564000/3564529.stm)

24 Carroll RORY, "Italy's Bloody Secret, Education", *The Guardian*, June 2001.

himself to be immeasurably superior to the rest of mankind.”<sup>25</sup> According to the former general, it was Mussolini who bore sole responsibility for Italy’s entry into the war. The Duce, and his innermost circle of enabling sycophants, were responsible for Italy’s lack of preparation and the abysmal prosecution of the conflict. As the British government saw Badoglio as reliably anti-communist, he was never tried for the war crimes committed under his watch as Commander in Chief of the Italian army.<sup>26</sup>

While Badoglio was not the only Italian to popularize this style of narrative, his slanted work was one of the very few Italian accounts translated into English. This was a consequence of the Cold War, a conflict that significantly impacted the way english speaking academics perceived Italy’s war effort. As the fault line between east/west antagonism ran through a now divided Germany, central Europe was a clear battleground between the Soviet Bloc and the Western alliance. Due to the heightening potential of a ground war between NATO and the Warsaw Pact, Anglo-American military planners turned to the only people with real combat experience fighting the Soviets - the veterans of the German military. The Wehrmacht spent much of the war locked in a death grip with the Red Army. As the German armies had come seemingly close to victory over the Soviet Union throughout the initial phases of Operation Barbarossa, the architects of future wars became highly interested in the lessons learned from Germany’s four years of apocalyptic combat across Eastern Europe.<sup>27</sup>

Due to America’s desperate need of actionable military intelligence on the USSR, accounts from the German perspective were quickly translated into english. The Italian perspective, demolished as a significant power on the continent and discredited by military failings, was of little interest to Americans or the British Commonwealth. Prominent German military commanders were given a platform to forge their own narrative of the war. Due to Cold War tensions, Russian archival and firsthand sources were inaccessible or not trusted. Lacking these alternative perspective,

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25 BADOGLIO, *Italy in the Second World War*, 3.

26 Effie PEDALIU, “Britain and the ‘Hand-over’ of Italian War Criminals to Yugoslavia, 1945–48”, *Journal of Contemporary History* 9 no. 4 (2004), 506.

27 SADKOVICH, “Understanding Defeat: Reappraising Italy’s Role in World War II,” 44.

Anglo-American histories during the post-war era placed far too much confidence in the authenticity of German primary sources, often echoing their accounts nearly verbatim.<sup>28</sup>

Numerous German generals used this opportunity to shift disproportionate responsibility for their eventual downfall onto the Italian armed forces - a military already popularly discredited. A dominant post-war narrative to romanticise Germany's campaign on the Eastern Front was largely powered by famous Wehrmacht commanders such as Erich von Manstein, Friedrich von Mellinthin, and Heinz Guderian. Just as these figures were influential in creating narratives that prejudiced the American view of the Eastern Front, the German perspective was equally important in the way Italy was viewed in historical accounts published soon after the war. German military critics were instrumental in popularizing the idea that moral inadequacies and the "simple cowardice" of Italian soldiers lost their country the war. While not always the case, the argument that Italian "hearts were just not in the war" frequently came sheathed in the language of race.<sup>29</sup>

It should come as little surprise that German writers, fervently conditioned to the overtly racist attitudes of the early twentieth century, would make great use of racial theory to explain Italian defeats during the war. Even by the standards of the era, National Socialist ideology was infamous for associating cause and effect with ethnic ancestry. There is no question that the "Germans looked down on their ally as racially inferior," and that this view was shared by major German figures.<sup>30</sup> Siegfried Westphal, Chief of Staff of the German/Italian Panzer Army in North Africa, considered that the lack of aggressive spirit among Italians, officers and soldiers alike was derived from their 'southern tendencies' which "made them too emotional and unsteady to be good soldiers."<sup>31</sup> Albert Kesselring, the overall German commander in the Mediterranean theatre, stated that the average

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

29 SADKOVICH, "Of Myths and Men: Rommel and the Italians in North Africa, 1940-1942" *The International History Review*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (1991), 312.

30 SADKOVICH, "Of Myths and Men: Rommel and the Italians in North Africa", 311.

31 SADKOVICH, "Of Myths and Men", 311.

Italian was not qualified to even carry a weapon, and was “conceited, saddled with a vivid imagination which made it difficult for him to tell reality from fantasy, and easily contented with coffee, cigarettes, and women.”<sup>32</sup>

German military commanders propagated these myths and stereotypes to salvage their own reputations. According to German accounts, the Italians defending the Don River positions supporting the German siege of Stalingrad disintegrated because of deficiencies in Italian valour. Wehrmacht officers argued that the unwillingness of the Italian 8<sup>th</sup> Army to hold its ground allowed the elite German 6<sup>th</sup> Army to be encircled within the city and annihilated. The early Italian debacles in North Africa, supposedly caused by faint-hearted and hesitant decisions by high command and on the battlefield, forced the redeployment of critical German units that could have been used decisively elsewhere.<sup>33</sup> In summary, German historiography argued that Italian incompetence was largely rooted in a perceived inherent racial-cultural inferiority that snatched German defeat from the jaws of victory. German writers during this period argued Italy’s defeat was continually postponed by the efforts of the audacious Wehrmacht soldiery through his superior Germanic fighting spirit and leadership. Italy was saved again and again by the “genial Hitler and his superior German war machine, which met its own ruin as a result of its generous aid to its pitiable and ridiculous ally.”<sup>34</sup>

The Western Allies were receptive to this point of view. Allied press reports trivialized the threat Italian forces represented, while portraying the Germans in a much more frightening and capable fashion. British war-time propaganda consistently highlighted the rout of the Italian 10<sup>th</sup> Army in Libya by a numerically inferior British force. From the British perspective, Italian failure in the deserts of North Africa and in the hills of Greece demonstrated the lack of ability among Italy’s leadership, as well as the ineptitude and demoralization of common soldiers. After the United States joined the conflict, this attitude was passed on to the Americans by Britain.<sup>35</sup>

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32 SADKOVICH, “Of Myths and Men”, 312.

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

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

35 Ian WALKER, *Iron Hulls, Iron Hearts: Mussolini’s Elite Armoured Divisions in North Afri-*

This understanding of history was parroted by postwar historians in the first wave of non-biographical works. Writing on the North African theatre regarding Italian retreat and German intervention, Kenneth Macksey in 1972 argued that “the British threw out the Italian Chicken only to let in the German Eagle.”<sup>36</sup> British General Sir William Jackson, writing a few years later, claimed that the defeat of the Italians on the dunes of the Western Desert in early 1941 opened the way for “two races of equal fighting quality - the British and German.”<sup>37</sup> Considering intense and widespread German anti-Italian prejudice, the blind acceptance of German sources as an objective source of information is the most serious flaw of early Anglo American historiography.

*Macgregor Knox. Foundation of Modern Historiography*

At the beginning of the 1980’s, Italian historiography began to shift. Born after the war, they brought with them a different set of values and ways of viewing the world, without the distorting effects of government propaganda and residual wartime ultra-nationalism. The historian Macgregor Knox is the author “whose works have most shaped the views of readers of English on the Italian military.”<sup>38</sup> Knox is considered an expert on both foreign and military policies of both the Fascist and National Socialist regimes. Having published numerous articles and books on the Italian military during the Second World War, Knox was the first English writer to present a holistic analysis of the Italian war effort. The writings of Knox have had substantial repercussions for Italian historiography. Comprehensive popular histories of the Second World War largely base their depiction of Italian involvement primarily on his research. As this style of history is the most widely read, Knox’s influence on both the public at large and military academia has been colossal.

The works of Macgregor Knox do not simply repeat the myths of an ab-

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ca. (Ramsbury, England: The Crowood Press, 2003), 61-62.

36 WALKER, *Iron Hulls, Iron Hearts*, 286.

37 WALKER, *Iron Hulls, Iron Hearts*, 286.

38 James SADKOVICH, “Fascist Italy at War”. *The International Historical Review*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (1992), 526.



solute dictator pushing his nation to cataclysmic destruction or a people's refusal (or ability) to fight. At the beginning of his book, *Hitler's Italian Allies*, Knox writes that the "Italian dictator's sovereign fecklessness and the alleged absence of popular support for the war" are only partial answers at best. Knox's acknowledgement of these long-standing tropes surrounding Italy's bitter military defeat was an important historiographical change. Knox was by no means fond of Mussolini - he was perceived as a "military dilettante."<sup>39</sup> Although clearly in control of foreign policy, Mussolini was "conscious of his own lack of experience and understandably reluctant to damage his aura of dictatorial infallibility."<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, Knox argues that the "restraints under which Mussolini labored" severely constrained his ability to act unilaterally.<sup>41</sup> Mussolini lacked Hitler's totalitarian control, and had to compromise with a deeply entrenched establishment: parliament, monarchy, army, the church, and fascist conservatives. Limited in his power, Knox argues that he only interfered in matters of military professionals when the situation demanded it. The Duce was reluctant to spend his restricted political capital infuriating his armed forces. As such, he tended to let his military establishment handle their own affairs, by allowing them to control their own organization, procurement strategies, and tactical doctrine.<sup>42</sup> As detailed later, this would have serious consequences.

Knox writes that the Italian soldier had two undeniably excellent qualities; "the willingness to suffer... and (if led with anything approaching competency) the willingness to fight and die."<sup>43</sup> He contends that the popular myth, that the Italian soldier considered World War II "a war not felt," is simply not true.<sup>44</sup> Despite the claims of wartime media, 'cowardice' in the Italian army was not significantly greater than any other major armed force of the period. Knox notes that Italian units were "enduring and fa-

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39 KNOX, *Mussolini Unleashed*, 7.

40 KNOX, *Hitler's Italian Allies*, 43.

41 KNOX, *Common Destiny*, 111

42 KNOX, *Hitler's Italian Allies*, 47.

43 MACGREGOR KNOX, "The Italian Armed Forces: 1940 - 3," in *Military Effectiveness, Volume Three: The Second World War*, ed. Allan MILLET and Murray WILLIAMSON (London: Unwyn Hyman, 1988), 143.

44 "The Italian Armed Forces: 1940-3," 143



talistically stubborn” and overwhelmingly stood and fought. When Italian troops surrendered en masse, it was due to encirclement and facing certain annihilation, not cowardice in pitched battle.<sup>45</sup>

Mussolini’s “strategic megalomania,”<sup>46</sup> ideological convictions, and character flaws effectively tied Italian fortunes to a Third Reich bent on self-immolation. Knox asserts that Germany’s instigation of global war by the end of 1941, barring improbable levels of Allied incompetence, “would have destroyed the Fascist regime of Italy regardless of their level of military or economic effectiveness.”<sup>47</sup> After Hitler’s failure to win the broader war in 1941/1942, due to decisive macroeconomic forces the conflict was essentially lost – the scientific, demographic, and financial advantages of the Grand Alliance of Britain, the United States and the Soviet Union would have undoubtedly crushed the Axis alliance eventually.

Though his foreign policy blunders ensured his country’s ultimate defeat, the reason why the Italian army was so remarkably ineffectual at the strategic level was hardly Mussolini’s cross to bear alone. Italy could have maintained some degree of dignity in its defeat. Knox makes the innovative argument that Italy’s military humiliation during the Second World War was “first and foremost a failure of Italy’s military culture and military institutions.”<sup>48</sup> The troubles of the Italian war effort had longstanding structural roots within the Italian state that can be traced back to its unification in the 1870’s. Comparable flaws were apparent in the Italian “North and South, Left and Right, workers, industrialists, and generals.”<sup>49</sup>

Eschewing racial justifications, Knox uses an institutional-cultural lens to explain the disastrous results of Italy’s war. According to Knox’s analysis, the most significant of Italian cultural inadequacies was the enduring resistance to modernity that reached across Italian society. Pervasive narrowmindedness was a widespread cultural trait of mistrust, dividing the nation by language, geography, and social class. Furthermore, there was

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

46 KNOX, *Hitler’s Italian Allies*, 1.

47 KNOX, *Hitler’s Italian Allies*, 2.

48 KNOX, *Hitler’s Italian Allies*, x.

49 KNOX, *Hitler’s Italian Allies*, 29

an ingrained and fierce “resistance to precision and rationale planning.”<sup>50</sup> Knox argues that these cultural factors created a society short on common trust, collaboration, and natural teamwork. In the campaign against British Somaliland, Italian command sought to use inter-personal rivalries to their advantage. By placing feuding officers in adjacent attack sectors, this would “put the wind under their feet.”<sup>51</sup> To the surprise of the staff officers involved, both commanders “concentrated on preventing the other from getting there first.”<sup>52</sup> Moreover, inter-service rivalries were endemic. Each branch of the military controlled weapons development and production completely independent of one another and kept cooperation at the bare minimum.<sup>53</sup> Tactical integration was no better. There was underlying fear across the Italian military of losing power through apparent subordination to another branch. Without any kind of doctrinal framework or cooperation between ground and air forces, the Italian army’s ability to execute offensive operations was effectively hamstrung. As each arm planned their operations independently, the army was deprived of important tactical instruments, such as close air support.<sup>54</sup> This development stood stark contrast to the Germans, which had achieved considerable martial success though close cooperation between service branches

Some Italian problems could never have been fully mitigated. Italy lacked a large industrial sector. Still mostly agrarian, Knox argued that the country’s output was only a fraction of that of its German ally and the smallest of the major industrialized states.<sup>55</sup> Italy suffered from a lack of native raw war materials, a situation made worse by the British naval blockade. While the regime “failed miserably in mobilizing the nation’s resources,”<sup>56</sup> an influx of raw materials would not have changed the deeply flawed organizational/ideological structure of the Italian military nor its shallow industrial base.

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50 KNOX, *Hitler’s Italian Allies*, 28.

51 KNOX, *The Italian Armed Forces: 1940 – 3*, 165.

52 KNOX, *The Italian Armed Forces: 1940-3*, 157.

53 KNOX, *Hitler’s Italian Allies*, 38.

54 KNOX, *Hitler’s Italian Allies*, 113.

55 KNOX, *Common Destiny*, 148.

56 KNOX, *Hitler’s Italian Allies*, Introduction.

Italy lacked a well-developed national military culture and tradition. Combined with a lack of national unity, “the absence of altruism in the service of higher national purposes”<sup>57</sup> created a highly dysfunctional military procurement system. This helps to explain why industrialists involved in the armaments industry swindled the national treasury through “illegal cartels and all manners of deceptive practices.”<sup>58</sup> As leading manufacturers consistently threatened to instigate labour unrest and production stoppages, the Army accepted the continued production of ineffective or useless weapons in fear of “ending up with no weapons at all.”<sup>59</sup> In addition, due to a “culture of stubborn and parochial backwardness,” Italy’s primary manufacturers failed to update their production and quality control techniques.<sup>60</sup> Clinging to old models of skilled workers “slowly hand crafting obsolete weapons,” they refused to adopt standardized models in mass production lines that allowed the U.S.S.R., the United States, and Germany to produce needed equipment and weaponry much more efficiently than Italian Industry.<sup>61</sup> Crippled by both structural as well as self-inflicted problems, Italy could not produce the large quantities of modern war material that were desperately needed on the fronts.

Italy’s military elite proved “wholly unable to imagine modern warfare,” let alone prepare and fight battles that depended on using mechanized, combined arms tactics.<sup>62</sup> Instead of accepting that war had now largely had become a contest of advanced machines, the Italian army’s conservative and rigid leadership placed its faith in mass formations of infantry. Numerically enlarging the army to the largest feasible size, “Italy’s eight million bayonets” were supposed to overcome all resistance.<sup>63</sup> However, in the maelstrom of technologically amplified warfare, “superiority in numbers tended only to produce superior numbers of maimed, missing, killed, and captured.”<sup>64</sup>

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57 KNOX, *Hitler’s Italian Allies*, 28.

58 KNOX, *Hitler’s Italian Allies*, 28

59 KNOX, *Hitler’s Italian Allies*, 42.

60 KNOX, *Hitler’s Italian Allies*, 42.

61 KNOX, *Hitler’s Italian Allies*, 45.

62 KNOX, *Hitler’s Italian Allies*, Intro.

63 KNOX, *The Italian Armed Forces: 1940-3*, 162.

64 KNOX, *The Italian Armed Forces: 1940-3*, 162.

This attitude also influenced the army's force organization and equipment procurement. Most of the nation's resources went toward basic infantry equipment for the inflated mass of manpower, while critical up-to-date war machines were given low priority as "innovation remained suspect" throughout the army.<sup>65</sup> Italy's army thus went into North Africa lacking sufficient armoured units and mobile infantry. The mobility and firepower that was critical to success in desert warfare was rarely found in sufficiently quality or quantity.

An insightful report was compiled by Italian intelligence on the nature of the German Blitzkrieg, or 'lightning war.' This approach to mechanized warfare proved extraordinarily successful in the conflict's early years. Badoglio, the Army's Chief of Staff, responded to this document by dismissively stating that "we'll study it when the war is over."<sup>66</sup> The proud ignorance of the Italian general staff prevented the widespread adoption of more effective approaches to warfare that handicapped the army in the field. In addition, the dominant military culture was still firmly rooted in the First World War, emphasizing mind over matter. Marshall Graziani, Italy's 1940 North African theatre commander, boldly stated that "when the cannon sounds, everything will fall into place."<sup>67</sup> There was a "widespread assumption that in battle, intuition and individual valor counted for more than training."<sup>68</sup> It should come as no surprise that there was little emphasis on properly training the reservists and conscripts that formed the vast bulk of the army.

A smaller, more effectively trained, equipped, and mobile army could have taken advantage of the dismal allied situation of 1940/41 by using all of Italy's might in a short, aggressive campaign. However, deep flaws in Italy's military culture strangled any attempt to build a force composition that harmonized with Italian comparative strengths and larger strategic objectives. Structural issues in the country's military culture caused the Italian military industrial complex to produce many of the "least effective,

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65 KNOX, *Hitler's Italian Allies*, 47.

66 KNOX, *The Italian Armed Forces: 1940-3*, 154.

67 KNOX, *The Italian Armed Forces: 1940-3*, 171.

68 KNOX, *The Italian Armed Forces: 1940-3*, 164.

least numerous, and most overpriced weapons of the Second World War.”<sup>69</sup> The prevailing ethos of the military and the country led to the deployment of an army that was thoroughly technologically backward.

Knox finds plenty of historical exemplars to support this. Italian infantry had to engage forces wielding superior weaponry and equipment. The Italian 8<sup>th</sup> army, marching into the maw of Operation Barbarossa, had been issued boots whose soles were made of cardboard.<sup>70</sup> Italian tank crews were sent into battle in obsolete vehicles that were outclassed in almost every way. The most effective Italian tank produced in any real quantity, the mechanically unreliable M14, could hardly dent British Grants and Crusader IIIs. A single hit by an enemy gun could prove fatal, as thin Italian tank armor “would sometimes shatter like glass.”<sup>71</sup> Tank crews operated without any form of radio until mid-1941, and the compensated compasses necessary for effective desert navigation were never issued.<sup>72</sup> Air support was equally poor. The Italian SM85 dive bombers often “proved more dangerous to their crews than the enemy.”<sup>73</sup> The fighters of the Regia Aeronautica were often underpowered, outgunned, and without electronic navigational aids. The Breda Ba.88 ground attack aircraft was even cited as the “most remarkable failure of any operational aircraft to see service in World War II” and was eventually determined to be of more use as an airfield distraction to draw fire away from more valuable planes.<sup>74</sup> Knox states that the most effective machines Italian industry managed to create were manufactured too late and in too few numbers to have any noticeable impact.<sup>75</sup> This dismal and depressingly long list is symbolic of Knox’s holistic view on the Italian war effort. In his analysis, Knox argues that the fact that the Italian Army held together as long as it did was remarkable considering the flaws inherent within its establishment.

69 KNOX, *Hitler’s Italian Allies*, 46.

70 KNOX, *The Italian Armed Forces: 1940-3*, 161.

71 KNOX, *The Italian Armed Forces: 1940-3*, 139.

72 KNOX, *The Italian Armed Forces: 1940-3*, 154.

73 KNOX, *Hitler’s Italian Allies*, 40.

74 David MONDEY, “Hamlyn Concise Guide to Axis Aircraft of World War II,” (London: Bounty Books, 2006) 8.

75 KNOX, *Hitler’s Italian Allies*, 65.

### *The Revisionist Position*

The historian James Sandkovich is one of the more recent historians to attempt a reimagining of Italy's role in the Second World War. In contrast to Knox, Sandkovich argues that "Italy's failures have often been overstated, while Germany's have been understated."<sup>76</sup> When placed in a wider context, Italy upheld its part of the Axis alliance whereas the Third Reich did not. Sandkovich argues that Italian economy was an important contributor to the Axis alliance. Sandkovich research suggests that Italy produced relatively proportionate quantities of weaponry compared to Germany. Artillery, aircraft, and armored vehicles were manufactured at around twenty percent of the overall German total; similar to the disparity between the overall economic power of the two countries.<sup>77</sup> Sandkovich considers this a remarkable achievement, given Italy's structural economic problems. In addition, he asserts that at the war's start, Italy's weapon systems performed at the same level as the weaponry of the other major powers.<sup>78</sup> Italian research and development managed to design some of the war's best armaments; the Cannone 90/53 canon and the Macchi C.205 fighter being the most notable. Even the P.26/40 heavy tank would be a decent match for most other tanks of its class. Lack of resources and insufficient technical expertise depressed production. While Sandkovich acknowledges the efficiency of Italy's war economy was far from perfect, the root of the army's operational and technological failings was by no means entirely self-inflicted.

According to Sandkovich, the economic and tactical doctrines of the Third Reich were the main cause of Italy's humiliation. Germany was almost as unprepared for total war as Italy was in 1939. The men in charge of fueling the Germany's future campaigns corrected this deficit by thoroughly plundering Europe of its military and natural resources. Italy, cut off from Soviet and American imports by German declarations of war, desperately needed raw materials to maintain their war economy. German actions ensured these assets were not forthcoming. Germany appropriated

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

77 SADKOVICH, *Understanding Defeat: Reappraising Italy's Role in World War II*, 34

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

Italian sources of coal in Poland and Czechoslovakia and took the lion's share of Romanian oil. The Germans even appropriated most of the assets from Yugoslavia and Greece, countries supposedly in Italy's sphere of influence.<sup>79</sup> German bad faith was further demonstrated by Hitler's refusal to honour accords on economic aid.<sup>80</sup>

Additionally, Sadkovich stresses that it was the Germans who were disloyal to their southern ally. Hitler was deeply distrustful of his non-German allies, and once claimed that "every second Italian is either a traitor or a spy."<sup>81</sup> The Führer would not provide German weaponry without German soldiers attached to them. Italy, who had sent its finest vehicles and armaments to fight and die in the disastrous campaigns against the Soviets, was in essence abandoned by Germany.<sup>82</sup> Eighty-thousand Italians would die across the Soviet Union; a figure four times as large as the number of Germans who died in North Africa. In the theatre where Italy's survival was to be determined, German support was kept to the minimum required to prevent total collapse.<sup>83</sup> In contrast, Britain's allies were instrumental to their eventual success in North Africa. By the end of 1942, British Mediterranean forces were massively augmented by large numbers of tanks manufactured in America.<sup>84</sup> Other armoured and support vehicles, vital to mobile warfare, produced in the United States as well as the Commonwealth, became paramount to British success.

Knox may also have an "an anti-fascist bias"<sup>85</sup> that weakens the strength of his work. Far from the blood thirsty tyrant depicted by Knox, Sandkovich argues that Mussolini was a victim of German duplicity as well as a decently sensible statesman. According to Sandkovich, Mussolini appears to have signed the Pact of Steel with the intention to stymie German belliger-

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

80 SADKOVICH, *Fascist Italy at War*, 530.

81 KNOX, *The Italian Armed Forces: 1940 – 3*, 161.

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

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

84 "Britain's Struggle to Build Effective Tanks During the Second World War," *Imperial War Museum*, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/britains-struggle-to-build-effective-tanks-during-the-second-world-war>.

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



erence. Mussolini went to war in 1940 out of fear, not stupidity. Worried that a victorious Germany would turn on Italy for impeding its annexation of Austria and its refusal to enter the war in 1939, Mussolini acted to avoid becoming another German vassal state. Disgusted with “German political incompetence, racism, and brutality, and frustrated by his inability to get Hitler to appreciate the importance of the southern theatre,”<sup>86</sup> Mussolini continually attempted to find a diplomatic resolution to the war. It was Hitler, not Mussolini, who was the irrational ideologue that continually backed his ally into corners which he had no hope of escaping.

No doubt the Italian military had its share of errors in judgement. However, Sadkovich is correct that historians caught up in anti-Italian narratives tend to portray the Italians in the worst possible light while giving others the benefit of the doubt. Sadkovich argues that in most situations, Italian commanders made reasonably competent decisions under the circumstances. Erwin Rommel, commander of the German Afrika Korp, is often depicted as “without question, the most outstanding battlefield commander of the war.”<sup>87</sup> On the other hand, the Italian general Rodolfo Graziani is commonly portrayed as an “ignoramus”<sup>88</sup> When both men retreated before the British rather than hold isolated, vulnerable positions with overextended supply lines, Rommel is titled a ‘genius’ while Graziani is labeled a coward who panicked in the face of adversity. This double standard can be found throughout accounts of the North African conflict. Sadkovich argues that in most situations, Italian commanders made reasonably competent decisions under the extraordinarily adverse circumstances.

### *Conclusion*

Although the historiographic debate still rages on, the false narratives of the post war era have begun to fade away. Contemporary experts on the Second World War would adamantly disagree that it was “more detrimental for Germany to have Italy as an ally than simply to have fought her as

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86 SADKOVICH, *Fascist Italy at War*, 530.

87 WILLIAMSON, MILLET. *A War to be Won: Fighting the Second World War*, 100.

88 WILLIAMSON, MILLET. *A War to be Won*, 292.



an enemy.”<sup>89</sup> While clearly incapable of fighting a first-class world power by herself, Italy was still a valuable ally. In Bruce Watson’s history of the North African theatre, he writes that the British had to shatter “Rommel’s Panzer Armie Afrika – and its supporting Italian divisions.”<sup>90</sup> The phrasing of this statement has the underlying relationship backwards. From 1940 to mid-1943 Italy – not Germany – was the primary Axis power in both Africa and the Balkans. Italian divisions formed the majority in both theatres, and Italians shed their blood and died in service of the Axis cause. Vast amounts of Anglo-American material and tens of thousands of men that could have been thrown exclusively against the 3<sup>rd</sup> Reich instead was devoted to combating Italians. Italian assistance diverted Western strength and allowed Germany to concentrate the majority of its strength on the Eastern Front. Even after Italy’s formal surrender, the collaborationist Italian Social Republic continued the effectively fight for the Axis.

After Fascist Italy’s collapse, the Nazi regime was forced to redeploy significant forces to cover areas once occupied by the Italian army. This forced the German forces stationed on the Russian front to be substantially reduced from their potential. By June 1944, there were 52 German divisions in Italy and the Balkans – about 18.3 per cent of Germany’s 285 divisions.<sup>91</sup> When the Russians launched their great summer offensives of 1944, there were simply not enough German soldiers left to effectively stop them. Furthermore, Allied troops that had previously been earmarked for Mediterranean operations could be redirected to Operation Overlord. Without Italian support, the German Reich’s capacity to turn back the Allied advance would degrade substantially.

Anglo-Saxon historiography not only often overlooks the Italian role in the war, but Germany’s other ‘minor’ allies as well. The endurance of Hitler’s regime was dependent on the immense effort made by all the nations that fought beside it. Without the combat troops, logistical support, and occupation forces provided by her allies, Germany could not have fought for so long in as many theatres as it did. German “arrogance, indif-

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89 WILLIAMSON, MILLET. *A War to be Won*, 31.

90 BRUCE WATSON, *Exit Rommel*, (Praeger Publishers: Westport, 1999), 2.

91 SADKOVICH, *Understanding Defeat: Reappraising Italy’s Role in World War II*, 46.

ference, and ineptitude” concerning their allies led to horrific loss of life. Forty-six non-German divisions from Allied Axis Armies were wiped out at Stalingrad alone.<sup>92</sup> Without the contributions of Italy, Spain, Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Finland, Germany’s collapse would have come much earlier. It is a historiographical tragic that the sacrifices of millions of non-Germans for the Axis cause go largely unacknowledged. For a more accurate understanding of the Second World War, the erroneously overwhelming predominance of Germany over its supporting allies must be corrected.

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92 SADKOVICH, *Understanding Defeat: Reappraising Italy’s Role in World War II*, 49.

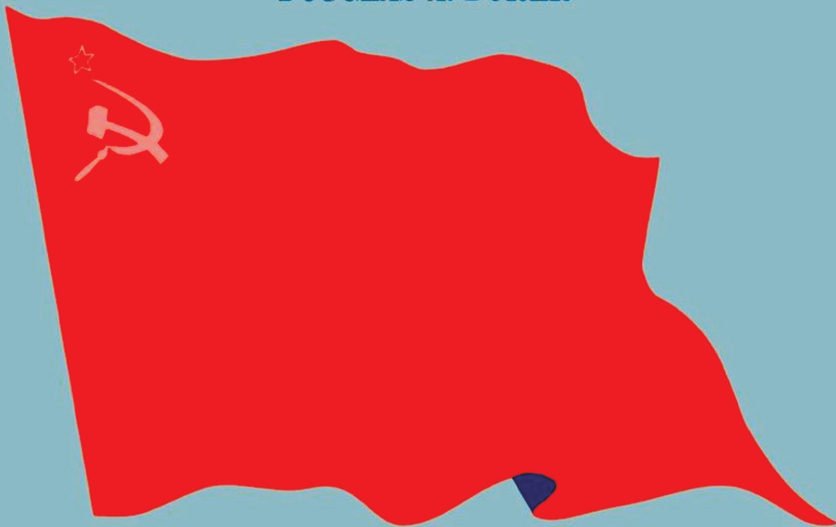
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