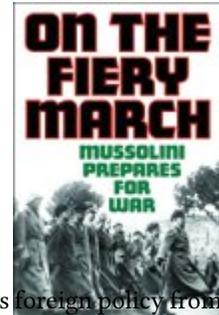


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

G. Bruce Strang. *On the Fiery March: Mussolini Prepares for War*. Westport: Praeger, 2003. xv + 375 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-275-97937-9.

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Dominant scholarship on the foreign policy of fascist Italy stresses rational strategic thinking. MacGregor Knox, the most widely cited historian to make this argument, makes the case that Benito Mussolini had consistent, expansionist foreign policy goals based in Italy's national interest and that he steadily worked to achieve them within the international political environment of his day.[1] G. Bruce Strang's *On the Fiery March* offers a strikingly different perspective—for Strang, Mussolini's "mentalite", or worldview, provides a better explanation than a focus on strategic, rational factors. *On the Fiery March* is provocative because it provides a much-needed counter to current orthodoxy. The book's central argument did not ultimately convince this reader, however.

Strang dedicates the book's first chapter to outlining his argument. Because Mussolini dominated foreign policy decision making, Strang argues, the focus should be overwhelmingly on Mussolini. Specifically, Strang argues that we should focus on Mussolini's mentalite, which he defines as "a set of related intellectual constructs that represented a coherent, though not necessarily rational, framework for interpreting both history and contemporary events" (p. 13) The fascist dictator's worldview consisted of five different sets of ideas: anti-bolshevism, opposition to freemasonry, opposition to democracy, anti-Semitism, and social Darwinism. Strang argues that social Darwinism was the most important of the different elements; social Darwinism, he suggests, was manifest in the duce's obsession with demographic trends, his belief in the virtues of war, and his commitment to garnering an empire for Italy. Strang is careful to acknowledge that despite his mentalite, Mussolini "had to act in the world as it existed" (p. 31).

Having outlined the argument, the author provides a

chronological analysis of Mussolini's foreign policy from 1936 to 1940 based on access to the important "Carte Lancellotti" in the Italian Foreign Ministry's archives.[2] Through the chapters that follow perhaps the most important case Strang makes is that Mussolini's mentalite led fascist Italy to ally with Nazi Germany against Britain and France. The fascist dictator's worldview pushed for alliance with Nazi Germany because it was the only way to attain an empire for Italy. His mentalite also meant that Italy would oppose Britain and France because they were democratic, rife with freemasonry and Jews, and because they were demographically doomed. Strang uses these arguments to make sense of Italy's participation in the 1937 anti-comintern pact, Italian support for Nazi Germany's anchluss with Austria, and the 1939 Pact of Steel between Germany and Italy. Strang makes a compelling case that Italy's positive moves toward France and Britain, such as the 1938 Easter Accords, were feints designed to drive Britain and France apart or to win concessions. Strang further uses mentalite to make sense of other Italian action, such as support for Franco's forces in the Spanish Civil War and Italy's brutal suppression of insurgents in Libya.

In my view, the book's central argument suffers from three flaws that make it less than convincing: it is underspecified; it cannot explain the timing of the most important decisions of the period; and it does not provide a more convincing explanation than plausible alternatives.

Even if the reader is convinced by Strang's arguments about how mentalite matters, she is left with a critical, outstanding question: when is mentalite more or less important than strategic factors and why? This question is left open as the author fails to specify the precise relationship between Mussolini's mentalite and the

constraints of the outside world. Why did Mussolini decide to go against mentalite (which predicted France and Britain were demographically weak) and not follow Nazi Germany into war with Britain and France in the fall of 1939? Of course, rational, strategic thinking counseled this outcome but it also counseled that Italy should exercise caution in September and October 1940 rather than attempt simultaneous wars against Egypt and Greece. A thorough explanation would be able to make sense of both types of decision. Strang's argument explains the latter outcome but not the former. One way Strang might have attained greater specificity would have been to rely on the political science literature on ideational constructs and their impact on international politics.[3]

At best *On the Fiery March* provides the reader with an explanation of the goals of Italy's foreign policy and its alliance choices—its central argument provides no explanation for the timing of Mussolini's most important decisions. Given that Mussolini had been at the apex of the Italian political system since 1922, why did his mentalite impact policy only in the mid to late 1930s? While Strang notes that in 1936 Italian policy shifted starkly toward Mussolini's mentalite (p. 62), he does not provide the reader with a worldview-based explanation of why mentalite had been far less significant to that point or why mentalite began to matter at that point.

Finally, I would have been more convinced by this book had it directly confronted the obvious alternative explanations for the outcomes of interest. It seems that strategic factors rooted in neo-realist theory provide an equally compelling explanation. Mussolini consistently argued that Italy's "mare nostrum" goals were necessary to attain autonomy and security for its maritime trade in the Mediterranean. Given that 80 percent of Italy's foodstuff and raw materials imports passed through Suez and Gibraltar, this argument carries some credibility.[4] A similar explanation can be provided for Italy's alliance choices. As Strang recognizes, Mussolini "knew he could only pursue his own expansionist goals through the alliance with Germany" (pp. 233-34). Mussolini's alliance choices, then, come down to a means to pursue his expansionist ends, rather than being primarily driven by hatred of democracy in France and Britain.

While I remain unconvinced by the book's arguments, I think *On the Fiery March* is an important contribution to the literature on fascist foreign policy. Mussolini's mentalite was undoubtedly a part of his decision-making process and rational, strategic factors cannot explain some of his most important decisions. Perhaps *On the Fiery March* will provide the impetus for a new orthodoxy that synthesizes the best work on strategic, rational factors with the best work on Mussolini's worldview.

Notes

[1]. MacGregor Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed, 1939-1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982). This is not to de-emphasize Knox's research on the importance of domestic factors. See MacGregor Knox, "Conquest, Foreign and Domestic, in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany," *Journal of Modern History* 56 (March 1984): pp. 1-57. The most famous Italian historian to make the case for Mussolini as rational decision-maker is Renzo De Felice. See, for example, Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il duce: Lo Stato totalitario, 1936-1940* (Turin: Einaudi, 1981).

[2]. On the importance of the Carte Lancelotti see Alan Cassels, *Italian Foreign Policy, 1918-1945: A Guide to Research and Research Materials*, 2nd ed. (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1991), pp. 35-36. The reader might have had a better sense of the importance of the Carte Lancelotti had Strang explicitly noted instances where his research in the Carte contradicted previous interpretations or brought new information to light. This would have been especially helpful given the unfortunate Praeger practice of endnoting.

[3]. See, for example, Peter J. Katzenstein, ed. *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

[4]. See Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed*, pp. 69-70. For an excellent example of Mussolini's justification for the mare nostrum goals see the text of his 4 February 1939 speech as reprinted in Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed*, p. 40. It seems that one could also make the case that Italy intervened in the Spanish civil war because of Spain's geostrategic importance in the Mediterranean. See Strang's own discussion of this, pp. 55-58.

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