

# HOW MUSSOLINI TRICKED THE PRESS

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## I

IN the autumn of 1939, the Italian navy was in good shape and could make life difficult, if not impossible, for the British and French in the Mediterranean. But the Air Force was insufficient and obsolete, and the army had fallen into utter destitution. There was an appalling shortage of artillery, uniforms, shoes and raw materials. The Ethiopian and Spanish wars had depleted all supplies. What had been left had been squandered in Albania.

In his address of December 16, 1939, Count Ciano, the Italian Foreign Minister and Mussolini's son-in-law, had to admit that in the previous May he had informed Hitler that, especially as a consequence of the Ethiopian and Spanish wars, "Italy needs at least three years to bring her war preparations up to the necessary—that is, the maximum—level".

The *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* stated, on February 1, 1940, that "the fact is now confirmed that last September Italy was wholly unable to offer any real resistance to possible French attack, either through the Alps or in Africa". Supplies of arms, war machines and efficient air craft had been exhausted.

On April 20, the wildest among pro-German Fascist leaders, Signor Farinacci, wrote: "Last September, both because the conflict was then localized and because it had just broken out after four years of Italian wars, no other attitude but non-belligerence was possible." As a matter of fact, the conflict was not localized at all, since England and France had come in as soon as Hitler had attacked Poland. Thus the only explanation left for Italian non-belligerence is lack of armaments after "four years of wars".

Mussolini was like a warrior who has a lance (the navy), but no shield (the army), in a possible fight with a foe (France and England) armed with both lance and shield. If one prefers to put it less heroically, one can say that Mussolini could not go to war since he had neither shoes nor trousers.

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Last autumn a violent anti-German mood prevailed all over Italy, among all classes, even among the Fascists; this fact has been attested by all who then lived in Italy and have since come from there.

With his common sense, the Italian man in the street realized that eighty million Germans entrenched in the heart of Europe, and led by men carried away by reckless imperialist exultation, could not be downed by either the forty-two million French or the forty-four million Italians, if French and Italians did not join hands to convince the Germans that war would not pay. Not even a Franco-Italian alliance would stem the German tide. Nothing less than a triple alliance among England, France and Italy could enforce peace, especially when an agreement existed between Germany and Russia. Disruption of France or England under a German onslaught could yield no advantage for the Italian nation. Italy could be confronted in Europe by one overwhelming power, and would be forced to act as a mere cog in its machine. This would mean the end of Italian national independence, not in favor of some superior international organization guaranteeing equal rights to all partners, but in favor of one single predominant power.

These thoughts existed more or less clearly in the mind of every Italian. It is no wonder, therefore, that last September the great majority of the Italian people revealed themselves as unwilling to go to war on Hitler's side.

On September 23, Mussolini threatened "to clean up that small group of human dregs" that dared to disapprove of his policies. If that group had been really small, he would not have felt it necessary to get so excited over it. The truth was that last September he was not only disarmed, but also isolated and powerless among a hostile people.

At another time in his career Mussolini had found himself confronted with an equally desperate situation: in the latter half of 1924, after the Matteotti murder. At that time the leaders of parliamentary opposition stood with their hands in their pockets waiting for the King to throw Mussolini out. In this way they left the latter six months in which to reorganize his party, which had disbanded in the days following the murder. Meanwhile, Pope Pius XI censured the young Catholics who were resisting Fascist violence, summoned ecclesiastics to refrain from political activity, and in this manner disorganized the anti-Fascist movement among the Catholics. On January 3, 1925, while the opposition leaders were waiting for the King

to achieve a court revolution against Mussolini, the King did not move, and Mussolini crushed his opponents forever.

In the autumn of 1939, he had to avoid war as long as Italy was militarily and spiritually disorganized. It was necessary for him to gain time.

## II

Throughout the whole autumn and winter in Italy no one spoke of the alliance with Germany. This silence was regarded as a proof that Mussolini had split with Hitler, and that had the English and French helped him to refurnish his army and air force and to build up his defences at the Brenner Pass, he certainly would have remained neutral. Or who knows? Perhaps he would even have joined the Allies against Hitler. While the English and French were dreaming with their eyes open, Mussolini organized throughout Italy a new campaign of propaganda. Germany was forgotten. No one spoke of anything except England and France. It was necessary to keep oneself in readiness to go to war, not "at the side of the Germans", but rather "against England", and "against France". Men are so made that it is easier to incite them to hatred than to love!

At the same time the Rome foreign correspondents—channels of Fascist information and not independent observers—were instructed to send out the news that the King, the Crown Prince and Badoglio had forced Mussolini to remain neutral, that the Pope also was exerting himself to keep Mussolini neutral, and that therefore "Italy will no doubt remain neutral". Had the correspondents acted against Mussolini's interests, wholesale expulsions would have followed.

This skilful campaign of misinformation had the desired effect. During the autumn of 1939 and the winter and spring which succeeded, Mussolini remedied the hopeless military situation of the preceding summer, *through help given him by the French and the British*. I borrow the following from the February 1, 1940, release of the *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*:

The orders from Italy or England alone amount to four billions of lire, approximately \$160,000,000, for ships, machines, cars, motors and the like. French orders have amounted to three and a half billions of francs, about \$80,000,000. Both the purchasers furnish or permit importation into Italy of raw materials, such as coal, iron and metals. Mussolini takes all this material, often postponing payment, and makes very slow de-

liveries to his occidental customers. Evidently he works in the first place to restore the armament of his own army. Nobody knows what he will do next spring when the Allies should begin to receive the first important promised deliveries from Italy. He could easily, even without taking Germany's side openly, promote diplomatic friction with Paris and London, in order to postpone or even to refuse the delivery of the arms ordered and paid for.

Only a man under an oath of suicide in England or France could believe that Badoglio or the King or the Crown Prince would have hindered the outbreak of war.

Badoglio is a professional soldier, interested only in his business. He starts his own job always by urging against war, and thus evades responsibility in case of defeat. When war has been declared, he does his best to win. The King is incapable of taking any initiative for either war or peace. He is possessed of about as much will power as that which an American notary public needs in his office. As for the Crown Prince—the officers of the regiment of which he was colonel used to call him “the national simpleton”.

And what about the Pope? Here too Fascist manoeuvring with the press was subtle. On May 5, Pius XII delivered a sermon in a church of Rome at the end of which he implored the Most High to “disperse the whirlwind of death which crushes humanity”. The foreign correspondents were instructed to give great prominence to this prayer, and to point out the fact that “the streets were jammed with enthusiastic citizens who cheered and clapped and waved” (*New York Times*, May 6) and that at the conclusion of the sermon the congregation “gave him a five-minute ovation” (*New York Herald-Tribune*, May 6). Italian newspapers of May 6, however, kept utter silence concerning the crowds in the street, the sermon, and the applause at the end of it. Rather, on May 7, they announced that on the preceding day the Crown Prince had been solemnly received by the Holy Father. The Crown Prince was one of the two chiefs destined to lead the Italian army in the imminent war. Thus the press was to represent for readers outside Italy that the Pope was working for peace, whereas the account of the reception of May 6 was meant to bring home to Italians that the Pope and the Italian Government were working hand in glove.

The same tricks which succeeded to perfection after the Matteotti murder have succeeded to perfection once again

after the outbreak of war in 1939. Behold—on May 23, 1940—the King conferred Italy's highest decoration upon Goering, which made the German his cousin. Again, on May 25, the Crown Prince issued a proclamation to the infantry of Italy, exhorting them "to be ready and to let the solemn, inexorable cadence of your marching battalions resound throughout the byways of the Empire". On the same day Marshal Badoglio announced that he was at the service of Mussolini in this "hour of hard and severe vigil". On June 10, war was declared.

Thus a new deceit has been staged in Anglo-Saxon countries by skilfully regimented newspaper men.