



## *Mussolini's War: Fascist Italy from Triumph to Collapse: 1935–1943*

by John Gooch.

New York: Pegasus, 2020. Pp. xxv, 532. ISBN 978–0–241–18570–4.

Review by Jonathan Beard, New York City (jb752@caa.columbia.edu).

Of all the major belligerents in World War II, none has been ignored by historians the way Italy has. Military history readers know that Italian units fought alongside Rommel's Afrika Korps, and some of the naval battles between the *Regia Marina* and the Royal Navy have received detailed treatment, but tens of thousands of Italian soldiers fought, and died, not just in Africa, but in Greece, Russia, Yugoslavia and even France. Now we have *Mussolini's War*, chronicling the fascist armed forces from beginning to end. Historian John Gooch<sup>1</sup> (Leeds Univ., em.) has written a narrative that begins in a colonial war in East Africa and ends in chaos in Rome in 1943. Gooch has made an unusual choice: this is a top-down history of Mussolini and his generals and admirals, with an emphasis on logistics and Axis politics.

Gooch begins in the Horn of Africa: present-day Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia. Mussolini deployed Italian armies there to expand an existing colonial empire. The Italians prevailed, in part, by aerial bombing attacks on their opponents, who lacked aircraft—and much else—but also by using poison gas. Following this triumph, Il Duce decided to demonstrate Italy's importance by intervening in the Spanish Civil War. Once again facing foes whose organization, training, and equipment were inferior, Italian ground and air forces acquitted themselves well. But this engagement, Gooch notes, provided harbingers of wars to come:

Italy committed a total of 42,715 soldiers and 32,216 Blackshirt militiamen to the civil war in Spain and lost 3,318 dead and 11,763 wounded.... The direct cost worked out at 6,086,003,680 lire. The overall costs caused state expenditure to more than triple in 1936 to 66.9 billion lire, creating a deficit of 40.4 billion lire. (50)

Italy's leaders, realizing "this was not the kind of full-scale war that would be fought by two industrialized powers" (51) were loathe to join a world war anytime soon. General Carlo Favagrossa, head of the General Commissariat for War Production, told Mussolini in 1939 that "Italy was not yet ready to fight, and would not be fully ready even to begin to do so until 1945" (75).

Italy may not have been ready, but Adolf Hitler (and Joseph Stalin) invaded Poland on 17 Sept. 1939, and Mussolini's hapless armed forces were soon plunged into a multi-front war well beyond their capacities. The first debacle occurred on Italy's northwestern bafrikaorder, with France. In 1940, Hitler's Wehrmacht blitzed its way through Belgium and into France, defeating both the French army and the British Expeditionary Force. Mussolini waited until 10 June 1940 to declare war on France and ordered his army to cross the Alps. French forces easily blocked them. France ultimately capitulated to the Germans, and fighting stopped without any Italian gains. When Mussolini demanded the equipment of the French air force and navy, along with its naval bases in

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1. His previous work includes *The Italian Army and the First World War* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2014).

North Africa, Hitler (and Pétain) ignored him. While the campaign against France verged on farce, Italian forces were soon involved in real, bloody, fighting.

Mussolini, after occupying Albania, sent his army into Greece, hoping for a quick victory against an inferior foe. But the Greeks fought the Italians to a standstill, and even pushed them back. It was only after the Germans invaded Greece through Bulgaria that Greek resistance faltered. Gooch covers this campaign at some length, but the bulk of the book concerns the Italo-German war in North Africa and the occupation of Yugoslavia.

The war in North Africa featured several Italian infantry and armored divisions fighting alongside Rommel's Afrika Korps. This is typically the only theater of Italian participation covered in Anglo-American histories of World War II. Gooch once again concentrates on logistics and the Italians' struggle both to stop supplies from reaching British Malta and to supply their own men and Rommel's via convoys from Italy to Africa. As for Yugoslavia, the chapter subtitle is "Terror in the Balkans," and a typical passage explains why:

Operation VELEBIT began on 16 July 1942. Next day, visiting the generals on the spot, Roatta gave their men the authority to check on anyone simply found outdoors during the operation and "immediately shoot any civilian found at fault." When the first three cycles of the operation ended on 26 August, the Italians had killed 1,053 partisans, taken 1,381 prisoners, and shot another 1,236 people. (256)

Gooch shows that Italian commanders and their men mistreated and killed civilians in Russia, Yugoslavia, Greece, and especially Africa.

But *Mussolini's War* is more than an excellent, meticulously documented overview of the fascist Italian military. It is a sterling example of what may be dubbed "unpopular military history." Academic military historians have long lamented that the shelves of bookstores groan with books with subtitles like "How the Men of Company K Destroyed Hitler's Panzers and Defeated the Third Reich." Such books highlight the exploits of ordinary men and, rarely, women, and provide them with an often exaggerated heroic role in the war. Gooch's book opens with a list of twenty-seven *Dramatis Personae*, comprising brief biographies of the generals and admirals who play leading roles in his tale. Virtually no common soldiers or even junior officers are mentioned by name. Outstanding feats like the "human torpedo" raid on Alexandria, which put two British battleships out of action for months, are barely touched on, if at all. Instead of stressing the (occasional) successes of Italian torpedo bombers against Royal Navy warships, the author writes as follows:

The *Regia Aeronautica's* plans had been affected by the bombing of Turin and the subsequent decentralization of the aircraft industry: in December 1942, 215 aircraft had been produced out of a planned 250. By simplifying production, gradually reducing the types of planes to only six, and the types of engines to three or four, and reorganizing production facilities into groups of companies, it planned to be able to produce 3,557 aircraft during 1943 and 400 aircraft a month by the end of 1944. (329-30)

Readers seeking an overview of Italy's participation in wars from 1925 to 1943 will find an engaging and lucid narrative history in *Mussolini's War*. The often humiliating relations between the two dictators are detailed as well. Gooch's stress on factors that so many American and British books gloss over—supplies of coal, oil, gasoline, shells, and trucks—is most welcome in a field that often shortchanges the role of logistics.