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John Gooch, *Mussolini and His Generals: The Armed Forces and Fascist Foreign Policy, 1922-1940*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2007. Pp. x, 651. ISBN 978-0-521-85602-7.

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The debates have died down, yet questions remain. And for some of the extended debates about Italian Fascism—the inner efficiency of the regime, Mussolini’s real intentions, the loyalties of established elites—John Gooch’s title hints at the possibility of a decisive answer. The Duce’s relations with Italy’s conservative, monarchist, officer corps can be an indicator both of old guard attitudes toward their new leaders and of how structurally radical Fascism really was. Italy’s military planning provides a test of its administrative efficiency and of claims that Mussolini sagely sought to avoid war. Furthermore, the book’s blurbs emphasize the contribution that comes from attending to both foreign policy and the military, while the bibliography and footnotes testify to assiduous research. There is reason, then, to expect a lot from *Mussolini and His Generals*, even beyond its size, some 240,000 words by a well-established military historian.<sup>1</sup>

Organized chronologically, the book’s eight chapters slog through the regime’s bureaucratic leavings from the beginning of Mussolini’s reign, a decade of feints and retreats, the Ethiopian war, and the Pact of Steel up to the moment of entry into World War II. In his introduction, Gooch identifies four broad tendencies in Mussolini’s policy (beyond bellicose nationalism and imperialism) that were apparent even in the 1920s: hope for territorial gains across the Adriatic, in the Balkans and in the eastern Mediterranean; desire for equal status with Great Britain and France; determination to preserve Italy’s autonomy of action; and a willingness to use military force. From the perspective of Italy’s chiefs of staff, as reported in Gooch’s account of internal discussions, European international relations up to the war appeared utterly unstable and open to all sorts of contradictory possibilities.

Both dangers and opportunities made the condition of the armed forces a fundamental concern. Such practical problems as aging, inadequate equipment conflicted with such ambitious goals as military parity with France. Any resolution was undermined by Italy’s lack of essential resources and by confusion (hardly unique to Italy’s general staff) over the implications of new technologies. Shifting international arrangements and schemes for disarmament further complicated military planning. The highest army officials, believing the Italian army had never received proper recognition for its contribution to Allied victory in World War I, struggled in the 1920s with the effects of demobilization and disputed the size of army and length of service needed in peacetime. Naval officials stressed the losses they had suffered in World War I as well as Italy’s geographic vulnerability, while disagreeing over the relative value of lighter and faster or larger and more powerful ships and whether aircraft carriers were needed at all. The air force was torn between the famous theories of General Giulio Douhet, which emphasized the decisive power of bombers, and opinions that stressed the effectiveness of fighter planes in a coordinated assault.

A certain freshness enlivens the first chapter, on the period from 1922 to 1925, as a new regime seeks to prove itself in an unsettled world. Throughout his study, Gooch reports in respectful detail on the often desultory discussions among the military chiefs as well as on related bits of diplomatic maneuvers and speeches. Within these inner circles, vague claims were accompanied by precise-sounding estimates of military needs and tactically useful positions in disarmament talks. Here as throughout the book candid concerns about deficiencies are accompanied by very specific lists of desiderata. Later meetings produced other lists and similar complaints as perceived threats and imagined opportunities shifted with the diplomatic winds. It is difficult to judge what in these assessments may have been bureaucratic bluster, negotiating stances, or self-serving defenses deployed by officials operating within a hierarchy under a dictator.

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<sup>1</sup> Author of ten other books, including *Army, State, and Society in Italy, 1870-1915* (NY: St. Martin’s, 1989).

The period from 1925 to 1929, treated in the second chapter, offers the optimal opportunity to assess Mussolini's style and goals. Fascism was well established, the international situation was still fluid, and the Duce personally held all three ministries of war, navy, and air. General Pietro Badoglio, an experienced officer of the old school, became Chief of Staff (a position he had briefly held before the rise of Fascism). The opportunity for coordinated and systematic planning was great, and Mussolini provided incentive by stressing the need to get ready for war. Again, the services prepared elaborate estimates of the raw materials that would have to be imported during wartime, of the months that stockpiles of various size would last, and of the armaments needed. Attacking Yugoslavia was considered, the risk of a two-front war against Yugoslavia and France was assessed, and plans were readied for war with Germany or Austria, or in the Balkans. In the top-level meetings that considered all this, the services competed and personalities clashed, then things quieted down with summary statements from the Duce, calling for preparedness and prompt action, while leaving specific issues largely unresolved. Attention to Italy's stance in negotiations on naval disarmament had little effect on what was built, although it amplified preoccupation with equaling the strength of France. The spirit of adventurism, vibrant in talks of possible conquests, was restrained in practice by Badoglio's caution and his resistance to making the detailed plans the Duce called for. The air force shifted toward a doctrine favoring fighters over bombers, and the navy continued to think in defensive terms. All added some new equipment to their arsenals and complained of serious gaps. By the end of the decade, as plans got a little firmer (and the focus on attacking Yugoslavia was stronger), issues of logistics and matériel remain unresolved. Even the flamboyant Italo Balbo's complaints about "generic" planning had little effect. Mussolini instructed the services to plan for war by 1938.

By the 1930s, Italy seemed to have a place among the great powers; it was active in major international conferences and engaged in bilateral negotiations with France, Britain, and Germany. Efforts to split Britain and France over naval allotments and submarine quotas failed, however, to achieve their goal. Dino Grandi and Balbo, both early and prominent Fascists, now held major positions. As foreign minister, Grandi presented Italy as a force for peace so insistently that Mussolini felt it necessary to give a more aggressive speech of his own. (Behind the scenes, it was said that Grandi's peaceful gestures were intended to "chloroform" France.) As head of the air force, Balbo achieved international acclaim by leading dramatic flights of seaplanes across the Atlantic. Mussolini soon got both out of Rome, sending Grandi to London as ambassador and Balbo to Libya as governor. The regime seemed solidly entrenched, strengthened by the Vatican accords. Italy established ties with eastern European states not part of the Little Entente, profiting from the sale of arms and airplanes. Mussolini continued to fear a joint French-Yugoslav attack and anticipated launching a war against them separately. Europe's attention to German aims opened space for Italian maneuvers, something welcomed by Italy's leaders, who nevertheless considered conflict with Germany to be as likely as cooperation, another frontier for which war plans were needed. In official discussions, references to Fascism intruded more frequently with assertions that Fascist youth movements produced inductees who could be trained more rapidly than before and that the speed and aggressive élan of the armed forces benefited from the Fascist spirit.

A more self-assured government and a nation militarily stronger still could not match French levels of production and expenditures. While the services fought over budgets and tactics, estimates of needed supplies continued to exceed the production of arms, motorized vehicles, fuel storage facilities, and chemicals (including poison gas, considered as just another weapon). So questions remained about whether or how the navy could achieve dominance in the Mediterranean or maybe just the eastern Mediterranean, what kind of planes the air force needed, and whether the army should become a faster, more agile force. And, as before, the Duce dampened disputes by first noting their importance, then injecting optimistic assumptions, urging alertness, and juggling budgets. Still, Italy had grown militarily stronger in an international situation permitting an increased activism that seemed the culmination of a decade of Fascism.

War followed. Italy invaded Ethiopia in 1935 and annexed it the following year, then sent troops to aid Franco in the Spanish Civil War, withdrew from the League of Nations, signed the Pact of Steel, and in 1939 conquered Albania. In the tradition of imperialism, the other powers had granted Italy a more or less free

hand in Ethiopia, and with some skill the government withstood League of Nations sanctions. In the shadow of Germany's increasing power, Pierre Laval and then Anthony Eden reached out to Mussolini. These are critical events, well known to historians of modern Europe. Gooch's study of Italy's military planning and diplomacy adds marginally by revealing the anticipation of war that underlay Mussolini's opaque diplomacy and by providing a sense of the rumors and gossip that circulated in Italian diplomatic channels.

The insider view might have been sobering. The Ethiopian campaign had not been so triumphant. General Emilio de Bono's principal qualification for command was having been one of the "quadrumviri" who led the march on Rome in 1922. He combined caution with ineptitude, while the Duce recognized the need for rapid victory in the face of sanctions, world opinion, and fear of an Anglo-French alliance. That fear was fed by Grandi, of whom Gooch declares in an unusually colorful comment that his "ability to misrepresent the policies of the power to which he was accredited was only surpassed by his capacity for oleaginous fawning on the Duce" (313). Mussolini, presumably with some reluctance, turned to Badoglio, who had for years been sluggish in bringing about the changes the Duce sought, giving him command in Ethiopia. Badoglio managed to complete the conquest in a few months more. Although the navy performed surprisingly well in handling the vast shipments of men and supplies the war had required, on the whole the quality of planning and tactics had not been impressive. Rather, effective propaganda, aided by the dramatic use of airplanes and poison gas, gave the impression at home and to many abroad that Italy was now a fearsome military power. The early successes of Italian troops in Spain allowed much trumpeting of Fascist élan, but with their defeat at Guadalajara (where Italian volunteers in the Garibaldi brigade were on the winning side), Mussolini realized that he was stuck in Spain for longer than he had intended. Of the possible lessons from these two wars, none, Gooch says, was put to use or even clearly drawn.

By 1939, the threat of war shaped all discussions; yet a remarkable consistency emerges from his account of meeting after meeting among the chiefs of staff. As one would expect, war planning became more urgent, concrete, and detailed. Assessments of needs and available resources identified serious gaps, now become more worrisome. When informed of the country's inadequate stocks of coal, iron, or manganese, the Duce discoursed on deposits yet to be discovered on Italian soil and the capabilities that could emerge from new technologies. When the wartime limitations on available supplies were specified, he chose the most optimistic estimates. The services, at least in their reports, followed suit. The army, which had reduced divisions to two regiments instead of three in the name of maneuverability, tended to slight the fact that its divisions now had fewer men. The emphasis on light tanks and overall speed was little affected by the conclusion from maneuvers that Italy ought to have tanks with greater fire power and better mobility on uneven terrain. Rather, the army chief of staff reported confidently on the value of his armored divisions and motorized infantry even while noting a need for more tanks and artillery. The navy staged air maneuvers that impressed Hitler, but the value of aircraft carriers in the Mediterranean (Italy had none) continued to be debated. The air force declared many of its planes outdated without arriving at a credible plan for their replacement. Greater military cooperation with an ever more powerful Germany was surely reassuring, yet Italy's military and diplomatic leaders neither liked nor trusted their German counterparts, who in turn were skeptical of Count Galeazzo Ciano's boasts about Italy's military strength. One must be careful here, for the quality of military planning tends to look flawed in hindsight, and inter-service cooperation in other countries was not always better. Nevertheless, given the troubling realities these officers had itemized, there is something shocking in loose talk around the table of the advantages Italy would have fighting England in North Africa or the value of Hungary as an ally in an Italian surprise attack on Yugoslavia. Also suspect in these official meetings is the reliance on surprise and the Fascist spirit for dealing with various combinations of enemies. Having breathed propaganda for decades and survived so many close calls, Italy's planners perhaps accepted illusions out of sheer habit.

The contradictions were stunning. A harshly aggressive public tone was reinforced by the invasion of Albania in April and a closer alliance with Germany. At the same time, Mussolini complained that Italy was surrounded from Corsica and Tunisia to the Indian Ocean and faced strong defenses in the Alps and North Africa. Mobilization for the invasion of Albania did not go well. Receiving more reports with their dreary

statistics of inadequate weapons and supplies, Mussolini called on the armed forces to prepare for war by 1941-42 or perhaps 1942-43. In May an Italian emissary assured the Germans that Italy would be ready in 1942-43 to take part in "lightning operations" designed to knock out Greece, Romania, and Turkey. In August, German officials, presented with a towering list of Italy's needs, realized that the Italian navy was not ready for the hoped-for offensive in the western Mediterranean and Atlantic. When war broke out in September 1939, Italy declared its neutrality, and realism prevailed. The King opposed war. Badoglio warned of Italy's vulnerability to attack and gave a devastating report on the state of Italian forces and their lack of fuel. The navy admitted it was no match for the French and British fleets, and news arrived of uprisings in Libya. Mussolini fired the chiefs of staff of the army and the air force and warned his military subordinates not to claim having done this not accomplished. But the 1940 meeting of the *Commissione suprema di difesa* was like the meetings of other years.

The Commission began with a discussion on anti-aircraft defence and the announcement by Mussolini that Italy probably possessed the best gun in the world in the shape of the 90-mm gun. The problem was that the first one would not be available before the end of the year. In his view Italy would have an adequate defence when she had two thousand guns, half of them modern. Evacuating the cities would be no defense—Italy was small, and it would simply produce crowding elsewhere. The best protection was the threat of reprisals, but passive defence could be provided if most people used their cellars or protected their ground floor rooms with sand-bags. The problem of how families of six or seven could afford gas masks at thirty-five lire each was raised but not directly resolved (503).

Each service presented its own discouraging picture before discussion turned to petroleum, only to be "warned that the production of lubricants was inadequate for peace and for war" but that sufficient amounts got to Italy from Mexico and the United States. The navy said it had enough for a year of war. "To enter a war, the air force needed at least 400,000 tons of fuel and the army 500,000 tons. By June 1941, domestic refineries would be able to produce 100,000 tons of aviation fuel, 140,000 tons of motor fuel, and 650,000 tons of lubricants a year" (503-4). No wonder so good a Fascist as Giuseppe Bottai complained in his diary that he had never seen so much paper as the reports flowing in and setting "mythical dates" for preparedness. Then, in June 1940, the Duce decided to enter the war, although his advisors all favored some further delay. The military chiefs went along.

What, then, does this diligent account of eighteen years of meetings contribute to the larger questions about the Fascist regime? Although clearly well aware of historiographical controversies, Gooch for the most part sticks to his focus and does not directly engage them. Gradually his distant and objective tone gives way to terse, sardonic appraisals, judgments a reader has reason to trust. The impression of Mussolini that emerges is closer to the dismissive views common among historians in the 1950s and 60s than to later interpretations that considered him a restrained statesman who followed traditional international aims while focused on domestic issues. This volume speaks to that indirectly, however, for domestic policies are not probed and only intermittently referred to. The interesting glimpses here into diplomatic thinking supplement standard accounts and have the added aura of things said in secret. But their historical significance is limited both by what is omitted (Gooch does not claim to be writing a diplomatic history) and by the very nature of the regime. Its practices were often not consistent with policy statements, which varied according to who issued them and where. Statements in the inner councils must be understood in the context of what other prominent figures said in other situations and in light of what ultimately was done—matters outside the scope of this study.

*Mussolini and His Generals* is primarily a contribution to military history, revealing what minutes of formal meetings contain. It is not a study of tactics or performance. Gooch gives us numbers with numbing precision—of tanks or ships or planes or servicemen thought to be needed, of tons of coal and gallons of oil available or estimated to be essential for wars of various durations. We do not learn what the various services really had or did. It might be interesting to study how these estimates changed over the years. Anyone investigating particular events or policies will find this study a valuable reference. The more other readers already know of this history, the more interest they will have in the additional information to be found

here. Did members of Italy's officer class retain a traditional loyalty to the king and drag their feet in the face of Fascist adventurism? Nothing here contradicts that view. But such resistance is hard to distinguish from inefficiency or acquiescence owing to mere careerism. While official meetings rarely reveal personal intent, they offer a remarkable picture of the energy expended in high-ceiled conference rooms concocting scenarios for overcoming constraints of geography, limited resources, and a lagging economy—something Fascist Italy never achieved, despite its leaders' ambitions.