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Global Governance and Imperial Entanglements: Competition, Cooperation, and Catastrophe in Anglo-Italian Relations, 1922-1940

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in History

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Abstract

This study reconsiders the road to war narrative by focusing on cooperation rather than conflict in Anglo-Italian relations. I link international and imperial historical methods in order to examine British and Italian efforts to cooperate over their clashing interests in empire between 1922 and 1940. By comparing six case studies drawn from British and Italian archives, this thesis explains why the two governments pursued cooperation over empire; how imperial methods facilitated or challenged cooperation; and what this tells us about the global order and the norms that governed it during the interwar years. Three case studies highlight imperial spaces where cooperation was relatively successful and three case studies explore imperial crises which created great challenges for cooperation. British and Italian attempts at cooperation reveal the hybrid nature of international relations during the interwar years combining nineteenth century norms and practices with norms of internationalization embodied by the League of Nations.

Keywords

International History; Empire; British Empire; Fascist Italy; International Cooperation; Twentieth Century History; Arabian Peninsula; Middle East; Mediterranean; Global Order

Summary for Lay Audience

Many historians have painted the 1920s and 1930s as a steady decline into war as Fascist ideology became increasingly revisionist while the European democracies attempted to enforce the status quo. Anglo-Italian relations during this time have been characterized as an inevitable clash between Fascism and democracy. My thesis project aims to reconsider how we think about global order and the ‘road to war’ by focusing on cooperation instead of conflict. Building on recent trends in international history and studies of empire, my thesis bridges these two bodies of literature in order to explain what Anglo-Italian cooperation at these imperial-international intersections reveals about the global order in the 1920s and 1930s. In this context, cooperation refers to rules, norms, and practices defined bilaterally for the purpose of navigating, mediating, and limiting imperial competition and clashing interests.

My thesis employs a comparative approach to analyze two categories of case studies in British and Italian cooperation over empire: one category examines the Arabian Peninsula, the Palestine Mandate and Malta where Italian imperial ambitions clashed against the established imperial presence of Britain and the other category explores Fascist imperial conquest in Corfu, Abyssinia and Albania, sovereign states which put these cases in the League of Nations’ spotlight. British and Italian attempts at cooperation reveal the hybrid nature of international relations during the interwar years combining nineteenth century norms and practices with norms of internationalization embodied by the League of Nations. These case studies suggest a new interpretation of this so-called interwar period: rather than see it as an interlude between conflicts or a period when international order broke down, we can see a commitment to that order and discern the rules, norms, possibilities and limits of a Eurocentric global order.

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Introduction

Cooperation, Empire, and Global Order

In the winter of 1937, Ivy Chamberlain, the wife of former British Foreign Secretary Austen Chamberlain, took one of her many vacations to Rome to escape the dark and gloomy London weather. Upon her arrival in the cloudless city of Rome, Ivy was charmed by an extravagant private dinner with Benito Mussolini and his closest advisors.¹ After entertaining Ivy for an evening, the Fascist dictator immediately got down to business with the widow of his old family friend. The morning after her elaborate reception, Ivy met with officials from the Italian Foreign Ministry for an informal briefing on relations between the two countries. Later that week, Ivy sat down with Mussolini to discuss the prospective Anglo-Italian Agreement. The Duce requested that she tell him what “the feeling in England was for Italy” to which she replied “we would like friendship and I’m sure that that is the wish of both Neville and Anthony.”² The dictator expressed his sincere desire for friendship with England, referencing the ‘tradition’ of Anglo-Italian cooperation since Italian unification.³ Appealing to both the long history of cooperation between the two countries and Austen Chamberlain’s friendly predisposition toward the Fascist regime in the 1920s, Mussolini persuaded Ivy of his ‘genuine’ intentions to determine an understanding with her brother-in-law in London.

Combining sociability, established connections, and matters of state, the most powerful members of the Fascist leadership discussed with Ivy the various areas that an Anglo-Italian agreement would cover.⁴ As formal negotiations came to a close weeks later, Neville Chamberlain thanked his sister-in-law for her role in “the creation of the

¹ Ivy to Neville, 16 December 1937, Neville Chamberlain Papers, Cadbury Research Library, UK [hereafter NC] 1/17/5.

² Ivy to Neville, 16 December 1937, NC 1/17/5.

³ Ivy to Neville, 16 December 1937, NC 1/17/5.

⁴ Ivy to Neville, 22 February 1938, NC 1/17/8.

atmosphere in Rome necessary for opening conversations.”⁵ While unorthodox in their diplomacy, both the British and Italian leaderships demonstrated a desire to restore the tradition of Anglo-Italian friendship and preserve cooperation between the two countries despite their clashing interests and ideological incompatibility.

In accounts of the ideological polarization that has characterized the road to the Second World War in Europe, we might expect reports of cooperation between democratic Britain and Fascist Italy to be infrequent. The dominant narrative of this period privileges national division, ideological tension, and stories of conflict with the final declaration of war clearly in sight. A more nuanced analysis of the norms and standards that guided the postwar order and the tensions that they created allows for a deeper understanding of how states navigated and mediated the complex and multi-layered global order between the two wars. My thesis links international and imperial historical methods in order to examine British and Italian efforts to cooperate over their clashing interests in empire. Recently, scholars have emphasized the need to explore the role of international cooperation during the interwar years.⁶ The emergence of international institutions and the rise of multilateralism provided an opportunity for cooperation across borders at not only a political level, but also on social, cultural, and technological projects. Likewise, recent histories of empire have highlighted imperial cooperation, knowledge transfers, and the transnational networks that constitute empire.⁷ Imperial frontiers were porous. Empires and the people within them exchanged ideas,

⁵ Neville to Ivy, 3 March 1938, NC 1/17/9.

⁶ See Akira Iriye, *Cultural Internationalism and World Order*. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997); Daniel Gorman, *The Emergence of International Society in the 1920s*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Mark Mazower, *Governing the World: The History of an Idea*. (New York: Penguin Press, 2012); Glenda Sluga, *Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013); Daniel Gorman, *International Cooperation in the Early Twentieth Century*. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017);

⁷ See Volker Barth and Roland Cvetkovski (eds.), *Imperial Co-operation and Transfer, 1870-1930*. (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc., 2015).

information, and methods across fragile borders. My thesis bridges these two bodies of literature in order to explain what Anglo-Italian cooperation at these imperial-international intersections reveals about global order in the 1920s and 1930s.

Through an examination of Anglo-Italian cooperation over empire between 1922 and 1940, my thesis explores three over-arching questions: Why did the British and Italian governments pursue cooperation in empire during the 1920s and 1930s? How did imperial methods facilitate or challenge cooperation between the British and Italians? And what does the course of Anglo-Italian cooperation over empire tell us about the imperial system, the role of the League of Nations within it, and the norms that governed the imperial project during the interwar years? The central argument of this thesis is that Anglo-Italian cooperation over empire reflects an intersection, and in several instances, a tension between different layers of the global order in the 1920s and 1930s, between nineteenth century imperial norms and the ideals of the League of Nations system.

In my thesis, cooperation refers to rules, norms, and practices defined bilaterally for the purpose of navigating, mediating, and limiting imperial competition and clashing interests. The British and Italians clashed over empire throughout the 1920s and 1930s. The Mediterranean and Red Sea basins emerged as sites of intense imperial rivalry as both powers pursued a policy of expansion and consolidation of interests in the region. In view of this escalating competition, the British and Italians opted to pursue a policy of cooperation in which the two empires supported a set of norms and practices from which they both benefited. To a certain degree, cooperation was necessary. Until 1940, neither the British nor the Italians believed that they had the capacity to become regional hegemons. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, it was in both empires' interest to limit competition and collaborate to safeguard their positions in the Mediterranean and the Middle East.

Cooperation looked and functioned differently across imperial space. In some spaces, cooperation was a system. These systems often emerged out of imperial agreements or understandings that institutionalized common practices and behaviours toward empire. More frequently, cooperation was used as a tool to navigate competition

and conflicting interests. The two empires used cooperation when it suited their own interests and those of the imperial project more broadly. At times, the British and Italians used cooperation as a tactic to circumvent international oversight, silence anticolonial nationalism, and maintain empire embroiled in international crisis that demanded change.

Cooperation between the British and Italians was based on the assumption that imperial competition needed limits.⁸ This did not mean, however, that competition ceased to exist. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the British and Italians continued to compete for space, resources, and influence in empire. To focus on cooperation is not to see the world through rose-coloured glasses. Cooperation between the British and Italians was not easily achieved. Often times, the systems of cooperation established in imperial spaces were not ideal for either empire. The British and Italians frequently compromised over their interests. On a number occasions, the mutual policy of cooperation endured great strain as the Italians attempted to push its boundaries to the limits. The British and Italian Empires nevertheless used cooperation as a tool to navigate between their obligations to the League of Nations, their competing ambitions, and their own vulnerabilities and limitations in empire.

Anglo-Italian Relations in the International System

While the British and Italians ended up on opposite sides of the war in 1940, only twenty years earlier the two countries emerged from the First World War with a number of common interests and concerns. The British ended the war as Europe's strongest power financially and the most stable politically. But within a year of the armistice, the fragility of the British empire had become clear.⁹ In the years following the war, British policymakers prioritized de-mobilization, disarmament, and economic recovery. Italy, however, entered the 1920s deeply dissatisfied and internally divided. The Paris Peace

⁸ See Florian Wagner, "Private Colonialism and International Co-Operation in Europe, 1870-1914." Volker Barth and Roland Cvetkovski (eds.), *Imperial Co-operation and Transfer, 1870-1930*. (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc., 2015), 95.

⁹ See Adam Tooze, *The Deluge: The Great War and the Remaking of Global Order, 1916-1931*. (London: Allen Lane & Penguin Books, 2014), 374.

Conferences had not transformed Italy into a world-class empire as the Treaty of London (1915) had promised.¹⁰ After the March on Rome, consolidation of the Fascist regime, economic recovery, and extension of empire became the most pressing matters for the Italian government. While the British and Italians had different domestic issues to attend to, they held parallel views toward the postwar balance of power and viewed the international order of friends and foes through a similar lens: the Americans were a source of money and morals; the Bolsheviks, a revisionist menace; the French, economically weak, security-obsessed, and untrustworthy; the Germans, within limits, had potential to be valued partners in Europe.

Policymakers in both Britain and Italy recognized the crucial role that the United States would play in the postwar global order, feared the magnitude of its power as an enemy, and desired its friendship. The First World War had transformed the role of America in the global arena. America emerged from the war as an economic powerhouse and the world's new moral guide.¹¹ At the centre of the war debts schemes, the United States became the world's greatest creditor.¹² Forging, preserving, and preparing cordial relations with the US for economic and strategic purposes remained a key interest of British and Italian policymakers throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Their calculations always included the US.¹³

¹⁰ See Marco Mondini, "Between Subversion and Coup D'Etat: Military power and Politics after the Great War (1919-1922)." *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 11, no. 4 (2006), 445-464; H. James Burgwyn, *The Legend of the Mutilated Victory: Italy, the Great War and the Paris Peace Conference, 1915-1919*. (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1993).

¹¹ Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (London: Allen Lane/Penguin Press, 1998), 108; Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the international Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 3; Tooze, 255-270.

¹² Patricia Clavin, *The Great Depression in Europe, 1929-1939*. (Houndmills: MacMillan Press, LTD., 2000), 18-21; Mazower, *Dark Continent*, 108; Tooze, 211.

¹³ Tooze, 26; Patrick O. Cohrs, *The Unfinished Peace after World War I: America, Britain, and the Stabilization of Europe, 1919-1932*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

The revelation that the Americans were not an ally that could be counted on drew the British and Italians together. In the beginning of the 1920s, the British had two main concerns with America's growing power: the repayment of war debts and the question of naval equality between the United States Navy and the Royal Navy.¹⁴ In both affairs, the answer lay in conceding to American demands. For the Italians, the problem of war debt was also central.¹⁵ During his first months in power, Mussolini worked to settle the war debt issue, allowing him to establish a privileged relationship between the Italian government and J.P. Morgan.¹⁶ While both the British and Italians viewed the United States as essential to the economy, it was also a major obstacle to the empire-building project. As the British government approached the tumultuous 1930s, the role of American economic power and public opinion continued to limit, restrain, and self-censor British decision-making on the global stage. These considerations often prompted the British to adopt a stronger stance in the League of Nations than many policymakers preferred. By the mid-1930s, the Italians were less concerned and pursued the violent conquest of Abyssinia unintimidated by the consequences. American public opinion soon came to revile Fascism and condemned Italian imperialism. Throughout the interwar years, both the British and Italians recognized the profound economic value of Washington, but confronted great difficulties when it came to American attitudes toward empire.

The Soviet Union was a threat to both Britain and Italy. In the aftermath of the Great War, Bolshevism had become public enemy number one in both countries.¹⁷ In

¹⁴ Zara Steiner, *The Lights that Failed: European International History, 1919-1933*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 186-189; BJC McKercher, *Transition of Power: Britain's Loss of Global Pre-eminence to the United States, 1930-1945*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 11.

¹⁵ See Gian Giacomo Migone, *The United States and Fascist Italy: The Rise of American Finance in Europe*. Preface and Translated by Molly Tambor. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 32-36.

¹⁶ Migone, 91.

¹⁷ John Ferris, *Men, Money and Diplomacy: The Evolution of British Strategic Policy, 1919-1926*. (London: Macmillan Press, 1989), 154.

1919 to 1920, Marxist-Leninist Italian socialists wreaked havoc across the Italian countryside.¹⁸ The widespread fear of Bolshevism and internal subversion facilitated the rise of Fascism in Italy.¹⁹ Keith Neilson highlights the role of the Bolshevik threat in British foreign policy between the two World Wars.²⁰ British decision-makers believed that Bolshevism posed a powerful threat to the British empire, British trade agreements, and the balance of power.²¹ During the early 1920s, the British government feared that Bolshevik subversion would undermine Germany's embryonic democracy providing the Bolsheviks with the opportunity to overthrow the budding European order.²² During the 1920s and early 1930s, both British and Italian officials expressed concern over the spread of Bolshevism not only in Europe, but in empire. But by the mid-1930s, the British government had begun to reconsider the role of the Soviet Union in British foreign policy in light of disturbing global developments.²³ Mussolini's anti-bolshevism, however, escalated throughout the 1930s as he committed Italy to preventing the rise of a Bolshevik government in Spain.²⁴ The common suspicion of the Bolshevik menace that the British and Italian leadership shared in the postwar order helped to facilitate cooperation between the two governments throughout the 1920s. But the shifting attitudes towards Russia during the 1930s also created challenges and barriers to cooperation between the two governments.

¹⁸ MacGregor Knox, *To The Threshold of Power, 1922/1933: Origins and Dynamics of the Fascist and National Socialist Dictatorships, Volume 1*. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007), 247-249.

¹⁹ Mark Mazower, *Governing the World: The History of an Idea*. (New York: Penguin Press, 2012), 14.

²⁰ Keith Neilson, *Britain, Soviet Russia, and the Collapse of the Versailles Order, 1919-1939*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

²¹ Neilson, *Britain, Soviet Russia, and the Collapse of the Versailles Order*, 28-30.

²² Paul Kennedy, *Realties Behind Diplomacy: Background Influences on British External Policy, 1865-1980*. (Sydney: Allen and Urwin, 1981), 245-246; Ferris, *Men, Money, and Diplomacy*, 103.

²³ See Neilson, *Britain, Soviet Russia, and the Collapse of the Versailles Order*, 88-254.

²⁴ G. Bruce Strang, *On the Fiery March: Mussolini Prepares for War*. (Westport: Praeger, 2003), 73-76.

France is often seen as Britain's eternal ally against the dictators and Fascist Italy's eternal enemy challenging its Mediterranean dreams. The 1920s, however, began quite differently. It is true that throughout the interwar years, British officials worked with the French government to preserve the general values of the postwar order and maintain peace. But by the spring of 1921, the British government had begun to view France as a strategic menace.²⁵ During the early 1920s, British policymakers wanted to replace the prewar balance of power in Europe with a new one. British policymakers identified Britain's two principal wartime allies as the major threats to this new order. Beyond the Bolshevik threat, the British government feared that France would attempt to establish hegemony in Europe. The French had thwarted British initiatives in European reconstruction, blocked British aims in Turkey, and challenged British interests at the Washington Naval Conference.²⁶ In addition to the diplomatic strength of the French, the Air Ministry highlighted the air menace that the French Air Force (FAF) posed to Britain.²⁷ This concern over the strength of the FAF, combined with recent theories of strategic bombing, prompted the British government to develop schemes to expand the Royal Air Force (RAF) in anticipation of a French offensive.²⁸ By the 1930s, British officials had begun to look upon the French with less suspicion, although not with much confidence, but remained adamant that France should not receive privileged treatment as the other European democracy in order to avoid dividing the continent into antagonistic ideological blocs.²⁹

The Italians were also mistrustful of French designs in Europe. After the March on Rome, Poincaré welcomed the Fascist regime's entry into international society in the hope of gaining Mussolini's support in the reparations questions with Germany.³⁰ In his

²⁵ Ferris, *Men, Money, and Diplomacy*, 104.

²⁶ Ferris, *Men, Money, and Diplomacy*, 107.

²⁷ Ferris, *Men, Money, and Diplomacy*, 110.

²⁸ Ferris, *Men, Money, and Diplomacy*, 128.

²⁹ RAC Parker, *Chamberlain and Appeasement: British Policy and the Coming of the Second World War*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 17-19.

³⁰ Alan Cassels, *Mussolini's Early Diplomacy*. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press,

study of Mussolini's early diplomacy, Alan Cassels points out that Mussolini entertained an association with the French only as a means to strengthen relations with the British.³¹ From the beginning, Mussolini regarded France as Italy's natural rival. Events in the 1930s reinforced Mussolini's enmity towards the French. The failed Mussolini-Laval Accords left the Fascist dictator feeling that the French had extended the Italians a free hand in Abyssinia only to sever it after the invasion and cry 'bad' imperialism on the international stage.³² Within a year of the Abyssinia Crisis, the French and Italians ended up on opposite sides of a proxy war in Spain.³³ While the common suspicion of French designs created space for Anglo-Italian cooperation throughout the 1920s, diverging attitudes towards the role of France in the 1930s frustrated attempts to preserve cooperation between the two countries.

After the Paris Peace Conference, both British and Italian officials favoured an economically stable but limited Germany and looked upon the subsequent rise of Adolf Hitler with hopeful caution. At the Paris Peace Conference, the British Prime Minister, Lloyd George, and the Italian Prime Minister, Vittorio Orlando, replaced by Francesco Nitti, desired retribution and 'never again.'³⁴ By the end of 1921, the reparations scheme had proven unworkable. The British government believed that in light of the harsh peace settlement and Germany's imploding economy, the country was unable to pay reparations.³⁵ In the years following the war, the British government wanted to "get on with business" by rebuilding the European economy and relieving itself of its wartime

1970), 16.

³¹ Cassels, 35.

³² G. Bruce Strang, "Imperial Dreams: The Mussolini-Laval Accords of January 1935." *The Historical Journal* 44, no. 3 (2001), 799-809.

³³ See John F. Coverdale, *Italian Intervention in the Spanish Civil War*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).

³⁴ Patrick O. Cohrs "The First 'Real' Peace Settlements after the First World War: Britain, the United States, and the Accords of London and Locarno, 1923-1925." *Contemporary European History* 12, no. 1 (2003) 7.

³⁵ Steiner, *The Lights that Failed*, 201-203.

commitments to Europe.³⁶ Because of the key role that Germany had played in Britain's export market prior to 1914, British policy became increasingly inclined towards the reintegration of Germany into the world system as a vehicle for European recovery and reconstruction.³⁷ Prior to the March on Rome, the Fascist party had adopted a rather rigid position towards the reparations question. But after assuming power, Mussolini gradually moved closer to the British line on reparations.³⁸ To maintain the European economy, the British and Italians recognized that Germany needed to be weakened, but not crushed.³⁹

It is well-known that Germany ended the 1930s as the enemy of one and the ally of the other. But in the beginning of the decade, the British and Italians looked upon the recovering country with a common set of concerns. As the 1930s began to unfold, the British and Italians remained sympathetic to moderate German demands that appeared to be in pursuit of a return to normalcy rather than boundless revisionism. While a number of officials and diplomats emphasized the Nazi threat, most British policymakers looked upon Hitler with both anxiety and a certain degree of understanding given their view of the Versailles settlement as punitive.⁴⁰ It was not until the latter-half of the 1930s, after Hitler's increasingly revisionist policies, that the British decision-making apparatus reached a consensus on the formidable threat that Nazi Germany posed. In his recent study on the relationship between the two dictators, Christian Goeschel points out that it was Hitler who initially sought out Mussolini, rather than the other way around.⁴¹

³⁶ British Secretary's Notes of a Meeting held at Belcaire, Lympe, near Hythe, on Sunday, April 24, 1921, at 11am, 24 April 1921. Documents on British Foreign Policy [hereafter DBFP] S. I, Vol XV, (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1948-1984).

³⁷ At the Paris Peace Conferences, Lloyd George had initially been more concerned with containing German aggression. This view changed in the early 1920s. Peter Jackson, "French Security and a British 'Continental Commitment' after the First World War: A Reassessment," *The English Historical Review* 4, no. 1 (2011), 345-385.

³⁸ Cassels, 47.

³⁹ Tooze, 293; Cassels, 68.

⁴⁰ Frank McDonough, *Neville Chamberlain, Appeasement and the British Road to War*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 22.

⁴¹ Christian Goeschel, *Mussolini and Hitler: The Forging of the fascist Alliance*. (New

Mussolini was careful to avoid developing too cozy a relationship with his German counterpart, worried that it would give the British cause for concern.⁴² While admiring Hitler's militarism, Mussolini held a deep suspicion of the German dictator that was only finally abated in light of Hitler's support for Mussolini's adventure in East Africa in 1935.⁴³ By the autumn of 1936, Mussolini publicly declared an ideological tie with the Third Reich in his proclamation of the Rome-Berlin Axis.⁴⁴ Despite the growing hysteria around the German Menace and Mussolini's deepening bond with Hitler, British decision-makers remained adamant that they must preserve relations with the Italians in order to weaken the Rome-Berlin Axis and restrain Hitler's revisionism.⁴⁵ The role of Germany in the international order became a key point of estrangement between the British and Italians.

We cannot understand why the British and Italians cooperated over empire without considering developments in the international system. Until the latter-half of the 1930s, the British and Italian governments held surprisingly similar attitudes towards international politics. Particularly during the 1920s, this parallel view of the international order facilitated cooperation between the British and Italians over empire. Common concerns over Bolshevik penetration and French subversion encouraged cooperation between the British and Italians in the Middle East. A shared suspicion of Hitler's intentions pressured the two governments to preserve friendly relations during the early 1930s. But as Mussolini became increasingly set on preparing for war while Neville Chamberlain vowed to prevent it, cooperation became increasingly difficult to repair and

Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 4.

⁴² Goeschel, 33.

⁴³ G. Bruce Strang, "‘Places in the African Sun’: Social Darwinism, Demographics and the Italian Invasion of Ethiopia," In G. Bruce Strang (ed.), *Collision of Empires: Italy's invasion of Ethiopia and its International Impact*. (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2013), 16.

⁴⁴ Goeschel, 5.

⁴⁵ See Hankey to N. Chamberlain, 19 July 1937, Cabinet Archives, The National Archives, UK [hereafter CAB] 63/52; Prime Minister's Papers, The National Archives, UK [hereafter PREM] 1/276.

preserve. My analysis of British and Italian perceptions of the postwar international order demonstrates that common concerns or diverging interests in the international system informed how the two countries approached relations in empire. Until the spring of 1939, common interests outweighed clashing goals in both Europe and empire.

The Imperial System, Imperial Norms, and Repertoires of Rule

Recent literature on empire has highlighted how perceptions of legitimate and illegitimate imperial methods of rule have changed over time.⁴⁶ During the nineteenth century, great powers did not go to war over colonial matters. Instead, great powers met at imperial conferences to carve up the world and negotiate clashing imperial interests in private rooms hidden from the public eye. Acquisition of new territories or the extension of imperial frontiers could be conducted through commercial infiltration or campaigns of colonial conquest. Imperial administration included both direct and indirect forms of rule. When feasible, imperial powers established systems of indirect rule through networks of economic, financial, and political influence.⁴⁷ British responses to the 1857 Indian Revolt, however, demonstrates that when colonized populations attempted to challenge the fragility of indirect rule, the imperial power responded with violence, repression, and direct forms of imperial administration.⁴⁸ These imperial norms persisted into the beginning of the twentieth century, but encountered new scrutiny as international attitudes toward empire began to shift in the wake of the First World War.

The postwar peace settlements redefined the rules of empire and launched a new set of normative principles designed to govern imperial methods and interactions. The values of Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points trickled into the postwar imperial. While Wilson's principles were not intended to apply equally to all people, world leaders used

⁴⁶ See Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: power and the politics of difference*. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2010).

⁴⁷ Burbank and Cooper, *Empires in World History*, 287.

⁴⁸ Burbank and Cooper, *Empires in World History*, 306-312.

notions of Genevan internationalism, the distant promise of self-determination, and the guarantee of justice by imperial oversights to justify the new imperial system. Susan Pedersen has argued that the League of Nations did not require empires to govern differently, it required them to *say* they governed differently.⁴⁹ While it is true that the League introduced a new level of civilizing rhetoric into the imperial lexicon, it also did more than that. This new standard was one of both empty rhetoric and sincere ideals. The League of Nations attempted to enforce the boundary between the so-called civilized world and the imperial world on the basis of League membership and set a new standard over acceptable methods of rule. At many points throughout its existence, diplomats in Geneva confronted tension between these ideals and practice. It was often the case that political expediency received priority over the League's desired new standards. But while Geneva's ideals often failed to come to fruition, these reformed imperial standards remained a constant goal for League diplomats throughout the interwar years.

The League of Nations added new layers to the international hierarchy and revised the boundaries of the imperial world. Not all states were equal. The postwar international order was hierarchical and racialized. Independent states had an enhanced legitimacy in the international order as sovereign entities.⁵⁰ By recognizing their independence, League members were off limits to imperial expansion and conquest. The League of Nations also added a new category of empire: the mandate.⁵¹ The League delegated the victorious empires with administrative oversight of the colonies and territories seized from the German and Ottoman Empires with the task of assisting them towards independent statehood in either the near or distant future. Mandates were governed by one country and were off limits to other imperial powers. Territories outside of the League of Nations system were vulnerable to imperial conquest and competition in

⁴⁹ Susan Pedersen, *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 4.

⁵⁰ Glenda Sluga, *Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2013), 50; and See Article 1 of the League of Nations Covenant in Appendix A.

⁵¹ See Article 22 of the League of Nations Covenant in Appendix A.

ways in which League members and Mandates were not. These were primarily ‘new’ states that had emerged in Africa and the Middle East deemed not ‘civilized’ enough to participate in the League apparatus. Geneva’s checks and balances did not extend to these spaces. While spaces recognized by the League were off limits to new imperial expansion, unrecognized states were fair game.

The League of Nations also limited the range of imperial methods available to imperial powers. Martin Thomas has pointed out that after the First World War, European public opinion became highly critical of “wholesale killings” in empire that had characterized the methods of imperial acquisition in the previous century.⁵² The League no longer considered colonial war, violent conquest, and brutal repression in empire as legitimate methods of imperial rule. Instead, empire ought to be ruled by an administration of imperial oversight assigned by the metropole or the Permanent Mandates Commission (PMC). The League of Nations articulated a set of norms that held empire to new standards and new scrutiny.⁵³ When imperial powers violated the legalities of the League, their imperial infractions became publicized around the world in an effort to hold imperial powers accountable. Susan Pedersen argues that the Mandates system functioned as a vehicle for the internationalization of political issues from the national or imperial to the international realm.⁵⁴ Within this framework, imperial powers and the Permanent Mandates Commission were subject to both fellow League members in Geneva and the attitude of public opinion internationally.⁵⁵ The internationalization of empire added a new layer of accountability and surveillance to the imperial project.⁵⁶ The

⁵² Martin Thomas, *Empires of Intelligence: Security and Colonial Disorder after 1914*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 6.

⁵³ Susan Pedersen, “Empires, States and the League of Nations.” in Patrician Clavin and Glenda Sluga (eds.), *Internationalisms: a twentieth-century history*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 116 and 124.

⁵⁴ See Pedersen, *The Guardians*, 77-103; Pedersen, “Empires, States and the League of Nations,” 113-138.

⁵⁵ Sluga, *Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism*, 2.

⁵⁶ See Pedersen, “Empires, States, and the League of Nations,” 116; Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, “Empires after 1919: old, new, transformed” *International Affairs* 95,

League of Nations internationalized and formalized empire and, in doing so, attempted to make empire more humane in comparison to the imperial methods of the nineteenth century.⁵⁷

My work reveals a tension between two sets of imperial norms and standards: the great power imperial system that emerged out of the nineteenth century and the internationalized system inaugurated by the League of Nations. Despite the efforts of the League of Nations to reform empire, nineteenth-century imperial norms persisted well into the twentieth century. The nineteenth-century imperial system had been characterized by imperial conquest and cooperation between great powers about how to maintain empire. This was the form of cooperation that British and Italian governments preferred during the interwar years. At a number of points throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the two governments sidelined the League and negotiated deals over empire. While both the British and the Italians participated in the League's system, the new standards of the League of Nations clashed with British and Italian interests and the norms of the older imperial system. When imperial methods overtly violated the League of Nations' Covenant, the international community worked to hold the transgressive power to account. The new scrutiny and accountability mechanisms of the League of Nations challenged British and Italian cooperation over empire at a number of moments during the interwar years.

The chapters that follow compare the methods of empire employed by the British and Italians to examine how these methods intersected and how they managed their differences. Many scholars of Italian Fascism highlight the callous suppression, brutal tactics, and the military mobilization that characterized Fascist colonialism in Libya, Italian Somaliland, Eritrea, and Abyssinia.⁵⁸ The methods of Fascist imperialism included

no. 1 (2019), 87.

⁵⁷ Susan Pedersen, *The Guardians*, 4.

⁵⁸ See John Gooch, *Mussolini and His Generals: The Armed Forces and Fascist Foreign Policy, 1922-1940*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Robert Mallett, *Mussolini in Ethiopia, 1919-1935: The Origins of Fascist Italy's African War*. (New

the mobilization of hundreds of thousands of Italian troops to pacify colonial territories, forced concentration of local populations, aerial bombardment, and chemical warfare. For many historians, this level of violence shows that Fascist colonialism was unique in comparison to other traditions of empire. There is a tendency in the literature to view Fascist imperialism as purely violent in comparison to the British empire's 'humane' imperialism reformed by the League of Nations. This view has established a false dichotomy between violent and so-called humane imperialism.

Exploring the role of cooperation between the Fascist and the British empires minimizes this apparent difference between them and demonstrates how they learned from one another. Throughout the interwar years the British and Italians surveilled one another's activities, and learned from one another's methods of rule across contact zones in the Mediterranean and the Middle East. Policymakers in Rome and London as well as the 'men on the spot' in these imperial spaces, facilitated knowledge transfers about colonial techniques of rule. The local conditions, the threat of competition, and the global order all informed decision-makers' choices to adopt a particular set of methods from their imperial repertoires. The case studies that follow demonstrate that the British empire was not only an accomplice to Fascist imperial violence, it was itself a perpetrator.

York: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Alexander de Grand, "Mussolini's Follies: Fascism in its Imperial and Racist Phase, 1935-1940." *Contemporary European History* 13, no. 2 (2004), 127-147; John Gooch. "Re-conquest and Suppression: Fascist Italy's Pacification of Libya and Ethiopia, 1922-1939." *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 28, no. 6 (2005), 1005-1032; Nicola Labanca, "Italian Colonial Internment," Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller (eds.), *Italian Colonialism*. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 15-26; Giorgio Rochat, "The Italian Air Force in the Ethiopian War (1935-1936)," Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller (eds.), *Italian Colonialism*. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 37-46; Alberto Sbacchi, "Poison Gas and Atrocities in the Italo-Ethiopian War (1935-1936)." Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller (eds.), *Italian Colonialism*. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 47-56; Michael R Ebner, "Fascist Violence and the 'Ethnic Reconstruction' of Cyrenaica (Libya), 1922-1934." Philip Dwyer and Amanda Nettelbeck (eds.), *Violence, Colonialism and Empire in the Modern World*. (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), 197-218; Nicolas G. Virtue, *Royal Army Fascist Empire: The Regio Esercito on Occupation Duty 1936-1943*. PhD Diss. Western University, 2016; Giuseppe Finaldi, "Fascism Violence and Italian Colonialism." *The Journal of Holocaust Research* 33, No. 1 (2019), 22-42.

As Wolfgang Schivelbusch argues in his comparative history of Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and New Deal America in the 1930s, to identify commonality is not to claim sameness — to compare is not to equate.⁵⁹ Yet comparison does provide the opportunity for critique; to identify similarity and acknowledge complicity. My thesis draws attention to the continuities of mass violence in the twentieth century as urged by scholars such as Hannah Ardent, Mark Mazower, Caroline Elkins, Satia Priya, and others.⁶⁰ My analysis of British and Italian imperial methods demonstrates the flexibility of imperial repertoires of rule.⁶¹ The strategies that the two empires adopted shifted along a spectrum of imperial repertoires that spanned from cooperation with local elites on one end to brutal repression on the other depending on the various forces at play. By comparing these commonalities, my thesis illuminates the continuum that exists between liberal and Fascist conceptions of empire. I argue that while these campaigns differed in scale and scope, they were all part of the logic of empire.⁶²

Case Studies in Anglo-Italian Relations

My thesis employs a comparative approach to analyze two categories of case studies of British and Italian cooperation over empire: one category examines the Arabian Peninsula, the Palestine Mandate, and Malta where Italian imperial ambitions clashed against the established imperial presence of Britain and the other category explores

⁵⁹ Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Three New Deals: Reflections on Roosevelt's America, Mussolini's Italy, and Hitler's Germany*. Translated by Jefferson Chase. (New York: Metropolitan Books and Henry Holt and Company, 2006), 15.

⁶⁰ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. (New York: A Harvest Book, 1966); Mark Mazower, "Violence and the State in the Twentieth Century." *The American Historical Review* 107, No. 4 (2002), 1158-1178; Caroline Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya*. (New York: Henry Holt, 2005); Satia Priya, *Spies in Arabia: The Great War and the Cultural Foundations of Britain's Covert Empire in the Middle East*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁶¹ Burbank and Cooper, *Empires in World History*, 16.

⁶² See Michelle Gordon, "The Dynamics of British Colonial Violence." Volker Barth and Roland Cvetkovski (eds.), *Imperial Co-operation and Transfer, 1870-1930*. (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc., 2015), 153-174.

imperial conquest in Corfu, Abyssinia and Albania, sovereign states which put these cases in the League of Nations' spotlight. The first three case studies show how cooperation and compromise over empire in these imperial spaces succeeded because the two empires followed nineteenth-century imperial methods and remained outside of the League of Nations' purview. The second chapter reveals the challenges and limits of cooperation between the two empires.

These case studies reveal the multi-layered, and often contradictory, nature of global order in the 1920s and 1930s. The First World War and the rise of the League of Nations did not produce a break with the 'old diplomacy' and new imperialism that characterized the decades before 1914. Instead, it introduced a new layer to the global order. The League attempted to reform imperialism and introduce a new standard over methods and imperial space. Yet imperial conquest, indirect rule, and bilateral cooperation that characterized the nineteenth century imperial project persisted well into the twentieth century. British and Italian attempts at cooperation reveal the hybrid nature of international relations during the interwar years that combined nineteenth century norms and practices with norms of internationalization embodied by the League of Nations. These case studies suggest a new interpretation of this so-called interwar period: rather than see it as an interlude between conflicts or a period when international order broke down, we can see a commitment to that order and discern the rules, norms, possibilities and limits of a Eurocentric global order.

Chapter 1

1 Cooperation in Empire

In the autumn of 1927, the Royal Air Force stationed in Aden received orders from London to carry out a targeted aerial bombardment campaign against indigenous populations in Yemen. Since 1923, Zeidi troops under the direction of Imam Yahya had been encroaching upon the Aden hinterlands and carrying out periodic raids on settlements within the British Protectorate. After several years of refusing British demands to evacuate the territory, the British Resident at Aden warned Imam Yahya that his “occupation of Aden renders him liable at any time to such measures of retaliation by land, sea, or air, at such time and in such manner as [the British government] deem[s] suitable.”⁶³ In the autumn of 1927, the Committee of Imperial Defence recommended that the British government deploy an additional air squadron to Aden to deal with the local situation.⁶⁴ The Cabinet viewed the use of airpower as an ideal instrument for “controlling semi-civilized” peoples.⁶⁵ In response to another encroachment on Aden territory, the British government intermittently bombed settlements between 1927 and 1928 housing the Imam’s troops and cultural sites within the Kingdom of Yemen.⁶⁶

To British officials, bombing Yemen was justified on both strategic and moral terms. The Cabinet viewed the air arm as both a mechanism of imperial control and as a means of reinforcing British imperial prestige. The Colonial Office supported the Aden Resident’s view that drastic action was “essential if British prestige.... [was] to be upheld” within the region.⁶⁷ The Foreign Office viewed the “bombings as punishment” for the Imam’s efforts to undermine Britain’s relations with the tribes of the Protectorate

⁶³ 1 December 1926, CAB 23/53/31.

⁶⁴ 25 October 1927, CAB 23/55/22.

⁶⁵ Secretary of State for Air Memorandum, 17 May 1928, CAB 24/195/10.

⁶⁶ 28 December 1928, CAB 23/57/16.

⁶⁷ Shuckburgh to Foreign Office [hereafter FO], 15 February 1928, Foreign Office Archives, The National Archives, UK, [hereafter FO] 371/13003, E 776/80/91.

and for his expansionist tendencies.⁶⁸ Some British officials, however, found this response too lenient. One Foreign Office official wanted to “bomb [the Imam] to blues until he evacuated all the territory belonging to us.”⁶⁹ When discussing the matter with the Italians, Dino Grandi expressed his confidence that the British would do so, “in the most gentlemanly manner.”⁷⁰ By the spring of 1928, one Foreign Office official exclaimed that the “recent bombings had the desired effect.”⁷¹ The Imam was prepared to negotiate the terms of his evacuation. Despite the existence of the League of Nations and the existence of pacifist and human rights activists, imperial violence in the Arabian Peninsula went unnoticed and unpunished.

For both contemporary observers and modern historians, it was Fascist aggression that caused the imperial crises that preceded and provoked the Second World War. The violence of Fascist expansionism in the 1920s and 1930s has been considered uniquely Italian in comparison to Britain’s “moral” imperialism. Many narratives assume that these two empires were guided by different conceptions of empire. Yet throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the two empires frequently collaborated to maintain the imperial system. In imperial spaces deprived of international scrutiny, the British government often welcomed cooperation with the Italians and employed methods similar to those that Fascist imperialism would adopt later in the 1930s. Cooperation with the British provided the Italians with an opportunity to learn and replicate British imperial tactics, including the bombing of indigenous populations, martial law, identity construction, and forced assimilation. In contrast to studies that juxtapose British and Italian imperialism in the interwar years, this chapter examines how they cooperated over empire as a deliberate effort to circumvent international scrutiny.

⁶⁸ FO to Graham, 17 February 1928, FO 371/13003, E 776/80/91.

⁶⁹ Oliphant Minute, 16 February 1928, FO 371/13003, E 776/80/91.

⁷⁰ Graham to Chamberlain, 4 May 1928, FO 371/13004, E 2351/80/91.

⁷¹ Osborne Minute, 26 March 1928, FO 371/13004, E 1588/80/91.

The three imperial spaces at the centre of this analysis are: the Arabian Peninsula, the Palestine Mandate, and Malta. While each was under the formal oversight of the British empire, they were sites of serious imperial competition between Britain and Italy. Each of these territories was a key location for both Britain's imperial defence strategy and Fascist ambitions for *spazio vitale*. Although Britain had acquired the Palestine Mandate through the Permanent Mandates Commission, there was very little League presence in any of these three spaces when it came to mediating competition between empires. The British and Italians entrenched their imperial roles in Arabia, Palestine, and Malta primarily by means of economic penetration and collaboration with local elites. Yet when deemed necessary, expansion via bombs and airplanes were incorporated into their imperial repertoire with the knowledge that instances of imperial violence would go unchecked.

Many historians have pointed to imperial competition between the British and the Italians as proof that escalating conflict characterized Anglo-Italian relations during the interwar years. Manuela Williams has examined Italian propaganda campaigns and intelligence collecting initiatives in Britain's Middle Eastern Empire and Mandates. Williams argues that Fascist propaganda campaigns in the region indicate Mussolini's intention to threaten the British empire.⁷² She points out that while Italy's growing ties with Arab nationalists generated serious concerns for the British, this effort to undermine the British empire was not supported by a coherent imperial strategy.⁷³ Similar to Williams, Massimiliano Fiore examines the imperial conflicts that emerged between the British and Italians in the Middle East in relation to Mussolini's aggressive anti-British

⁷² See Manuela A. Williams, *Mussolini's Propaganda Abroad: Subversion in the Mediterranean and the Middle East, 1935-1940*. (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2006); Manuela Williams, "Mussolini's War of Words: Italian Propaganda and Subversion in Egypt and Palestine, 1934-1939." *Eunomia* 1, (2012), 49-78.

⁷³ See Manuela Williams, "Mussolini's Secret War in the Mediterranean and the Middle East: Italian Intelligence and the British Response." *Intelligence and National Security* 22, no 6 (2007), 881-904; Manuela Williams, "Between Arab Nationalism and Zionism: Fascist Politics and Propaganda in the Middle East in the 1930s." *Eunomia* 2, (2013), 85-122.

plans to expand from the early 1920s.⁷⁴ He argues that the road to war begins much earlier in empire than it does in Europe. Fiore's research affirms the earlier work of Lawrence Pratt and Reynolds Salerno which focus on the Mediterranean origins of the Second World War.⁷⁵ Most recently, Nir Arielli has provided nuance to the arguments surrounding the role of Fascist ideology in empire by recognizing that while Fascist policy in the region was influenced by ideological expansionism, Mussolini's policymaking was also informed by other forces at play.⁷⁶

This chapter resituates sources of competition and growing tensions between the British and Italians within a broader context of cooperation. As many historians have pointed out, the Italians adopted subversive methods to challenge the British empire in the Mediterranean and the Middle East. This focus on Italian attempts to extend the Fascist empire at the expense of the British has a tendency to minimize persistent efforts to preserve cooperation between the two empires alongside competition. In Arabia, Palestine, and Malta, the British and Italians established normative expectations, through formal agreements as well as a tradition of understanding, about the limits of competition and how to maintain empire. In each of these imperial spaces, the British and Italian governments followed a nineteenth-century style of imperial cooperation that existed outside the League of Nations system. This chapter demonstrates that bilateral cooperation over empire remained an essential feature of the imperial system well into the twentieth century.

⁷⁴ Massimiliano Fiore, *Anglo-Italian Relations in the Middle East, 1922-1940*. (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2010).

⁷⁵ Lawrence Pratt, *East of Malta, West of Suez: Britain's Mediterranean Crisis, 1936-1939*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975); Reynolds M. Salerno, *Vital Crossroads: Mediterranean Origins of the Second World War, 1935-1940*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002).

⁷⁶ Arielli Nir, *Fascist Italy and the Middle East, 1933-1940*. (Hampshire, Palgrave MacMillan, 2010); Nir Arielli, "Italian Involvement in the Arab Revolt in Palestine, 1926-1938." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 35, no. 2 (2008), 187-204.

By comparing tension and cooperation in Arabia, Palestine, and Malta with the internationalized crises of Chapter 2, this chapter explores why some instances of imperialism were subject to international scrutiny and the mechanisms of imperial accountability while others were not. Susan Pedersen has emphasized that the League of Nations and the Permanent Mandates Commission inadvertently held imperial rule to new standards and new scrutiny through the advent of internationalization.⁷⁷ My research parallels the work of Susan Pedersen and explores the limits of imperial accountability as a twentieth century standard inaugurated by the League of Nations. These mechanisms of imperial accountability were by no means applied universally. I argue that the system of imperial accountability was limited by the status of the territory in question, the imperial methods used, and the legacy of nineteenth century imperial norms. As a result, Imperial accountability was largely absent in Arabia, Palestine, and Malta during the 1920s and 1930s.

This chapter will explore three case studies in which the system of bilateral cooperation over empire ranged from highly to thinly institutionalized. This chapter will begin by exploring imperial tension and cooperation in the Arabian Peninsula where the British and Italians established a system of cooperation over how to maintain empire that informed and guided decision-making in the region. In Palestine, the second case study, the British and Italians used bilateral cooperation as a tool to negotiate the limits of competition culminating with the 1938 Easter Accords. Imperial cooperation in Malta, the third case study, was informed by a tradition of coexistence rather than formal agreements between the two empires. While the form of cooperation varied across imperial space, it was always based on the assumption that imperial competition needed limits.

⁷⁷ Susan Pedersen, *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Susan Pedersen, "Empires, States and the League of Nations." In Glenda Sluga and Patricia Clavin (eds.), *Internationalisms: a twentieth-century history*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 113-125.

1.1 The Arabian Peninsula, 1926-1932: The Rome Understanding & Spheres of Influence

On 10 February 1927, the British and Italians settled the terms of the Rome Understanding which outlined the respective interests of each empire in the Red Sea and determined the fate of the Arabian Peninsula under British and Italian imperialism. Through the Rome Understanding, the British and Italians recognized one another's vital interest in the Red Sea region and agreed that there should be economic and commercial freedom on the Arabian coast and Islands of the Red Sea. The British and Italians also agreed that it was in their common interest to exert their influence in Arabia in the cause of peace. Most importantly, the British and Italians vowed to "maintain close touch with each other in all questions affecting the Red Sea and Southern Arabia in order to avoid misunderstandings between them."⁷⁸

Many historians have brushed over the Rome Understanding as largely ineffectual and having had little impact on the overall policy of the two empires. Early Fascist historian Renzo de Felice and his followers have long denied that Mussolini intentionally pursued an aggressive policy against the British empire and emphasize his desire for peaceful coexistence with the British.⁷⁹ Rosaria Quartararo, a student of de Felice, argues that the British never truly respected Italian interests in Yemen and secretly aimed to undermine Italy in the region.⁸⁰ More recent scholarship has focused on Mussolini's ideological ambitions to expand the Fascist Empire at the expense of the British.⁸¹ Manuela Williams and John Baldry largely disregard the Rome Understanding as a short-

⁷⁸ Clayton to Tyrrell, 10 February 1927, FO 371/12236, E 701/22/91.

⁷⁹ See Renzo de Felice, *Mussolini il fascista: Parte 1, Volume 2, l'organizzazione dello Stato fascista, 1925-1928; Mussolini il duce, Parte 2, Volume 1, Gli anni del consenso, 1929-1936*. (Turin: Einaudi, 1965-1996).

⁸⁰ Rosaria Quartararo, 'L'Italia e lo Yemen. Uno studio sulla politica di espansione Italiana nel Mar Rosso (1923-1937)', *Storia Contemporanea* X.4/5 (1970), 811-872.

⁸¹ Arielli, *Fascist Italy in the Middle East*, 23; Fiore, *Anglo-Italian Relations in the Middle East*, 23.

lived détente evocative of Italian deception.⁸² Fiore argues that the Fascist dictator's activities in Arabia demonstrate that the British and Italians had irreconcilable goals.⁸³ Similarly, Arielli claims that despite the Rome Understanding, Fascist policy in Arabia generated a greater threat to British interests than anywhere else in the Arab World.⁸⁴

Historians have yet to explain why both British and Italian officials prioritized cooperation in Arabia and how the Rome Understanding shaped empire in the region. The British and Italians pursued the Rome Understanding because unchecked imperial competition posed a greater risk than entering into a system of imperial cooperation in Arabia. Prior to the Rome Understanding, imperial competition in Arabia was an unregulated game. The terms of the Rome Understanding institutionalized a set of normative standards over how to maintain empire in Arabia. This case study begins by exploring the imperial tensions between the British and Italians and the perceived advantages of entering into a system of cooperation. It subsequently explores the ways in which the norms established by the Rome Understanding informed British and Italian decision-making towards the region. Far from being inconsequential, I argue that the Rome Understanding established a standard over the limits of empire in the Arabian Peninsula.

1.1.1 Imperial Tensions in the Arabian Peninsula

Since the First World War, the majority of the Arabian Peninsula was nominally independent with the exception of the Aden Protectorate. The region was made up of three primary kingdoms: the Kingdom of Yemen ruled by Imam Yahya who was also the leader of the Zeidi sect of Islam; the Kingdom of Hejaz, Nejd, and its Dependencies ruled by Ibn Saud; and the small principality of Asir ruled by Imam Idrisi. The independence of these kingdoms was self-declared and recognized by only a handful of European states.

⁸² Williams, *Mussolini's Propaganda Abroad*, 31; John Baldry, "Anglo-Italian Rivalry in Yemen and Asir 1900-1934." *Die Welt des Islams* " No. 1 (1976), 178-79.

⁸³ Fiore, *Anglo-Italian Relations in the Middle East*, 23 and 33.

⁸⁴ Arielli, *Fascist Italy in the Middle East*, 23.

Existing outside of the League of Nations' system, the Arabian Peninsula was vulnerable to external influence and imperial infiltration in ways in which other independent states were not. As neither an independent member, a mandate, nor an official part of a European empire, the Arabian Peninsula was exempt from the new standard of imperial morality and international surveillance that applied to other imperial spaces.

The British government's key priority in the Arabian Peninsula was the security of the Aden Protectorate in order to preserve vital imperial communications through the Red Sea. Since the opening of the Suez Canal, the Aden Protectorate had been an essential imperial outpost between London and India. In the 1880s, the British began to form treaty relations with local leaders in the hinterland surrounding Aden mirroring practices established in British India in order to ensure the port's security.⁸⁵ After the outbreak of war in 1914, the British concluded treaties with both Imam Idrisi and Ibn Saud against foreign aggression.⁸⁶ The British did not want the responsibility that would go along with incorporating these territories into the official realm of the British empire. Instead, the British used the treaty system to win the loyalty of ruling elites. British imperial security relied on maintaining peaceful relations with local leaders.

After the Great War, the British government struggled to balance its treaty obligations and strategic interests in the Arabian Peninsula with the Treasury Department's widely known effort to curb imperial defence spending during the 1920s.⁸⁷ In light of these postwar financial priorities, the Cabinet remodelled British defence

⁸⁵ Simon C. Smith, "Rulers and Residents: British Relations with the Aden Protectorate, 1937-59." *Middle Eastern Studies* 31, no. 3 (1995), 510; Paul Dresch, *A History of Yemen*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 9-10.

⁸⁶ Colonial Office [hereafter CO] Memorandum, 18 October 1926, CAB 24/182/2.

⁸⁷ See John Robert Ferris, *Men, Money, and Diplomacy: The Evolution of British Strategic Policy, 1919-1926*. (London: Macmillan Press, 1989); Paul W. Doerr, *British Foreign Policy, 1919-1939*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998); B.J.C. McKercher, *Transition of Power: Britain's Loss of Global Pre-eminence to the United States, 1930-1945*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 1-94.

policy on the assumptions that peace reigned and empire was secure.⁸⁸ In the Arabian Peninsula, however, such was not the case. The treaties with tribes in the Aden hinterland obliged the British government to provide them with protection when necessary.⁸⁹ Imam Yahya's recent encroachments on the hinterland threatened both the tribes in the region and Britain's interests in the Aden Protectorate. Reports that the Italians were supporting Imam Yahya with war materiel and training increased alarm over the situation. The cessation of the Anglo-Japanese alliance in 1921 further emphasized the need to ensure the security of the Red Sea in order to ensure fleet access to the Singapore base.⁹⁰ To make matters worse, the British government began to receive sporadic reports of Soviet infiltration and subversion in the region. Many of the Departments emphasized that the security of this region was a 'vital interest' of the British empire and argued that there could be no cuts to defence spending until these threats were alleviated.⁹¹

Unlike the British, the Italians were newcomers to the Arabian Peninsula in the 1920s.⁹² In 1923, Benito Mussolini began to pursue a policy of peaceful penetration in Yemen.⁹³ The region had both a strategic and economic value within the Fascist empire-building project. Extending the Fascist sphere of influence into Yemen would contribute toward Mussolini's ultimate goal of breaking Italy out of its Mediterranean prison and obtaining *spazio vitale*.⁹⁴ With a position in Arabia, the Italians could secure an outlet for

⁸⁸ Ferris, *Men, Money, and Diplomacy*, 25-30.

⁸⁹ See Oliphant Memorandum, 15 December 1926, FO 371/11448, E 7036/2660/91. And see Clive Leatherdale, *Britain and Saudi Arabia, 1925-1939: The Imperial Oasis*. (London: Frank Cass, 1983).

⁹⁰ Tripodi, 211.

⁹¹ Hankey Memorandum, 9 November 1926, CAB 24/182/2; CO Memorandum, 29 November 1926, CAB 24/182/40; Graham to FO, 13 January 1927, FO 371/12235, E 229/22/91.

⁹² Quartararo examines the beginning of the Italian empire-building project in Arabia from the early 1920s. See Quartararo, 811-872.

⁹³ Mussolini to Della Torretta, 27 August 1926, I Documenti Diplomatici Italiani [hereafter DDI], S. 7, Vol. 4.

⁹⁴ See Williams, *Mussolini's Propaganda Abroad*, 31-39; Fiore, *Anglo-Italian Relations*

their colonies in Somaliland and Eritrea and establish a naval base in the Indian Ocean with the potential to threaten British communication through the Red Sea. Apart from Mussolini's ideological guidance, Jacopo Gasparini, the Governor of Eritrea, was the main personality behind Italy's Arabian policy. Throughout the 1920s, Gasparini worked to reinforce trading ties between Yemen and Eritrea.⁹⁵ In early 1926, Gasparini, in collaboration with the Colonial Ministry, established a company known as SCITAR (Società Commercial Italo-Araba) for the purpose of developing economic relations between Italy and Yemen. The company secured an oil monopoly in Yemen through a special concession from Imam Yahya. Meanwhile, the Italian government created an organization in Italy for the sale of products exported from Yemen, specifically coffee and leather.⁹⁶ On the surface, SCITAR appeared as Italian private enterprise. But owned and operated by Fascist officials, the company had not only "commercial and industrial intentions" but clear "political aims" in Yemen.⁹⁷

In the summer of 1926, Gasparini visited Yemen to discuss the possibility of concluding an economic agreement with the Imam Yahya, in the hope of formalizing Italy's position.⁹⁸ On 2 September 1926, Italy became the first European country to recognize Yemen's independence when Gasparini signed a Treaty of Friendship and Commerce with Imam Yahya opening up "new horizons" for Italy's "political and economic activity" in the Arab World. In a secret annex, Imam Yahya granted Italy "the right of way" in economic enterprise in Yemen in exchange for annual instalments of

in the Middle East, 9-11; Arielli, *Fascist Italy and the Middle East*, 19-20.

⁹⁵ Jemen e l'Eritrea, 6 September 1924, Archivi di Famiglie di Persone: Jacopo Gasparini, 1897-1989 [hereafter Archivi Gasparini], b. 4, Archivio Centrale dello Stato [hereafter ACS]; Eritrea ed Jemen, May-June 1925, Archivi Gasparini, b. 4, ACS; Mussolini to Della Torretta, 27 August 1926, DDI, S. 7, Vol. 4; Mussolini to Della Torretta, 27 August 1926, DDI, IV; A. Chamberlain to Wingfield, 13 September 1926, FO 371/11448, E 5369/2660/91.

⁹⁶ Guariglia to Grandi, 5 March 1930, DDI, S. 7, Vol. 8..

⁹⁷ De Bono to Mussolini, 6 March 1929, DDI, S. 7, Vol. 7.

⁹⁸ Mussolini to Della Torretta, 27 August 1926, DDI, S. 7, Vol. 4.

Italian war materiel.⁹⁹ After concluding the treaty, Pietro Lanza di Scalea, Minister of the Colonies, boasted that the new accord marked Fascist Italy's determination not to remain imprisoned within its territorial limits.¹⁰⁰ The Italians could now view the "Red Sea as an area of our influence."¹⁰¹

By the mid-1920s, British and Italian interests in Arabia clashed. The British government viewed the Red Sea region as an essential imperial highway whose security was vital to the Empire. By the summer of 1926, the security of Britain's imperial communications faced threats for which the government had neither the defences nor the finances to address. Meanwhile, the Italians had gained a strong foothold in Yemen, challenging Britain's position in the region even further. The Italians aimed to extend the Fascist sphere of influence by supporting Imam Yahya's expansionist tendencies. While imperial competition revved up into the mid-1920s, neither the British nor the Italians were prepared for an imperial confrontation in the region. Both British and Italian officials began to view cooperation, at least in the short term, as far more advantageous than unrestrained competition and potential colonial war.

1.1.2 The Advantages of Cooperation over Empire

In an effort to prevent imperial competition from spiraling out of control, the British and Italians negotiated an agreement over the limits of empire in Arabia. In Whitehall, the Cabinet determined that unless the British cooperated, the only other "solution to Italian activities" was to strengthen defences in the region in preparation for a direct conflict with the Italians.¹⁰² The Colonial Office responded that "it was inconceivable that Britain would engage in anything like a conflict with Italy over this

⁹⁹ Annesso Al Trattato Italo-Iemenita, 2 September 1927, Archivio Storico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Italy [hereafter ASMAE], Affari Politici, 1919-1930 [hereafter AP (I)], Arabia, b. 80, fac. 867.

¹⁰⁰ Lanza di Scalea to Mussolini, 10 September 1926, DDI, IV.

¹⁰¹ Lanza di Scalea to Mussolini, 10 September 1926, DDI, IV.

¹⁰² CO Memorandum, 29 November 1926, CAB 24/182/40

corner of Arabia.”¹⁰³ In the Foreign Office, Austen Chamberlain pointed out that all reports “go to show that [the Italians] are working primarily to establish for themselves a position in Arabia. This operation by no means requires the undermine of ours.”¹⁰⁴ The British had also received a number of intelligence reports that revealed that the Italians were genuinely inclined to conclude an agreement over empire.¹⁰⁵

In Rome, the Foreign Ministry held the view that while the Italians had interests in Arabia, they need not conflict with the British. For nearly a year, Gasparini had been encouraging the Colonial Ministry to conclude an imperial agreement with the British that would divide the Peninsula into two spheres of influence.¹⁰⁶ Gasparini recognized Britain’s superiority in the region and believed that Italy’s best option for colonial acquisition was through a forward policy in isolated areas rather than on a broad front.¹⁰⁷ He reminded the Colonial Ministry that an open imperial clash would damage Italy’s economic interests in Yemen and emphasized that the British were inclined to conclude an agreement in Arabia. In support of this view, Dino Grandi suggested that the British and Italians should confirm their “friendship” and “cooperation in this sphere as [they have] in others.”¹⁰⁸

Both the British and the Italians determined that limiting competition would be beneficial to both empires. As the British and Italians prepared for negotiations, it became clear that an imperial understanding in Arabia could serve as a platform for addressing a number of outstanding tensions in the region. Through negotiations, the British and Italians hoped to prevent the outbreak of a proxy war, settle the Farasan Island dispute, and safeguard the region from Soviet subversion. Such an agreement

¹⁰³ CO to FO, 5 August 1926, FO 371/11447, E 4631/2660/91.

¹⁰⁴ A. Chamberlain to Lloyd (Cairo), 6 December 1927, FO 371/12239, E 5061/22/91.

¹⁰⁵ Paternò to Ministry of Colonies, 17 November 1926, HW 12/89/124691.

¹⁰⁶ Gasparini to Lanza di Scalea, 15 February 1926, DDI, S. 7, Vol. 4.

¹⁰⁷ Tripodi, 216.

¹⁰⁸ A. Chamberlain to Wingfield, 13 September 1926, FO 371/11448, E 5369/2660/91.

could not only limit competition, it could inaugurate a collaborative imperial endeavour in Arabia. Both the British and Italians had little to risk and much to gain from an imperial understanding in Arabia.

Through discussions for an imperial understanding, the British and the Italians first and foremost aimed to prevent the outbreak of a proxy war in the Arabian Peninsula. Tensions between local leaders had been escalating throughout the 1920s. In 1925, British intelligence reports revealed Imam Yahya's intentions to invade Asir and expand the Yemeni empire with the support of Italian men, money, and munitions. Considering the threat that Yemen posed to Aden, the British wished to prevent Imam Yahya from expanding his power in the region by absorbing Asir and gaining a foothold in the Farasan Islands.¹⁰⁹ In an effort to prevent the outbreak of hostilities, the British government negotiated an agreement with France, Belgium and Italy in the spring of 1925 that aimed to prohibit the supply of arms to Arabian rulers.¹¹⁰ But due to Italy's blatant violations of the agreement, only one year later the Cabinet decided to lift the arms embargo. By the end of the summer, both the British and Italians were sending war materiel to opposing rulers in the Arabian Peninsula.

The looming confrontation between Asir and Yemen threatened to drag the British and Italians into opposite sides of a proxy war.¹¹¹ British Foreign Secretary, Austen Chamberlain warned that "we are engaging in a covert war with Italy. She under the Imam's flag and we under the Idrisi's."¹¹² The Foreign Office warned that the "clash" of interests between Britain and Italy in southern Arabia was "likely to damage relations between the two countries" beyond the Peninsula.¹¹³ Mussolini also expressed concern over the impending conflict as he did not want this to lead to a dispute between Italy and

¹⁰⁹ Mallet Memorandum, 15 July 1926, FO 371/11447, E 4332/2660/91.

¹¹⁰ Oliphant Minute, 3 August 1926, FO 371/11447, E 4637/2660/91.

¹¹¹ Oliphant Minute, 3 August 1926, FO 371/11447, E 4637/2660/91.

¹¹² A. Chamberlain Minute, 20 July 1926, FO 371/11448, E 4679/2660/91.

¹¹³ CO Memorandum, 18 October 1926, CAB 24/182/2.

Britain¹¹⁴ After a discussion with Austen Chamberlain in Leghorn, Mussolini became convinced that an understanding over the Red Sea provided the Italians with the most advantageous way forward. Both the British and the Italians expected that a system of cooperation would prevent these imperial tensions from escalating to damage relations between the two empires on the global stage.

The negotiations also addressed conflicting interests in the Farasan Islands. In the summer of 1926, the Farasan Islands had become a site of intense competition as Imam Idrisi opened up the Islands for commercial activity. A number of British and Italian oil firms began vying for commercial dominance of the Islands. The British government determined that the government itself should not be involved in an oil concession. But the Foreign Office maintained that it must “ensure that if any concessions are granted, they go to a British company” because of the important role of the Islands for British imperial security in the region.¹¹⁵ The Admiralty and the Air Ministry argued that if a foreign power were to establish either an air base or naval base in the islands off the coast of Asir, it would constitute a serious threat to British communications and require a strengthening of British defences in the region.¹¹⁶ In exchange for accepting an offer from a British oil company, the Idrisi demanded access to war materiel to be used against Yemen. But as the prospect of a conflict with Italy drew closer, the British government became increasingly hesitant about arming Asir.

The Italians viewed the Farasan Islands as an opportunity to both strengthen Italy’s economic position and counter perceived British expansionism in the Arabian Peninsula.¹¹⁷ Gasparini emphasized the importance of establishing a durable economic position in the Arabian Peninsula by supplanting the trade monopoly that Aden held over

¹¹⁴ Mussolini to King Emmanuel III, 30 September 1926, DDI, S.7, Vol. IV.

¹¹⁵ Malkin Minute, 22 November 1926, FO 371/11448, E 6351/2660/91.

¹¹⁶ Hankey Memorandum, 9 November 1927, CAB 24/182/2.

¹¹⁷ Several Fascist officials believed that British economic activities in the Peninsula indicated Britain’s intention to undermine the Italians in Yemen. Gasparini to Lanza di Scalea, 15 February 1926, DDI, S. 7, Vol. 4.

the region.¹¹⁸ British intelligence reports suggested in 1926 that Imam Yahya promised the Italians an oil concession in the Farasan Islands after Yemeni forces had conquered Asir.¹¹⁹ The Italians, however, were not inclined to wait. The British began to receive evidence that the Italians were attempting to sway the loyalties of local elites in Asir in order to gain consent for an oil concession in the Farasan Islands. Yet, oil was not the only resource that the Italians were after. Gasparini argued that the SCITAR should pursue a salt concession in the Farasan Islands. He believed that such an enterprise would give Italy absolute dominance over the Yemeni economy and strengthen Italy's political position in the country.¹²⁰

There were a number of matters on which the two empire-builders clashed, but both the British and the Italians feared the infiltration of another power into the region — the Soviets. Since the end of the First World War, both the British and Italians had been highly skeptical of Soviet designs in Europe and empire.¹²¹ The British had learned of the insurrectionist capabilities of Soviet influence from their experience in other parts of the empire.¹²² The Italian Foreign Ministry kept close tabs on Soviet activities in the Peninsula and began intercepting Soviet communications.¹²³ These reports revealed that Soviet agents were working in Saudi Arabia and Yemen to gain influence with local elites. The British received numerous reports of Soviet propaganda in Arabia. One article denounced British and Italian imperialism in the region and proclaimed that the “Arabian

¹¹⁸ Catena Insuperabile to Gasparini, n.d. ACS, Gasparini, b. 4.

¹¹⁹ Mallet Memorandum, 15 July 1926, FO 371/11447, E 4332/2660/91.

¹²⁰ Gasparini to Mussolini, 1 June 1928, ACS, Gasparini, b. 4.

¹²¹ See Keith Neilson, *Britain, Soviet Russia, and the Collapse of the Versailles Order, 1919-1939*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Alan Cassels, *Mussolini's Early Diplomacy*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 11-13.

¹²² See Steven B. Wagner, *Statecraft by Stealth: Secret Intelligence and British Rule in Palestine*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019), 60-63; Satia Priya, *Spies in Arabia: The Great War and the Cultural Foundations of Britain's Covert Empire in the Middle East*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 202-220.

¹²³ See, Azione Sovietica telegraffi, ASMAE, AP (I), Arabia, b. 806, fac. 897; Sovietica azione, ASMAE, Affari Politici, 1930-1943 [hereafter AP (II)] Arabia, b. 7, fac. 2.

territories could be united only from below.” Soviet influence and support promised to provide the “essential conditions for unification” and free the Arabs from imperialism.¹²⁴

On a number of occasions, the Foreign Office expressed skepticism that the Soviets posed a real threat in the region and questioned whether the Italians were using a false threat of Soviet subversion to maintain close relations with the British.¹²⁵ While a number of Foreign Office officials believed that reports of Soviet subversion were just another Italian ‘bluff,’ there was a widespread sense in the British government that on the matter of Soviet influences in Arabia, it was better to be safe than sorry. For the British and Italians, the Soviet Union was a common enemy against which mutual cooperation could be beneficial. By consolidating their positions on the Peninsula, the British and Italians aimed to exclude the Soviets from the region.

1.1.3 The Rome Understanding and Imperial Norms

As winter fell upon London, the British and Italians began exchanging notes to delineate the purpose and scope of the negotiations to take place in Rome. The negotiations themselves were largely conducted by lower level officials and ‘experts’ on Arabia. On the British side sat the British Ambassador to Rome, Ronald Graham, and a British colonial administrator and expert on the Arabian Peninsula, Sir Gilbert Clayton. Governor of Eritrea Jacopo Gasprini and young Fascist zealot and Director General for Europe and the Levant, Raffaele Guariglia, represented the Italian side. Their priorities were different: while Whitehall’s priority concerned the empire’s strategic position in the Red Sea, Rome’s was of a commercial and economic nature.¹²⁶ After nearly a month of negotiations, the group of experts and colonial officials had reached a common understanding of empire in Arabia.

¹²⁴ R. Vaughn to FO, 5 September 1927. FO 371/12238, E 3878/22/91.

¹²⁵ Osborne Minute, 19 January 1927, FO 371/12235, E 345/22/91; Graham to FO, 29 March 1928, FO 371/13004, E 1736/80/91.

¹²⁶ FO Preliminary Draft Instructions, 10 December 1926, FO 371/11338, E 6785/2660/91.

The Rome Understanding has strong parallels to nineteenth century imperial norms. The Understanding was based on the assumption that imperial competition needed limits. The talks in Rome established spheres of influence, encouraged collaboration with local elites, and created rules for economic competition. The Understanding was a behind-closed-doors agreement that the British and Italians specifically decided did not constitute an official treaty so that it would not need to be registered with the League of Nations.¹²⁷ Neither the British nor the Italians desired any form of League oversight in Arabia. The scant press coverage of the agreement reflects the legacy of the widely condemned ‘old diplomacy’ well into the 1920s.¹²⁸ The League of Nations and international public opinion were almost completely blind to this imperial understanding.

In practice, the Understanding established a new standard for a collaborative imperial endeavour in which the British and Italians recognized the limits of their respective influence and the methods by which it was maintained. The Rome Understanding established *de facto* spheres of influence in Arabia. The Kingdom of Hejaz, Njed and its Dependencies and the principality of Asir fell within the British sphere while Yemen came under Italian influence. The British initially wanted to include a term in which the two empires renounced their political ambition in the region and agreed to limit empire purely to commercial endeavours. Gasparini demurred that the term was too vague and pointed out that commercial enterprise in Arabia was frequently wrapped up in local politics.¹²⁹ Instead of sanctioning ‘political ambition’, the British and Italians agreed to work with and through political elites within their spheres of influence. The text of the agreement also committed the two governments to “exercise” their respective “influences” on Ibn Saud, Imam Yahya, and Imam Idrisi towards eliminating

¹²⁷ As per Article 18 of the League of Nations Covenant, all official treaties or international engagements entered into by any Member state were required to be registered with the League of Nations. See Article 18 in Appendix A.

¹²⁸ Graham to FO, 12 January 1927, FO 371/12235, E 209/22/91; Osborne Minute, 14 January 1927, FO 371/12235, E 209/22/91.

¹²⁹ Clayton to Tyrrell, 10 February 1927, FO 371/12236, E 701/22/91.

causes of conflict between them.¹³⁰ The British and Italians attempted to both influence local elites and construct commercial monopolies in order to secure and reinforce the frontiers of their respective spheres of influence.

For example, the British used the new spheres of influence arrangement in Arabia to push Yemeni forces out of occupied portions of the Aden hinterland. When Tribes under Imam Yahya occupied the outer limits of the Aden protectorate in 1923, the British had done very little to expel Yemeni forces from the territory.¹³¹ But after the Rome Understanding, the British government developed a higher expectation of the durability and security of these imperial frontiers. British decision-makers anticipated that a secure border would allow them to reduce the imperial defence requirements in Aden reflecting the Treasury's postwar defence policy.¹³² After the talks in Rome, the British government became increasingly concerned with consolidating its formal empire according to the letter of its treaty obligations. The Foreign Office believed that the Italians had a responsibility to restrain Imam Yahya from his expansionist tendencies and requested that Gasparini use his influence with the Imam to secure an evacuation of Aden or face British Aerial bombardment.¹³³

After several weeks of further encroachments on Aden territory, the Foreign Office took unilateral action to preserve the boundaries of the imperial system in Arabia – as described in the opening paragraph of this chapter. When the British issued warnings to the Imam that he must evacuate the Aden Protectorate or face unrestrained aerial bombardment without warning, the Italians objected because such a brutal act undermined their joint obligations to preserve peace in the region as laid out in the Rome Understanding. The two empires had agreed that safeguarding peace in Arabia was most advantageous to their economic and strategic interests in the region. Therefore

¹³⁰ Clayton to Tyrrell, 10 February 1927, FO 371/12236, E 701/22/91.

¹³¹ Lloyd to A. Chamberlain, 14 January 1928, FO 371/13003, E 384/80/91.

¹³² 3 November 1926, CAB 53/1/11.

¹³³ Italian charge d'affaires (conversation), 8 October 1927, FO 371/12239, E 4268/22/91; Lloyd to A. Chamberlain, 14 January 1928, FO 371/13003, E 384/80/91.

imperialism ought to be conducted through negotiation, mediation, and indirect rule rather than through airplanes, bombs, and conquest. Moreover, the Foreign Ministry feared that the real British objective was to expand their influence over Yemen, at Italy's expense.¹³⁴

Anglo-Italian relations over the Yemeni-Aden border demonstrates the value of the spheres of influence system in Arabia. The British used the imperial system in order to secure and consolidate the Aden Protectorate. This would allow them to reduce their imperial defence obligations in the region. While carrying out a bombing mission in Yemen, the British pressed the Italians to use their influence in Yemen to put an end to the border dispute.¹³⁵ For the Italians, the belief that Britain's ambitions were expanding reinforced the need for cooperation under the Rome Understanding in order to preserve their position in Yemen. Mussolini argued that an ongoing conflict between Britain and Yemen "represents a serious danger for us" because it both provided the British with a justification to extend their position in Arabia and it stirred Imam Yahya's suspicions over the direction of Italian loyalties.¹³⁶ Mussolini explained that Italy's influence in Yemen was a result of limiting competition "that still very much exists between powers in the Red Sea."¹³⁷ By mediating the conflict between Yemen and the British, the Italians could protect Imam Yahya from British expansionism.¹³⁸ These faulty interpretations of British motives encouraged the Foreign Ministry to work to maintain the spheres of

¹³⁴ See Canero Medici to Ministero degli Affari Esteri, 28 November 1928, ASMAE, AP (I), Arabia, b. 800, fac. 865; Guariglia to Bordonaro, 27 October 1927, ASMAE, AP (I), Arabia, b. 800, fac. 867; Gasparini to Ministero degli Affari Esteri, 28 March 1927, ASMAE, AP (I), Arabia, b. 800, fac. 865; Ministero delle Colonie to Ministero degli Affari Esteri, 21 November 1927, ASMAE, AP (I), Arabia, b. 800, fac. 865.

¹³⁵ Gasparini to Ministero degli Affari Esteri, 28 March 1927, ASMAE, AP (I), Arabia, b. 800, fac. 865; Gasparini to Ministero degli Affari Esteri, 14 April 1927, ASMAE, AP (I), Arabia, b. 800, fac. 865; Italian charge d'affaires (conversation), 8 October 1927, FO 371/12239, E 4268/22/91, Zeidi encroachment in the Aden Protectorate.

¹³⁶ Mussolini to Bordonaro, 21 October 1927, ASMAE, AP (I), b. 800, fac. 865.

¹³⁷ Mussolini to Bordonaro, 21 October 1927, ASMAE, AP (I), b. 800, fac. 865.

¹³⁸ Gasparini to Ministero delle Colonie, 25 October 1927, ASMAE, AP (I), Arabia, b. 800, fac. 865.

influence system rather than abandon it. As a result, with the help of Italian mediation, the British entered into to “ticklish negotiations” with the Imam from the spring of 1928 until 1932.¹³⁹

The Rome Understanding also imposed limits on economic competition in Arabia. During discussions in Rome, the British and Italian delegations agreed that there should be economic and commercial freedom for the citizens and subjects of the two countries.¹⁴⁰ This condition meant that as long as a company did not appear to be directly owned or operated by a government, it was free to establish itself in the region. The two empires were free to engage in commercial competition so long as they respected the limits of political influence of one another’s sphere. The talks in Rome confirmed economic penetration as a tool of empire in Arabia.

The recognition of commercial competition as a legitimate imperial activity reopened debate over the Farasan Island oil concession. After a number of bids and botched deals, the British division of the Shell Company, Anglo-Saxon Petroleum, won the Farasan Islands oil concession shortly before the talks in Rome. In Rome, the British secured *de facto* oversight of the Islands under the British sphere of influence and confirmed that no foreign power should establish a political position on the islands.¹⁴¹ After the Understanding, a debate began to emerge between Anglo-Saxon Petroleum and Imam Idrisi over the terms of the contract. As a condition of the concession, the Foreign Office authorized the Resident at Aden to provide the Shell Company with arms and munitions to send to Imam Idrisi to defend Asir. But in the summer of 1927, Imam Idrisi claimed that the Shell Company had not supplied the war materiel promised and demanded that Shell Company cease operations until the shipments arrived.¹⁴²

¹³⁹ CO to FO, 15 February 1928, FO 371/13003, E 776/80/91.

¹⁴⁰ Clayton to Tyrrell, 10 February 1927, FO 371/12236, E 701/22/91; Resoconto Delle Conversazioni che hanno avuto luogo in Roma, ACS, Archivio Gasparini, b. 4.

¹⁴¹ Clayton to Tyrrell, 10 February 1927, FO 371/12236, E 701/22/91.

¹⁴² CO to FO, 15 February 1928, FO 371/13003, E 776/80/91.

The Foreign Office received countless reports that the Italians were behind the Farasan Island controversy. After the Rome Understanding, the Italian Colonial Ministry sent “archaeological missions” to Asir bearing gifts and donations for the tribal leaders of the Farasan Islands in an effort to gain the indigenous population’s consent for an Italian oil concession.¹⁴³ The Italians established a close relationship with highly respected local elites, such as Sayed Al-Mirghani and Abdullah Soheili, who traveled across Asir with money, gifts, and promises of Italian goodwill in an attempt to secure a privileged position for Italian firms in the Farasan Islands.¹⁴⁴ Almost all reports carried a similar message: Italian agents were violating the Rome Understanding and undermining the British position in Arabia. Most Foreign Office officials, however, dismissed the reports as inaccurate or unimportant. As several scholars have shown, colonial prejudices and assumptions about race often tainted intelligence analysis and collection.¹⁴⁵ These agents were rarely British nationals. Within the British colonial mind, the reports of agents indigenous to the Arabian Peninsula needed to be regarded with skepticism. In interpreting the reports of Sayed Moustapha, an agent from Asir, the Resident at Aden noted that the agent’s “love of power” no doubt “play[ed] a part in his actions.”¹⁴⁶ The Foreign Office often deemed these agents untrustworthy and self-interested and believed that their reports were influenced by ulterior motives and the regional feud between Ibn Saud and Imam Yahya.¹⁴⁷ Orientalist views of colonial subjects as cunning and corrupt prompted Colonial Office and Foreign Office officials to rely very little on intelligence reports when it came to policymaking vis-a-vis Italy in Arabia.

Members of the Foreign Office overwhelmingly believed that the Italians were not out to undermine Britain’s position in Arabia over the Farasan Island concession. The

¹⁴³ Ministero delle Colonie to Ministero degli Affari Esteri, 8 March 1928, ASMAE, AP (I), Arabia, b. 80, fac. 873.

¹⁴⁴ Moustapha El-Idrisi to Lloyd, 26 April 1927, FO 371/12237, E 2028/22/91.

¹⁴⁵ Wagner, 4; Thomas, *Empires of Intelligence*, 76-78; Priya, 5.

¹⁴⁶ Steward to CO, 22 July 1927, FO 371/12237, E 3223/22/91.

¹⁴⁷ Osborne Minute, 6 May 1927, FO 371/12237, E 2028/22/91.

Air Ministry and Colonial Office argued that an Italian concession in the Islands would lead the Italians to establish a political position on the Asiri Islands.¹⁴⁸ But the Foreign Office viewed commercial competition between the two empires in the Farasan Islands as only a minor threat. In preparations for discussions in Rome, the Foreign Office had pointed out that “economic competition is both [a] natural and beneficial” part of empire and that it only becomes “dangerous when associated with political rivalry.”¹⁴⁹ The Foreign Office differentiated between political influence and commercial competition. The Cabinet confirmed that as “long as the object of the Italians is commercial penetration, we have no grounds for objection.”¹⁵⁰ Because the Italians had pursued a forward policy of commercial penetration and indirect rule, the British government believed that the Italians had a right to establish a position in Arabia. From the British perspective, the Italians were doing empire the right way. Their imperial rivalry was not a threat and commercial competition, within reason, was part of the imperial game.

1.1.4 Conclusion

Britain and Italy had an imperial presence and ambitions in the Arabian Peninsula. But common concerns about the internal stability of Arabia, zones of competition, and external imperial challenges caused the British and Italians to pursue a system of cooperation. From the British point of view, an agreement with the Italians would provide the necessary conditions to cut defence spending in the region, prevent the outbreak of a proxy war, and secure the Farasan Islands from Italian political influence. For the Italians, an understanding would secure the British empire’s recognition of Italy’s special position in Yemen. Foreign Minister Dino Grandi viewed the Understanding as the “Magna Carta of our political situation in the Red Sea.”¹⁵¹ In the latter half of the

¹⁴⁸ Osborne Minute, 2 July 1927, FO 371/12235, E 637/22/91.

¹⁴⁹ Oliphant Minute, 3 August 1926, FO 371/11447, E 4637/2660/91.

¹⁵⁰ CO Memorandum, 29 November 1926, CAB 24/182/40.

¹⁵¹ Grandi to De Bono, 16 February 1931, DDI, S. 7, Vol. 10, No. 7, 117-121.

1920s, it was in both Britain's and Italy's interest to limit competition and collaborate to safeguard their positions against Soviet subversion.

Historians have been too quick to dismiss the Rome Understanding. Far from being inconsequential, the Rome Understanding established a common understanding over the limits of empire in the Arabian Peninsula. The talks in Rome established a spheres of influence arrangement that delineated the limits of the British and Italian empires in the region. It introduced collaboration with political elites, negotiation, and economic penetration as the most legitimate methods of empire. The Rome Understanding did not end imperial competition between the British and Italians in Arabia, but it fundamentally altered how the rivalry was perceived and navigated. Suspicions and faulty interpretations of one another's ambitions reinforced the assumptions on which the Rome Understanding had been based: competition needed limits. The Rome Understanding institutionalized cooperation over empire and introduced standards and expectations of imperial rule.

This case reconsiders the nature of British and Italian conceptions of empire. Italian imperialism in the Arabian Peninsula complicates our understanding of Fascist imperialism as always excessively violent. It demonstrates that Italian Fascism incorporated spheres of influence, economic penetration, and collaboration with local elites into its imperial repertoire. It also reveals that similar to the Italians less than a decade later, the British also conducted empire via bombs, deaths, and brutality well into the 1920s. Imperialism in Arabia complicates the neat dichotomy that many scholars have established between Fascist imperialism and liberal imperialism reformed by the League of Nations. The Rome Understanding inaugurated a new period of Anglo-Italian imperial cooperation in the Red Sea with few accountability mechanisms in place. Outside of the purview of League imperial oversight, the British and Italians established an imperial system in the Arabian Peninsula created and maintained by two imperial powers.

1.2 The Palestine Mandate, 1922-1938: The Easter Accords and Balancing Imperial Tensions

Nearly two decades of competition and cooperation in Palestine culminated with the conclusion of Easter Accords in 1938 between Britain and Italy as the two empires finally agreed upon the limits of the Italian empire in the Mandate.¹⁵² The goal of the agreement was to settle all outstanding concerns between the British and Italian governments in the Mediterranean and the Red Sea. In exchange for Britain's *de jure* recognition of the Fascist Empire in Abyssinia as discussed in Chapter 2, Mussolini agreed to curb Italy's anti-British activities in Palestine and adopted a more peaceful policy towards the British in the Arab world.¹⁵³ The Italians vowed to cease anti-British propaganda in Palestine and respect the limits of its position in the British Mandate. Count Ciano assured the British government that "the Italian government will do nothing to prejudice the position of [the British] in Palestine."¹⁵⁴ After years of Italian influence, agents, and propaganda, in the region, Mussolini pulled out of Palestine.

Most historians agree that the Easter Accords were ineffectual and that the Italian intention was always duplicitous – Italy's goal was to supplant Britain as an imperial power.¹⁵⁵ Arielli concludes that one of the key aims of Italian policy in Palestine was to destabilize London's position in the Mandate.¹⁵⁶ Similarly, Williams highlights the balancing act that the Italians played between the Arabs and the Zionists in Palestine

¹⁵² Anglo-Italian Agreement, Perth to FO, 16 April 1938, FO 371/22410, R 3940/23/22.

¹⁵³ Appunto Per S.E. Il Ministro, 4 July 1938, ASMAE, Gabinetto del Ministro e della Segreteria Generale, 1923-1943 [hereafter GAB] 744, b. 4, fac. 1.

¹⁵⁴ Perth to Halifax, 28 April 1938, FO 371/22412, R 4472/23/33.

¹⁵⁵ Arielli, *Fascist Italy and the Middle East*; Arielli, "Italian Involvement in the Arab Revolt in Palestine," 187-204; Fiore, *Anglo-Italian Relations in the Middle East*, 94; Williams, *Mussolini's Propaganda Abroad*, 51; Pratt, 136; Dawn M Miller, "Dark Waters; Britain and Italy's Invasion of Albania, 7 April 1939." *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence*, 16 (2003), 290-300; Matthew H. Hefler, "In the way': Intelligence, Eden, and British Foreign Policy towards Italy, 1937-1938." *Intelligence and National Security* (2018), 13.

¹⁵⁶ Arielli, "Italian Involvement in the Arab Revolt in Palestine," 187.

during the 1920s as indicative of Italian ambitions to replace the British as the mandatory power.¹⁵⁷ Fiore points out that while the Italians undertook a number of systematic initiatives in Palestine in order to increase Fascist influence in the region with the aim of achieving *mare nostrum*, it was not until the fallout of the Abyssinia Crisis (1935) that the Italians adopted an explicit anti-British policy in Palestine in collaboration with Arab leaders.¹⁵⁸ The immediate cessation of Fascist activities in Palestine after the Easter Accords has been almost entirely omitted from this narrative.

The Easter Accords belong to a longer tradition of competition and cooperation over Palestine between the British and the Italians. Anglo-Italian cooperation in the Palestine Mandate can be divided into three major phases: the cautious phase; the aggressive phase; and the roll-back phase. Between 1922 and 1929, the Italians worked to hold the British accountable to the terms of the Mandate as a means of pressuring the British to concede to Italian aspirations behind closed doors. The years following the 1929 Disturbances challenged Anglo-Italian cooperation in empire as both imperial powers attempted to use alternative imperial measures in an effort to shape the Mandate for their own gain. Between 1937 and 1939, the British and Italians attempted to reconcile their interests in Palestine. The Easter Accords emerged as an imperial bargain that reinforced the need to pursue a policy of cooperation in Palestine.

Although Palestine was part of the Mandates system, imperial competition within the Mandate slid under the League's already preoccupied purview. The Permanent Mandates Commission was overwhelmed with escalating Arab-Jewish tensions.¹⁵⁹ In Palestine, the two empires sidelined the League of Nations and used bilateral cooperation as a tool to navigate episodes of competition. The limits of empire were consistently renegotiated as the Italians pushed the boundaries of the imperial system. The cycle of

¹⁵⁷ Williams, *Mussolini's Propaganda Abroad*, 32-36.

¹⁵⁸ Fiore, *Anglo-Italian Relations in the Middle East*, 92.

¹⁵⁹ Pedersen, *The Guardians*, 95-108 and 357-393.

tensions-negotiations-cooperation repeated throughout the interwar years culminating with the Easter Accords.

1.2.1 The Cautious Phase: Forming, Enforcing, and Revising the Mandate, 1922-1929

During the Mandate's early phase, the British and Italians tried to resolve their competing interests through negotiations. The British Government was drawn to Palestine because of its paramount strategic position at the eastern flank of the Suez Canal. The Great War had shattered nineteenth-century beliefs that the deserts of the Sinai Peninsula would act as a natural defence for the Canal.¹⁶⁰ The Colonial Office argued that the occupation of Palestine during the War had been necessary in order to preserve the security of Egypt. The Colonial Office noted that "to lose Palestine is to lose Arabia" which would be a loss that the British could not afford.¹⁶¹ The Air Staff supported this view and maintained that "prevention is better than cure."¹⁶² If British influence in Palestine decayed, it would be nearly impossible to operate any strategic air route from Egypt to Iraq and India in the event of another war.¹⁶³ In addition to its vital location, the prospect of oil in Palestine also encouraged the British to seek control.¹⁶⁴ After the capitulation of the Ottoman Empire, the Permanent Mandates Commission allocated the Palestine Mandate to the British with the task of establishing a Jewish national homeland and guiding the territory toward independent nationhood.

Even after the Permanent Mandates Commission conceded the Palestine Mandate to the British, the Italians tried to get a toe in the Palestine door. Sects within the Italian government had been pushing for an Italian position in Palestine for years. A vague reference to an Italian sphere in Asia Minor was among the territorial acquisitions

¹⁶⁰ CO Memorandum, 14 May 1923, CAB 5/5.

¹⁶¹ CO Memorandum, 14 May 1923, CAB 5/5.

¹⁶² Air Staff Memorandum, 2 June 1923, CAB 5/5.

¹⁶³ Air Staff Memorandum, 2 June 1923, CAB 5/5.

¹⁶⁴ Naval Staff Memorandum, 29 June 1923, CAB 5/5.

promised to Italy in the Treaty of London (1915) in exchange for its entry into war in support of the Entente.¹⁶⁵ While Liberal Italy's dreams of a Mandate in Asia Minor were foiled by the Wilsonian turn at the Paris Peace Conferences, Mussolini remained determined to extend Italian influence into Palestine. Like Yemen, Palestine also lay in a strategic location bordering the so-called prison bars of the Eastern Mediterranean. The Fascist dictator planned to topple the Mandate by exploiting its internal contradictions over the scheme for a Jewish homeland in the Permanent Mandates Commission. Meanwhile, the Italians would develop a strong position in Palestine through commercial and religious institutions. Once the British found themselves at an impasse, the Mandate would need to be either internationalized or lifted to independence.¹⁶⁶ Mussolini believed that once Palestine was free from British domination, the Italians could take advantage of the weak independent state and extend the Italian sphere of influence.¹⁶⁷ In effect, Mussolini intended to transform Palestine into another Yemen.

Since the latter half of the nineteenth century, Liberal Italy had positioned itself as protector of the Holy Places in Palestine. The Mandate committed the British to "establish a Jewish homeland in Palestine without prejudicing the rights of non-Jewish communities."¹⁶⁸ In formulating the Mandate, British experts recognized the "historic rights and position of Italian religious institutions in Palestine."¹⁶⁹ On a number of occasions, Fascist officials protested that the British government had broken its obligations to protect the interests of Italian Catholic institutions in Palestine.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁵ Cassels, 23; Alan Sharp, *The Versailles Settlement: Peacemaking After the First World War, 1919-1923*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 139 and 148; and see James Burgwyn, *The Legend of the Mutilated Victory: Italy, the Great War and the Paris Peace Conference, 1915-1919*. (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1993).

¹⁶⁶ Relazione per S.E. Il Ministro, 1930, Palestina, AP (I) b. 1465, fac 6347.

¹⁶⁷ Arielli, *Fascist Italy and the Middle East*, 15.

¹⁶⁸ Balfour to de Martino, 19 July 1922, FO 371/7778, E 7213/78/65.

¹⁶⁹ Balfour to de Martino, 19 July 1922, FO 371/7778, E 7213/78/65.

¹⁷⁰ Mussolini to Bordonaro, 10 July 1928, DDI S. 7, Vol 6; Mussolini to Bordonaro, 22 December 1928, DDI, S. 7, Vol. 7.

Mussolini complained that the “traditionally Italian” Christian rights in the Holy Land were “continually being harmed by the incomprehensible and unjustified aspirations” of Zionism.¹⁷¹ Il Duce stressed to the Italian Ambassador to London, Chiaramonte Bordonaro that he must make Italian concerns clear to the Foreign Office.¹⁷² The Italian Ambassador to London frequently reminded the British government of its obligations to non-Jewish religious communities under the Mandate and made several claims that Italian Catholic institutions had suffered under the Mandatory administration.¹⁷³ The British government assured the Italians that the programme in Palestine would not prejudice Italy’s traditional Christian rights in the region.¹⁷⁴ Beyond these assurances, the British proposed that an international commission be established for the purpose of settling all outstanding questions regarding the Holy Places. Such a commission, however, never materialized.¹⁷⁵

These tensions over religious interests in Palestine was a source of competition between the Italians and the British throughout the 1920s, but it also provided a basis for cooperation. The Fascist regime used the question of Catholic interests in Palestine to negotiate the extension of Italian influence into the region. Il Duce hoped that Britain’s recognition of Italy’s special interests would allow Italy to supplant the French as protector of Christianity in the Middle East. Many Fascist officials argued that Christianity “must prevail [in Palestine] for spiritual, political, and historical reasons.”¹⁷⁶ Questions over religious rights in Palestine facilitated discussions between the two

¹⁷¹ Mussolini to Bordonaro, 22 December 1928, DDI, S. 7, Vol 6.

¹⁷² Mussolini to Bordonaro, 22 December 1928, DDI, S. 7, Vol 6.

¹⁷³ A. Chamberlain to Della Torretta, 19 April 1927, FO 371/11474, E 2565/681/65.

¹⁷⁴ See Graham to A. Chamberlain, 21 April 1927, FO 371/12206, C 3729/3729/22. Unconvinced by Whitehall’s assurances, several Fascist officials emphasized the need for the Italians to work with the Jews themselves in order to preserve Catholic holy sites in Palestine. See Pedrazzi to Mussolini, 19 May 1927, DDI, S. 7, Vol. 5; Sacerdoti to Foreign Ministry, 4 December 1928, DDI, S. 7, Vol. 7.

¹⁷⁵ Arielli, *Fascist Italy in the Middle East*, 15.

¹⁷⁶ Relazione per S.E. Il Ministro, 1930, Palestina, AP (1919-1930), b. 1465, fac. 6347.

governments as the Italians attempted to hold the British accountable to the terms of the Mandate and secure advantages for Italy's Catholic influence. While these negotiations frequently proved futile, the Italians largely respected the limits established by the Mandate and through bilateral discussions.

The threat of America's growing commercial interests in the Middle East prompted the Italians to work with the British and conclude an economic understanding in Palestine. The British had been "anxious to treat American institutions" in Palestine "generously to avoid the slightest suspicion of discrimination against them."¹⁷⁷ In the spring of 1924, the British accorded the United States most-favoured-nation treatment in Palestine. After news broke about the Anglo-American Convention, the Italians rushed to secure their own economic agreement with the British.¹⁷⁸ In an exchange of notes in the spring of 1926, the British confirmed that Italian commercial enterprise could participate in the development of public works and promised to consider special arrangements for admission of Italian labourers in Palestine. The British also reaffirmed their commitment to give the Italians favourable consideration in the event of an Italian "economic zone in Asia Minor materializing."¹⁷⁹ In practice the Agreement did little to advance Italy's position in Palestine as US financial circles established a strong position in Palestine during the latter half of the 1920s.¹⁸⁰ But after the 1926 agreement, Mussolini continued to use the threat of American commercial dominance to secure greater economic influence in Palestine. On several occasions, Mussolini emphasized the need to preserve Anglo-Italian cooperation in view of growing American economic power. He confided in Austen Chamberlin that American "wealth was becoming a danger" and that "they would eat us all up" if the British and Italians did not work together.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁷ Rendel Minute, 16 December 1932, FO 371/16055, E 6400/370/31.

¹⁷⁸ Guariglia per Gabinetto, 6 September 1930, Palestina, AP (1919-1930), b 1465, fac 6347.

¹⁷⁹ CO Memorandum, 19 April 1926, FO 371/11474, E 2565/681/65.

¹⁸⁰ Rosso to Oliphant, 11 March 1926, FO 371/11473, E 1681/681/65; de 'Calboli Barone to Mussolini, 30 August 1929, DDI. S. 7, Vol. 7.

¹⁸¹ A. Chamberlain Minute, 3 April 1929, FO 371/13691, C 2504/2462/22.

Despite Italian challenges and demands, they were cautious in Palestine. Mussolini negotiated with the British over the limits of Italian influence in the Mandate. Despite their apparent imperial fragility, the British held a relatively strong line in negotiations. In a formalized imperial space such as Palestine, the British were less inclined to share the ‘burden’ of empire as they were in Arabia. During the 1920s the Italians began to lay the groundwork for the network of local elites and loyal agents that would join Italy in its subversive efforts in the 1930s. But, in the 1920s, these contacts were primarily used to ensure Italy’s position in the region and to secure commercial agreements. The Mandate’s internal issues largely distracted the League from growing Italian influence in Palestine. The Permanent Mandates Commission was far more concerned with maintaining order and control over the local population than it was with broader imperial relations. This lack of imperial oversight created space for the two empires to re-negotiate the limits of empire and for the Italians to push its boundaries.

1.2.2 The Aggressive Phase: Subversion and Propaganda, 1929-1937

Many historians argue that Italian policy in Palestine did not undergo a major shift until after the Abyssinia Crisis.¹⁸² While the British were largely unaware of Italian subversive activities in Palestine prior to the Abyssinia Crisis, the Italians had adopted an increasingly aggressive policy from 1929 onward. The Palestine Mandate reached a point of crisis in 1929 as demonstrations in Jerusalem spiraled into violent riots between Arab and Jewish populations. The British imperial security apparatus was unprepared to handle the situation.¹⁸³ The Italians believed that the shortcomings of British rule— the reduction of white troops, weak intelligence services, and lack of firm authority — had been the cause of unrest.¹⁸⁴ After the 1929 Disturbances, the Italians escalated their

¹⁸² Fiore, *Anglo-Italian Relations in the Middle East*, 42-45; Arielli, “Italian Involvement in the Arab Revolt in Palestine,” 187; Williams, *Mussolini’s Propaganda Abroad*, 63-65.

¹⁸³ Wagner, 81.

¹⁸⁴ Francesco Waceki Vi Cellere to Ministry Affari Esteri, 25 June 1930, Palestine, AP (I), b. 1465, fac. 6347.

complaints over the treatment of Italian interests in Palestine.¹⁸⁵ In light of Britain's growing imperial fragility, many Fascist officials recognized that the British administration in Palestine was in no position to guarantee Italian rights in the region and opted to pursue alternative methods. The anti-British policy that emerged after 1935 built upon the forward policy that had unfolded after the 1929 riots.

The British were largely unaware of the extent of Fascist activities in Palestine until Italian policy became overtly anti-British policy after the Abyssinia Crisis. A number of intelligence reports suggested that while there was a fomenting fascist moment among Arab nationalists, "the origin of the movement" was "difficult to trace."¹⁸⁶ On a number of occasions, the Italian President of the Permanent Mandates Commission, Alberto Theodoli facilitated talks between the British and the Italians over the unrest in the Mandate. During the early 1930s, the Italians largely preserved the appearance of cooperation in Palestine as Italian officials repeatedly expressed their desires to see the "sources of the disturbances" removed.¹⁸⁷ Secretly, Mussolini planned to exacerbate the tensions between the populations in Palestine in order to "force England to ask for a transformation of the Mandate" and secure for Italy a predominant position in an independent Palestine.¹⁸⁸ After the 1929 Disturbances, the Italians brushed aside negotiations with the British and began to foster relations with Jewish and Arab leaders in Palestine to see which relationship would reap the greatest rewards.

During the late 1920s and early 1930s, the Italians toyed with the idea of supporting the creation of a small independent Jewish state acceptable to the Arabs as a means of opening the door to Italian influence in Palestine. The Italians had initially

¹⁸⁵ Italian Ambassador (communicated), 26 September 1929, FO 371/15334, E 5012/5012/31.

¹⁸⁶ Criminal Investigation Department (Jerusalem) to CO, 22 September 1933, FO 371/16926, E 6335/111/31.

¹⁸⁷ Drummond to FO, 13 December 1933, FO 371/16932, E 7823/6498/31.

¹⁸⁸ Relazione per S. I. Il Ministro, n.d., ASMAE, AP (I), Palestina, b. 1456, fac. 6347.

viewed Zionism as an instrument of British intervention in the Middle East.¹⁸⁹ But in the latter half of the 1920s, the Italian Consulate in Jerusalem emphasized the need to develop cultural and economic relations with the Jewish community in Palestine. An Italian agent known as de Angelis highlighted the benefits and the dangers that an independent Jewish state could pose to Italy's position in the Mediterranean. If oriented towards the Italians, a Jewish state in Palestine would "break the great blockade of the Arab states from the Red Sea to the Tigris" and weaken the Arab stronghold in the Middle East.¹⁹⁰ But if the Jewish state were not under Italian influence, it would pose a grave threat to Italy's expansionist objectives. De Angelis argued that the "Jews would not fail to throw themselves into the race for political and economic influence" in the Middle East and that the "Jewish state would not fail to cross the path of our policy of expansion towards the east and stand in our way in management of Mediterranean policy."¹⁹¹

The Italian Consulate in Jerusalem reported that the Jews had become "the ruling class" in Palestine and that it had become "necessary to get to work with the Jews."¹⁹² Colonial Official Orazio Pedrazzi warned that "if we don't do it, others will do it."¹⁹³ In the spring of 1934, officials at the Italian Consulate in Jerusalem met with Chaim Weizmann to discuss potential Italian support for Zionist aspirations in the region. When asked what the "Jews [would] give Italy in exchange for support," Weizmann replied that the Zionist movement was "still too young" to offer anything substantial, but that he could promise "his personal friendship" and to help the Italians achieve a more equal footing vis-à-vis the British in Palestine.¹⁹⁴ For the Italians, this was not enough. In return for Italian support, Mussolini required an agreement that promised future political and

¹⁸⁹ Williams, *Mussolini's Propaganda Abroad*, 37.

¹⁹⁰ De Angelis to Ministero degli Affari Esteri, 23 October 1933, ASMAE, Gab 743, b. 3.

¹⁹¹ De Angelis to Ministero degli Affari Esteri, 23 October 1933, ASMAE, Gab 743, b. 3.

¹⁹² Pedrazzi to Mussolini, 19 May 1927, DDI, S. 7, Vol. 5.

¹⁹³ Pedrazzi to Mussolini, 19 May 1927, DDI, S. 7, Vol. 5.

¹⁹⁴ de Angelis to Mussolini, 20 March 1934, DDI, S. 7, Vol. 15.

economic influence in the region. In addition to Weizmann's less than alluring offer, Fascist officials recognized that Italy was playing a "dangerous game" and that support for a "little Zionist solution" would almost certainly "provoke" the British.¹⁹⁵ Even by 1934, the Italians tried to avoid harming relations with the British until they were sure that an independent Palestine would serve Italian interests.

While the Italians developed relations with the Zionist community, they also appealed to the Arab community in Palestine. Since the late 1920s, the Italian government had been fostering relations with Arab nationalists by backing various Palestinian rebels with arms and financial support to help lift them towards independence.¹⁹⁶ The Italians hoped that supporting the Arab cause in Palestine would lead "the British [to] come to a similar end in Palestine as in Iraq."¹⁹⁷ Through these contacts, Mussolini hoped that the Italians could secure a political influence and a privileged economic position in Palestine upon its independence as Italy had done in Iraq earlier in the decade.¹⁹⁸ After several years of balancing between conflicting groups in the Palestine Mandate, the Italians determined that it was the Arabs who had the most to offer Fascist interests.

Securing positive relations with the Arabs would not only help the Italians to extend Fascist influence in Palestine, but into the Muslim world as a whole. At some point during the early 1930s, the Italian Consulate in Jerusalem befriended high profile Arab leaders Amir Shakib Arslan, Ihsan Bey al-Jabari, and Hajj Amin Al-Husayni, the Mufti of Jerusalem. From the beginning of the decade until the signature of the Easter

¹⁹⁵ de Angelis to Mussolini, 20 March 1934, DDI, S. 7, Vol. 15.

¹⁹⁶ See Consul Generale d'Italia Gerusalemme to Ministry degli Affari Esteri, 20 March 1930, Palestina, AP (I), b. 1465, fac. 6346; Peo Vivilasta to Ministero degli Affari Esteri, 20 December 1930, Palestina, AP (I), b. 1465, fac. 6346; Gazzera to Ministero degli Affari Esteri, 1 December 1930, Palestina, AP (I), b. 1465, fac. 6346.

¹⁹⁷ Relazione Per S. I. Il Ministro, n.d., ASMAE, AP (I), Palestina, b. 1456, fac. 6347.

¹⁹⁸ See Massimiliano Fiore, "Anglo-Italian Armament Trade Competition in Iraq: The Italian Air Force Mission to Iraq, 1937-40." *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 40, no. 2 (2012), 166-167.

Accords, the Italian government supplied these leaders with “aid” in the form of funding, arms, and munitions.¹⁹⁹ In meetings with Shakib Arslan and al-Jabari, Italian officials supported violent action and terrorism against the Jewish community in Palestine and encouraged pan-Arab agitation to awaken “the spirit of independence” across various Arab countries.²⁰⁰ The Italians received information from agents in Palestine that a number of leaders across the Middle East were collaborating in pursuit of an Arab Federation.²⁰¹ Italian support for independence for the Arab countries tapped into growing resentment of British policy in the Middle East and painted Italy as an advocate of the Arab cause, paving the way for Mussolini to declare himself the Protector of Islam in the spring of 1937.

In addition to establishing direct ties with Arab leaders, the Italians also embarked on a propaganda campaign in the Arab World that took a virulent anti-British turn after the Abyssinia Crisis.²⁰² In 1934, the Fascist leadership had launched a programme of eastern music and news in Arabic languages that Radio Bari broadcast to Libya, Abyssinia, Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Palestine, and the Red Sea regions.²⁰³ Disillusioned with British sanctions during the Abyssinian Crisis, Italian-sponsored broadcasts became blatantly anti-British and Fascist appeals to Arab nationalism and dissemination of anti-British sentiments became increasingly hostile.²⁰⁴ Italian-sponsored propaganda highlighted the British government’s inability to prevent political interference of external powers within the borders of the Palestine Mandate. In the spring of 1936, the crescendo

¹⁹⁹ Suvich to Mussolini, 4 September 1934, DDI, S. 7, Vol. 15; Baistrocchi to Ministero degli Affari Esteri, 10 September 1936, ASMAE, Gab. 743, b. 3.

²⁰⁰ Suvich to Mussolini, 4 September 1934, DDI, S. 7, Vol. 15.

²⁰¹ Baistrochi to Ministero degli Affari Esteri, 10 September 1936, ASMAE, Gab. 743, b. 3,

²⁰² See Arielli, “Italian Involvement in the Arab Revolt in Palestine,” 201-204. Fiore, *Anglo-Italian Relations in the Middle East*, 35-76.

²⁰³ Callum A. MacDonald. “Radio Bari: Italian Wireless Propaganda in the Middle East and British Countermeasures.” *Middle Eastern Studies*, 13:2 (1977), 195.

²⁰⁴ Drummond to FO, 28 May 1937, FO 371/21159, R 3792/1/22; Fiore, *Anglo-Italian Relations in the Middle East*, 40.

of Italian activities in Palestine reached its peak with the outbreak of the Arab Revolt.²⁰⁵ With the support of Italy, the disturbances in Palestine had become a conflict of international proportion as the pan-Arab movement gained momentum.

1.2.3 The Roll-Back Phase: Negotiating Empire, 1937-1939

Increasing instability in Palestine convinced the British that something must be done about Italian activities in the Mandate. Italian influence in Palestine had far exceeded acceptable limits of economic and religious influence under both the terms of the Mandate and British conceptions of empire. As the Arab Revolt escalated and the international situation deteriorated, the British became determined to mitigate Italian influence in the Mandate. The Italian leadership believed that they were in a strong bargaining position. Fascist officials subversive propaganda campaign could be used to intimidate the British government and force it to offer the Italians coveted concessions on the international stage.²⁰⁶ In the summer of 1937, both British and Italian decision-makers decided to cooperate over Palestine in order to stabilize and consolidate their respective empires.

British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain believed that the British could roll back Italian activities in Palestine through a negotiated agreement.²⁰⁷ The Foreign Office had “little doubt” that the Italians were carrying out an “offensive and objectionable campaign to undermine British influence in the Middle East area and in Palestine in particular.”²⁰⁸ Anthony Eden, Robert Vansittart, and Miles Lampson, warned the British

²⁰⁵ See Arielli, “Italian Involvement in the Arab Revolt,” 187-204.

²⁰⁶ Fiore, *Anglo-Italian Relations in the Middle East*, 43-50; MacDonald, 196; Pratt, 66.

²⁰⁷ The broader scope of negotiations for the Easter Accords is discussed in Chapter 2.

²⁰⁸ Italian Activities in Palestine, Norton to FO, 25 June 1937, FO 371/21159, E 3563/22/31. The Foreign Office noted that it would be very difficult to stop anti-British propaganda. The British government could not interfere with the transmission’s wavelength without breaching international regulation. On numerous occasions between the Abyssinia Crisis and the Easter Accords, the British Cabinet considered the possibility of embarking on a counterpropaganda in the Arab World but came to the conclusion that such an attempt would do little good. As a European democracy, the British government had a very limited control over the tone of the press during

Prime Minister that Mussolini's attempts to whip up anti-British sentiments foreshadowed his expansionist ambitions to re-establish the old Roman Empire in the Mediterranean at the expense of Britain's position in the region.²⁰⁹ In negotiating an agreement with the Italians, the British government had three principal aims concerning Palestine. First, Italian propaganda in Palestine must end. Second, an Anglo-Italian agreement ought to "re-establish a satisfactory basis" for Italian activities in Palestine.²¹⁰ Finally, the British government intended "to do everything possible to secure in advance Italian acquiescence in our future Palestine policy."²¹¹ The Foreign Office proposed that if the Italians refrained from "any attempt to create difficulties" in Palestine, the British would respect the legitimate Italian interests existing in the region.

While the Italians rejected the proposal because it gave the British a blank cheque in Palestine, Count Ciano assured Chamberlain that Italy would not undermine Britain's position in Palestine. But, there was a price: *de jure* recognition of Italy's conquest of Abyssinia.²¹² In a conversation with the British Ambassador to Rome, Count Ciano stated that any basis for an Anglo-Italian agreement must begin "with recognition of the [Italian] Empire in order to remove any possibility of misunderstanding and friction in the future."²¹³ In negotiations for the Easter Accords, Palestine emerged as an imperial

peacetime. The debate over propaganda in the British Cabinet demonstrates one of the few moments in Anglo-Italian relations over empire in the 1920s and 1930s where the ideological variance between the British and Italians can actually be seen in the imperial arena. See Record of a discussion of the possibility of a retaliation in kind against Italian anti-British propaganda in the Middle East," 22 November 1937, R 7779/1/22, *DBFP* S. 2, Vol.19.

²⁰⁹ Lampson to FO, 22 May 1937, FO 371/21159, R 3795/1/22; McDermott Minute, 3 June 1937, FO 371/21159, R 3792/1/22; Nichols Minute, 2 July 1937, FO 371/21159, R 4557/1/22.

²¹⁰ Perth to FO, 16 May 1938, FO 371/ 22412, R 5205/23/22.

²¹¹ Perth to FO, 16 May 1938, FO 371/ 22412, R 5205/23/22.

²¹² 19 February 1938, NC 2/24.

²¹³ Conversations with the British Ambassador, 19 June 1937, Malcom Muggeridge (ed.) and Stuart Hood (trans.), *Ciano's Diplomatic Papers* [hereafter CDP]. (Long Arce: Odhams Press Limited, 1948), 171.

bargaining chip. By the late 1930s, the Italians prioritized formal empire over zones of influence. For Mussolini, the prestige of the empire over Abyssinia took precedence over covert Italian activities in Palestine. For the British, the sacrifice of Abyssinia was a small price to pay for the security of the empire. Through the Easter Accords, the two empires traded the British mandate over Palestine for *de jure* recognition of the Fascist empire in Abyssinia.

After nearly two decades of oscillation between competition and cooperation, the British and Italians finally came to an understanding of what constituted the reasonable limits of imperial competition in Palestine. Immediately following the conclusion of the Anglo-Italian Agreement, Italian-sponsored anti-British propaganda slowed to a halt across the Mediterranean and Red Sea.²¹⁴ As the British government continued to delay the implementation of the Accords, the Italians began to curb their anti-British activities in Palestine and adopted a more peaceful policy towards the British in the Arab world.²¹⁵ Unlike the Rome Understanding, the Easter Accords did not establish a sphere of influence system. Instead, Italian activities in Palestine were limited to reasonable commercial competition and oversight of Christian institutions.

As 1938 came to a close, it was the British who emerged the winners of the Palestine-Abyssinia imperial bargain. Despite efforts to assure leaders in the Middle East that Italy had not abandoned its pro-Arab policy, strong criticisms and suspicions emerged in both local press releases and official communications from Arab leaders to the Italian government.²¹⁶ The Fascist Grand Council received numerous letters from key figures in the Arab revolt critical of Italy's recent collaboration with the British. Many leaders in the Arab revolt viewed the Easter Accords as a betrayal and a confirmation that

²¹⁴ Anglo-Italian negotiations, Perth to FO, 30 May 1938, FO 371/22412, R 5205/23/22; Conversation with the British Ambassador, 3 June 1938, CDP, 211.

²¹⁵ Appunto Per S.E. Il Ministro, 4 July 1938, ASMAE, GAB 744, b. 4, fac. 1; Arielli, "Italian Involvement in the Arab Revolt," 200-201.

²¹⁶ Appunto per S. E. Il Ministro, 29 March 1938, ASMAE, GAB 744, b. 4, fac. 1.

the Italians had abandoned their pro-Arab policy.²¹⁷ In response, Mussolini did little beyond sending kindly worded letters of Fascist support to subdue suspicions. The conclusion of the Anglo-Italian Agreement both directly and indirectly weakened Mussolini's position in the Middle East.

1.2.4 Conclusion

Historians have been correct to highlight the intense imperial competition between the British and Italians in Palestine. But throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the British and Italians used cooperation as a tool to limit competition and advance their own imperial interests. The British and Italians continuously re-negotiated the boundaries of competition in Palestine and pushed them to their limits. While the Palestine Mandate existed within the twentieth-century imperial system governed by the League of Nations, Anglo-Italian relations over Palestine were often characterized by nineteenth-century imperial practices. The limits of Italian economic, religious, and political influence were rarely negotiated at the Permanent Mandates Commission. They were primarily negotiated with British officials in closed-door rooms.

The persistence of nineteenth century imperial norms well into the twentieth century was possible because the Permanent Mandates Commission had little time to hold the British and Italian governments accountable for their behaviour. The League of Nations was preoccupied with the question of the Jewish homeland and growing tensions between local populations. The international attention that the Arab-Israeli conflict received distracted the PMC and international observers from Italian activities in the region. The conditions in the Mandate created space for imperial competition. But neither the British nor the Italians wanted an open imperial clash in the Palestine Mandate. The British gave in to Italian demands for coexistence between religious institutions and freely permitted Italian commercial activity in the region. During the 1930s, the Italians took advantage of Britain's imperial weakness in Palestine and established a strong influence in Palestine. In many respects, the Palestine Mandate was a shared imperial

²¹⁷ Appunto per S. E. Il Ministro, 29 March 1938, ASMAE, GAB 744, b. 4, fac. 1.

space. Despite the usefulness of borders and spheres in regulating imperial competition, the case of Palestine also shows the porousness and co-existence of empires.

While many historians dismiss the Easter Accords as ineffectual, this agreement was a response to nearly two decades of imperial competition and cooperation in the Palestine Mandate. The agreement also highlights the role of *Realpolitik* and pragmatism in Mussolini's policy making. While he ultimately desired Italian preeminence in Palestine, cooperation with the British frequently served Italy's immediate interests in empire. Italy's internal weakness and instability in the 1920s forced Mussolini to adopt a cautious approach to competition in Palestine. While the Italians adopted a more aggressive policy towards Palestine after the 1929 Disturbances, Mussolini decided to roll back this policy in favour of cooperation with and recognition by the British. The imperial bargain encapsulated within the Easter Accords confirms the legacy of nineteenth-century imperial carve-ups and exchanges on the eve of the Second World War.

1.3 The Crown Colony of Malta, 1929-1934: A Collision of Cultures in an (Italian) British Colony

Officially, Malta was a British Crown Colony. But for more than one hundred years, Malta had been subject to both British and Italian imperial influences. The internal political crisis of 1929-1930 gave rise to profound tension between the British and Italians over the limits of imperial power in the small Mediterranean island. In an effort to limit the increasing Fascist influence in the Crown Colony, the British government suspended the constitution and introduced several Ordinances in the early 1930s that banned the teaching of the Italian language in elementary schools, closed several Italian secondary schools, and banned British subjects from participating in Fascist groups and organizations. Most importantly, these Ordinances recognized any person born on the Island as a British subject even if this person was born to Italian parents. Yet this anti-Italian legislation did not entirely limit Italian influence on the Island. Instead, it re-negotiated its place in Malta.

A handful of historians have examined the so-called Fascist culture war in Malta. Henry Frendo's exhaustive study of culture, politics, and identity in Malta during the 1920s and 1930s explores strains in Anglo-Italian relations in the years leading up to the Abyssinia Crisis.²¹⁸ The author depicts Maltese Prime Minister Lord Strickland as a polarizing figure in local politics, but largely places the blame on Italian priests and local organization for creating trouble in the British Empire.²¹⁹ Claudio Baldoli focuses on the Italian sponsored "cultural conflict" in Malta.²²⁰ Baldoli examines the role of Fascist propaganda in Malta within the broader attempt to transform Italian communities abroad into Fascist colonies and argues that this shows that Mussolini was driven above all by

²¹⁸ Henry Frendo, *Europe and Empire: Culture, Politics and Identity in Malta and the Mediterranean, 1912-1946*. (Santa Venera, Malta: Midsea Books, 2012).

²¹⁹ Henry Frendo, "Britain's European Mediterranean: Language, religion, and Politics in Lord Strickland's Malta (1927-1930)" *History of European Ideas* 21, no. 1 (1995), 47-65.

²²⁰ Claudia Baldoli, "The 'Northern Dominator' and the Mare Nostrum: Fascist Italy's Cultural War in Malta." *Modern Italy* 13, no. 1 (2008), 5-20

ideological ambitions. Both Frenzo and Baldoli use the estrangement of Anglo-Italian relations after 1935 as an endpoint from which to look back on the period.

It is true that Malta was a site of deep competition between the British and the Italians. Unlike in Arabia and Palestine, competition between the two empires extended far beyond the commercial realm as the British and Italians framed empire in cultural, racial, and religious terms. But in many ways, Malta was a shared imperial space. While the British held formal control over the island's political and economic institutions, the Italians dominated the legal, religious, and cultural establishments. Yet there were few formal agreements between the two empires with respect to the extents and limits of Italian influence in the British colony unlike the experiences in Arabia and Palestine. This case study begins by outlining the tradition of peaceful coexistence that informed the limits of competition in Malta before turning to examine the tensions that emerged at the turn of the 1920s. But before long, the two empires adopted a cautious approach to empire in Malta as the international situation became increasingly precarious. I argue that a normative tradition of coexistence between British and Italian influences that had been formulated in the nineteenth century served as a guide to navigate imperial competition well into the 1930s.

1.3.1 Coexistence in Malta: British and Italian Interests

By the beginning of the 1920s, both the British and Italians had a well-established position in Malta. The British government held formal political control over Malta and held substantial influence in the island's economy. But beyond British political and economic institutions, Malta was home to Italian religious, cultural, and legal institutions. Throughout the nineteenth century, the influences of these two empires in Malta existed in relatively peaceful coexistence. As Malta began to move toward nationhood after the First World War, the British and Italians attempted to imbue the Maltese with the cultural characteristics of their respective empire to retain close affiliation between the Island and the Empire upon independence. The nation-building project in the small Mediterranean island began to mobilize competing conceptions of how a Maltese national identity ought to look and threatened the system of coexistence that had prevailed on the island for more than a century.

The Italians established a deep and long-lasting position in the island. Malta had been a part of the Kingdom of Sicily before it was a British colony.²²¹ Even after the island fell under British control, the Italian language, customs, and religious practices remained entrenched among the cultural elite. During the nineteenth century, Malta became a trilingual island in which children from an early age were educated in English, Maltese, and Italian. English emerged as the language of politics and commerce in Malta, but Italian became the language of professionals and the Church. The legal system in Malta was strictly Italian.²²² Law School requirements necessitated that all practicing and prospective lawyers be fluent in the language.²²³ Beyond the legal system, Italian influence persisted through the Catholic Church as the primary religious institution on the island. The Archbishops of Malta and Gozo were independent diocesan Bishops who reported directly to the Vatican.²²⁴ By the early twentieth century, Malta was home to a population of settled and highly educated Italians.²²⁵ The rise of Fascism reinforced the importance of the relationship between Malta and Italy. Shortly after the March on Rome, Mussolini referred to Malta as an “Italian colony” and emphasized the “racial and cultural ties between the Maltese and Italy.”²²⁶ For the Italians, the island was not simply a strategic imperial outpost. Malta was an extension of Italy proper.

As the 1920s and 1930s unfolded, the British government became increasingly determined to preserve its position in Malta for the purpose of imperial defence. Since the mid-nineteenth century, the British had viewed Malta as a ‘fortress colony’ which housed the headquarters for the Royal Navy’s Mediterranean Fleet.²²⁷ After the First World War,

²²¹ Baldoli, “The ‘Northern Dominator’ and the Mare Nostrum,” 6.

²²² Only upon a rigorous petition process in which both parties were English speakers, could English be substituted for Italian. 1 June 1934, Cunliffe-Lister Memorandum, CAB 24/249/35.

²²³ 25 September 1934, CAB 23/79/17.

²²⁴ CO to FO, 3 June 1931, FO 371/15248, C 3839/3/22.

²²⁵ Frendo, “Britain’s European Mediterranean,” 53.

²²⁶ Mussolini to de Martino, 12 November 1922, DDI, S. 7, Vol. 1.

²²⁷ A. J. Stockwell, “‘The Gibraltar of the East’? Singapore and Other Fortress Colonies

the Treasury implemented a demobilization and disarmament scheme to reduce defences in the Mediterranean to a minimum based on the assumption of a friendly Italy. By the early 1930s, however, the British had become increasingly concerned with the security of its mercantile shipping routes and imperial communications through the Mediterranean. British policymakers looked upon not only the growing strength and efficiency of French and Italian air forces with uncertainty, but their anxious gaze extended into the Far East in light of increasing Japanese aggression.²²⁸ After the Manchurian Crisis of 1931, Britain's position in the Mediterranean became indispensable in the event of reinforcements needed at the Singapore base.²²⁹ Meanwhile, the British were still pushing for world disarmament at the conference in Geneva rendering any substantial strengthening of Britain's position in Malta impractical. From the perspective of imperial defence, Malta had become an essential but highly vulnerable imperial outpost.

Administration of the Crown Colony became increasingly complex in light of surging Maltese nationalism.²³⁰ Since 1919, the Maltese indigenous population had been vying for self-governance. Erez Manela has examined the emergence of anti-colonial nationalism in the years surrounding the Paris Peace Conferences.²³¹ While Manela highlights widespread disillusionment in the colonial world in response to the collapse of the Wilsonian moment, the Maltese experience appears as somewhat of an exception. As Manela argues, the Wilsonian Moment presented nationalist elites in the imperial world with an unprecedented opportunity to advance nation-building claims and expand

in the Second World War" In Anthony Webster and Nicholas J. White (eds.), *Singapore — Two Hundred years of the Lion City*. (London: Routledge, 2020), 189; Paul Knepper, "The 'White Slave Trade' and the Music Hall Affair in 1930s Malta," *Journal of Contemporary History* 44, no. 2 (2009), 207.

²²⁸ 11 April 1933, CAB 53/4/5.

²²⁹ 28 February 1933, CAB 53/4/4.

²³⁰ Knepper, "The 'White Slave Trade'," 207.

²³¹ See Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the international Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

legitimacy at home and abroad.²³² Unlike many movements across the colonial world, the nationalist aspirations of the Maltese were realized to a certain extent. In comparison to Arabia and Palestine, for example, there was something different about the nationalist ambitions of the Maltese. To a certain degree, nation-building in Malta made sense within the European colonial imagination. The Maltese were white. From the British Cabinet's point of view, the Maltese deserved a true chance to "satisfy their aspirations" and prove themselves at self-government.²³³

1.3.2 The 'Language' Question

After more than a century of "sheltered existence" as a Crown Colony, in 1921 the British government introduced an English parliamentary style of self-government and established a constitution for the island with the goal of guiding it towards European civility.²³⁴ Malta soon began to develop a bipolar party system tainted by competing imperial interests. The Nationalist Party held the majority from Malta's first parliamentary elections in 1921 until 1927. The party platform was based on the Church and the defence of the Italian influence in Maltese culture. The opposing Constitutional Party built its platform on maintaining a special connection with the British and highlighted Maltese nationalism as distinct from Italian influence.²³⁵ In an effort to conjure a distinctly Anglicized Maltese identity, the Constitutional Party adopted an anti-clerical position. The nation-building project in Malta brought to light the need to define what it meant to be Maltese. After more than one hundred years of relatively peaceful coexistence between British and Italian influence, the internal situation in Malta exacerbated tensions between the two empires.

The Italians exploited the fragile state of Maltese politics. From Mussolini's perspective, a self-governing Malta provided the Italians with an opportunity to influence

²³² Manela, 8.

²³³ Cunliffe-Lister Memorandum, 18 April 1934, CAB 24/248/46.

²³⁴ FO Memorandum, 28 April 1931, FO 371/15249, C 7329/3/22.

²³⁵ FO Memorandum, 28 April 1931, FO 371/15249, C 7329/3/22.

local politics and establish a privileged position in the island through pre-existing Italian institutions. Similar to Fascist designs on Yemen and Palestine, Mussolini did not aim to establish a formal Italian empire in Malta. Instead, the Fascist dictator intended to infiltrate the island's political system with loyal Fascists who would run the territory in Italy's interest. The Italians established numerous cultural institutions and Fascist organizations designed to guide the Maltese towards realizing their "true" racial and cultural heritage. Beyond the cultural sphere, the Italian government provided the Nationalist Party in Malta with funding and advisors to advance the cause of the Italian influence politically. By encouraging cultural ties between Malta and Italy, Il Duce planned to awaken the "Italian national conscience in the Maltese people."²³⁶ Fascist Officials believed that the Maltese could be made Italian on the basis of the island's proximity to Europe and the perceived whiteness of its indigenous population. Italian propaganda claimed that Malta was a long lost part of Italy that could be re-united with the "mother country" through cultural ties and Italian institutions.²³⁷

Tensions between the Italian and British influences came to a critical crossroad in 1927 when the Constitutional Party under Lord Gerald Strickland won the national election and began a program of anti-Italian propaganda. Strickland was a true product of the imperial situation in Malta. He was the son of an aristocratic Maltese mother and an English naval officer father who became fluently trilingual in Malta's official languages and was a practicing Roman Catholic.²³⁸ After assuming the premiership, Strickland made it his mission to Anglicize and "civilize" Maltese culture.²³⁹ In Whitehall, the Colonial Office viewed Strickland's campaign as a "natural reaction" to the "under-

²³⁶ Mussolini to Rocco, 21 December 1922, DDI, S. 7, Vol. 1; Murray to FO 23 September 1931, FO 371/15249, C 7303/3/22.

²³⁷ Enrico Mizzi to Agenzia d'Italia, 23 September 1931, FO 371/15249, C 7303/3/22.

²³⁸ By the late 1920s, Strickland's political reach was not limited to the Mediterranean island. The Maltese Prime Minister also served as a Tory MP in the House of Commons and frequently addressed the House of Lords on imperial and international issues in Maltese affairs. Frendo, "Britain's European Mediterranean," 53.

²³⁹ Frendo, "Britain's European Mediterranean," 54.

current of Italianism in Malta.”²⁴⁰ The Cabinet was more critical. They complained that the new Maltese Prime Minister was “by nature, quarrelsome, tactless, and shifty.”²⁴¹ While the Colonial Office acknowledged that Strickland was “a hot-headed and unbalanced person” and even “a fanatic” on the subject of Italianism, there was little that could be done to modify the fundamental basis of the Constitutional Party’s platform.²⁴² The Foreign Office pointed out that Strickland alone did not deserve all the blame for the unrest as that Italian influences had far exceeded appropriate limits.²⁴³ But as long as Maltese politics remained free from direct Fascist influences, the British government kept its distance from the colony’s internal politics.

This cultural crossroad erupted into a full-blown crisis in 1929 when the Catholic Church rushed to the defence of Italian culture in Malta. In the spring of 1929, Prime Minister Strickland used the unfrocking of a British Catholic Priest by the Franciscan Order to challenge Italian influence through the Catholic Church.²⁴⁴ In response, the Vatican instructed the Archbishops in Malta to carry out a defamation campaign against Strickland while Fascist organizations in Malta launched personal attacks on the Prime Minister.²⁴⁵ The Palazzo Chigi believed that Strickland “wished for war against the Italian language.”²⁴⁶ After a year of escalating tensions, the Vatican issued a Pastoral declaring that those who voted for Strickland in the next election would be guilty of “mortal sin” and subsequently excommunicated from the Catholic Church.²⁴⁷ In light of

²⁴⁰ Wilson to Tyrrell, 13 March 1926, FO 371/11394, C 3391/1804/22.

²⁴¹ FO Memorandum, 28 April 1931, FO 371/15249, C 7329/3/22.

²⁴² Wilson to Tyrrell, 13 March 1926, FO 371/11394, C 3391/1804/22.

²⁴³ Smith Minute, 17 March 1926, FO 371/11394, C 3391/1804/22.

²⁴⁴ FO Memorandum, 28 April 1931, FO 371/15249, C 7329/3/22.

²⁴⁵ Guariglia to Mussolini, 12 November 1928, DDI, S. 7, Vol. 7.

²⁴⁶ Cerruti to Mussolini, 12 November 1928, DDI, S. 7, Vol. 7.

²⁴⁷ FO (Communicated), 26 February 1931, FO 371/15247, C 1274/3/22; FO Memorandum, 28 April 1931, FO 371/15249, C 7329/3/22.

the Vatican's threats, the Governor of Malta claimed that it would be impossible to hold free elections and temporarily suspended the constitution.

In Malta, the Wilsonian Moment extended far beyond the months surrounding the Paris Peace Conferences. But similar to its colonial comrades in other imperial spaces, the idealism of the Wilsonian Moment in Malta collapsed just the same. The Cabinet concluded that self-governance through a parliamentary institution granted to Malta in 1921 had "been given a fair trial and failed."²⁴⁸ The Foreign Office reflected that the Maltese people "had been able to develop an honest and progressive administration" and established a "loyal, enlightened, and instructive" press. The Maltese demonstrated that British and Maltese interests could "work together" in Malta for the "common good under the British flag."²⁴⁹ The island had achieved a "certain standard of culture and civilization."²⁵⁰ But in the aftermath of the election crisis, the Governor of Malta explained to the Cabinet that while the "polite society [was] starting to become English" the island "cannot yet be considered culturally English."²⁵¹ Malta as a whole was not as "civilized" as the British had thought. The British government suspended the constitution indefinitely and reinstated the imperial dictatorship that had ruled the island for a century.²⁵²

The British believed that excessive Italian cultural influences were at fault for the failure of the self-governance experiment. For more than a decade, British officials emphasized the stark difference between the British Anglo-Saxon race and the Italian Latin race. The interwar British gentleman was characterized as reticent, reserved, and rational.²⁵³ The British were men of bourgeois democracy and believed that states shared

²⁴⁸ Cunliffe-Lister Memorandum, 18 April 1934, CAB 24/248/46.

²⁴⁹ FO (Communicated), 26 February 1931, FO 371/15247, C 1274/3/22.

²⁵⁰ Cunliffe-Lister Memorandum, 18 April 1934, CAB 24/248/46.

²⁵¹ Campbell Memorandum, 24 April 1934, CAB 24/249/24.

²⁵² FO (Communicated), 26 February 1931, FO 371/15247, C 1274/3/22.

²⁵³ Peter Mandler, *The English National Character: The History of an Idea from Edmund Burke to Tony Blair*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 173.

a common interest in peaceful coexistence.²⁵⁴ British officials complained that the Italians were a “sensitive and emotional race” suggesting their lack of “civility” in comparison to the British gentleman.²⁵⁵ The language used to describe Italians indicated that they were opportunistic, lacking loyalty, and could “be bought at a price.”²⁵⁶ British officials claimed that the Italians were not, by nature, a people of democracy. The Italians were a “warlike” Latin people inclined to dictatorship.²⁵⁷ Local elites in Malta stressed to their British superiors that “British character” and “Anglo-Saxon morality” were radically different from the “Latin morality” on the island.²⁵⁸ Regardless of the so-called “progress” that the Anglo-Maltese people had made under British guidance, the pervasive Italian elements led to political degeneration in Malta. The culture of the Nationalist Party and “the old gang” of Italian bureaucrats did not jive with British democratic traditions. Strickland’s premiership further exacerbated these tensions by antagonizing the Italians. From the British perspective, it was the influence of these backward Latin elements in Maltese culture that had caused the island’s parliamentary experiment to fail.

After the capitulation of Malta’s self-governance, the British government implemented a scheme designed to limit Italian cultural elements in Malta. In the spring of 1932, the British government introduced a Letters Patent that prohibited the teaching of Italian in Maltese elementary schools and stipulated that all Italian schools must close by 1934.²⁵⁹ The British also introduced new legislation to limit Italian cultural institutions and ban British subjects from participation in Italian organizations. Under the British government’s proposed laws, a British subject was defined as any person born in Malta, whether to British, Maltese, or Italian parents.²⁶⁰ Because of the tradition of long-term

²⁵⁴ Mandler, 144.

²⁵⁵ See Graham to Balfour, 12 July 1922, FO 371/7672, C 10160/8635/22.

²⁵⁶ See Graham to Curzon, 7 June 1923, FO 371/8889, C 10142/647/22.

²⁵⁷ Graham to A. Chamberlain, 15 June 1926, F 371/11384, C 7240/77/22.

²⁵⁸ Lewis Mizzi to Gerald Strickland, 21 January 1925, FO 371/10789, C 2638/2638/22.

²⁵⁹ 26 October 1932, CAB 23/72/15.

²⁶⁰ Silenzi to Mussolini, 10 October 1933, DDI, S. 7, Vol 14.

Italian settlement in Malta, the new law would recognize many persons who identified as Italian as British subjects and would ban them from participation in Italian cultural activities. Finally, the British government attempted to develop a scheme that would transform the legal system in Malta from an Italian-based to a British-based system. British legislation after the 1929-1930 election crises sought to limit Italian cultural influences in Malta in an effort to create the necessary cultural conditions to re-introduce self-government to the Maltese.

Unsurprisingly, the British government's proposed Italophobic legislation did not sit well with the Fascist leadership. Mussolini believed that the new legislation was of a "hateful and unfriendly character towards Italy."²⁶¹ The Italian Foreign Ministry complained that Italy's activity in Malta had never been political and that it, therefore, could not have been the cause of political instability.²⁶² Fascist officials argued that the coexistence of Italian, Maltese, and British cultures in Malta had never been a problem until Prime Minister Strickland made it one.²⁶³ In a conversation with Mussolini, the British Ambassador to Rome, Ronald Graham, confessed that "Strickland's policy was a mistake, but there is no going back."²⁶⁴ The Colonial Office also recognized that it was "due primarily to Strickland's own action," that the situation in Malta had changed.²⁶⁵ In a conversation with Robert Vansittart, Italian Ambassador Bordonaro seethed that the recent British legislation "had been a mistake" from the "international point of view."²⁶⁶ Dino Grandi warned that the current tensions over Malta would "create a cloud between the cordial Italian-English relations" extending far beyond the imperial realm.²⁶⁷

²⁶¹ Mussolini to Grandi, 5 September 1933, DDI, S. 7, Vol. 14.

²⁶² Colloquio Fra Suvich e Graham, 31 July 1933, DDI, S. 7, Vol. 14.

²⁶³ Colloquio Fra Mussolini e Graham, 25 July 1933, DDI, S. 7, Vol. 14.

²⁶⁴ Colloquio Fra Mussolini e Graham, 25 July 1933, DDI, S. 7, Vol. 14.

²⁶⁵ Colonial Office to Foreign Office, 31 January 1930, FO 371/15247, C 5/3/22.

²⁶⁶ Bordonaro to Grandi, 4 March 1932, DDI, S. 7, Vol. 11.

²⁶⁷ Grandi (Appunto), 8 March 1932, DDI, S. 7, Vol. 11.

1.3.3 Caution in Empire

Despite escalating tensions over Malta, both the British and Italians proceeded with relative caution and restraint in an effort to preserve cooperation between them. Between the initial election crisis and the autumn of 1934, the international situation had changed significantly. The Great Depression of 1929 reduced confidence in the global economy and shook beliefs that it could be revived through global cooperative effort.²⁶⁸ The Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931 alerted the British to the vulnerabilities of the Eastern defences and highlighted the necessity of a peaceful Mediterranean in the event of war in the Far East.²⁶⁹ The opening of the World Disarmament Conference in Geneva and its prolonged collapse drew the British government's attention towards the need to establish a basis for cooperation between powers in Europe. The rise of Nazi Germany in 1933 raised suspicions in both Rome and London over Adolf Hitler's true intentions. As the future of the global order became increasingly unstable and unpredictable, the possible rupture of Anglo-Italian relations over a small colonial issue in Malta did not appear to be worth the risk for either the British or the Italians.

Shortly after the announcement of Britain's new language laws, the Italian Foreign Ministry sent orders to the Consul in Malta explaining that while it must support the local defence of the Italian language and culture on the island, it should also "exercise moderation."²⁷⁰ Fascist officials believed that the British government's new language legislation in Malta "may not be final" and that "much [would] depend on the reaction in Malta."²⁷¹ The Italians continued to use the press and propaganda to elicit sympathy for

²⁶⁸ Patricia Clavin, *The Great Depression in Europe, 1929-1939*. (Houndmills: MacMillan Press, LTD., 2000), 167.

²⁶⁹ 2 May 1932, CAB 53/4/6. See Bradford Lee, *A Britain and the Sino-Japanese War, 1937-1939: A study in the Dilemmas of British Decline*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1973), 6-7; B.J.C. McKercher, "No Eternal Friends or Enemies: British Defence Policy and the Problem of the United States, 1919-1939." *Canadian Journal of History* (1993), 284-285.

²⁷⁰ Buti to Suvich, 30 September 1932, DDI, S. 7, vol. 12.

²⁷¹ Bordonaro to Grandi, 6 March 1932, DDI, S. 7, vol. 11.

the Italian cause in Malta. But beyond the press, Fascist circles in Malta did very little to advance their cause or challenge the new British legislation. Foreign Ministry Official Gino Buti recommended that “appropriate action should be taken by the consul as far as possible outside of local politics.”²⁷² After the new language legislation, Fascist activities in Malta shifted from direct interference in the Nationalist Party program to limit its activities within the cultural sphere. Mussolini believed that in the current situation an “attitude of moderation” would serve Fascist interests most effectively.²⁷³

On several occasions, the Italians attempted to negotiate an understanding with the British over Malta and put the Language Question to rest. The Foreign Ministry, however, believed that a diplomatic appeal to the British would not have much effect. Bordonaro lamented that he “did not believe that diplomatic action on our part [would] have the effect it had three years ago in the time of Austen Chamberlain.”²⁷⁴ While Mussolini’s attempts to convince the Colonial Office to permit the voluntary teaching of Italian in Malta ultimately proved futile, the Italians received word that the Foreign Office had decided to “suspend ‘for the moment’ any attitude or hostile measure to the question of Italian language in Malta.” The British needed “the support of Italy in other fields.”²⁷⁵ After receiving reports that the British planned to table the new legislation, Italian appeals to the British plateaued.

British policy-makers believed that a friendly Italy could be a valuable ally to Britain’s attempts to stabilize the European situation. While suspicious of French intentions in the 1920s, the British began to realize the advantages of loose collaboration with the French in maintaining the continental balance of power and hoped that the Italians would do the same.²⁷⁶ During the early 1930s, the British and French

²⁷² Bordonaro to Grandi, 6 March 1932, DDI, S. 7, vol. 11.

²⁷³ Mussolini to Silenzi, 31 October 1932, DDI, S. 7, vol. 12.

²⁷⁴ Bordonaro to Grandi, 6 March 1932, DDI, S. 7, vol. 11.

²⁷⁵ Mussolini to Grandi, 7 November 1932, DDI, S. 7, vol. 12; Silenzi to Mussolini, 15 November 1932, DDI, S. 7, vol. 12.

²⁷⁶ See B.J.C. McKercher, “Deterrence and the European Balance of Power: The Field

spearheaded a number of initiatives designed to conclude a ‘Mediterranean Locarno’ and confirm cooperation between the three major Mediterranean powers: Britain, France, and Italy. After Hitler’s rise to power in 1933, the British government became increasingly concerned with Italy’s commitment under the Treaty of Locarno (1925) to guarantee the sovereignty of Austria. The British recognized that Italy might actually “gain advantages from a German success in Austria.”²⁷⁷ The British also wanted to confirm Mussolini’s leadership in the recently concluded Four Power Pact between the British, Italians, French, and Germans intended to preserve international collaboration in light of the collapsing World Disarmament Conference and the failed World Economic Conference. The British government feared that the Four Power Pact could dissolve if Italy started “secretly backing Germany.”²⁷⁸ The Cabinet concluded that whether in the League or in the Four Power Pact, “everything depended on Italy.”²⁷⁹

Within a European geopolitical context, the British government hoped to move forward with the Anglicization of Malta without jeopardizing cooperation with the Italians on more pressing matters. The British intentionally delayed action on the Malta questions until they had secured Italy’s commitment to the Four Power Pact.²⁸⁰ Even after the conclusion of the Pact, the British proceeded with caution. In September 1933, British Foreign Minister, John Simon, warned that “in view of the European situation... matters could not be pushed to a quarrel with Italy.”²⁸¹ The Foreign Minister explained to the Cabinet that “on balancing respective risks, I feel bound to suggest that direct action against Italian institutions in Malta should be suspended temporarily until the

Force and British Grand Strategy, 1934-1938.” *English Historical Review* 73, no. 500 (2008), 100.

²⁷⁷ 5 September 1933, CAB 23/77/1.

²⁷⁸ 5 September 1933, CAB 23/77/1.

²⁷⁹ 5 September 1933, CAB 23/77/1.

²⁸⁰ Simon and Cunliffe-Lister Memorandum, 4 July 1933, CAB 24/242/24.

²⁸¹ Simon Memorandum, 2 September 1933, CAB 24/243/15.

international situation is clearer.”²⁸² British officials communicated the importance of continued cooperation between the two countries despite the colonial issue in Malta. In a conversation with Undersecretary of State Fulvio Suvich, Eric Drummond emphasized that issues in Malta “must not disturb at all friendship between our two countries” and that the British desired “joint action [between the British and Italians] in the important international issues”²⁸³

By the autumn of 1934, questions concerning Malta began to fizzle out. After considerable debate, the Cabinet decided to implement another Letters Patent introduced on 16 August to transition the legal system from Italian to English. While the British had effectively subdued Italian influence in the legal and education systems, Malta remained devoutly Roman Catholic. The Cabinet also determined that Malta must remain in a ‘state of emergency’ for the foreseeable future allowing the Governor of Malta to retain full control over Maltese politics.²⁸⁴ While the Governor of Malta implemented a number of these new laws during 1932, the British government did not require that these laws were followed or enforced. Increasing tensions in Europe caused the British government to adopt a more conciliatory approach to empire. For the Italians, the Malta issue was overshadowed by plans for the military invasion of Abyssinia set for the autumn of 1935. By the mid-1930s, the question of the cultural and racial character of Malta had become secondary or irrelevant.

1.3.4 Conclusion

Many historians cast a negative light on Italian activities in Malta as if the title of Crown Colony extended the British a just right to the Island. Yet, in many ways Malta was a shared imperial space. Unlike cooperation in the Arabian Peninsula and the Palestine Mandate, Anglo-Italian cooperation in Malta was not institutionalized through

²⁸² Simon Memorandum, 2 September 1933, CAB 24/243/15.

²⁸³ Colloquio fra Suvich e Drummond, 3 November 1933, DDI, S. 7, vol 14.

²⁸⁴ Cunliffe-Lister Memorandum, 5 November 1934, CAB 24/251/91. A number of the new laws were officially implemented in 1932, including the law that required the closure of Italian schools in Malta. Many of these laws, however, were not abided nor enforced.

formal agreements or understandings. Cooperation in Malta was guided by more than a century of coexistence between British and Italian interests on the Island. The coexistence between British and Italian institutions reveals the porousness of empire and disrupts traditional views of imperial power. The most profound challenge to tradition of cooperation in Malta was the nation-building project in the island itself. The extension of self-governance to Malta in 1921 created space for these norms to be challenged. While neither the British nor Italians desired a conflict over Malta, both empires tried to shift the balance of power on the Island in favour of their respective cultural influences. The most serious breach of imperial coexistence was sparked by a local elite with his own political agenda: Lord Gerald Strickland. Yet even as tensions escalated, neither the British nor the Italians secured a hegemonic position in Malta. While British legislation did shift the balance of influence on the island, it did not totally eliminate the parallel coexistence of British and Italian influences in different institutional spaces within the island.

The narrative of the so-called cultural war that emerged between the British and Italians overlooks the British government's assimilatory cultural project in Malta. After more than a century of coexistence between British and Italian imperial influences, tensions emerged as each empire attempted to establish the cultural dominance of either 'Englishness' or Italianità in Malta. Rather than differentiating between the colonizer and the colonized, local politics explored the degrees to which the island's population reflected the cultures of these imperial actors. Unlike other parts of the empire, many British officials recognized Malta as a part of Europe proper as the indigenous population had a racial affinity with central Europeans. By imposing English cultural traditions on the Maltese, the people could be guided towards European civility and nationhood. The British cultural project in Malta was motivated by racial ideologies surrounding the perceived whiteness of the Maltese and the disruptive force of hot-headed Latin morality.

1.4 Conclusion: Cooperation and Accountability

Comparing Anglo-Italian relations in these three imperial spaces demonstrates that there was intense imperial rivalry, but there was also cooperation. Many scholars have argued that relations between the British and Italians over empire were characterized by escalating conflict throughout the interwar years. This focus on Benito Mussolini's ideological ambition to expand the Fascist empire and achieve *spazio vitale* in the Mediterranean and Middle East through violent conquest has obscured both our understanding of Anglo-Italian relations and the imperial system in the 1920s and 1930s. It is true that the two empires often had clashing goals in the Mediterranean and the Middle East, but on a number of occasions the British and Italians opted to collaborate and compromise over empire to prevent competition from going too far. In Arabia and Malta, the two empires created systems of cooperation through formal agreements and normative traditions that were informed by broader geopolitical priorities. In Palestine, cooperation was a tool of empire used to mitigate competition and secure imperial gains. Each of these case studies demonstrate that both the British and Italians shared the common assumption that there were limits to imperial competition.

These case studies demonstrate that the British and Italians typically had more to gain than they did to lose from cooperation over empire. In Arabia, cooperation over empire provided the British with a greater sense of security over its imperial defences while opening the door to the Italians for economic gains and a new sense of imperial legitimacy. In Palestine, the precarious system of cooperation culminated in the Easter Accords in which the Italians conceded political influence in the Mandate in exchange for *de jure* recognition of the Italian Empire in Abyssinia. In this exchange, each empire viewed the costs as relatively minor in exchange for the benefits. In Malta, the tradition of coexistence proved stronger than imperial policy. The British and Italians had more to gain from preserving the status quo than they did from continued imperial competition that resulted in local instability.

Beyond considerations limited to the imperial realm, these cases demonstrate that common concerns about the global order prompted the British and Italians to preserve cooperation despite conflicting imperial ambitions and political ideals. Britain and Italy's

joint obligations under Locarno brought the two countries together as the two major European powers committed to European security, apprehensive of central European developments, and suspicious of French designs on the Mediterranean. Throughout the 1920s and early 1930s, British and Italian officials discussing imperial tensions would emphasize their desire to extend cooperation and joint action from Europe to the imperial realm. Furthermore, both the British and Italians feared the establishment of another European empire in Arabia. Soviet propaganda across the Arabian Peninsula emerged as a major threat to the imperial system established by the Rome Understanding and provided a basis for continued cooperation. In Palestine, both the British and Italians desired to prevent American economic interests from supplanting their own. In Malta, the increasing instability of the global order in the 1930s caused both the British and Italians to adopt more cautious approaches to empire. Officials in both countries recognized that the British and Italians faced more substantial problems in Europe than they did in the little colony of Malta.

The cases of imperial competition in Arabia, Palestine, and Malta demonstrate that to a certain extent, imperial powers could sideline League oversight as they pleased. Like the Italians, the British incorporated imperial violence into their imperial repertoire when beyond the realm of international scrutiny. The use of imperial methods and the organization of empire in Arabia was fair game because the region existed entirely outside of the League system. Unlike international condemnation of Italian imperial violence in Corfu, Abyssinia, and Albania examined in the second chapter, the international community did not condemn British actions because the Arabian Peninsula was not subject to international surveillance and was, therefore, exempt from the privileges of imperial accountability mechanisms. Similarly, there was no League presence in Malta. While Malta became self-governing in 1921, it remained a British colony. The British and Italians both attempted to impose their cultural and racial affinities onto the Island and the Maltese people. While the Maltese were not subject to bombs and bullets, they were subject to the colonial erasure of their culture and assimilatory programs at odds with League ideals of self-determination. Even in a territory under the Permanent Mandates Commission's oversight, as long as the British

and Italians did not directly intervene with bombs and planes, they could negotiate new limits of economic penetration and local collaboration.

These case studies demonstrate that the mechanisms of imperial accountability encountered serious limits and restrictions long before the League's final failure in the Abyssinia Crisis. In these imperial spaces, the League of Nations played a minimal role, if any role at all. Unlike the cases examined in Chapter 2, neither Arabia, Palestine, nor Malta received the international attention necessary to hold imperialism accountable. In Arabia, Palestine, and Malta, it was not an international body that established the main imperial framework. Instead, it was secret agreements between two states over how to maintain empire. While Susan Pedersen is right to emphasize the attempts to the League of Nations to make empire accountable, there were limits to these accountability mechanisms. Imperial accountability mechanisms were limited by the League's terms of recognition and the legacy of the imperial system of the nineteenth century. My analysis of Anglo-Italian relations in Arabia, Palestine and Malta demonstrates that in spaces excluded from the League of Nations imperial system, nineteenth-century imperial norms prevailed in the absence of international oversights.

Chapter 2

2 Imperial Crisis

On April 5, 1939, warnings fell from the sky. The Italian air force dropped hundreds of thousands of pamphlets in Tirana, Durazzo, Valona, Santi Quaranta, and San Giovanni di Medua alerting the Albanian cities of imminent invasion.²⁸⁵ The swirl of leaflets dropped by warplanes urged Albanians to adopt a position of non-resistance towards the occupying Italian forces. They warned Albanians “do not listen to the men of your government.” The Albanian government aims to “lead [Albania] to an unnecessary bloodshed.”²⁸⁶ The pamphlets claimed that the Italian troops were “of a people who have been friends with [Albania] for centuries” and that they were coming to “restore order, justice, and peace.”²⁸⁷

Terror struck at night. Italian bombs began to cascade over the country at 4:30am on Good Friday, April 7, 1939. In a highly coordinated effort, the Italian navy and air force attacked the four strategic port cities of Durazzo, Valona, Saranda, and Shingjin.²⁸⁸ Within a matter of hours Italian forces had more or less defeated Durazzo. After landing in the freshly conquered city to revel in the Italian triumph, Count Ciano commented on the stillness of the morning: “the sea was like a mirror” that reflected the destruction of the night. The warships and motorboats all rested “motionless and solemn” in the bay of Durazzo. Observing the total capitulation of the city against a backdrop of the towering Skanderbeg mountain range, Count Ciano scribbled triumphantly in his Diary that it truly was “a beautiful spectacle.”²⁸⁹

²⁸⁵ n.d., ACS, Ministero della Cultura Popolare [hereafter MinCulPop], Affari General, b. 92, fac. 9; Ryan to Halifax, 18 May 1939, FO 371/23714, R 2254/1335/90.

²⁸⁶ n.d., ACS, MinCulPop, Affari General, b. 92, fac. 9

²⁸⁷ n.d., ACS, MinCulPop,, Affari General, b. 92, fac. 9

²⁸⁸ 8 April 1939. FO 371/23712, R 2456/1335/90

²⁸⁹ 7 April 1939, *The Ciano Diaries: 1939-1943*. [hereafter TCD], 61.

The Foreign Office disapproved of the violent nature of the invasion, noting that Mussolini's methods "shocked the Christian conscience."²⁹⁰ Nonetheless, the Foreign Office accepted the outcome as "sad but inevitable."²⁹¹ According to one Foreign Office official, "sticking to Christian ethics and honest dealings" would have put the Italians "in precisely the same position as they are now."²⁹² For example, the Italians could have simply replaced the Albanian King with an Italian sympathizer or even stationed a garrison in Albania, in which case "there would have been no storm clouds over Easter" and "no international complications."²⁹³ For the British, the problem of the Italian empire-building project in Albania was one of methods rather than purpose.

The Italians were surprised that the international reaction to the occupation of Albania "was almost non-existent."²⁹⁴ What remained of the Albanian government appealed to the League of Nations and a number of friendly governments. Yet the Albanian King's story of "a million Albanians" who fought in the mountains and in the streets and made the "utmost sacrifices to prevent the violent action of Italy" was ignored by all. Unlike earlier crises, the Italian invasion was not the focus of castigatory public opinion nor was it the target of lobbying initiatives. The flurry of international 'talk' that characterized previous episodes of imperial violence was surprisingly quiet.

The Italian invasion of Albania is rarely the case that historians point to when exploring Fascist imperial violence. The brutal nature of the Italian conquest of Abyssinia in 1935 has by far overshadowed other instances of imperial violence during the interwar years. Abyssinia, however, was neither the first nor the last place to fall victim to Fascist imperial violence. Furthermore, many historians view the Abyssinia Crisis as proof of the

²⁹⁰ A. N. Noble Minute, n.d., FO 371/23713, R 2059/1335/90.

²⁹¹ A. N. Noble Minute, 14 April 1939, FO 371/ 23711, R 2823/725/90.

²⁹² A. N. Noble Minute, n.d., FO 371/23713, R 2059/1335/90.

²⁹³ A. N. Noble Minute, n.d., FO 371/23713, R 2059/1335/90.

²⁹⁴ 7 April 1939, TCD, 61.

ideological incompatibility of the British and Italian empires. This chapter focuses on Anglo-Italian cooperation over empire in cases where Italian expansion became an international issue, in particular crises involving independent states which fell under the mandate of the League of Nations.

The three imperial crises in this chapter -- Corfu, Abyssinia, and Albania -- all challenged cooperation between the British and the Italians. The Italians had deep imperial interests in each territory despite their League-recognized independence. These territories had been 'lost' in Italy's so-called mutilated victory after the First World War and held a key role in Fascist ambitions for *spazio vitale*. The brutality of Fascist imperial methods and the member-status of each country prompted the League of Nations to respond and the British to rally in support of the international community's moral compass. It was widely recognized that by invading League members and using violent methods, the Italians were doing empire the wrong way. But despite condemnations of Fascist aggression, in the aftermath of each crisis the British and Italians worked together to repair traditional cooperation.

This chapter reconsiders the role that the League of Nations played in the imperial system by analyzing its part in mediating these three imperial crises. For too long, scholars have dismissed the many contributions of the League of Nations and instead focused on "why the League failed."²⁹⁵ It is true that the League was founded on the idealistic hopes and dreams of world peace. While it ultimately failed to achieve these lofty objectives, the League nonetheless contributed to a number of innovative developments in global governance. The League acted as a norm-setting international body that established new expectations and monitored their realization. In her study of the Permanent Mandates Commission (PMC), Susan Pedersen demonstrates that the PMC unintentionally introduced a number of mechanisms that attempted to make empire more accountable.²⁹⁶ Among these mechanisms, the most consequential was the new

²⁹⁵ See Susan Pedersen, "Back to the League of Nations." *American Historical Review* 112, No. 4 (2007), 1091-1116.

²⁹⁶ Susan Pedersen, "Empires, States, and the League of Nations." Glenda Sluga and

level of international ‘talk’ about empire. The Permanent Mandates Commission acted as a vehicle for the internationalization of imperial issues and contributed to new levels of diplomacy, scrutiny, and publicity over imperial matters.²⁹⁷ This chapter demonstrates that the advent of international surveillance and ‘talk’ about empire was not limited to the mandates system.

This chapter reveals both the extent and limits of the League’s imperial accountability mechanisms on the international stage. While responses varied, the League did attempt to hold violent Fascist imperialism accountable. Each crisis functioned as a learning experience for the League of Nations in which Geneva confronted and attempted to address the challenges and limitations inherent within both the League framework and the shifting international system. Diplomats in Geneva encountered a great learning curve when it came to questions of implementing the Covenant, imposing sanctions, and the possibility of war. These imperial crises reveal the fundamental contradiction that tormented the League for the duration of its existence: for a body designed to preserve peace, its accountability mechanisms threatened to produce European war. Many diplomats feared that to apply sanctions under the Covenant would result in war between the League of Nations and the transgressor. In each case, the British and Italians circumvented the League to preserve cooperation within the imperial system through compromise rather than to rupture cooperation through imperial accountability.

Patricia Clavin (eds.), *Internationalisms: a twentieth-century history*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 116.

²⁹⁷ Susan Pedersen. *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 5.

2.1 The Corfu Crisis: ‘Mad Dog’ Mussolini and a League Success Story?

The murder of an Italian General in Greece on a joint boundary commission sparked one of the first major international crises of the interwar period. On the morning of August 27, 1923 the Italian delegation of the International Boundary Commission appointed to delineate the boundary between Greece and Albania was murdered on Greek soil.²⁹⁸ In response, Mussolini sent a seven-point ultimatum to the Greek government demanding that Greece take responsibility for the murders, apologize, and compensate Italy.²⁹⁹ When Greece rejected three points of the ultimatum, Benito Mussolini ordered the Italian Naval Forces stationed in Gallipoli to occupy the independent Greek Island of Corfu.³⁰⁰ On August 31, 1923 the Italian Navy carried out a bombing campaign against the island causing fires in local schools and killing numerous Greek civilians.³⁰¹ On September 1, 1923, the Greek government addressed the matter of Italian aggression in the League of Nations and claimed that the Italian occupation of Corfu was in violation of Articles 12 and 15 of the Covenant.³⁰² Within a few days, the two countries had come to an agreement and on September 27, the Italians evacuated Corfu.³⁰³ It would appear that when faced with its first major crisis, the League of Nations rolled back Italian aggression and safeguarded the sovereignty of the Greek island of Corfu.

Historians have reached different conclusions about the significance of the Corfu Crisis for the League of Nations. Alan Cassels argues that more than any other individual,

²⁹⁸ Kennard to Curzon, 31 August 1923, FO 371/8613, C 15121/15065/62.

²⁹⁹ Mussolini (appunto), 28 August 1923, DDI, S. 7, Vol. 2.

³⁰⁰ Montagna to Mussolini, 30 August 1923, DDI, S. 7, Vol. 2; Mussolini to Vittorio Emanuele III, 31 August 1923, DDI, S. 7, Vol. 2.

³⁰¹ Summonte to Mussolini, 1 September 1923, DDI, S. 7, Vol. 2.

³⁰² Dispute between Greece and Italy, 1 September 1923, United Nations Office at Geneva, Switzerland, [hereafter UNOG], League of Nations Archives [hereafter LON] C. 577, M. 226; Dispute between Greece and Italy, 1 September 1923, UNOG, LON, C.577, M 226. See Articles 12 and 15 in Appendix A.

³⁰³ Poincare to Drummond, n.d., UNOG, LON, C 643.

Mussolini was responsible for the collapse of the League. In 1923, Mussolini began the erosion of the international organization that he would later complete in 1935.³⁰⁴ James Barros argues that the Corfu Crisis exposed the shortcomings of the League of Nations as the crisis was mitigated largely by the Conference of Ambassadors rather than the League Council.³⁰⁵ Similarly, Peter Yearwood argues that by the end of the crisis, peace had been preserved, but despite the League rather than because of it. The crisis proved the Covenant ineffective when faced with great power aggression against a smaller power.³⁰⁶ Adam Tooze stands alone in arguing that the Corfu Crisis was the League of Nations' first major test and that it was ultimately successful in containing the crisis.³⁰⁷ Tooze emphasizes that the Corfu Crisis was precisely the type of incident that the League of Nations was designed to address and that the outcome of the Crisis marked the limit of Fascist aggression until the collapse of the international order in the 1930s.

The literature's focus on the Corfu Crisis as an early sign of the failures of the new international system presents an overly deterministic view of the interwar years. Rather than perpetuating the narrative of the League of Nations as a doomed institution, it is important to examine what the League of Nations, its members, and its diplomats learned from the Corfu Crisis. For the first time, diplomats in Geneva faced a number of questions pertaining to the League's authority, the implementation of the Covenant, and the commitment to preserve peace. Rather than a foreshadowing of its failures, the Corfu Crisis was both a learning and formative experience for the League of Nations, its members, and its diplomats in Geneva in which the international community began to engage with the questions that would plague the League for the remainder of its

³⁰⁴ Alan Cassels, *Mussolini's Early Diplomacy*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 126.

³⁰⁵ James Barros, *The Corfu Incident of 1923, Mussolini and the League of Nations*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), 305-306.

³⁰⁶ Peter J. Yearwood "'Consistently with Honour': Great Britain, the League of Nations and the Corfu Crisis of 1923." *Journal of Contemporary History* 21, no. 4 (1986), 574.

³⁰⁷ Adam Tooze, *The Deluge: The Great War and the Remaking of Global Order, 1916-1931*. (London: Allen Lane & Penguin Books, 2014.), 447.

existence. During the Crisis, the League of Nations began to clarify its doctrines and practices. Compromise emerged as a key tool to making the global order work.

2.1.1 Italy, Greece, and Imperial Crisis

Long before the March on Rome, Italian politicians had deep interests in the Aegean and Adriatic Sea bordering the east and west coasts of Greece. Both Liberal Italy and Fascist Italy tried to incorporate the ethnically Greek Dodecanese Islands into the Italian empire. Italy had been in *de facto* occupation of the Dodecanese Islands since the outbreak of the Italo-Turkish War in 1911.³⁰⁸ The Italians viewed the Dodecanese Islands as an essential strategic location in the Eastern Mediterranean and as a possible stepping-stone for a military invasion of Turkey.³⁰⁹ In exchange for entering the First World War on the side of the Entente, the Italian leadership worked to secure *de jure* recognition of its position in the Dodecanese Islands among a number of other territorial acquisitions in the Adriatic Sea and southern Europe.³¹⁰ While the Entente Powers promised Italy a number of territorial acquisitions including the Dodecanese Islands, the Wilsonian turn of the Paris Peace Conferences frustrated Italy's imperial dreams. It was not until the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) that Italy finally secured recognition of its position in the Dodecanese islands. The Italian acquisition of the Dodecanese Islands, however, exacerbated pre-existing tensions between Greece and Italy .

The Corfu Crisis emerged out of the long-standing efforts of Italy to supplant Greek regional power in the Mediterranean. Enraged by Greek anti-Italian press after the

³⁰⁸ Antonis Klapsis, "Attempting to Revise the Treaty of Lausanne: Greek Foreign policy and Italy during the Panagalos Dictatorship, 1925-1926." *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 25, no. 2 (2014), 244.

³⁰⁹ Klapsis, "Attempting to Revise the Treaty of Lausanne," 245.

³¹⁰ Sperling and Nicolson Memorandum, 4 April 1923, FO 371/8898, C 6137/6137/22. See Zara Steiner, *The Lights that Failed: European International History, 1919-1933*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 86; Sally Marks, *The Illusion of Peace: International Relations in Europe, 1918-1933*. (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 7; H. James Burgwyn, *The Legend of the Mutilated Victory: Italy, the Great War and the Paris Peace Conference, 1915-1919*. (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1993), 22-25.

Treaty of Lausanne, the Fascist leadership began to consider the use of force in response to Greek provocations.³¹¹ In an article published in *Il Popolo d'Italia* shortly after the invasion entitled “The Reasons for Italian Actions” Mussolini explained that Corfu “had been Venetian territory for four centuries” implying that Italy had a historic right to reunify with the lost Island of Corfu.³¹² In the Fascist official mind, the seizure of Corfu was not simply a means of affirming Fascist prestige in response to the murder of the Italian delegation in Greece. Instead, the murders provided Mussolini with an ideal pretext for the conquest of Corfu and the acquisition of a new steppingstone towards the eastern Mediterranean. The Italian invasion of Corfu was an imperial venture with the goal of rebuilding the lost Roman Empire. In the early days of the crisis, there was little doubt that Mussolini intended to seize Corfu permanently.³¹³

The Italian invasion of Corfu produced a full-fledged international crisis. Both the European press and various public figures across the continent berated the Italian ultimatum as old diplomacy of the pre-war years designed to induce a war. Journalists and politicians alike made comparisons between the Italian ultimatum to Greece and the “peremptory and uncompromising” ultimatum that Austria delivered to Serbia in 1914.³¹⁴ British officials suspected that Mussolini hoped that the Greeks would fail to satisfy Italian demands, thereby providing the Italians with an opportunity “to show the world that Italy is a strong Mediterranean Power.”³¹⁵

In Geneva, League diplomats denounced imperial violence directed against not only Greek civilians, but also defenceless refugees housed on the island. A mass “population exchange” between Turkey and Greece had begun earlier that year. The

³¹¹ Cassels, 99.

³¹² La Ragioni Dell’Azione Italiana, 5 September 1923, *Il Popolo d’Italia*, *Opera Omnia di Benito Mussolini* [hereafter OO], Vol. 20.

³¹³ Cassels, 99.

³¹⁴ Montagna to Mussolini, 1 September 1923, DDI, S. 7, Vol. 2; Stamford-Ham to Tyrrell, 2 September 1923, FO 371/8613, C 15134/15065/62.

³¹⁵ Kennard to Curzon, 31 August 1923, FO 371/8613, C 15121/15065/62.

Treaty of Lausanne stipulated that Muslims in Greece must ‘return’ to their homeland in Turkey while Orthodox Christians in Asia Minor must repatriate back to Greece.³¹⁶ This treaty-mandated instance of ethnic cleansing resulted in a flood of refugees and displaced peoples across the region.³¹⁷ During this time, Corfu became home to approximately 7000 refugees and 350 orphans.³¹⁸ The Chairman of the Commission for the Protection of Women and Children in the Near East emphasized the harm that the Italian invasion had done to refugees of the Greco-Turkish war. The Italian bombardment of Corfu was carried out on short notice and it was directed against the barracks housing refugees, many of which were women and children.³¹⁹ Italy’s use of violence did not only violate expectations of empire and international relations, it also harmed League efforts to monitor the rights of refugees and minorities. The attack on a refugee centre breached the League’s humanitarian values and reinforced calls to hold Fascist violence accountable.

A number of non-governmental organizations tried to sway both international public opinion and the attitudes of politicians in support of the League of Nations. The League of Nations Union (LNU) had one of the loudest voices when it came to influencing public opinion and government decision-makers. The League of Nations Union had formed in October 1918 as a non-governmental organization based in the British Isles.³²⁰ The LNU had three main objectives: to confirm the British people’s

³¹⁶ Mark Mazower, “Minorities and the League of Nations in Interwar Europe.” *Daedalus* 126, no. 2 (1997), 48. Renée Hirschon, “‘Unmixing’ Peoples in the Aegean Region.” In Renée Hirschon (ed.), *Crossing the Aegean: A appraisal of the 1923 compulsory population exchange between Greece and Turkey*. (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008), 6.

³¹⁷ See Elisabeth Kontogiorgi, “Economic Consequences following Refugee Settlement in Greek Macedonia, 1923-1932,” 63-78; Alexandra Yerolympos, “Inter-war Town planning and the Refugee Problem in Greece,” 133-144; Tolda Köker, “Lessons in Refugeehood: The Experience of Forced Migrants in Turkey,” 193-208. In Renée Hirschon (ed.), *Crossing the Aegean: A appraisal of the 1923 compulsory population exchange between Greece and Turkey*. (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008)

³¹⁸ Politis to Drummond, 9 September 1923, UNOG, LON, C. 598, VII.

³¹⁹ Kennedy to Drummond, 1 September 1923, UNOG, LON, C. 578 (1).

³²⁰ Daniel Gorman, “Liberal Internationalism, The League of Nations Union, and the

support of the League of Nations as the instrument for removing injustices that may threaten world peace; to foster mutual understanding, goodwill, and advance cooperation between different countries; and to advocate for the League to maintain international order and liberate people from war.³²¹ In response to the Italian invasion of Corfu, the League of Nations Union pressed for “full use of the League’s power under the covenant” in order to achieve an “immediate settlement” between Italy and Greece.³²² The Executive Committee of the LNU believed that the British government’s response could “establish or destroy the League” and concluded that it must pressure the British government to “do all in its power to ensure that the League shall not hesitate to enforce the covenant.”³²³ The LNU requested that local branches petition the government and sent resolutions to Geneva and Paris in an effort to influence public opinion.³²⁴ Members of the LNU also published pieces in the press in support of the League..³²⁵

The League of Nations Union quickly ran into challenges when it came to exerting pressure on British decision-makers. In the summer of 1923, Westminster paused for an exceedingly long summer break. From August 2 to November 13, the doors to Parliament remained closed as British politicians took extra time to relax after the Lausanne Conference. Even the British Cabinet took a recess from August 23 to September 26. The Corfu Crisis erupted in the midst of this long summer break. The LNU sent hundreds of letters to the British government, but the absence of many of Britain’s key decision-makers limited the LNU’s ability to pressure the government. By

Mandates System.” *Canadian Journal of History* XL (2005), 453.

³²¹ Gorman, “Liberal Internationalism, The League of Nations Union, and the Mandates System,” 455.

³²² 5 September 1923, Executive Committee Minutes, London School of Economics Archives [hereafter LSE], LNU, 2-5.

³²³ 5 September 1923, Executive Committee Minutes, LSE, LNU, 2-5.

³²⁴ 5 September 1923, Executive Committee Minutes, LSE, LNU, 2-5.

³²⁵ See Helen McCarthy, *The British People and the League of Nations: Democracy, Citizenship, and Internationalism, c. 1918-1945*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 20.

September 19, many LNU members expressed great frustration with the way that the British government, and as a result, the League of Nations, were handling the Corfu Crisis. The LNU even considered direct press attacks on Geneva and Whitehall for their failure to enact the Covenant appropriately.³²⁶ While the LNU had a profound influence on public opinion during the Corfu Crisis, its ability to pressure the key decision-makers was limited.

2.1.2 Cooperation in Crisis: Britain's Shifting Position

The Foreign Office scrambled to respond. In the early days of the Crisis, the Foreign Office had made it clear that it intended to support application of the League of Nations Covenant in the Greco-Italian dispute. Robert Cecil, British delegate to the League and leading member of the League of Nations Union emphasized that the “real crisis” was the “existence of the League and that any failure to uphold the Covenant would be followed by a general exodus of all the small states from the League.”³²⁷ In support of this view, Foreign Secretary George Curzon believed that if the League failed to deal with the crisis effectively, it could lead to a rupture within the League itself. He staunchly opposed Italian calls to mediate the matter through the Conference of Ambassadors in Paris, one of the only remaining wartime inter-allied bodies, rather than the League of Nations.³²⁸ In a conversation with Italian Ambassador Della Torretta, Curzon explained that the League “exists precisely to resolve conflicts such as that which has arisen between Italy and Greece” and that “sidelining the League would constitute a renunciation of its political principles.”³²⁹ Even after the Italian delegate threatened that Italy might withdraw from the League, Curzon confirmed that the British government would not declare itself “contrary to the competence of the League.”³³⁰

³²⁶ 19 September 1923, Executive Committee Minutes, LSE, LNU 2-5.

³²⁷ Crewe to FO, 5 September 1923, FO 371/8615, C15344/15065/62

³²⁸ Curzon Minute, 3 September 1923, FO 371/8614, C 15177/15065/62.

³²⁹ Della Torretta to Mussolini, 3 September 1923, DDI S. 7, Vol. 2; Curzon Minute, 3 September 1923, FO 371/8614, C 15179/15065/62.

³³⁰ Della Torretta to Mussolini, 4 September 1923, DDI S. 7, Vol. 2.

The Foreign Office's initial support for the League of Nations was fueled by the pressure of public opinion, but also the interests of British imperial defence. The strategic importance of Greece was well understood within British defence circles. It had long been a tenet of British policy that Greece remain within the British sphere and not fall to potentially hostile hands, whether internal or external.³³¹ The Foreign Office believed that Italy's permanent occupation of Corfu would "constitute an intolerable disturbance of the naval balance in the Mediterranean."³³² The Admiralty suspected that the Italian occupation of islands in the Mediterranean was for "strategic reasons" rather than simply a reaction to the murders of Italian officials in Greece.³³³ The Foreign Office argued that the threat that the Italian occupation posed to British imperial defence interests in the Mediterranean provided an "even stronger justification" to "support the League".³³⁴

It soon became clear, however, that enforcing the Covenant might do more harm than good to British interests. The Corfu Crisis ignited a debate within the Foreign Office over the necessary price to be paid to preserve good relations with Italy. Only two months before the Crisis, the Foreign Office believed that the British could "count on" the "cooperation and support" of the Italians, important on a range of issues.³³⁵ Most importantly, the British were trying to secure Italian cooperation over the French occupation of the Ruhr and preserve Italian support for the postwar international order at large. The Foreign Office's experience in negotiations for the Treaty of Lausanne inclined the British to believe that if Mussolini did not find "satisfactory results with [the British]" the Fascist dictator would "turn elsewhere."³³⁶ Enforcing the League of Nations Covenant by imposing sanctions on the Italians would damage Anglo-Italian cooperation and threatened to derail British interests in Europe. Negotiations at Lausanne had also

³³¹ Graham to FO, 5 September 1923, FO 371/8615, C 15340/15065/62.

³³² Stamford-Ham to Tyrrell, 2 September 1923, FO 371/8613, C 15134/15065/62

³³³ Admiralty to FO, 3 September 1923, FO 371/8613, C 15140/15065/62.

³³⁴ Stamford-Ham to Tyrrell, 2 September 1923, FO 371/8613, C 15134/15065/62.

³³⁵ Graham to Curzon, 7 June 1923, FO 371/8889, C 10142/647/22.

³³⁶ Graham to Curzon, 7 June 1923, FO 371/8889, C 10142/647/22.

taught the Foreign Office that “Italian friendship [could] be bought at a price.”³³⁷ British officials unanimously agreed that the British must pursue a solution to the Corfu Crisis that would maintain friendly cooperation with their ally.³³⁸ It appeared that sidelining the League of Nations was the necessary price for preserving friendly relations with Italy.

The British valued Italy as an ally in part because France seemed bent on a dangerous path that collided with British objectives and strategic outlooks. For more than a year leading up to the Crisis, tensions had been escalating between the British and French. In the autumn of 1922, a crisis had emerged between the British and the French over the resurgence of the Greco-Turkish conflict in Asia Minor.³³⁹ While the British supported the Greek effort, the French supported Turkish ambitions.³⁴⁰ Only a few months later, the British and French fell out over the French occupation of the Ruhr. Throughout 1923, rumours began to swirl about an impending “anti-British continental bloc” between Italy and France.³⁴¹

In championing the League of Nations, the British government risked consolidating Franco-Italian solidarity and alienating itself in Europe. Immediately following the murders in Greece, the French government expressed its willingness “to join Italy in a step towards the Greek government”, possibly in the hope of winning Italian support for the advance into the Ruhr.³⁴² Even after the Italian invasion of Corfu, Poincaré confirmed that “it was his intention to support Italy loyally and unconditionally”

³³⁷ Nicolson Minute, 13 June 1923, FO 371/8889, C 10142/647/22.

³³⁸ 26 September 1923, CAB 23/46/19.

³³⁹ See Ferris, John. “‘Far Too Dangerous a Gamble’? British Intelligence and Policy during the Chanak Crisis, September-October 1922.” *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 14, No. 2 (2003): 139-184; Martin Thomas and Richard Toye, *Arguing about Empire: Imperial Rhetoric in Britain and France, 1882-1956*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 122-154.

³⁴⁰ Thomas and Toye, 122 and 148.

³⁴¹ Graham to Lampson, 5 February 1923, FO 371/8889, C 2572/647/22; Nicolson Minute, 13 June 1923, FO 371/8889, C 10142/647/22.

³⁴² Vannutelli to Mussolini, 29 August 1923, DDI, S. 7, Vol. 2.

in the conflict with Greece.³⁴³ In a conversation with the Italian ambassador to Paris, Romano Avenzzana, Poincaré explained that he was “keenly willing to render services” in an effort to “eliminate any cause of friction between France and Italy.”³⁴⁴ Poincaré instructed the French delegate to the League of Nations to support the Italian line. The British believed that the French government “had thrown itself on the side of the Italians” leaving the British “no alternative but to defer to the Italian contention.”³⁴⁵

Mussolini welcomed French support during the Crisis, but he was ultimately after closer cooperation with the British. This balancing act between the British and the French was not pure opportunism as the de Felice school has argued with respect to Italian policy in the 1930s. While he “practice[d] a double-end policy” that intended to “take advantage of the disagreements” that existed between the British and French in order to “improve Italy’s position,” Mussolini ultimately aimed to base Italian politics “on friendly collaboration with the British.”³⁴⁶ Over both the Ruhr Question and the Lausanne negotiations, Mussolini explained that he had “no doubt that intimate Anglo-Italian collaboration” would be a “force of great value” in settling the Ruhr Crisis.³⁴⁷ In response to Britain’s support for the League after the Italian invasion of Corfu, Mussolini claimed that he had “always been willing” to support close collaboration with the British, but that Great Britain’s recent policy had made his “task difficult.”³⁴⁸ Upon receiving Poincaré’s support, Mussolini attempted to use the prospect of close collaboration with the French as a means of pressuring the British to concede to his ambitions in the eastern Mediterranean.

³⁴³ Avenzzana to Mussolini, 3 September 1923, DDI S. 7, Vol. 2.

³⁴⁴ Avenzzana to Mussolini 6 September 1923, DDI, S. 7, Vol. 2.

³⁴⁵ 26 September 1923, CAB 23/46/19.

³⁴⁶ Mussolini to Della Torretta, 3 January 1924, DDI, S. 7, Vol. 2.

³⁴⁷ Mussolini to Della Torretta, 25 May 1923, DDI, S. 7, Vol. 2.

³⁴⁸ *l’Amicizia Anglo-italiana e l’atteggiamento Inglese*, 6 September 1923, OO, Vol. 20.

Beyond the risks to Britain's position vis-a-vis Italy and France, the Foreign Office also began to doubt the League's ability to implement effective sanctions to uphold the Covenant, a question that would trouble British decision-makers for years to come. A violation of Article 12 or 15 would require the League of Nations to implement sanctions against Italy unless the Italians accepted arbitration through the League or the Permanent Court of International Justice.³⁴⁹ The Treasury Department warned that the implementation of sanctions would compel the British to cut off all diplomatic and economic relations with the Italians.³⁵⁰ A Treasury report explained that sanctions would involve the "imposition of the wartime system" in Britain as well as other League members.³⁵¹ Most importantly, the Treasury emphasized that "unless every state joined in these measures, they would be ineffective."³⁵² British decision-makers worried not only about the attitude of the League-outlier Americans, but also of the French who had consistently supported the Italians at every chance they had.

While the Treasury Department raised concerns about the potential shortcomings of sanctions, the Foreign Office also dreaded the possibility that they might be effective and that "a check...of a humiliating kind" might push Italy closer to communism.³⁵³ While many British politicians disliked Fascism, they abhorred communism and sought to prevent its spread at almost any cost. British officials also warned that damage to the Duce's prestige could provoke more not less expansionism and revisionism, for instance in Yugoslavia. British officials believed that Mussolini was "in a dangerous mood" and appeared "disposed to rush into wild adventures."³⁵⁴ The Foreign Office warned that application of the Covenant "[might] even end in war" between Italy and League

³⁴⁹ See Articles 12 and 15 on sanctions and Articles 13 and 15 on the role of the Permanent Court of International Justice in Appendix A.

³⁵⁰ Treasury to FO, 4 September 1923, FO 371/8615, C15356/15065/62.

³⁵¹ Treasury to FO, 4 September 1923, FO 371/8615, C15356/15065/62.

³⁵² Treasury to FO, 4 September 1923, FO 371/8615, C15356/15065/62.

³⁵³ Crewe to Curzon, 4 September 1923, FO 371/8614, C 15212/15065/62.

³⁵⁴ Kennard to Lampson, 31 August 1923, FO 371/8614, C 15329/15065/62.

members.³⁵⁵ The application of sanctions against Italy had the ability to not only damage Anglo-Italian relations, but to alienate Italy from the League of Nations system and the postwar order.

The Corfu Crisis presented the British with a difficult choice: whether to preserve the legitimacy of the League of Nations with the possibility it might lead to the outbreak of war or to look for an alternative solution beyond the League to ensure a peaceful settlement. After a brief period of support for the League, the Foreign Office determined that it must prioritize an expeditious solution to the Crisis and preserve peace in Europe.³⁵⁶ Fundamentally, the British government did not believe that supporting the League of Nations was worth the risk of the outbreak of another war between the countries of Europe. Despite the tone of international public opinion, the pressure of the League of Nations Union, and its obligations to uphold the legitimacy of the League of Nations, the British government prioritized cooperation with the Italians over enforcing the League of Nations Covenant.

2.1.3 The League of Nations and the Conference of Ambassadors

While the Foreign Office debated the value and risks of supporting the League, the Italians attempted to circumvent League mediation altogether. After the invasion, the Italians capitalized on Greece's precarious membership in the League of Nations. Greece's international standing had been severely shaken during the Chanak Crisis (1922). While the Turkish attack against Greek Smyrna prompted a crisis of international proportion, Athens was dealing with a domestic crisis of its own. In the end of September a revolution broke out prompting King Constantine to abdicate.³⁵⁷ The League refused to recognize the new Greek government because of both the violent nature of the revolution

³⁵⁵ Kennard to Lampson, 31 August 1923, FO 371/8614, C 15329/15065/62.

³⁵⁶ 26 September 1923, CAB 23/46/19.

³⁵⁷ David Fromkin, *A Peace to End all Peace: The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East*. (New York: Avon Books, 1989), 553.

and the absence of its traditional constitutional monarchy.³⁵⁸ By the summer 1923, none of the League members with the exception of France had recognized the new government.³⁵⁹ In the days leading up to the murder of the Italian delegation, the British reaffirmed that it would maintain its “firm decision not to recognize the regime in Greece.”³⁶⁰ Mussolini expected that he could convince the British not to support the application of the Covenant to Greece because the Greek government was not recognized itself.³⁶¹

Mussolini insisted that the League should not be involved in the case of Corfu. First of all, Mussolini claimed that the Italians had actually not violated the League of Nations Covenant. The invasion of Corfu was not an act of war and, therefore, Articles 12 and 15 did not apply. Instead, the occupation of Corfu was both a “coercive” measure and a means of “simple self-protection of [Italian] interests.”³⁶² The Fascist dictator instructed the Italian delegate to Geneva, Antonio Salandra, to emphasize that Italy’s inability to obtain justice for the murders of the Italian delegation “amicably and with peaceful means of satisfaction” entitled the Italians to “the use of violence.”³⁶³ He declared that Italy would “remain indefinitely in possession of Corfu” unless the Greeks provided the Italians with all reparations demanded.³⁶⁴ In an article in *Il Popolo d’Italia*, the Duce claimed that “if there had been an English statesman in my place, he would have acted like me and would been absolutely right to do so.”³⁶⁵ The article referenced a number of precedents from the nineteenth century to demonstrate that Italy’s actions were

³⁵⁸ Kennard to FO, 3 September 1923, FO 371/8613, C 15171/15065/62

³⁵⁹ Marchetti to Arlotta, 13 June 1923, DDI, S. 7, Vol. 2.

³⁶⁰ 6 September 1923, DDI. S. 7, Vol. 2.

³⁶¹ Avenza to Mussolini, 3 September 1923, DDI s. 7, Vol. 2.

³⁶² Mussolini to Salandra, 1 September 1923, DDI S. 7, Vol. 2.

³⁶³ Mussolini to Salandra, 1 September 1923, DDI S. 7, Vol. 2.

³⁶⁴ La Ragioni Dell’Azione Italiana, 5 September 1923, *Il Popolo d’Italia*, OO, Vol. 20.

³⁶⁵ La Ragioni Dell’Azione Italiana, 5 September 1923, *Il Popolo d’Italia*, OO, Vol. 20.

“fully founded in the law of the nations.”³⁶⁶ Because the occupation was an act in pursuit of “justice” rather than war, Mussolini claimed that the League had no grounds for mediating the dispute.

Second, Mussolini protested that if the matter must be addressed, it was an issue for the Conference of Ambassadors, not the League of Nations.³⁶⁷ Mussolini contended that since the Conference of Ambassadors was the body that appointed the international boundary commission, it should be the body to investigate and mediate the dispute. But the real motivation was to prevent the British from supporting League oversight. Della Torretta stressed that Robert Cecil very often acted independently in Geneva and disregarded Foreign Office directives.³⁶⁸ The Italian ambassador warned Mussolini that Cecil was a “fanatic” supporter of League internationalism.³⁶⁹ Il Duce feared that the British would pressure other League delegates to take a hostile attitude to Italy in the League.³⁷⁰ The Conference of Ambassadors in Paris would be shielded both from the internationalist zeal and the glare of publicity that characterized diplomacy in Geneva.³⁷¹ Furthermore, in Paris, Athens did not have a seat at the table. Both the Italians and the French could ensure a judgement in favour of political expedience rather than Wilsonian principles.³⁷²

In support of the Italian view, Poincare sent a resolution to Geneva on September 6 on behalf of the Conference of Ambassadors that emphasized Greece’s responsibility for the Crisis and proposed the appointment of a commission of enquiry to thoroughly investigate responsibility for the murders.³⁷³ By delaying firm action on the dispute, the

³⁶⁶ Mussolini to Salandra, 1 September 1923, DDI S. 7, Vol. 2.

³⁶⁷ Avenza to Mussolini, 3 September 1923, DDI S. 7, Vol. 2.

³⁶⁸ Della Torretta to Mussolini, 1 September 1923, DDI S. 7, Vol. 2.

³⁶⁹ Della Torretta to Mussolini, 31 August 1923, DDI, . 7, Vol. 2.

³⁷⁰ Mussolini to Vannutelli, 2 September 1923, DDI S. 7, Vol. 2.

³⁷¹ Cassels, 110.

³⁷² Cassels, 111.

³⁷³ 6 September 1923, League of Nations Official Journal [hereafter LNOJ], Issue 11,

League Council left space for another international body to propose a solution in its place. In response to the Conference of Ambassadors' resolution, the Spanish delegate to the League proposed to send Poincaré eight points for consideration at the Conference's next meeting on matters pertaining to a commission of inquiry, reparations, and justice. With instructions from his government to "act in Geneva with moderation", even Robert Cecil supported the Council's communication to Paris.³⁷⁴ The Council's response indicated the League "would be glad to receive information as to the deliberations of the Conference of Ambassadors" transferring the decision-making authority from Geneva to Paris in settling the dispute.³⁷⁵ By the end of the League Council meeting on September 6th, the League of Nations had effectively outsourced its authority and influence in mediating the Corfu Crisis to the Conference of Ambassadors. Within a week of Italy's invasion, Mussolini succeeded in sidelining the League of Nations, silencing the mechanisms of imperial accountability with it.

Once the Conference of Ambassadors convened to discuss the League's recommendations, the Italians set the terms upon which it would evacuate Corfu — terms that closely mirrored the original Italian ultimatum. Before the Italian evacuation could take place, Mussolini demanded that Greece deposit 50 million lire and punish the killers of the Italian delegation. The British Ambassador, Robert Crewe, explained that the perpetrators of the crime in Janina may not be found which would result in a failure to meet Italian demands.³⁷⁶ Crewe argued that the Conference of Ambassadors' guarantee to investigate the murders had "removed all reason for the continuation of the occupation."³⁷⁷ In Paris, it became increasingly unclear what would constitute an Italian evacuation of Corfu. Romano Avenzzana warned Mussolini that the Italo-Greek conflict

1294.

³⁷⁴ 6 September 1923, LNOJ, Issue 11, 1298; Della Torretta to Mussolini, 11 September 1923, DDI, S. 7, Vol. 2.

³⁷⁵ 6 September 1923, LNOJ, Issue 11, 1294-1301; Cassels, 113.

³⁷⁶ Romano Avenzzana to Mussolini, 9 September 1923, DDI, S. 7, Vol. 2.

³⁷⁷ Romano Avenzzana to Mussolini, 11 September 1923, DDI, S. 7, Vol. 2.

was shifting to “give rise to an Italian-English contest” and suggested that the Italians should neither “prolong the Italian-Greek dispute” nor “remain in Corfu” as damage to Anglo-Italian relations appeared imminent.³⁷⁸ The prospect of harming relations with the British, a result that maneuvering outside the League intended to avoid, pressured Mussolini to reevaluate the longevity of Italy’s occupation of Corfu.

Mussolini ultimately compromised over Italy’s position in Corfu. On September 12, Mussolini sent orders to Romano Avenzzana to inform the Conference of Ambassadors that should the “investigation fail to identify the culprits or declare them untraceable” such conditions would allow Italy’s “pledge [to remain in Corfu] to be released” and “Greece would have to provide other repairs.”³⁷⁹ In Paris, Avenzzana assured the ambassadors that Italy would “evacuate no later than September 27th” as the deadline set by the Ambassadors for the conclusion of the investigation in Greece. In exchange for the Italian evacuation of Corfu, the Greek government was required to permit an investigation by an interdepartmental control commission between September 17th to 27th, make a number of public apologies, hold funerals for and honour the victims, and pay the Italian government 50 million lire in damages.³⁸⁰ Upon receiving a resolution by the Conference of Ambassadors outlining the terms of settlement, the League Council took “note of the resolution and welcome[d] the fact that it put an end to a situation which ha[d] aroused intense anxiety.”³⁸¹ Avenzzana boasted to Mussolini that the Conference of Ambassadors had “forced Greece to accept and execute virtually every point” of the original Italian ultimatum.³⁸² While the Conference of Ambassadors forced Mussolini to abandon his imperial dreams of an Italian Corfu, the Fascist dictator secured a number of advantages for Fascist prestige.

³⁷⁸ Romano Avenzzana to Mussolini, 11 September 1923, DDI, S. 7, Vol. 2.

³⁷⁹ Mussolini to Romano Avenzzana, 12 September 1923, DDI, S. 7, Vol. 2.

³⁸⁰ Romano Avenzzana to Mussolini, 14 September 1923, DDI, S. 7, Vol. 2.

³⁸¹ 17 September 1923, LONJ, Issue 11, 1306.

³⁸² Romano Avenzzana to Mussolini, 14 September 1923, DDI, S. 7, Vol. 2.

2.1.4 Conclusion

The Corfu Crisis forced diplomats in Geneva to engage with the tension between League principles and practical application that would challenge the League throughout the interwar years. The Crisis raised questions over the limits of the League's authority and the League's ability to implement sanctions. It revealed tensions between Geneva's internationalist values and members' national interest as the British government struggled to reconcile its international obligations with its foreign policy priorities. The Crisis revealed an incompatibility between doctrines and principles and the practical need for political expediency to mitigate crisis. Most importantly, the Crisis brought to light the friction between the application of the Covenant and the League's commitment to preserve peace. The Corfu Crisis was also a lesson to the European empires that League member states were off limits and that imperial violence was obsolete. It demonstrated that empire was subject to a new level of public scrutiny, surveillance, and critique. Moving forward, empires needed to use greater restraint, as imperial violence could no longer go unchecked.

As the champion of League values, several scholars have highlighted the British government's outrage in reaction to the Italian occupation of Corfu.³⁸³ This outrage, however, was not long lasting. It soon became clear that full-fledged support of the League was impracticable and undesirable. Compromise was needed to make the League survive: between principles and practices, internationalism and national interest, and imperial ambitions and realities. Beyond securing the Italian evacuation of Corfu, the League's ability to hold imperial violence accountable was limited. On nearly every other Italian demand, the League conceded. The key role of compromise established during the Corfu Crisis informed League responses and practices in future imperial crises.

³⁸³ Yearwood, 561.

2.2 The Abyssinia Crisis: The League's Final Failure?

Twelve years after the Corfu Crisis, the Italians sparked another international crisis that deeply shook faith in the international order. On October 3, 1935, Mussolini ordered Italian troops to occupy independent League member Abyssinia in flagrant violation of Article 12 of the League of Nations Covenant. The Abyssinian government immediately communicated to the League that "Italian military aeroplanes bombarded Adowa and Adrigat" resulting in numerous civilian victims including women and children.³⁸⁴ Unlike in Corfu, the Italian invasion did not unfold under the guise of the so-called need for justice. The invasion of Abyssinia was a plain and simple imperial conquest. The British government ultimately decided to support the League of Nations' decision to implement limited economic sanctions against Italy in an effort to convince Mussolini to abandon the invasion. But as a result of the decision to forgo an oil embargo, the sanctions proved largely ineffective. After months of chemical warfare that devastated the local populations, Mussolini claimed to have pacified the region. By the summer of 1936, the League of Nations lifted the feeble sanctions effort and permitted the Italians to remain in *de facto* occupation of the once independent country in the horn of Africa.

The Abyssinia Crisis has received extensive scholarly attention. Many scholars view the Abyssinia Crisis as the final great failure of the League of Nations because it confirmed the double standards within the League and undermined the League's authority.³⁸⁵ Susan Pedersen argues that the Italian invasion of Abyssinia dealt a particularly harsh blow to the ideological foundations of League imperialism as the

³⁸⁴ Ministry for Foreign Affairs to Secretary-General, LNOJ, Vol. 16, Issue 11, C. 405, M. 201; See Article 12 in Appendix A.

³⁸⁵ See Ian S. Spears, "The Ethiopian Crisis and the Emergence of Ethiopia in a Changing State System." G. Bruce Strang (ed.), *Collision of Empires: Italy's invasion of Ethiopia and its International Impact*. (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2013), 33-34; Gaynor Johnson, "Philip Noel-Baker, the League of Nations, and the Abyssinian Crisis, 1935-1936." G. Bruce Strang (ed.), *Collision of Empires: Italy's invasion of Ethiopia and its International Impact*. (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2013), 53-54.

Italians appropriated League rhetoric to justify the brutal conquest of Abyssinia.³⁸⁶ Alternatively, historians of Italian Fascism have explained the Abyssinia Crisis as the critical turning point when Mussolini abandoned the status quo and opted for an increasingly revisionist foreign policy.³⁸⁷ Historians such as MacGregor Knox and G. Bruce Strang view the Italian invasion of Abyssinia as a manifestation of the social Darwinist principles of Fascist ideology.³⁸⁸ Among these two schools of thought, there is a general consensus that Mussolini's invasion of Abyssinia and the British government's implementation of sanctions proved that ideological incompatibility was dividing Europe in the 1930s.

This case study reconsiders the Abyssinia Crisis as the point of rupture in Anglo-Italian relations. It is true that the Abyssinia Crisis caused severe and relatively long-lasting strain between them, but the British and Italians attempted to maintain cooperation during the crisis and repair relations in its aftermath. Between the winter of 1935 and the spring and 1938, both the British and Italians used compromise as a tactic to prevent the breakdown of the imperial system and as a bargaining chip to secure advantages for their own respective positions in empire. By looking beyond 1935, I challenge the traditional view that the Crisis itself marked the failure and collapse of the League of Nations. The League's immediate response to the Abyssinia Crisis does not

³⁸⁶ Pedersen, *The Guardians*, 297.

³⁸⁷ Robert Mallett, *Mussolini and the Origins of the Second World War, 1933-1940*. (Houndmills: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003); John Gooch, "Re-conquest and Suppression: Fascist Italy's Pacification of Libya and Ethiopia, 1922-1939." *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 28, no. 6 (2005), 1022; Robert Mallett, *Mussolini in Ethiopia, 1919-1935: The Origins of Fascist Italy's African War*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

³⁸⁸ MacGregor Knox, *Common Destiny: Dictatorship, Foreign Policy, and War in fascist Italy and Nazi Germany*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 113-147; G. Bruce Strang, *On the Fiery March: Mussolini Prepares for War*. (Westport: Praeger, 2003), 39-42; G. Bruce Strang, "'Places in the African Sun': Social Darwinism, Demographics and the Italian Invasion of Ethiopia." G. Bruce Strang (ed.), *Collision of Empires: Italy's invasion of Ethiopia and its International Impact*. (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2013), 11-31.

mark a renunciation of its founding principles. Instead, the League's final failure was the moment when it revoked Abyssinia's member status and recognized the Italian conquest. This marked the abandonment of League principles and the admission of imperial violence into the twentieth-century imperial repertoire.

2.2.1 The Pre-Abyssinia Days and the Hoare-Laval Pact

Diplomacy and compromise over competing interests in Abyssinia set the tone for the ultimate solution of the Abyssinia Crisis long before the Italian invasion. The Abyssinia Question was a dilemma that had plagued Anglo-Italian relations since the end of the First World War. Italy's desire to join Eritrea and Somaliland to increase the security of the Italian empire in East Africa fueled Italian efforts to obtain a position in Abyssinia. By the mid-1930s Mussolini believed that Italy was ready to carry out the military conquest necessary to seize Abyssinia. In a memorandum written in December of 1934, Mussolini declared that "as soon as our military preparations" can ensure the "security of victory" the Italians must carry out "the destruction of the Abyssinia forces" through "total conquest."³⁸⁹ The Duce estimated that Italy would be ready to establish its "direct dominion" over Abyssinia "through necessary military measures" by October.³⁹⁰ But Mussolini had learned a valuable lesson from his experience in the Corfu Crisis -- Italy must avoid international crisis in order to limit League interference.

During the early months of 1935, Mussolini schemed to gain the consent of both the British and French to ensure European stability during the colonial campaign.³⁹¹ Fascist officials engaged in bilateral talks with the British and the French in an effort to secure a 'free hand' in Abyssinia. Mussolini quickly concluded a secret agreement with the French over Abyssinia, but attempts to extend this arrangement to the British proved

³⁸⁹ Dirretive del capo del governo e ministro degli esteri, 30 December 1934, DDI, S. 7, Vol. XVI.

³⁹⁰ Mussolini to Grandi, 25 January 1935, DDI, S. 7, Vol. 16.

³⁹¹ Dirretive del capo del governo e ministro degli esteri, 30 December 1934, DDI, S. 7, Vol. XVI.

much more taxing.³⁹² The WalWal incident that had erupted in December of 1934 alerted British public opinion to Italy's empire-building aims in Abyssinia. The incident did not become a full-fledged crisis, but public opinion and party politics pressured the British government to support a solution in Geneva.³⁹³ In response, the Foreign Ministry attempted to fuse the solution of the Abyssinia Question with the security of Europe. The Italians reminded the British that their "close policy of cooperation" extended "to all problems — both in Europe and in Africa."³⁹⁴ The Foreign Ministry instructed Grandi to reaffirm that "the continuation of the intimate collaboration between the [two] governments in European politics must be corroborated and reaffirmed with a sincere and complete collaboration also in Ethiopia."³⁹⁵

The Italians expected that the Stresa Conference scheduled for April would provide the ideal opportunity to reinforce the link between the Abyssinia question and the problems facing Europe.³⁹⁶ In April of 1935, British, Italian, and French officials met in the Italian resort town of Stresa to discuss the growing German threat and the necessity of maintaining peace in Europe. At the Conference, the three governments agreed to pursue a common line of conduct in Geneva with respect to German violations of Versailles and confirmed their determination to maintain the independence and integrity of Austria. Most importantly, the British, Italian, and French governments declared their "earnest desire to sustain peace by establishing a sense of security" and to oppose "any unilateral repudiation" of treaties that "may endanger the peace of Europe" in support of the League of Nations Covenant.³⁹⁷ While the Stresa Conference secured Mussolini his desired scheme for European stability, it fell short of fulfilling his quest for an understanding with the British over Abyssinia.

³⁹² Mussolini to Grandi, 25 January 1935, DDI, S. 7, Vol. 16.

³⁹³ Grandi to Mussolini, 22 February 1935, DDI, S. 7, Vol. 16.

³⁹⁴ Vitetti to Mussolini, 28 December 1934, DDI, S. 7, Vol. 16.

³⁹⁵ Ministero degli Affari Esteri to Grandi, 17 March 1935, DDI, S. 7, Vol. 16.

³⁹⁶ Buti to Suvich, 1 April 1935, DDI, S. 7, Vol. 16.

³⁹⁷ UK Delegation to FO, 15 April 1935, FO 371/18836, C 3289/55/18.

In the months following the Stresa Conference, the Italians used Anglo-Italian collaboration in Europe as leverage to secure British consent on the Abyssinia question. The maintenance of the Stresa Front was essential in order to curb German aggression in Europe. Following the Conference, Eric Drummond inquired whether “a situation like that of Egypt would satisfy Italy” in Abyssinia suggesting that while the British would not permit the formal extension of the Italian empire, they would be inclined to accept an exploitive treaty system in Abyssinia.³⁹⁸ Mussolini demurred. Throughout the summer, Mussolini continued his efforts to secure a “free hand in Ethiopia” from the British while the British tried to mediate the dispute through the League.³⁹⁹ As the Italians made their final preparations for the invasion of Ethiopia, the Italian Foreign Ministry attempted to persuade the French to convince the British “not to oppose our action” which would cause a rupture in the Stresa system.⁴⁰⁰

The tone of international public opinion prompted the British government to support the League in response to the Italian invasion of Abyssinia. In the days leading up to the invasion, the LNU began to lobby the Foreign Office, the House of Commons, the League Assembly, and French public opinion to generate support for the League Covenant.⁴⁰¹ In an interview with the Foreign Office, Robert Cecil emphasized the need for “collective action for the restraint of Italy” through “economic pressure required under Article 16.”⁴⁰² Many historians have pointed out that the pacifist results of the LNU’s Peace Ballot prompted the British government to support the application of sanctions for domestic party politics purposes.⁴⁰³ But it is clear that LNU lobbying efforts resonated far beyond General Election interests. The LNU declared that “the great mass

³⁹⁸ Drummond to Mussolini, 21 May 1935, DDI, S. 8, Vol. 2.

³⁹⁹ Grandi to Mussolini, 3 May 1935, DDI, S. 8, Vol. 1.

⁴⁰⁰ Suvich to Chambrun, 26 August 1935, DDI, S. 8, Vol. 1.

⁴⁰¹ 26 September 1935; 3 October 1935, Executive Committee Minutes, LSE, LNU 2-14.

⁴⁰² 3 October 1935, Executive Committee Minutes, LSE, LNU 2-14; See Article 16 in Appendix A.

⁴⁰³ See Zara Steiner, *The Triumph of the Dark: European International History, 1933-1939*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 106.

of the people of this country” supported use of “the whole force of the League” to stop the war and encouraged local branches to pressure the government.⁴⁰⁴ Through their lobby efforts, the LNU internationalized Fascist imperial violence and persuaded the British government to impose limited sanctions against its Stresa partner.

Similar to the Corfu Crisis, the British government attempted to circumvent pro-League pressures and devise a settlement outside of Geneva to preserve cooperation in Europe and maintain the imperial system. Many historians have examined British policy in formulating what has come to be reviled as the Hoare-Laval Pact. By December the British government had become paralyzed over the same questions that it had considered during the Corfu Crisis: the questions of the effectiveness of oil sanctions and the prospect of war erupting in Europe. In view of the risks of applying the Covenant to its fullest extent, British Foreign Secretary Samuel Hoare and French Prime Minister Pierre Laval fabricated an imperial compromise. The terms of the Hoare-Laval Plan grew out of the months of negotiations that had unfolded with the Italians over the limits of empire in Abyssinia prior to the invasion. The Hoare-Laval Plan proposed to resolve the crisis by according the Italians a “zone of economic expansion and colonization in Abyssinia” while maintaining Abyssinia sovereignty and access to the sea.⁴⁰⁵ In an effort to preserve cooperation and prevent a “mad dog act”, the Foreign Office finally agreed to concede the free hand in Abyssinia that Mussolini had been attempting to secure for the past year.⁴⁰⁶

The Abyssinia Crisis demonstrates both the power and limits of internationalization. The League of Nations responded with more drastic action than ever before. It is true that the Abyssinia Crisis proved League mechanisms ineffective, but this does not yet represent an ultimate departure from League principles. When the terms of the plan leaked, the Hoare-Laval Pact quickly became vilified in public opinion. The

⁴⁰⁴ 10 October 1935, Executive Committee Minutes, LSE, LNU 2-14.

⁴⁰⁵ Hoare Memorandum, 8 December 1935, FO 371/19167, J 9106/1/1.

⁴⁰⁶ Cabinet (extract), 2 December 1935, FO 371/19218, J 8860/5499/1.

LNU expressed indignation towards the settlement and urged the British government “to continue the policy of sanctions until they are effective and to support no settlement of the Abyssinia dispute which failed to make it clear that aggression does not pay.”⁴⁰⁷ The pressures of international public opinion and the LNU were strong enough to persuade British decision-makers to abandon the Hoare-Laval Plan for the time being. While internationalization effectively pressured Geneva to respond, the League remained limited by its inherent faults and ultimately failed to roll-back Italian imperialism.

2.2.2 The Gentleman’s Agreement: A D tente?

As the Italian campaign in Abyssinia began to wind down in the spring of 1936, the British government began to consider a scheme for repairing cooperation with the Italians. Changes in the international situation which made war seem more likely convinced the British that relations with Italy had to be fixed. Faith in the League of Nations was dwindling while German strength on the continent was intensifying. The German remilitarization of the Rhineland in the spring of 1936 raised concerns about stability and peace in Europe and reinforced the need for the Stresa Front more than ever. The Committee of Imperial Defence recommended repairing relations with the Italians in order to redistribute defences from the Mediterranean to protect British interests in Europe and the Far East.⁴⁰⁸ Italy also wanted to repair relations with Britain, as it was unprepared for war. By the summer of 1936, both British and Italian officials began to lay the groundwork for what would become a grand imperial bargain: British imperial security for Italian imperial recognition.

The Foreign Office had become increasingly concerned with the prospect of a brewing alliance between Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany if Anglo-Italian cooperation was not repaired. The Italians had made it clear that they “w[ould] not forget” that Germany was the only major European power to abstain from sanctions against Italy.⁴⁰⁹

⁴⁰⁷ 12 December 1935, Executive Committee Minutes, LSE, LNU 2-14.

⁴⁰⁸ Chatfield Memorandum, 18 June 1936, CAB 24/263/4.

⁴⁰⁹ Grandi to Mussolini, 13 March 1936, DDI, S. 8, Vol. 3.

After the fall of Addis Ababa in May 1936, Nazi Germany became the first state to recognize the Italian Empire in Abyssinia.⁴¹⁰ The outbreak of the Spanish Civil War later that summer provided Mussolini with another opportunity to strengthen relations with Hitler.⁴¹¹ Within a month of the outbreak of civil war, the Italians and Germans had begun to send war materials to General Franco in support of a Nationalist victory in Spain. In the beginning of October, Fascist and Nazi officials began discussions for a political agreement between the two countries based upon “the principle of similarity of the two regimes” and the “common obligation to establish an anti-Bolshevik Front” in Spain.⁴¹² The agreement for the Rome-Berlin Axis only had one caveat — an understanding over the future of Austria.⁴¹³ In return, Hitler vowed to support and recognize all of Italy’s rights in the Mediterranean.⁴¹⁴

The British believed that restoring cooperation with the Italians over European security and the limits of empire could drive a wedge between Hitler and Mussolini. Cabinet Secretary Maurice Hankey argued that Britain “must do [its] utmost to get back

⁴¹⁰ Christian Goeschel, *Mussolini and Hitler: The Forging of the Fascist Alliance*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 66-67.

⁴¹¹ The Spanish Civil War threatened to divide Europe into two ideological blocs. By the end of the summer, the British government hoped to prevent the war from spilling over into Europe at all costs. In an effort to contain the Spanish Civil War, the British and French governments formulated the Non-Intervention Committee in September of 1936. The Committee’s members, Britain, France, Germany, Italy, and the Soviet Union, had unanimously agreed to ban international involvement in the Spanish Civil War and to preserve the territorial integrity of Spain. Members of the British government believed that such a policy would be the best way to prevent the ideological division of Europe into two hostile blocs and hoped that the policy of non-intervention would help to check dissension at home. See Thomas to FO, 23 September 1937, FO 371/21345, W 17863/7/41; Foreign Office Memorandum (News Department), 21 April 1937, FO 371/21331, W 7402/7/41.

⁴¹² Gabinetto Appunto (Afunso), October 1936, DDI, S. 8, Vol. 5. See Barbieri, Pierpaolo. *Hitler’s Shadow Empire: Nazi Economics and the Spanish Civil War*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).

⁴¹³ Attolico to Ciano, 6 October 1935, DDI, S. 8, Vol. 5.

⁴¹⁴ Gabinetto Appunto (Afunso), October 1936, DDI, S. 8, Vol. 5; Protocollo Italo-Tedesco, 23 October 1936, DDI, S. 8, Vol. 5.

to cordial relations with Italy” in order to prevent Mussolini from permanently turning to Hitler.⁴¹⁵ He emphasized in several Cabinet meetings that “Italy lives in dread of a German menace through Austria and the Tyrol.”⁴¹⁶ The Cabinet believed that repairing relations would “solve at a stroke a number of problems of intense difficulty.”⁴¹⁷ Through negotiations for an understanding with the Italians, the Foreign Office hoped to secure an understanding over the status quo in the Mediterranean, a renunciation of anti-British intrigue in the region, and the Italian accession to the Montreux Convention.⁴¹⁸ In the autumn of 1936 Anthony Eden met with Dino Grandi to express the British government’s “wish to establish the old relations of the past, before the Italian-Abyssinian conflict.”⁴¹⁹ He explained that “despite the substantial differences” that “fatally exist” between “Fascist doctrine and our traditions as a democratic country,” the British desired to repair cooperation in pursuit of European peace.⁴²⁰

The Italians had one requirement for such a détente — recognition of the Italian Empire in Abyssinia.⁴²¹ The Foreign Ministry requested that the British government withdraw its legation guard in Addis Ababa and transform its legation into a consulate as an indication of its recognition of Abyssinia’s new colonial status.⁴²² In the first week of November, the British withdrew the Legation Guard as a demonstration of Britain’s goodwill and turned the Legation into a Consulate shortly thereafter.⁴²³ The Foreign Office explained that this transition would constitute a *de facto* recognition of the Italian

⁴¹⁵ Hankey Memorandum, 8 June 1936, CAB 63/51.

⁴¹⁶ Hankey Memorandum, 8 June 1936, CAB 63/51.

⁴¹⁷ Cabinet Conclusions (extract), 4 November 1936, FO 371/20412, R 6694/226/22.

⁴¹⁸ Drummond to FO, 9 January 1937, FO 371/21157, R 356/1/22.

⁴¹⁹ Grandi to Ciano, 14 October 1936, DDI, S. 8, Vol. 5.

⁴²⁰ Grandi to Ciano, 15 November 1936, DDI, S. 8, Vol. 5.

⁴²¹ Grandi to Ciano, 14 October 1936, DDI, S. 8, Vol. 5.

⁴²² Grandi to Ciano, 14 October 1936, DDI, S. 8, Vol. 5.

⁴²³ Drummond to FO, 9 January 1937, FO 371/21157, R 356/1/22.

Empire in Abyssinia, similar to what the British had proposed in the Hoare-Laval Plan.⁴²⁴ A symbol of recognition, however, was Britain's limit. The Foreign Office maintained a hard stance against including the question of formal recognition within negotiations for a *détente*. Anthony Eden maintained that the question was outside the scope of discussions for a *détente* as the Foreign Office expected that the question would be raised in Geneva in the following year.⁴²⁵ The British wanted to "keep liberty of spontaneous action over Abyssinia" that might arise through the League.⁴²⁶

The negotiations for what has become known as the Gentlemen's Agreement focused almost exclusively on the Mediterranean status quo and brushed the Abyssinia Question aside. The British aimed to reach an understanding in the Mediterranean in order to reduce the empire's naval commitments in the region.⁴²⁷ For the Italians, an understanding in the Mediterranean could finally secure British recognition of Italy's vital interests in the sea. In a speech shortly before the opening of negotiations, Mussolini declared that "this sea, for Great Britain is a road, one of many roads" or more accurately, "a short cut" to the empire.⁴²⁸ Mussolini proclaimed that "for us Italians, it is life" and demanded that "our vital rights be respected."⁴²⁹ In negotiating an understanding with the British, Mussolini envisaged either a sphere of influence arrangement or a non-aggression pact between the two countries in the Mediterranean.⁴³⁰

Talks between the British and Italians culminated on January 2, 1937 with the signature of the Gentleman's Agreement. The Italian Ambassador to Rome proclaimed that the Agreement marked a "definitive turning point in the history of recent relations"

⁴²⁴ Grandi to Ciano, 2 December 1936, DDI, S. 8, Vol. 5.

⁴²⁵ Cabinet Conclusions (extract), 4 November 1936, FO 371/20412, R 6694/226/22.

⁴²⁶ Drummond to FO, 27 November 1936, FO 371/20412, R 7189/226/22.

⁴²⁷ Admiralty to FO, 21 November 1936, FO 371/20412, R 6974/226/22.

⁴²⁸ Discorso di Milano, 2 November 1936, *Il Popolo d'Italia* No. 303, OO, Vol. 28.

⁴²⁹ Discorso di Milano, 2 November 1936, *Il Popolo d'Italia* No. 303, OO, Vol. 28.

⁴³⁰ Il "Gentlemen's Agreement," 8 November 1936, *Il Popolo d'Italia*, N. 309, OO, Vol. 28.

between the two governments.⁴³¹ In the year that had passed since the height of the Abyssinia Crisis, the British and Italians worked to negotiate a new basis for cooperation between one another in the Mediterranean. In its final form, the agreement was a very simple understanding over the Mediterranean. Both the British and Italians had abandoned a number of questions pertaining to rights in Abyssinia and imperial interests in the Middle East in order to establish a general *détente*. In the early days of 1937, the Foreign Office had believed that Anglo-Italian relations had finally been restored.

Despite the good-will gesture of the Gentleman's Agreement Italian volunteers arrived in Spain less than two weeks later which the British perceived as a clear violation of the status quo.⁴³² Count Ciano explained that Italian action did not violate the new agreement because the Italians had no intention of changing the territorial status quo and that, at this point, the Italians were unable to abandon intervention and leave "the Germans master of the situation."⁴³³ It is clear, however, that the Italians had approached negotiations for the Gentlemen's agreement only half-heartedly. In the short term, the Italians aimed to secure a victory for Fascist prestige, a blow to the League's legitimacy, and a reduction of British naval power in the Mediterranean. Mussolini also viewed an agreement with the British as a means of blocking British approaches to Hitler for an Anglo-German Accord.⁴³⁴ In the long-term, Grandi explained that repairing relations with the British was "armistice, not peace" when it came to empire.⁴³⁵ In several telegrams to

⁴³¹ Drummond to FO, 9 January 1937, FO 371/21157, R 356/1/22.

⁴³² Hendaye to FO, 12 January 1937, FO 371/21319, W 1052/7/41; Drummond to FO, 13 January 1937, FO 371/21319, W 974/7/41. As Eden had suspected, the Italians had acted in bad faith in negotiating the Gentleman's Agreement. Even before Count Ciano signed the Declaration, he had assured the Nazi leadership that Italy would continue to support the Nationalists in Spain. See John Gooch, *Mussolini and his Generals: The Armed Forces and Fascist Foreign Policy, 1922-1940*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 327.

⁴³³ Ciano to Grandi, 7 January 1937, DDI, S. 8, Vol. 6.

⁴³⁴ Robert Mallett, "Fascist Foreign Policy and Official Italian Views of Anthony Eden in the 1930s." *The Historical Journal* 43, No. 1 (2000), 182.

⁴³⁵ Grandi to Ciano, 14 October 1936, DDI, S. 8, Vol. 5.

Count Ciano, Dino Grandi argued that “the less we give the British the impression of wanting their friendship,” the more they will “be forced” to “pay for it.”⁴³⁶ While an understanding in the Mediterranean was desirable for the time being, the failure to secure a definitive recognition over the Italian Empire in Abyssinia nullified the perceived advantages. The Gentlemen’s Agreement did not repair the cooperation of the pre-Abyssinia days nor did it resurrect the Stresa Front. The negotiations for the agreement did, however, provide a basis for future discussions between the two governments.

2.2.3 The Easter Accords: An Imperial Bargain

After the Gentlemen’s Agreement proved unsuccessful in repairing collaboration in empire, the British government began to reconsider how to restore relations with Italy as the international situation became increasingly precarious. By July of 1937, Britain confronted potential war in Europe, the Mediterranean, and now the Far East for which it had neither the allies nor the resources to fight.⁴³⁷ The British government could count on neither the enfeebled French nor the isolationist Americans to come to Britain’s aid if war were to break out in either of the potential theatres as the French continued to be embroiled in both political and economic crisis while public opinion across the Atlantic disapproved of an American involvement in another European war.⁴³⁸ The internal disarray of the Soviet Union caused the British government to strike the Soviets from Britain’s list of potential allies.⁴³⁹ Even the governments in the Dominions voiced serious

⁴³⁶ Grandi to Ciano, 14 October 1936, DDI, S. 8, Vol. 5.

⁴³⁷ See Pratt, 48.

⁴³⁸ 19 July 1937, CAB 63/52; 19 July 1927, PREM 1/276; Julian Jackson, *The Fall of France: The Nazi Invasion of 1940*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 107-112; August 1937, Survey #91, *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion, 1935-1971, Volume One: 1935-1948* American Institute of Public Opinion – AIPO [GALLUP]. (New York: Random House, 1972), p 65; B.J.C. McKercher, “No Eternal Friends or Enemies: British Defence Policy and the Problem of the United States, 1919-1939.” *Canadian Journal of History* 28, no. 2 (1993), 287.

⁴³⁹ Keith Neilson, *Britain, Soviet Russia, and the Collapse of the Versailles Order, 1919-1939*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 212-223.

reservations about the possibility of involvement in another war in Europe.⁴⁴⁰ Britain had few options for allies other than Italy.

In view of the British government's fruitless attempts to reach an understanding with either Germany or Japan, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain made reconciling Britain's traditional friendship with the Italians a priority during the summer of 1937. There were many advantages to a reconciliation, including securing communications through the Mediterranean.⁴⁴¹ In view of the constraints on Britain's defences, the Chiefs of Staff highlighted the "desirability, from the military point of view, of the restoration of our former friendly relations with Italy" and recommended that "[a]nything which can be done, without overriding disadvantages in other directions, to dispel the clouds of mutual suspicion which at present darken Anglo-Italian relations, would be of the greatest advantage from the military point of view."⁴⁴²

Reconciling Britain's strategic dilemma was not Neville Chamberlain's only concern. As the Foreign Office began to prepare a scheme for negotiations, it had soon become clear that the British could also negotiate a grand bargain over empire. Since the Abyssinia Crisis, Italian activities threatened to undermine British interests in the Mediterranean, as discussed in Chapter 1. But if the two countries could get on better terms, Chamberlain believed that Mussolini would reign in his defensive preparations and revise his ambitions in the Mediterranean.⁴⁴³ Through talks with the Italians, Chamberlain hoped to settle British concerns over Italian-sponsored anti-British propaganda in the Middle East; Italy's growing political influence in Palestine and Arabia; Italian military power in the Mediterranean in the strength of the Libyan garrison

⁴⁴⁰ R.A.C. Parker, *Chamberlain and Appeasement: British Policy and the Coming of the Second World War*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 19.

⁴⁴¹ Ismay to Nichols, 12 August 1937, FO 371/21161, R 5523/1/22.

⁴⁴² 12 August 1937, CAB 53/32/8.

⁴⁴³ This view was widely supported. See Hoare-Belisha Minute, 22 July 1937, FO 371/21160, R 5137/1/22; Osborne Minute, 10 February 1938, FO 371/22403, R 1391/23/22.

and the recent air base developments; and Fascist involvement in the Spanish Civil War.⁴⁴⁴

In exchange for limiting activities in Britain's Middle Eastern and Mediterranean empire, the Italians wanted to finally secure Britain's *de jure* recognition of Italy's conquest of Abyssinia. By 1937, Mussolini was no longer willing to settle for *de facto* recognition of the Italian empire. While Mussolini's underlying rationale for recognition is not clear in the records, British *de jure* recognition was the only significant concession that Italy wanted.⁴⁴⁵ In a conversation with the British Ambassador to Rome, Count Ciano stated that any basis for an Anglo-Italian agreement must begin "with recognition of the [Italian] Empire in order to remove any possibility of misunderstanding and friction in the future."⁴⁴⁶ Throughout the summer, Ciano repeatedly emphasized that any agreement between the British and Italians would need to contain clear recognition of the empire, define the new colonial borders, and establish a new era of relations between two equal empires.⁴⁴⁷

Chamberlain believed that *de jure* recognition was worth the price. Many British officials referred to *de jure* recognition as "our most valuable weapon" in dealing with the Italians. Several Foreign Office officials argued that the sooner the British government could formally recognize the Italian empire, the better.⁴⁴⁸ A handful of states had already moved toward recognition. Chamberlain's close advisor, Cabinet Secretary Maurice Hankey stressed that since the British government would eventually have to grant *de jure* recognition, such a gesture should be put forward while it was still worth

⁴⁴⁴ Foreign Office Minute, 10 August 1937, FO 371/21161, R 5332/1/22.

⁴⁴⁵ G. Bruce Strang, "A *Mésentente Cordiale*: Italian Policy and the Failure of the Easter Accords, 1937-8." *Diplomacy & Statecraft*. Accepted for publication in final form, 32.1 (March 2021).

⁴⁴⁶ Conversations with the British Ambassador, 19 June 1937, CDP, 171.

⁴⁴⁷ Strang, "A *Mésentente Cordiale*: Italian Policy and the Failure of the Easter Accords, 1937-8."

⁴⁴⁸ Drummond to Sargent, 23 March 1937, FO 371/21171, R 2139/135/22.

something.⁴⁴⁹ Chamberlain held the view that the British should promise *de jure* recognition and work out the details in the League at the “earliest possible moment” in the interests of “general peace.”⁴⁵⁰ Owen O’Malley, head of the Southern Department, pointed out that unless the British government offered Italy *de jure* recognition over Abyssinia, Mussolini would pursue closer relations with Hitler.⁴⁵¹ If the British government extended recognition of the Italian Empire as a part of a broader Anglo-Italian understanding, Mussolini could be lured away from the Axis. Chamberlain believed that the British government had little to risk and much to gain from sacrificing Abyssinia.⁴⁵²

Securing recognition of the Italian Empire was not Mussolini’s only motivation for an understanding with the British. Both Mussolini and Count Ciano hoped that negotiations for an Anglo-Italian agreement would drive a wedge between Britain and France.⁴⁵³ The Duce would not forget the French betrayal during the Abyssinia Crisis. Since then, the Italians and the French had ended up on opposite sides of a proxy war in the Spanish conflict. Throughout the autumn of 1937, Mussolini and Ciano consistently rebuked British efforts to bring the French in on a scheme for an understanding in the Mediterranean.⁴⁵⁴ In a letter to the Italian ambassador in Berlin, Count Ciano confirmed that “an agreement between Italy and Great Britain [was] destined to accentuate the French isolation” and to weaken the collective system that France supports.⁴⁵⁵

⁴⁴⁹ Stephen Roskill, *Hankey Man of Secrets, Volume III*. (London: Collins, 1974), 303. Chamberlain to Halifax, 7 August 1937, PREM 1/276; Foreign Office Minute (Halifax), 8 August 1937, FO 371/21173, R 5490/135/22.

⁴⁵⁰ Neville to Eden, 7 January 1938, AP 20/6.

⁴⁵¹ Foreign Office Minute (O’Malley), 26 February 1937, FO 371/21171, R 1543/135/22.

⁴⁵² This view was supported by many officials in the Foreign Office. See Ingram Minute, 18 February 1938, FO 371/22403, R 1550/23/22.

⁴⁵³ Strang, “A *Mésentente Cordiale*: Italian Policy and the Failure of the Easter Accords, 1937-8.”

⁴⁵⁴ Perth to FO, 4 December 1939, FO 371/21163, R 8036/1/22.

⁴⁵⁵ Ciano to Attolico, 17 March 1938, DDI, S. 8, Vol. 8.

As 1937 came to a close, both the British and Italians had determined that they had more to gain than lose from repairing cooperation. For Chamberlain, an agreement with the Italians could alleviate the strategic dilemma, strengthen the empire, and make progress towards preserving peace. For Mussolini, the Italians would make a huge step towards strengthening Fascist prestige on the international stage, pacifying the new Italian empire, and strengthening Italy's position in Europe by isolating the French. Even two years after the Abyssinia Crisis, the British and Italians were making continued efforts to limit their conflicting interests and settle their differences over empire. An imperial bargain — British imperial security for Italian imperial recognition — provided the basis upon which the two governments would dispel mutual suspicion and resume collaboration over empire.

Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden staunchly opposed Chamberlain's belief in the Italian option. When Neville Chamberlain insisted on moving forward, Eden resigned in February 1938. Within days of his resignation, the British government opened official negotiations with the Italians. On Easter Sunday in 1938, the British and Italians finalized the terms of the Anglo-Italian Agreement. In exchange for limiting Italian activities in Palestine, Arabia, and Spain, the cessation of Italian-sponsored anti-British propaganda, and an exchange of military information, the British government sacrificed Abyssinia and allowed the lands and the people of the once independent country to be consumed by Italian imperialism.

Shortly after the conclusion of the Easter Accords, the new British Foreign Secretary Viscount Halifax raised the question of Abyssinian sovereignty at the May Council meeting of the League of Nations. Halifax proposed that while "the League should not condone the action" of the Italians the question of recognizing the Italian empire in Abyssinia should be left to the individual member to decide.⁴⁵⁶ The British Foreign Secretary framed the present tension over recognition as a question of either idealistic devotion to League principles or a practical commitment to preserving peace.

⁴⁵⁶ 12 May 1938, LNOJ, Vol. 19, Issue 6, p. 336.

He claimed that such idealistic devotion had “increase[ed] international discord contributing to those very evils that it was designed to prevent.”⁴⁵⁷ In defence of his people, Haile Selassie asked the Council to refuse to take any steps toward recognition. He argued that the League had been “appointed guardian of the principles of international justice.”⁴⁵⁸ But by recognizing the Italian empire in Abyssinia, it was “about to sign its own death warrant by tearing up [the Covenant] with its own hands.”⁴⁵⁹ Silencing Haile Selassie’s protests, the President of the League Council resolved that it was “for the individual members of the League to determine their attitude” towards recognition. The question of Abyssinia’s sovereignty was closed.

2.2.4 Conclusion

The internationalization of the Abyssinia Crisis challenged Anglo-Italian cooperation, but it did not cause a permanent rupture. Actions by both governments, before, during and after the crisis, confirm their shared commitment to managing imperial rivalry in a way that would be mutually beneficial. Before the Italian invasion of Abyssinia, the Italians had worked to settle the Abyssinian question diplomatically and secure British consent to the expansion of the Italian empire. Through the Hoare-Laval Plan, the British government attempted to negotiate a compromise over empire in Abyssinia. Through negotiations for both the Gentlemen’s Agreement and the Easter Accords, the British and Italians attempted to reconcile and come to an understanding over the limits of the Italian empire. In negotiating the Easter Accords, the British used cooperation as a bargaining tactic to limit subversive Italian activities in the British empire in exchange for formal recognition of the Italian empire in Abyssinia. While the formula changed between 1935 and 1938, the idea of an imperial compromise over Abyssinia remained at the heart of the proposed and concluded agreements between the British and the Italians.

⁴⁵⁷ 12 May 1938, LNOJ, Vol. 19, Issue 6, p. 336.

⁴⁵⁸ 12 May 1938, LNOJ, Vol. 19, Issue 6, p. 337.

⁴⁵⁹ 12 May 1938, LNOJ, Vol. 19, Issue 6, p. 337.

Reconsidering the chronology of the Abyssinia Crisis challenges our understanding of when and why the League of Nations failed. In 1935, internationalization was still working. Fascist imperial violence prompted the international community to apply pressure on Geneva and national governments to hold Italy accountable. Though ultimately ineffectual, the League did impose sanctions. In 1935, the League of Nations stayed true to the moral principles upon which it was founded. But by 1938, the League renounced its foundational values because the international order had more to gain than it did to lose from sacrificing one of its own members to another member's imperial violence, or so it seemed. In his final speech to the League Council, Haile Selassie was right: the international body that had been "raised to make the triumph of peace" had become the "tomb of international morality."⁴⁶⁰ The League's failure should not be placed on the ineffectiveness of its accountability mechanisms in 1935 to 1936, but on its repudiation of its fundamental principles in the spring of 1938.

⁴⁶⁰ 12 May 1938, LNOJ, Vol. 19, Issue 6, p. 337.

2.3 The Italian Invasion of Albania: International Crisis or ‘A Perfect Solution’?

Less than a year after the implementation of the Easter Accords, another act of Fascist aggression challenged Anglo-Italian relations. During the first week of April 1939, the Italian government delivered a provocative ultimatum to the Albanian leadership which proclaimed that Albania must become an Italian protectorate and unite with Italy under King Victor Emmanuel III.⁴⁶¹ Mirroring the Corfu Crisis, Mussolini and Count Ciano ordered the invasion of Albania upon rejection of the ultimatum’s unreasonable terms. On April 7, Good Friday, Italian forces bombarded Albania. From exile in Greece, members of the Albanian government appealed to the League of Nations the following day. Albanian officials argued that the Italian invasion had violated Article 10, Article 11, and Article 17 of the Covenant and requested an immediate meeting of the League Council to discuss the matter.⁴⁶² Unlike the Corfu Crisis, there was no meaningful discussion in the League Council about how to hold Italy accountable and unlike the Abyssinia Crisis, there was no question of applying sanctions against Italy. By April 12th the Italians had in effect conquered Albania and the international community had done little to hinder the expansionist project.

Many historians view the invasion of Albania as one more act of aggression by the revisionist powers on the road to war. Renzo de Felice argues that Mussolini decided to invade Albania out of fear of the increasingly powerful Nazi presence on the continent.⁴⁶³ Robert Mallett and Reynolds Salerno view the Italian invasion of Albania as Mussolini’s retaliatory response to the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia with little

⁴⁶¹ Benito Mussolini and the Italian Foreign Ministry produced four different ultimatums to be sent to Albania in the weeks leading up to the invasion. There is little indication within the documentation which draft was sent to Albania in the end. *Progetti di Trattato Tra l’Italia e l’Albania*, n.d., DDI, S. 8, Vol. 11.

⁴⁶² Abid to Avenol, 8 April 1939, LNOJ, Vol 20, Issue 5-6, p 246; See Articles 10, 11, and 17 in Appendix A.

⁴⁶³ Renzo de Felice, *Parte III, Volume II, Lo Stato totalitario, 1936-1940*. (Turin Einaudi, 1965-96).

forewarning by the Führer.⁴⁶⁴ In contrast, G. Bruce Strang argues that the invasion of Albania represents the realization of Mussolini's ideological ambitions articulated in the 'March to the Sea' speech earlier that year.⁴⁶⁵ Steven Morewood and Lawrence Pratt emphasize the shifts in Italian and British policy.⁴⁶⁶ While Morewood claims that the British never considered war over Albania, Pratt notes that invasion marked a turning point in British policy from appeasement to containment.⁴⁶⁷ Dawn Miller condemns the British for wishful thinking resulting in faulty intelligence interpretations in the weeks leading up to the Italian invasion of Albania.⁴⁶⁸

While the Italian invasion of Albania is noted in many narratives of the road to war, historians do not look closely at the crisis and instead focus on either the preceding Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia or the ensuing conclusion of the Pact of Steel. This case study examines the Italian invasion of Albania within the context of the Fascist imperial crises that preceded it to demonstrate how imperial learning mitigated the international response to the invasion. The Italian invasion of Albania demonstrates an expansion of the Italian imperial repertoire in an effort to legitimize empire and circumvent crisis. The first section examines Italian activities in Albania prior to the invasion and highlights the continuities between the covert imperial methods examined in chapter one and those employed in Albania. This merging of methods against the backdrop of a deeply unstable Europe and fragile League of Nations prevented the invasion from becoming

⁴⁶⁴ Reynolds Salerno, *Vital Crossroads: Mediterranean Origins of the Second World War, 1935-1940*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002); Robert Mallett, *Mussolini and the Origins of the Second World War, 1933-1940*. (Houndmills, Palgrave MacMillan, 2003).

⁴⁶⁵ Strang, *On the Fiery March*, 229-274.

⁴⁶⁶ Steven Morewood, *The British Defence of Egypt, 1925-1940: Conflict and Crisis in the Eastern Mediterranean*. (Abingdon: Frank Cass, 2005); Lawrence Pratt, *East of Malta, West of Suez: Britain's Mediterranean Crisis, 1936-1939*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

⁴⁶⁷ Pratt, 160.

⁴⁶⁸ Dawn M. Miller, "Dark Waters; Britain and Italy's Invasion of Albania, 7 April 1939." *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence*, 16 (2003), 290-323.

internationalized. The last section examines the efforts of the British and Italians to preserve loose cooperation in the aftermath of the invasion as a tactic to delay the outbreak of hostilities between them and buying them time to explore other options. But really, by this point, their belief in cooperation as an imperial norm and a tactic to strengthen their respective positions in Europe and in empire had been exhausted.

2.3.1 Italian Designs and Covert Action

The Italians had designs on Albania since the end of the First World War. The Paris Peace Conference offered Italy full sovereignty over Valona and a substantial part of the hinterland with a League Mandate over the remaining territory.⁴⁶⁹ The arrangement soon proved unworkable as Italy faced increasing internal unrest within its own borders in addition to chronic instability in its possession on the other side of the Adriatic. On 9 November 1921, the Conference of Ambassadors in Paris recognized the independence of Albania but also conceded that the Italians had a special interest in the newly independent country. The Conference passed a resolution that gave Italian forces the right to enter Albania and restore its frontiers in the event of unrest.⁴⁷⁰ In the event of internal instability, the Conference of Ambassadors “recommend that Italy be authorized to intervene.”⁴⁷¹ The Conference of Ambassadors recognized that “if it was necessary to restore order in Albania, the duty rested on Italy.”⁴⁷²

On the basis of these special rights, the Italians viewed Albania as a territory within the Fascist sphere of influence. Similar to cases examined in Chapter one, the Italians established close relationships with local elites and a privileged economic position in the country throughout the 1920s. The Italians invested billions in developing Albania’s infrastructure and created a system of loans to the Albanian government from

⁴⁶⁹ A. N. Noble Minute, 14 April 1939, FO 371/23713, R 2760/1335/90.

⁴⁷⁰ FO Minute, 8 April 1939, FO 371/23712, R2664/1335/90.

⁴⁷¹ A. N. Noble Minute, 14 April 1939, FO 371/23713, R 2760/1335/90.

⁴⁷² FO Minute, 8 April 1939, FO 371/23712, R2664/1335/90.

the mid-1920s.⁴⁷³ The Italian legation in Albania also forged close relations with a number of major political figures creating a network of agents and informants. In exchange for their loyalty, the Italian government paid these Albanian politicians a generous sum.⁴⁷⁴ These Italian activities infringed upon Albania's sovereignty. But there was no League outcry in response to Italian economic penetration and funding of local politicians. In Albania, the Italians adopted imperial methods that slid under the League's radar and circumvented the scope of the League's surveillance and accountability mechanisms. For now, the Italians were doing empire 'the right way' by using relatively covert methods rather than imperial violence.

The Italians began ramping up their activities in the years following the Abyssinia Crisis. The Fascist leadership established a system of Italian propaganda designed to Italianize Albanians. By fabricating a cultural affinity between Albania and Italy, the Fascist leadership believed they would be able to justify a permanent Italian presence in the country after the initial intervention. The absorption of Albania would be framed as the realization of self-determination, re-uniting Albanians with the Roman empire. Since 1933, the Italians had been transmitting news bulletins and translations of the Duce's speeches to Albania from the Radio station in Bari.⁴⁷⁵ After the Abyssinia Crisis, the Ministry of Popular Culture began plans to build a radio station in Tirana which would serve as a "particularly effective tool for propaganda and penetration."⁴⁷⁶ The Ministry of Popular Culture also planned to expand the broadcasts to include cultural conversations to parallel other programs transmitted in the Arab World.⁴⁷⁷

The Fascist leadership also used the film industry to advance the Italian cultural and commercial penetration of Albania. In early 1935, the Director General for

⁴⁷³ Jacomoni to Ciano, 6 February 1939, DDI, S. 8, Vol. 11.

⁴⁷⁴ Jacomoni to Ciano, 6 February 1939, DDI, S. 8, Vol. 11.

⁴⁷⁵ Relazione sulle Transmission del Notiziario in Lingua Albanese Dalla Stazione EIAR Bari, 11 May 1938, ACS, MinCulPop, b. 92, fac. 1.

⁴⁷⁶ Alfieri to Ciano, 20 May 1938, AC, MinCulPop, b. 92, fac. 1.

⁴⁷⁷ Appunto per S. E. Pression, 24 October 1938, ACS, MinCulPop, b. 92, fac. 1.

Propaganda concluded several commercial agreements for the purpose of sending Italian documentaries and films to Albania.⁴⁷⁸ The Ministry of Popular Culture soon secured a monopoly over the Albanian film market to limit the number of films screened in other languages.⁴⁷⁹ The Italian government founded a covert agency under the Italian-Oriental Chamber of Commerce in Albania to manage film exports from Italy and imports into Albania. The agency exported both Italian films and foreign films dubbed in Italian to Albania.⁴⁸⁰ The Ministry of Popular Cultural also established ties with a pro-Italian Albanian businessman, Media Bego, to act as a liaison between Italian-sponsored film and Albanian film operators and began subsidizing Albanian importers of Italian language films.⁴⁸¹ Mussolini and Count Ciano expected that the influx of Italian films and radio would strengthen cultural ties with Albania and support a so-called union with Italy.

Originally, the Italians masked their empire-building ambitions in Albania under the guise of international law. Mussolini emphasized that the Italian absorption of Albania must be planned carefully in order to avoid an international crisis. He planned to use the pretext of internal unrest to establish itself in the country. The plan was that after receiving the orders from Rome, the Legation in Albania would send instructions to Italy's network of agents to stir up internal unrest.⁴⁸² The movement would appear as a call for revolution to unite with Italy and relieve Albania from its oppressive rule under the current king. In response to the instability, the Italians would deliver an agreement to King Zog that would effectively render the country an Italian protectorate. The agreement, however, would have the appearance of an international pact and would therefore be considered legitimate on the international stage.⁴⁸³ Within this plan, Italian military forces would have a very limited role as the impetus for the Italian annexation

⁴⁷⁸ Direzione Generale per La Cinematografia, 12 May 1938, MinCulPop, b. 92, fac. 1.

⁴⁷⁹ Direzione Generale per La Cinematografia, 12 May 1938, MinCulPop, b. 92, fac. 1.

⁴⁸⁰ The Ministry of Popular Culture estimated that 90% of Albanians understood Italian.

⁴⁸¹ Direzione Generale per La Cinematografia, 12 May 1938, MinCulPop, b. 92, fac. 1.

⁴⁸² 15 March 1939, TCD, 42-43; Jacomoni to Ciano, 6 February 1939, DDI, S. 8, Vol. 11.

⁴⁸³ 23 March 1939, TCD, 51.

would appear as a call from within the country. By December of 1938, Italian plans to annex Albania were nearly complete. Mussolini declared that the imperial venture would take place in the coming spring.⁴⁸⁴

The German annexation of Czechoslovakia frustrated Mussolini's plans. Jacomoni, the Italian Ambassador in Tirana, had warned Count Ciano that he did not believe "that an insurrectional movement [would] take place as previously foreseen, solely by force of the Italian people." Nazi aggression in central Europe further reduced the confidence of local leaders who feared that the international community would become involved if revolution were to break out. Jacomoni reported that "the intervention of Italian troops" had now become "essential in the sense that, without the security of it, the leaders could hardly move their gangs" to create unrest in Albania.⁴⁸⁵ After von Ribbentrop extended the Italians a free hand in the Mediterranean, Mussolini and the Italian Foreign Ministry subsequently prepared an ultimatum for Albania, the rejection of which would justify an Italian invasion. The Italians delivered the ultimatum on April 2nd and upon rejection on April 6th, Mussolini ordered the military invasion of Albania.

2.3.2 The Invasion of Albania: Averting International Crisis

The international response to the Italian invasion of Albania reveals the limits of imperial accountability in the late 1930s. By 1939, the Italians had learned the importance of justifying imperialism within the League's civilizing lexicon. The Italians prepared for the imperial endeavour in Albania differently than those in Corfu and Abyssinia by using methods that the League would deem acceptable or, at the very least, overlook. But they also used the instability of the international order to distract from Italian aggression and prevent a total rupture of relations with the British empire. Despite the full-fledged military invasion of Albania, the Italian leadership was relatively successful in mitigating the imperial crisis.

⁴⁸⁴ Strang, *On the Fiery March*, 211.

⁴⁸⁵ Jacomoni to Ciano, 19 February 1939, DDI, S. 8, Vol. 11.

In the days leading up to the invasion, the Italians had attempted to use the shadow of the Czech Crisis as a diversion from Fascist empire-building activities in central Europe. Count Ciano framed Italian action as an effort to restrain German aggression. The Italian Foreign Minister ordered Dino Grandi in London and Raffaele Guariglia in Paris to “get the word out” in these cities “through third parties” that Italian action would block “further German expansion in the Balkans.”⁴⁸⁶ He emphasized that this rumour must be created with the utmost discretion to prevent the identification of its origin.⁴⁸⁷ Upon hearing these rumours, one Foreign Office official minuted that “Count Ciano is a liar, and a clumsy liar at that.”⁴⁸⁸ While the British were skeptical of Italian designs on Albania, the Foreign Office had concluded that Italy would not occupy Albania in the near future because of the political complications with Yugoslavia.⁴⁸⁹

The Italian invasion took the British by surprise. When news of the invasion reached the Foreign Office, the most senior officials had already left London for the Easter Break. Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain had left to Scotland a day earlier and “hoped to stay [there] for about ten days.”⁴⁹⁰ To make matters worse, the Foreign Office struggled to reconcile reports between Albanian representatives and the Italian government with several officials noting that the situation was “extremely obscure.”⁴⁹¹ The Foreign Office concluded that regardless of the details of the situation, preserving the independence of Albania was not worth sparking a European war. The British had few direct interests in Albania and recognized that Italy had a special position in the country since the 1921 Conference of Ambassadors’ resolution. One Foreign Office official commented that “however violently one may dislike Italy’s policy, it is true that Italy has

⁴⁸⁶ Ciano to Grandi and Guariglia, 4 April 1939, DDI, S. 8, Vol. 11.

⁴⁸⁷ Ciano to Grandi and Guariglia, 4 April 1939, DDI, S. 8, Vol. 11.

⁴⁸⁸ A. N. Noble Minute, 5 April 1939, FO 371/23711, R 2333/1335/90

⁴⁸⁹ See A. N. Noble Minute, 28 March 1939; Sargent Minute, 29 March 1939, FO 371/23711, R 1989/725/90.

⁴⁹⁰ Crolla to Ciano, 7 April 1939, DDI, S. 8, Vol. 11.

⁴⁹¹ FO Minute, 8 April 1939, FO 371/23712, R2664/1335/90.

a special position in Albania where her political and economic interests are naturally predominant” and that it was “hardly worth risking a world war to try to prevent Italy from control a country” largely within her hands already.⁴⁹² In effect, the British recognized that Albania was already within the Fascist sphere of influence.

The Italians also highlighted the similarities between the Italian position in Albania and the British empire in an effort to legitimize the imperial arrangement. On a number of occasions, Fascist officials claimed that Italy’s position in Albania paralleled Britain’s position in Egypt and Iraq.⁴⁹³ Both countries were nominally independent states that had concluded highly restrictive international treaties with the British upon gaining independence. British troops were also stationed in both countries. In a meeting with the British Ambassador to Rome, Lord Perth, Count Ciano remarked that Italy intended to “observe the form” in Albania that the British had established in Egypt and Iraq.⁴⁹⁴ The Italian press referred to such an arrangement as “a perfect solution” for the Italian Empire.⁴⁹⁵ One Foreign Office official noted that while the Italians had wished for Albania to be regarded in the same light as Egypt, the two cases were very different. While Egypt was “in truth, an independent government” any future Albanian government would simply be Italy’s “puppet”.⁴⁹⁶ The British Ambassador claimed that the arrangement between Italy and Albania appeared to mirror the British model of Dominion status.⁴⁹⁷ Even British officials made efforts to reconcile the Italian position in Albania with imperial arrangements that they deemed legitimate. Italian mirroring of British imperial arrangements demonstrates another element of Fascist imperial learning in the Albanian case. Not only did the Italians incorporate covert methods used in other

⁴⁹² A. N. Noble Minute, 5 April 1939, FO 371/23711, R 2333/1335/90.

⁴⁹³ Perth to FO, 9 April 1939, FO 371/23712, R 2489/1335/90; Perth to FO, 13 April 1939, FO 371/23713, R 2720/1335/90; Perth to FO, 13 April 1939, FO 371/23713, R 2842/1335/90.

⁴⁹⁴ Perth to FO, 9 April 1939, FO 371/23712, R 2489/1335/90.

⁴⁹⁵ Perth to FO, 13 April 1939, FO 371/23713, R 2842/1335/90.

⁴⁹⁶ Miller Minute, 10 April 1939, FO 371/23712, R 2489/1335/90.

⁴⁹⁷ Perth to FO, 13 April 1939, FO 371/23713, R 2720/1335/90.

imperial spaces into their repertoire, they also imitated British imperial structures recognized by international law.

The years of Italian propaganda in Albania appeared to pay off in the wake of the invasion. The Ministry of Popular Culture shared the many letters that it received from Muslim community leaders in Albania praising the ‘Protector of Islam’ for liberating the Muslim community from the oppressive rule of King Zog. In a letter to the Ministry of Popular Culture, Beshet Shapati, head of the Muslim Community of Albania, exclaimed that “all Albanian Muslims welcomed with great enthusiasm the liberation of the country” and that Muslims know that “where ever the Italian flag waves, Muslims live freely and protected.”⁴⁹⁸ Another letter from the ex-Minister Mustafa Krufa Qazim Koculi Sejfi Villamasi highlighted the joy and gratitude of the Muslim community in response to the union with Italy.⁴⁹⁹ A letter from an unidentified group of Albanian refugees rejoiced that King Zog’s government has finally “finished stealing from the people and killing them” and welcomed the Duce as a great liberator of the Albanian people.⁵⁰⁰

It is unclear whether these letters came from the network of pro-Italian leaders whose generous Italian-sponsored salaries ensured their allegiance. These letters may have been sent by Italian agents living in Albania or they may have been sent out of fear in an effort to get on the good side of Albania’s new conqueror. It is safe to argue that not all Albanians welcomed the Italian invasion – the Foreign Office received a number of letters from Albanians condemning Italian aggression and requesting British assistance. Yet regardless of the origin of, or motivation for, the letters that the Italians received, these were the letters that were shared with the world. They created the perception that Albanians were favourable to a union with Italy and that international public opinion

⁴⁹⁸ Bastianini to Legations in Tehran, Bagdad, Cairo, Aleppo, 19 April 1939, ACS, MinCulPop, b. 92, fac. 9.

⁴⁹⁹ Mustafa Krufa Qazim Koculi Sejfi Villamasi to Mussolini, 13 April 1939, ACS, MinCulPop, b. 92, fac. 9.

⁵⁰⁰ unknown to MinCulPop, 8 April 1939, ACS, MinCulPop, b. 92, fac. 9.

need not condemn it. While it can be expected that many of these letters were sent for ulterior motives, the Italians used them to justify the invasion of Albania on the international stage.

In Europe, the press response to the Italian annexation of Albania remained relatively muted. In the days leading up to the invasion, the English press was extraordinarily positive about the prospect of Italian action in Albania. A *Daily Express* headline even hailed Italian action with “the Duce Protects Albania.”⁵⁰¹ Following the invasion the European press focused on what the invasion foreshadowed rather than the invasion itself.⁵⁰² The League of Nations Union also gave the invasion little attention. In the first and only executive committee meeting at which the invasion was discussed, the committee resolved that the British government should “have no further dealings or agreements with Mussolini” and that the LNU should “denounce the invasion of Albania.”⁵⁰³ Most of the conversation emphasized the need for collective defence and an arrangement between Britain and Russia. Unlike the response to Corfu and Abyssinia, the committee did not discuss tactics for the mobilization of public opinion or for lobbying London and Geneva. By the spring of 1939, the LNU, like Whitehall, had become preoccupied with preventing the outbreak of war and dismissed the notion of holding Fascist aggression accountable.

In Geneva, the response was even more apathetic. The Secretary-General of the League of Nations received a communication from the new head of the Albanian government less than a week after the Italian invasion that the country wished to withdraw from the League.⁵⁰⁴ With both Italy and Albania withdrawn from the League, there was little basis upon which the Covenant could be applied. From exile, however, King Zog and members of his former government petitioned the League to invoke

⁵⁰¹ Ciano to Jacomoni, 5 April 1939, DDI, S. 8, Vol. 11.

⁵⁰² Guariglia to Ciano, 8 April 1939, DDI, S. 8, Vol. 11.

⁵⁰³ 13 April 1939, Executive Committee Minutes, LSE, LNU-17.

⁵⁰⁴ Verlaci to Avenol, 13 April 1939, LNOJ, Vol 20, Issue, 4, p 206.

Articles 11 and 17 of the Covenant. More than a month passed before the Council addressed the issue. The Secretary-General noted that “reading the letter [from King Zog] consisted the action he intended to take” on the matter indicating that there was very little that the League of Nations could do.⁵⁰⁵ Viscount Halifax, however, was quick to raise a point of order. He noted that discussion of the Albania issue would entail a revision of the agenda which had already been adopted. The Council briskly passed a resolution to forward the matter to the Assembly and never discussed Albania again.

The Italian invasion of Albania was not subject to the same level of international ‘talk’ or public scrutiny as the Italian invasions of Corfu or Abyssinia. By the spring of 1939, the scope of international discussion had been redirected and confidence in the League’s institutional framework had been exhausted. The British press did express some criticism towards the Italian imperial venture. But with little support from other realms, it had very little impact. The LNU, preoccupied with encouraging its government to pursue a collective defence arrangement, did not coordinate with its sister organizations on the continent, did not mobilize public opinion, and did not lobby politicians to hold Fascist imperialism accountable. In Geneva, there was no question that the League of Nations would not employ sanctions against Italy. After sanctions proved ineffective in the Abyssinia Crisis and following the League’s subsequent recognition of the Italian Empire, the international community had very little faith in the League. Reflecting this sentiment, A. N. Noble commented to his Foreign Office colleagues that “nothing we or anyone else can do will stop the Italians [from] overrunning Albania if they decided to do so.”⁵⁰⁶ By the spring of 1939, it was clear that internationalization had stopped working.

2.3.3 Ebbing Anglo-Italian Cooperation

For both the British and Italians, the invasion of Albania emerged as a movement of clarity in which the two governments realize that the logic upon which their policy of cooperation has been based, no longer holds up. The invasion prompted British and

⁵⁰⁵ 22 May 1939, Council Minutes, LNOJ, Vol. 20, Issue 5-6, p 247.

⁵⁰⁶ A. N. Noble Minute, 5 April 1939, FO 371/23711, R 2333/1335/90

Italian decision-makers to re-evaluate the function of cooperation. Even after the Albanian episode, the two governments specifically decided against denouncing the Easter Accords in an effort to preserve loose cooperation between one another. But from the April of 1939 onward, loose cooperation becomes a tool to buy time before war rather than a device used to collaborate over the empire as it had been in the past. After nearly twenty years of negotiating, modifying, and reinforcing the system of cooperation between the two empires, the imperial system had begun to break down as Mussolini became increasingly determined to expand the Italian empire. While working to preserve the remains of the Easter Accords, both the British and Italians began to pursue other options that risked damaging Anglo-Italian relations, but that had a stronger prospect of maintaining and strengthening empire in the Mediterranean and Middle East.

For the British, the question of denouncing the Accords was a moral one. The crux of the issue was that the British could not understand why the Italians “intervened militarily instead of continuing to negotiate” because the British would have “no difficulty with negotiating.”⁵⁰⁷ Once again, the Italians were doing empire the wrong way -- through imperial violence rather than diplomacy. But in light of the relative absence of public pressure, the Foreign Office determined that it would be more advantageous to preserve the agreement than it would be to denounce it. From Rome, Perth recommended to the Foreign Office that “we should lose much and gain nothing from any such denunciation.”⁵⁰⁸ He pointed out that to denounce the treaty now would only relieve the Italian government of any obligation to carry out assurances over Spain, the Balearic Islands, and the Middle East.⁵⁰⁹ The Chiefs of Staff also supported preserving the agreement. Even in the spring of 1939, the Chiefs of Staff remained optimistic that there was still a possibility of “detaching Italy from the Rome-Berlin Axis” and believed that preserving the Easter Accords might secure Italian neutrality in the event of war in

⁵⁰⁷ 31 March 1939, CAB 53/47/3.

⁵⁰⁸ Perth to FO, 9 April 1939, FO 371/23785, R 2473/1/22.

⁵⁰⁹ Perth to FO, 9 April 1939, FO 371/23785, R 2473/1/22; FO to Lampson, 24 April 1939, FO 371/23785, R 3104/1/22.

Europe.⁵¹⁰ After the Italian invasion of Albania, the British leadership concluded that to denounce the Easter Accords would do more harm than good.

In the days after the invasion of Albania, the Italians went so far as to reinforce the importance of the Easter Accords in international affairs. Less than a week after the invasion, Crolla recommended to Ciano that “the best thing” the Italians could do to mitigate the consequences of the invasion was to announce the withdrawal of troops from Spain.⁵¹¹ Crolla anticipated that by making a show of the function of the Easter Accords, the Italian violation of the Mediterranean status quo could be overlooked. Mussolini sent orders to Crolla to confirm his intention to repatriate legionaries from Spain.⁵¹² The withdrawal of Italian troops from Spain was the most important condition of the Easter Accords for the British. While the Italian invasion of Albania had been a major blow for the Easter Accords, both the British and Italians opted to preserve the remnants of cooperation than abandon it altogether.

In the wake of the invasion, the British prioritized deterring further Italian aggression and building alliances in the event of the outbreak of war. Viscount Halifax swiftly concluded the day after the invasion that “we should not go to war about Albania and instead the British should “endeavour to seek further time, which we should use to improve our position.”⁵¹³ Albania was not worth war, but if the Italians were to expand to Turkey or Greece, it would dramatically impede British imperial defence strategy as a whole. In view of the strategic importance of Turkey and Greece, the Chiefs of Staff recommended that “everything possible should be done to maintain the most friendly relations with Turkey and to avoid an unfriendly Greece in time of war.”⁵¹⁴ The Foreign Secretary proposed that the British should extend the guarantee arrangement that had

⁵¹⁰ 31 March 1939, CAB 53/47/3.

⁵¹¹ Crolla to Ciano, 13 April 1939, DDI, S. 8, Vol. 11.

⁵¹² Crolla to Ciano, 9 April 1939, DDI, S. 9, Vol. 11.

⁵¹³ FO Minute, 8 April 1939, FO 371/23712, R2664/1335/90.

⁵¹⁴ 31 March 1939, CAB 53/47/3.

begun with Poland in response to German aggression to the eastern Mediterranean. Halifax proposed that the British should make it clear that if Turkey or Greece were attacked, the British government would come to its defence.⁵¹⁵ The decision to conclude security agreements with Turkey and Greece marks a shift in British policy from cooperation with Italy to an effort to deter further Italian aggression.

While the British hoped to prevent war against Italy, the Foreign Office became increasingly concerned with building alliances in the event of war in Europe. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the British government had avoided any firm agreement with the French.⁵¹⁶ While the central European dynamic of this wobbly friendship has received great scholarly attention, the Mediterranean element has been largely overlooked. In the Mediterranean, the British had consistently averted French appeals for an agreement over empire and instead attempted to bring the French in on a number of agreements with the Italians and multilateral pacts in an effort to avoid alienating Italy. After years of delay, the British opened informal talks with the French in February of 1939. Discussions initially progressed slowly but soon took on a new momentum as the events of March began to unfold.⁵¹⁷ When formal talks opened in London less than a week before the Italian invasion, the British and French primarily focused on preparing for war in Europe. These talks took on a new urgency after the invasion of Albania. In April, plans for the Mediterranean and Middle East emerged as a priority. The COS proposed that in the event of war in the Mediterranean the British and French should apply pressure on the

⁵¹⁵ FO Minute, 8 April 1939, FO 371/23712, R2664/1335/90; Baggallay to COS, 11 April 1939, CAB 53/47/6.

⁵¹⁶ Robert J. Young, *In Command of France: French Foreign Policy and Military Planning, 1933-1940*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978); Julian Jackson, *The Popular Front in France: Defending Democracy, 1934-1938*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Peter Jackson, *France and the Nazi Menace: Intelligence and Policymaking*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Peter Jackson, *Beyond the Balance of Power: France and the Politics of National Security in the First World War*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Andrew Webster, *Strange Allies: Britain, France and the Dilemmas of Disarmament and Security, 1929-1933*. (London: Routledge/Taylor & Francis, 2019).

⁵¹⁷ Young, 227.

Italian empire to cause Italy's position in Libya and Ethiopia to fall.⁵¹⁸ After the Italian invasion of Albania, the British government prioritized Anglo-French cooperation in the Mediterranean and building alliances in the event of war.

Following the Italian invasion of Albania, the British government also began to feel out the Soviets on the possibility of a tripartite alliance with the British and French.⁵¹⁹ Since the Soviet Union's return as a major player in European politics in the 1930s, the British had been hesitant to form close relations with the Bolshevik state. British officials also believed that the Soviet Union would have very little value as an ally because its already out-of-date military had been weakened by the purges.⁵²⁰ While the military situation was weak, the COS recommended that an alliance with the Soviets would have immense economic value. Soviet cooperation in withholding food and raw materials from Germany would prove invaluable in the event of an economic blockade.⁵²¹ The precarious discussions with the Soviets for an alliance began on the eve of the Italian invasion of Albania. While negotiations with the Soviets touched on the Mediterranean very little, they do represent a growing urgency in British foreign policy to secure allies against Europe's fascist powers. Next to France, the Soviet Union had been Mussolini's primary enemy largely for ideological reasons. The British government's decision to make a go of an understanding with the Soviets sent a clear message to the Italians that

⁵¹⁸ 19 April 1939, CAB 53/11/2.

⁵¹⁹ See Michael Jabara Carley, "'A Situation of Delicacy and Danger': Anglo-Soviet Relations, August 1939-March 1940." *Contemporary European History* 8, no. 2 (1999), 175-208; Robert Manne, "The Foreign Office and the Failure of Anglo-Soviet Rapprochement." *Journal of Contemporary History* 16, no. 4 (1981), 725-755; Keith Neilson, "'Pursued by a Bear': British Estimates of Soviet Military Strength and Anglo-Soviet Relations, 1922-1939." *Canadian Journal of History*, 28 (1993), 189-221; Geoffrey Roberts, "The Soviet Decision for a Pact with Nazi Germany." *Soviet Studies*, 44, no. 1 (1992), 57-78; Bruce G. Strang, "Once More unto the Breach: Britain's Guarantee to Poland, March 1939." *Journal of Contemporary History*, 31, no. 4 (1996), 721-752.

⁵²⁰ 25 April 1939, CAB 24/285/17.

⁵²¹ 10 May 1939, CAB 23/99/6.

Whitehall was exploring options that would likely bring about the end to Anglo-Italian cooperation.

For Mussolini and Ciano, the invasion of Albania proved that an alliance with Nazi Germany would better suit Fascist Italy's imperial ambitions. In a speech to the Fascist Grand Council earlier that year, Mussolini had made clear his expansionist ambitions in the Mediterranean. In his famous 'March to the Sea' speech, he announced that the tasks of Italian policy must be to "first break the prison bars" of the Mediterranean and to subsequently "march to the ocean" through French North Africa and British Egypt. Mussolini also declared that the Rome-Berlin Axis responded to the "fundamental historic need" of the Italian people in the Mediterranean.⁵²² The March to the Sea speech articulated the incompatibility between British and Italian imperial ambitions and highlighted the value of an alliance with Nazi Germany.⁵²³ Talks about formalizing the Axis into an alliance had begun to percolate at the turn of 1939, but the Italians remained hesitant until it was clear that cooperation with the British was fading away.⁵²⁴

Mussolini and Count Ciano were suspicious of Hitler's ambitions in the Balkans and the shock of the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia delivered a great blow to the Axis partnership. The invasion had come as a surprise to the Italians, who only received a night's notice of the plans for Nazi action in central Europe. Count Ciano complained that "the Axis functions only in favour of one of its parts" and that Hitler acts "entirely on [his] own initiative, with little regard to us."⁵²⁵ In the days following the Nazi invasion, Mussolini became increasingly concerned that the Nazis would establish "Prussian hegemony in Europe" at the expense of Italy.⁵²⁶ But von Ribbentrop was quick to assure

⁵²² 5 February 1939, *Relazione del Capo Governo, Mussolini, Al Gran Consiglio del Fascismo*, DDI. S. 8, Vol. 11.

⁵²³ Strang, *On the Fiery March*, 215.

⁵²⁴ Strang, *On the Fiery march*, 232.

⁵²⁵ 14 March 1939, TCD, 41-42.

⁵²⁶ 16 March 1939, TCD 44; 17 March 1939, TCD, 45-46.

the Italians that unlike the British, the Germans did not have any imperial interests in the Mediterranean. Von Ribbentrop wrote a letter to Ciano confirming that “in all questions affecting the Mediterranean, the policy of the Axis must be laid down by Rome, and that therefore Germany will never pursue in the Mediterranean countries a policy independent of Italy.”⁵²⁷ Ribbentrop’s reassurances confirmed that an alliance with Nazi Germany would prove more advantageous than Italy’s tradition of imperial cooperation with the British.

The British response to the Italian invasion of Albania proved Mussolini’s view that an alliance with Nazi Germany would best suit Italy’s imperial ambitions. Viscount Halifax’s reacted to the invasion of Albania by emphasizing the preeminence of British imperial interests in the Mediterranean. He declared that the British “cannot ignore what is happening in the Mediterranean area, even if this is an area in which we recognize the special interests of Italy.”⁵²⁸ For Mussolini, the invasion affirmed that the British and the Italians had incompatible imperial goals. The Fascist leadership viewed the British government’s move to create alliances and announce guarantees as a move to “enlarge the encirclement area” of the fascist powers.⁵²⁹ In the beginning of May, the Italians began plans for an alliance with the Germans to expand the empire and counter Britain’s new alliance-building project. On 22 May 1939, Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany concluded the infamous Pact of Steel in which the two powers recognized their solidarity of interests and vowed to deepen their collaboration in preparation for war. Anglo-Italian cooperation over empire had come to an end.

2.3.4 Conclusion

The Italian invasion of Albania should have been an international crisis. Like Corfu and Abyssinia, Albania was an independent member of the League of Nations. It

⁵²⁷ Von Ribbentrop to Ciano, 20 March 1939, CDP, 278.

⁵²⁸ Crolla to Ciano, 7 April 1939, DDI, S. 8, Vol. 11.

⁵²⁹ Attolico to Ciano, 14 April 1939, DDI, S. 8, Vol. 11; See Strang, *On the Fiery March*, 229-275.

was a victim of unrestrained Italian military aggression. Its political leaders quickly petitioned the League of Nations, invoked the Covenant, and requested that Geneva protect the rights and sovereignty of Tirana. Albanians under Italian occupation even sent letters to Geneva and Whitehall requesting NGOs and national governments to “protest and arouse world public opinion” against the “violence to our country.”⁵³⁰ But European public opinion was preoccupied with its own security. NGOs were busy petitioning their governments to prevent war. Whitehall was distracted by increasing German aggression in Europe. Geneva, what was left of it, avoided the question altogether. By 1939, no one in Europe believed that the independence of Albania was worth the possible outbreak of war.

The international situation deflected public scrutiny of Italy’s Albanian venture, but so did Italy’s use of imperial methods. By 1939, the Italians had learned the norms of the League of Nations imperial system and attempted to adjust accordingly. From the Corfu and Abyssinia Crises, the Italians had learned that imperial violence would prompt an imperial crisis. Italy’s adventures in Arabia, Palestine, and Malta, however, had received minimal, if any, international attention. In these imperial spaces, the Italians conducted empire through economic penetration, relationships with local elites, and cultural affinity to create a guise of self-determination. In Albania, the Italians spent years establishing a privileged economic position in the country and cultivating a cultural affinity between Albania and Italy. Mussolini and Ciano even developed plans to spark an internal insurrection that would prompt Italy to swoop in and heroically save the ‘uncivilized’ Albanians from themselves. When it became clear that the Italians would have to use force to expand the empire, they attempted to justify their action with an array of excuses. The Italians deliberately attempted to avoid an international crisis. By incorporating covert imperial methods and ‘speaking’ the language of the League, they did.

⁵³⁰ Field to Boyle, 11 April 1939, FO 371/23712, R 2533/1335/90.

The invasion of Albania prompted the British and Italians to re-evaluate the value of cooperation and what it meant for Anglo-Italian relations. Prior to the invasion, the two empires used cooperation as a tool to collaborate in maintaining the imperial system. But after the invasion, cooperation became an instrument used to delay the outbreak of war. The British and Italians decided to preserve what was left of the Easter Accords to uphold the appearance of cooperation. But for all practical purposes, the period of Anglo-Italian cooperation over empire had come to a close. The invasion confirmed that the Italian empire would expand at the expense of the British – limiting competition no longer appeared feasible. In the spring of 1939, there was no question that an alliance with Nazi Germany be more advantageous for the Fascist empire.

2.4 Conclusion: Imperial Crisis and Its Limits

The course of Anglo-Italian relations during these imperial crises reveals that there never was a break between League diplomacy and ‘old diplomacy’. While the British, and to a certain extent the Italians, would play along in Geneva, behind closed doors the two governments also came to alternative understandings. These case studies demonstrate that normative systems of League diplomacy and ‘old diplomacy’ co-existed and were invoked at different times when deemed most useful. When necessitated by public opinion and LNU pressure, the British would take a stand in the League against Fascist imperial violence. When it came to maintaining the imperial system and preserving cooperation, the British opted to mitigate crisis outside of the public eye. Whenever possible, the British and Italians settled imperial matters outside the League of Nations. Despite the rise of global governance and the League’s new normative standards, bilateral cooperation over empire remained an essential feature of the imperial system well into the twentieth century. These case studies demonstrate that global order is not a static and hegemonic normative system. Instead, these case studies reveal the co-existing, overlapping, and clashing nature of the global orders characterized by the pre-war years and the League of Nations system.

The League of Nations imperial system was built around a set of contradictions and double standards. As Susan Pedersen has argued, the Permanent Mandates Commission did not require states to govern empire differently, it required states to *say* they governed empire differently.⁵³¹ But responses to the Italian invasions of independent League members explored in this chapter tell a different story. When it came to sovereign League members, Geneva did not only *say* that empire was governed differently, it *did* attempt to enforce a new standard of empire. The League imperial system pressured empires to adopt different methods to achieve similar results. Imperial violence was outlawed and conquest became obsolete against League members of the “civilized world”. But empire still could be legitimately expanded in these territories through

⁵³¹ Pedersen, *The Guardians*, 4.

collaboration with local elites, economic penetration, and the infiltration of political agents if it were under the guise of the civilizing mission or self-determination. The League of Nations imperial system did revise the nineteenth-century imperial repertoire. But this revision did not make empire more humane. Whether through exploitive political and economic arrangements or the outright bombing of cities, imperialism remained a violent project.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the Italians attempted to learn the rules of this new imperial system. From the Corfu Crisis, the Italians learned that the international community was hesitant to apply the Covenant and implement sanctions. From the Abyssinia Crisis, the Italians learned that unjustified imperial violence was unacceptable in Geneva. In Albania, the Italians had finally learned the language of the League. The Italians framed their venture into Albanian as a necessary step to save the uncivilized Albanians from themselves. The Italian leadership frequently referred to King Zog of Albania as a “vain” and “childish” man who was a “tribal chief who now call[ed] himself King.”⁵³² The Italians initially attempted to avoid the use of imperial violence by establishing a system of Italian institutions in the country, securing the loyalties of local elites, and implementing a propaganda campaign in favour of Italian influence. Upon invading the country, the Italians proclaimed that their venture into Albania was a “high civilizing mission” and emphasized the population’s desire for a union with Italy as a realization of self-determination.⁵³³ Even after the invasion, the Italians left Albania with its own government intact mirroring British imperial arrangements. In Albania, the Italians merged imperial conquest with other methods more acceptable to Geneva. By 1939, the Italians had become fluent in the norms that underscored the League of Nations imperial system and, in doing so, circumvented imperial crisis.

⁵³² See Crolla to Ciano, 10 April 1939, DDI, S. 8, Vol. 11; Mussolini to Hitler, 15 March 1939, DDI, S. 8, Vol. 11.

⁵³³ Crolla to Ciano, 10 April 1939, DDI, S. 8, Vol. 11.

These imperial crises reveal the extents and limits of the League's imperial accountability mechanisms. In each case, an independent member of the League of Nations was subject to imperial violence in violation of the Covenant. Yet, in each case, the League of Nations responded differently. In Corfu, the League outsourced the matter to another international body, but it was ultimately successful in rolling-back Italian aggression. In Abyssinia, diplomats in Geneva had countless hours of discussion and applied sanctions under the Covenant against the Italians. In Albania, the League did nothing. These case studies demonstrate that the implementation of the League's accountability mechanisms depended on the imperial adventure becoming an international crisis. By 1939, the League's legitimacy was declining and the international community was preoccupied with the possibility of war in Europe. These case studies show that imperial crisis could only be internationalized if there was not a more pressing crisis in Europe. The Italian invasion of Albania did not become internationalized because international public opinion and government decision-makers were preoccupied with the crisis of Nazi aggression in Europe. This further reveals the logic of empire: the international community could care less about the decorum of the civilizing mission when European civilization itself was at risk.

These case studies highlight the problems of peacebuilding that afflicted the 1920s and 1930s. The peace-building process that immediately followed the Great War had been highly territorialized on central Europe. Numerous historians have criticized the interwar years for the failure to develop an Eastern Locarno. These case studies, however, reveal the impact of the unfinished peace in the Mediterranean and in empire. As Patrick Cohrs has argued with reference to the postwar financial settlement, the ultimate goal of long-lasting peace and stability informed British approaches to empire in the region.⁵³⁴ Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the British attempted to conclude an understanding among Mediterranean powers over what constituted the status quo in the region. The Foreign Office produced countless proposals for Mediterranean Pacts and schemes for a

⁵³⁴ Patrick O. Cohrs, *The Unfinished Peace after World War I: America, Britain, and the Stabilization of Europe, 1919-1932*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

‘Mediterranean Locarno.’ The imperial crises explored in this chapter emerged out of diverging conceptions of how a peaceful Mediterranean and Middle East ought to look. In the aftermath of the Abyssinia Crisis, Austen Chamberlain reflected that the “Locarno policy” had been based on a “definite guarantee of peace in the area where we are vitally interested” and restricted “our obligations elsewhere.”⁵³⁵ The former Foreign Secretary mused that it was precisely in what happened “elsewhere” that “the real difficulties arise.”⁵³⁶

⁵³⁵ 28 March 1936, Austen to Hilda, AC 5/1/730.

⁵³⁶ 28 March 1936, Austen to Hilda, AC 5/1/730.

Conclusion

Global Order, Continuities of Empire, and the Road to War

On 16 October, 1939, the British Ambassador to Rome, Percy Loraine met with Italian Foreign Minister, Count Ciano at the golf club which they both frequented. Both men ducked out of the office early that Monday afternoon to escape the taxing work of wartime diplomacy. As they played a round of golf, the two men exchanged views on the international situation. Ciano confided in Loraine that he felt “depressed about the future” as it appeared “dark and impenetrable.”⁵³⁷ Only a couple of weeks earlier the Nazis had overrun Poland but the end of the war in Europe did not appear to be close. The British Ambassador believed that the Italians were in a “difficult position” and that Count Ciano was firmly in the “anti-German camp.”⁵³⁸ Loraine lamented that “if only Germany would separate herself from Hitler ... there was a good chance of all of us getting on our legs again.”⁵³⁹ But Ciano was not so optimistic. He believed that “only some outside influence” could bring about Hitler’s downfall.

As they finished up their last hole, Loraine emphasized that despite the circumstances, he found himself feeling much happier recently. He rejoiced that the two countries had “lifted their relations out of a deep rut” and stressed his hope that relations would never again endure such strain. Count Ciano sympathized with this view and told the British Ambassador “you can count on me right through to help about that.”⁵⁴⁰ Both men left the golf course that afternoon to return to their offices and deal with the ongoing war in Europe. But these friendly interactions between men served to reinforce a hope that a total war between Great Britain and Fascist Italy could be avoided. For both the

⁵³⁷ Loraine to FO, 16 October 1939, FO 371/23821, R 9085/399/22.

⁵³⁸ Loraine to FO, 10 October 1939, FO 371/123821, R 8663/399/22; Loraine to FO, 11 October 1939, FO 371/123821, R 8681/399/22.

⁵³⁹ Loraine to FO, 16 October 1939, FO 371/23821, R 9085/399/22.

⁵⁴⁰ Loraine to FO, 16 October 1939, FO 371/23821, R 9085/399/22.

British and the Italians, ideological differences that existed between them did not render conflict inevitable even after the outbreak of war in Central Europe.

The case studies in this thesis might seem carefully delineated by time, place and scope. But their significance relates to many fundamental issues in European international relations in the 1920s and 1930s and forces us to rethink the so-called road to war; the role of ideology in determining state policies as well as the alliance system; the persistence of imperial norms and practices; Anglo-Italian relations and the inevitability of their breakdown; the ways in which empires learned from and replicated one another; and the norms and purpose of the interwar global order. These case studies also reconsider common assumptions about the British empire. They critique the British empire, not in the classic ‘guilty men’ sense that has come before, but for being not only complicit, but proactive in a collaborative imperial system founded on racial hierarchies that took the lives, cultures, and histories of peoples across the globe and culminated in total war.

When war broke out in Europe in the autumn of 1939, the Italians remained neutral. On several occasions, Mussolini and Count Ciano had made clear to the Nazis that Fascist Italy would not be prepared for a major European war until 1942. In negotiations for the Pact of Steel, Mussolini indicated that the Axis powers needed “a period of peace lasting no less than three years.”⁵⁴¹ The Italians still needed time to modernize the military and strengthen the economy before war. Until then, the Italians desired relative peace in Europe and the Mediterranean. Even after the war in Europe began, the Italians engaged in negotiations with the British over trade and empire until their own entry into the war in June 1940. Once the Nazis had overrun France, Mussolini and Ciano believed it was time to dispense with the remnants of compromise and embark

⁵⁴¹ Mussolini to Ciano, 4 May 1939, DDI, S. 8, Vol. 11; Colloqui del 6-7 Maggio a Milano del Ministro degli Esteri, Ciano, con il ministro degli Esteri Tedesco von Ribbentrop Promemoria, n.d., DDI, S. 8, Vol. 11; Conversation with Ribbentrop, 6-7 May 1939, CDP, 283.

on a war for empire. With the French defeated and the British overstretched between Europe and the Far East, the Fascist leadership believed that there was little left to stand in the way of securing *mare nostrum*.

Until the Fascist declaration of war in 1940, the British continued to pursue the policy of cooperation towards the Italians in the hope that they could delay, and, if possible, detach Italian support for its Axis ally. Nearly all reports received from the British embassy in Rome indicated that the Italians were not inclined to declare war against the British. Some British officials believed that “despite years of propaganda” the Italian people “still like us and hate the Germans” and were not inclined to embark on a war in support of a German issue.⁵⁴² Others expected that the Italians would join the war on whichever side appeared most likely to come out victorious.⁵⁴³ On a number of occasions, the Foreign Office discussed the possibility of bribing the Italians with imperial offerings in exchange for their support against Germany. They considered offering the Italians concessions in Jibuti, Tunis, British Somaliland, and Tangier, as well as participation in the Suez Canal. To a certain degree, the British were still sympathetic to Italy’s imperial ambitions and were willing to work with the Italians according to established norms and practices. But as the war dragged on, it became clear that an alliance with the Nazis better suited Italian interests. On June 10, 1940, Fascist Italy declared war on the British empire.

Many historians have explored the road to war between the British and the Italians. Orthodox historian Renzo de Felice and his followers argue that Mussolini did not actively play a role in the road to war. Instead, he played the role of the *peso determinante* between Nazi Germany and Great Britain in an effort to secure the best deal possible.⁵⁴⁴ In this view, Mussolini was simply an opportunist with no violent ambitions.

⁵⁴² A. N. Noble Minute, 8 September 1939, FO 371/123819, R 7204/399/22.

⁵⁴³ A. N. Noble Minute, 5 September 1939, FO 371/123819, R 7138/399/22.

⁵⁴⁴ De Felice, Renzo. *Mussolini: Parte II, Volume I, La conquista di potere, 1921-1925; Parte II, volume II, l'organizzazione dello Stato fascista, 1925-1928; Parte III, Il Duce, Volume I, Gli anni del consenso, 1929-1936; Parte III, Volume II, Lo Stato totalitario,*

The revisionist Anglo-Saxon school of thought largely discredits the orthodox view and argues that ideological differences between Britain and Fascist Italy essentially rendered war inevitable – Mussolini and Hitler were destined to form an alliance as a result of the ideological affinity of their regimes. While these historians differ on the beginning of the road to war, it is clear that from the March on Rome there was strong potential for conflict.⁵⁴⁵ Historians such as Lawrence Pratt, Reynolds Salerno, Nir Arielli, and Massimiliano Fiore highlight the Mediterranean origins of the Second World War and argue that the road to war begins much earlier in empire than it does in Europe.⁵⁴⁶

My analysis of Anglo-Italian cooperation over empire reveals a more complex story. It is clear from 1922 onward that the British and Italian empires had competing interests in the Mediterranean and the Middle East. As historians such as MacGregor Knox, G. Bruce Strang, and Massimiliano Fiore argue, Mussolini was ideologically motivated to expand the Italian empire.⁵⁴⁷ But these case studies also reveal a strong element of pragmatism and realism in Il Duce's decision-making. The 1920s and 1930s

1936-1940. (Turin Einaudi, 1965-96).

⁵⁴⁵ See MacGregor Knox, *Common Destiny: Dictatorship, Foreign Policy, and War in fascist Italy and Nazi Germany*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Aristotle A. Kallis, *Fascist Ideology: Territory and Expansionism in Italy and Germany, 1922-1945*. (London: Routledge, 2000) MacGregor Knox, *To The Threshold of Power, 1922/1933: Origins and Dynamics of the Fascist and National Socialist Dictatorships, Volume 1*. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007); John Gooch, *Mussolini and His Generals: The Armed Forces and Fascist Foreign Policy, 1922-1940*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Robert Mallett, *Mussolini in Ethiopia, 1919–1935: The Origins of Fascist Italy's African War*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

⁵⁴⁶ Lawrence Pratt, *East of Malta, West of Suez: Britain's Mediterranean Crisis, 1936-1939*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975); Reynolds M. Salerno, *Vital Crossroads: Mediterranean Origins of the Second World War, 1935-1940*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002); Massimiliano Fiore, *Anglo-Italian Relations in the Middle East, 1922-1940*. (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2010); Arielli Nir, *Fascist Italy and the Middle East, 1933-1940*. (Hampshire, Palgrave MacMillan, 2010).

⁵⁴⁷ See Fiore, *Anglo-Italian Relations in the Middle East*, 33; G. Bruce Strang, *On the Fiery March: Mussolini Prepares for War*. (Westport: Praeger, 2003); Knox, *Common Destiny*; Knox, *To the Threshold of Power*.

were not characterized by endless and escalating competition between the British and Italians empires. Instead, the two empires pursued a policy of cooperation to navigate competing interests and to prevent competition from going too far. There is no denying that Mussolini's activities in empire challenged the British. But for the most part, these challenges took place within limits during the interwar years. These case studies show that while his empire-building objectives were guided by his long-term ideological goal, Mussolini adjusted his short-term ambitions to suit global circumstances.

The imperial system, and the cooperation and compromise that it made possible, deeply informed Anglo-Italian relations during the interwar years. Until 1939, the British and Italians both believed that competition over empire should take place within limits. Since the nineteenth century, there had been an understanding among great powers that competition over empire should not lead to a conflict between them. This understanding persisted well into the twentieth century, even as the League of Nations attempted to shift imperial questions to the international realm. As the twentieth century unfolded, the British and Italians continued to pursue a policy of bilateral cooperation to navigate competition, silence anti-colonial nationalism, and sideline international oversight. In many instances, cooperation was not easy and the two empires were forced to compromise. Particularly in times of crisis, compromise between imperial ambitions and the status quo emerged as a tool to navigate crisis.

Shifting the focus to examine how empires were mutually sustaining and legitimizing within a broader competitive context allows us to reconsider the road to war narrative that has characterized Anglo-Italian relations. Until 1939, cooperation with the British was advantageous to the Fascist empire-building project. Through negotiation and compromise, the Italians extended the Fascist empire both formally and informally. In the latter half of the 1930s, Mussolini began to ramp up imperial expansion while the British became increasingly insistent on preserving the status quo. Yet even in the late 1930s, the Italian leadership was careful not to go too far. Italian imperial conquests in Abyssinia and Albania were chosen strategically – the British had few interests in these spaces. Even in 1938, the Italians agreed to respect the limits of empire and pulled out of Palestine.

The collapse of Anglo-Italian relations was not simply a result of ideological incompatibility between democracy and Fascism. In fact, when it came to empire, the two states were surprisingly compatible as they approached the imperial project with similar methods, practices, and assumptions. Instead, the collapse of this friendship can be understood as a re-evaluation of cooperation over their clashing imperial interests. For nearly twenty years, the British and Italians compromised over zones of competition. By 1939, however, it had become clear that while the Italians had a whole host of conflicting interests with the British, but they had very few with the Nazis. Hitler was preoccupied with expansion in central and eastern Europe and had little interest in the Mediterranean. With Hitler, Mussolini believed that there would be little need for compromise in empire. By 1939, an alliance with the Germans would prove more fruitful for Italy's empire-building goals.⁵⁴⁸ As Christian Goeschel has argued with respect to Fascist foreign-policy in Europe, this study shows that the alignment between Mussolini and Hitler was one of mutual interest rather than pure ideological affinity.

By looking beyond explanations about ideological incompatibility as the driving force on the road-to-war, the continuities between British and Fascist conceptions of empire become strikingly clear. Many historians have focused on how Fascist foreign policy represents a rupture with the past. It is true that Fascist Italy deviated from the policies of Liberal Italy. But the case studies in my thesis also show the many ways in which the Italians learned from British imperial practices and methods of empire. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the Italians looked to the British empire for inspiration and justification. After observing the British empire dropping bombs on indigenous populations in Yemen, the Italians did the same in Abyssinia less than ten years later. From their experience in Malta, the Italians learned the value of the British Empire's assimilatory practices. The importance of identity construction and cultural assimilation became a key part of the Italian imperial project in Albania. Mimicking the British in Malta, the Fascist leadership worked to Italianize Albania's political and commercial institutions long before annexation. The Italians even attempted to mirror British imperial

⁵⁴⁸ Von Ribbentrop to Ciano, 20 March 1939, CDP, 278.

arrangements to justify Italian expansionism. The British position in independent Iraq and Egypt provided an ideal model for the Italians. The Italians hoped to replicate this model in Yemen, the Palestine Mandate, Malta, and Albania. The Italians also learned from their own experiences throughout the interwar years as they observed which methods and practices would spark imperial crisis and which ones would not.

Imperial learning was a key feature of the imperial system during the interwar years. Examining the ways in which the British and Italian empires learned from one another and exchanged knowledge and information breaks down the binary that many scholars have created between Fascist and British imperial practices. In both the British and Italian empires, imperial violence was at the heart of their imperial repertoire. During the interwar years, both empires used aerial bombardment against indigenous populations, both empires incorporated martial law, both empires implemented assimilatory policies. They also influenced local elites, penetrated economies, and exploited natural resources. These commonalities demonstrate that a continuum existed between liberal and Fascist conceptions of empire, in particular, how it should be acquired, and how it should be controlled. While the two empires incorporated different methods in different spaces, they were part of a single logic of empire.⁵⁴⁹

A focus on cooperation between empires also disrupts the legacy of the long outdated colonizer-colonized and metropole-periphery models that suggest that the relationship between empire and imperial space was a strict one-to-one power dynamic. The literature on empire tends to recognize the colonizing imperial power as emanating from one particular European state as if imperial rule was hegemonic and undisputed within the imperial system. In many ways, the cases examined here were shared imperial spaces. In the Arabian Peninsula, the British and Italians shared the so-called burden of imperial security. The British held the Mandate for Palestine, but Italian religious and commercial institutions persisted parallel to the British Empire's political position.

⁵⁴⁹ See Michelle Gordon, "The Dynamics of British Colonial Violence." In Volker Barth and Roland Cvetkovski (eds.) *Imperial Co-operation and Transfer, 1870-1930*. (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc., 2015), 153-174.

Sharing of imperial space was most prominent in Malta where the British and Italians split influence in political, legal, educational, and religious institutions. The cases of Abyssinia and Albania provide examples of the limits of imperial sharing and the permeability of sovereignty. While each country was technically independent, they had been subject to imperial influences prior to crisis. In the decades before the crisis, the British, French, and Italians had concluded several agreements over the limits of empire in Abyssinia. The Italian invasion put an end to imperial sharing in the region. For much of the interwar years, Albania was a shared space as Italian activities infringed on the country's sovereignty since its inception. Cooperation over empire demonstrates the porousness of empire during the interwar years by highlighting the ways in which empires shared imperial spaces and coexisted through parallel zones of power.

In shared imperial spaces, support for or opposition to anti-colonial nationalism frequently emerged as a tool to leverage cooperation. Many scholars have pointed to internal rebellion and anti-colonial protests as symptoms of fractures within the imperial system.⁵⁵⁰ Yet, these movements became intertwined with empire-building itself. Within shared imperial spaces, the Italians sometimes supported and sometimes opposed anti-colonial movements as a means of advancing their own interests. In Arabia and Palestine, the Italians were advocates of anti-colonial nationalism as weak independence was more advantageous to Fascist empire-building than continued British rule. But when the two empires cooperated, the Italians subdued their support for anti-colonial nationalism in favour of preserving the imperial system and the advantages that they could secure within it. In Malta, the situation was different. The British and Italians competed in support of anti-colonial national movements in order to secure the loyalties of the future European state. These cases show that anti-colonialist movements and empire-building projects

⁵⁵⁰ Martin Thomas, *Empires of Intelligence: Security and Colonial Disorder after 1914*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Antoinette Burton, *The Trouble with Empire: Challenges to Modern British Imperialism*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the international Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

frequently collaborated to achieve divergent aims which further reveals the contradictions that characterized the interwar imperial system.

These case studies show the fragility of the interwar imperial system. Policies of cooperation, imperial sharing, and the instrumentalization of anti-colonial nationalism are symptoms of the precarity of the imperial system during the 1920s and 1930s. The British struggled to ensure global imperial defence, regional imperial security, and local imperial order while the Italians grappled with Fascistization domestically, as well as the industrialization and militarization necessary to carry forward the imperial project. To a certain degree, cooperation was necessary. It was not only a tool to navigate competition between empires. Cooperation also emerged as a tactic to manoeuvre within a precarious, fragile, and fractured imperial system. For much of the interwar years, it was clear that empire could not be maintained unilaterally. The two empires cooperated for their mutual benefit, shared the burden of imperial security, and collaborated to preserve the imperial system against internal opposition.

Common racial assumptions that underpinned the interwar imperial system shaped the global hierarchy and facilitated cooperation between imperial powers. Beyond the status of a particular territory within the League, conceptions of whiteness and 'other' characterized both the British and Italian colonial imagination. These racial hierarchies informed approaches to empire. For example, the British and Italians viewed Corfu, Malta, and Albania as imperial spaces with the potential to become 'European' because of the perceived degrees of whiteness of their populations. Within the Fascist colonial imagination, these populations could become a part of Italy proper. Cultural policies and efforts to 'Italianize' the local populations became deeply intertwined with the Fascist nation-building project itself. As Fascist officials developed cultural propaganda campaigns, they confronted questions of what it meant to be Italian and how this identity ought to be defined. For the British, conceptions of whiteness informed attitudes towards the legitimacy of empire. The Italian occupation of Corfu needed to be rolled back because Greece was a firm member of the European community. Within the colonial imagination, the status of Albania's independence was different than that of Greece. Albania was a primarily Muslim country on the outskirts of Europe. To a certain degree,

empire made sense in Albania as it did in the Muslim countries across Africa and the Middle East. Both empires viewed Malta as an experimentation ground for nation-building either through independence or imperial absorption. Perceptions of whiteness within the colonial imagination shaped the function of a particular space within the empire-building project and informed the selection of methods to which it was subject.

These case studies parallel the work of Susan Pedersen by looking beyond the mandatory power-mandate relationship characteristic of the PMC to investigate the extents and limits of imperial accountability within the imperial system more broadly.⁵⁵¹ In the cases examined in the first chapter, imperial accountability was non-existent. Remaining outside the League of Nations' imperial system, there was no way to hold the British empire accountable for aerial bombardment in Yemen and assimilatory practices in Malta. While Palestine was monitored by the PMC, Geneva was far too distracted with internal unrest within the Mandate to be concerned with escalating competition between empires. The cases examined in the second chapter feature internationalized crises subject to a certain degree of imperial accountability. While the success of imperial accountability in Corfu and Abyssinia is debatable, in both cases, the League tried to hold Italy accountable for imperial violence. In theory, Albania was an ideal candidate for the League's accountability mechanisms but in practice holding empire accountable was no longer a major goal as crisis in the centre of Europe became the priority.

It was not only the international status of the violated imperial space that prompted the League to hold empire accountable. Imperial accountability depended upon the internationalization of an imperial episode. Pressure from the Europe press, public opinion, lobby groups, and sympathetic diplomats gave Geneva the political will to enact the League's mechanisms of accountability against a transgressing empire. In spaces where crisis did not precipitate, imperial powers were relatively free to behave as they pleased. Cooperation between empires further limited the scope of accountability. Even

⁵⁵¹ Susan Pedersen, *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

in spaces where crisis erupted and when there was the political will to condemn imperial violence, the British and Italians attempted to reach a compromise outside of the League. These deep flaws within the system of accountability created space for empires to violate the League's imperial standards. The persistence of the nineteenth-century practice of cooperation undermined the mechanisms of accountability that the League had brought into being.

These case studies reveal the multi-layered and hybrid nature of global order during the interwar years. Many historians point to the First World War as a major turning point in history but close analysis of global order in the 1920s and 1930s does not support this view. John Ikenberry has demonstrated that in the transitions between global orders and sets of norms, there is an evolutionary logic at play.⁵⁵² Rather than a rupture and rebirth, global orders evolve over time. The postwar peace settlements and the rise of the League of Nations added new dimensions to the global order, but they did not replace the norms and standards that already existed. These case studies show that the pre-existing global order was surprisingly resilient and durable. Despite the League of Nations' efforts to reform empire at the international level, the British and Italians acted in accordance with nineteenth-century imperial standards through bilateral relations in the imperial realm. Yet both empires also worked to learn the standards of the new imperial system and become fluent in the language of the League.

These two sets of standards co-existed, sometimes harmoniously and sometimes in conflict. The cases examined in Chapter One show that the two empires preserved these practices with very little push-back as a result of the status of the imperial space within the international hierarchy. But when new levels of international surveillance brought to light the persistence of imperial violence as examined in Chapter Two, the different layers of the global order confronted a contentious convergence of orders and standards – nineteenth-century imperial conquest clashed with League principles on the

⁵⁵² John Ikenberry, "The Logic of Order: Westphalia, Liberalism, and the Evolution of International order in the Modern Era." In John Ikenberry (ed.), *Power, Order, and Change in World Politics*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 88.

international stage. Yet in each case, an ideal solution in accordance with either nineteenth-century standards or League norms was not reached. Imperial crisis caused the two global orders to collide and forced all parties into an unsettling compromise. Embedded in the global order of the interwar years was a central contradiction in which empires were held to new imperial standards that outlawed conquest and protected member-state sovereignty while continuing the empire-building project in accordance with nineteenth century practices.

The course of Anglo-Italian cooperation over empire brings these contradictions within the global order to the fore. But it also problematizes the global order of the 1920s and 1930s as an interlude between world wars or as period in which international order stopped working. Instead of interlude when international order broke down, these case studies reveal the ways in which states and empires navigated the multi-layered and contradictory global order during the 1920s and 1930s. We can see a commitment to different layers of this order at different times and we can see the rules and norms that made the international system work and the ones that challenged it. This focus on empire highlights the possibilities and limits of the hybrid and Eurocentric global order that characterized the 1920s and 1930s.

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FO 371: Foreign Office: Political Departments: General Correspondence from 1906-1966

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Appendix A: League of Nations Covenant (select excerpts)

THE HIGH CONTRACTING PARTIES,

In order to promote international co-operation and to achieve international peace and security

by the acceptance of obligations not to resort to war,

by the prescription of open, just and honourable relations between nations,

by the firm establishment of the understandings of international law as the actual rule of conduct among Governments, and

by the maintenance of justice and a scrupulous respect for all treaty obligations in the dealings of organised peoples with one another,

Agree to this Covenant of the League of Nations.

ARTICLE 1.

The original Members of the League of Nations shall be those of the Signatories which are named in the Annex to this Covenant and also such of those other States named in the Annex as shall accede without reservation to this Covenant. Such accession shall be effected by a Declaration deposited with the Secretariat within two months of the coming into force of the Covenant. Notice thereof shall be sent to all other Members of the League.

Any fully self-governing State, Dominion or Colony not named in the Annex may become a Member of the League if its admission is agreed to by two-thirds of the Assembly, provided that it shall give effective guarantees of its sincere intention to observe its international obligations, and shall accept such regulations as may be prescribed by the League in regard to its military, naval and air forces and armaments.

Any Member of the League may, after two years' notice of its intention so to do, withdraw from the League, provided that all its international obligations and all its obligations under this Covenant shall have been fulfilled at the time of its withdrawal.

ARTICLE 8.

The Members of the League recognise that the maintenance of peace requires the reduction of national armaments to the lowest point consistent with national safety and the enforcement by common action of international obligations.

The Council, taking account of the geographical situation and circumstances of each State, shall formulate plans for such reduction for the consideration and action of the

several Governments. Such plans shall be subject to reconsideration and revision at least every ten years.

After these plans shall have been adopted by the several Governments, the limits of armaments therein fixed shall not be exceeded without the concurrence of the Council.

The Members of the League agree that the manufacture by private enterprise of munitions and implements of war is open to grave objections. The Council shall advise how the evil effects attendant upon such manufacture can be prevented, due regard being had to the necessities of those Members of the League which are not able to manufacture the munitions and implements of war necessary for their safety.

The Members of the League undertake to interchange full and frank information as to the scale of their armaments, their military, naval and air programmes and the condition of such of their industries as are adaptable to war-like purposes.

ARTICLE 10.

The Members of the League undertake to respect and preserve as against external aggression the territorial integrity and existing political independence of all Members of the League. In case of any such aggression or in case of any threat or danger of such aggression the Council shall advise upon the means by which this obligation shall be fulfilled.

ARTICLE 11.

Any war or threat of war, whether immediately affecting any of the Members of the League or not, is hereby declared a matter of concern to the whole League, and the League shall take any action that may be deemed wise and effectual to safeguard the peace of nations. In case any such emergency should arise the Secretary General shall on the request of any Member of the League forthwith summon a meeting of the Council.

It is also declared to be the friendly right of each Member of the League to bring to the attention of the Assembly or of the Council any circumstance whatever affecting international relations which threatens to disturb international peace or the good understanding between nations upon which peace depends.

ARTICLE 12.

The Members of the League agree that, if there should arise between them any dispute likely to lead to a rupture they will submit the matter either to arbitration or judicial settlement or to enquiry by the Council, and they agree in no case to resort to war until three months after the award by the arbitrators or the judicial decision, or the report by the Council. In any case under this Article the award of the arbitrators or the judicial decision shall be made within a reasonable time, and the report of the Council shall be made within six months after the submission of the dispute.

ARTICLE 13.

The Members of the League agree that whenever any dispute shall arise between them which they recognise to be suitable for submission to arbitration or judicial settlement and which cannot be satisfactorily settled by diplomacy, they will submit the whole subject-matter to arbitration or judicial settlement.

Disputes as to the interpretation of a treaty, as to any question of international law, as to the existence of any fact which if established would constitute a breach of any international obligation, or as to the extent and nature of the reparation to be made for any such breach, are declared to be among those which are generally suitable for submission to arbitration or judicial settlement.

For the consideration of any such dispute, the court to which the case is referred shall be the Permanent Court of International Justice, established in accordance with Article 14, or any tribunal agreed on by the parties to the dispute or stipulated in any convention existing between them.

The Members of the League agree that they will carry out in full good faith any award or decision that may be rendered, and that they will not resort to war against a Member of the League which complies therewith. In the event of any failure to carry out such an award or decision, the Council shall propose what steps should be taken to give effect thereto.

ARTICLE 14.

The Council shall formulate and submit to the Members of the League for adoption plans for the establishment of a Permanent Court of International Justice. The Court shall be competent to hear and determine any dispute of an international character which the parties thereto submit to it. The Court may also give an advisory opinion upon any dispute or question referred to it by the Council or by the Assembly.

ARTICLE 15.

If there should arise between Members of the League any dispute likely to lead to a rupture, which is not submitted to arbitration or judicial settlement in accordance with Article 13, the Members of the League agree that they will submit the matter to the Council. Any party to the dispute may effect such submission by giving notice of the existence of the dispute to the Secretary General, who will make all necessary arrangements for a full investigation and consideration thereof.

For this purpose the parties to the dispute will communicate to the Secretary General, as promptly as possible, statements of their case with all the relevant facts and papers, and the Council may forthwith direct the publication thereof.

The Council shall endeavour to effect a settlement of the dispute, and if such efforts are successful, a statement shall be made public giving such facts and explanations regarding the dispute and the terms of settlement thereof as the Council may deem appropriate.

If the dispute is not thus settled, the Council either unanimously or by a majority vote shall make and publish a report containing a statement of the facts of the dispute and the recommendations which are deemed just and proper in regard thereto.

Any Member of the League represented on the Council may make public a statement of the facts of the dispute and of its conclusions regarding the same.

If a report by the Council is unanimously agreed to by the members thereof other than the Representatives of one or more of the parties to the dispute, the Members of the League agree that they will not go to war with any party to the dispute which complies with the recommendations of the report.

If the Council fails to reach a report which is unanimously agreed to by the members thereof, other than the Representatives of one or more of the parties to the dispute, the Members of the League reserve to themselves the right to take such action as they shall consider necessary for the maintenance of right and justice.

If the dispute between the parties is claimed by one of them, and is found by the Council, to arise out of a matter which by international law is solely within the domestic jurisdiction of that party, the Council shall so report, and shall make no recommendation as to its settlement.

The Council may in any case under this Article refer the dispute to the Assembly. The dispute shall be so referred at the request of either party to the dispute, provided that such request be made within fourteen days after the submission of the dispute to the Council.

In any case referred to the Assembly, all the provisions of this Article and of Article 12 relating to the action and powers of the Council shall apply to the action and powers of the Assembly, provided that a report made by the Assembly, if concurred in by the Representatives of those Members of the League represented on the Council and of a majority of the other Members of the League, exclusive in each case of the Representatives of the parties to the dispute, shall have the same force as a report by the Council concurred in by all the members thereof other than the Representatives of one or more of the parties to the dispute.

ARTICLE 16.

Should any Member of the League resort to war in disregard of its covenants under Articles 12, 13, or 15, it shall ipso facto be deemed to have committed an act of war against all other Members of the League, which hereby undertake immediately to subject it to the severance of all trade or financial relations, the prohibition of all intercourse between their nationals and the nationals of the covenant-breaking State, and the prevention of all financial, commercial or personal intercourse between the nationals of the covenant-breaking State and the nationals of any other State, whether a Member of the League or not.

It shall be the duty of the Council in such case to recommend to the several Governments concerned what effective military, naval or air force the Members of the League shall

severally contribute to the armed forces to be used to protect the covenants of the League.

The Members of the League agree, further, that they will mutually support one another in the financial and economic measures which are taken under this Article, in order to minimise the loss and inconvenience resulting from the above measures, and that they will mutually support one another in resisting any special measures aimed at one of their number by the covenant-breaking State, and that they will take the necessary steps to afford passage through their territory to the forces of any of the Members of the League which are co-operating to protect the covenants of the League.

Any Member of the League which has violated any covenant of the League may be declared to be no longer a Member of the League by a vote of the Council concurred in by the Representatives of all the other Members of the League represented thereon.

ARTICLE 17.

In the event of a dispute between a Member of the League and a State which is not a Member of the League, or between States not Members of the League, the State or States not Members of the League shall be invited to accept the obligations of membership in the League for the purposes of such dispute, upon such conditions as the Council may deem just. If such invitation is accepted, the provisions of Articles 12 to 16 inclusive shall be applied with such modifications as may be deemed necessary by the Council.

Upon such invitation being given the Council shall immediately institute an inquiry into the circumstances of the dispute and recommend such action as may seem best and most effectual in the circumstances.

If a State so invited shall refuse to accept the obligations of membership in the League for the purposes of such dispute, and shall resort to war against a Member of the League, the provisions of Article 16 shall be applicable as against the State taking such action.

If both parties to the dispute when so invited refuse to accept the obligations of membership in the League for the purposes of such dispute, the Council may take such measures and make such recommendations as will prevent hostilities and will result in the settlement of the dispute.

ARTICLE 18.

Every treaty or international engagement entered into hereafter by any Member of the League shall be forthwith registered with the Secretariat and shall as soon as possible be published by it. No such treaty or international engagement shall be binding until so registered.

ARTICLE 22.

To those colonies and territories which as a consequence of the late war have ceased to be under the sovereignty of the States which formerly governed them and which are

inhabited by peoples not yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world, there should be applied the principle that the well-being and development of such peoples form a sacred trust of civilisation and that securities for the performance of this trust should be embodied in this Covenant.

The best method of giving practical effect to this principle is that the tutelage of such peoples should be entrusted to advanced nations who by reason of their resources, their experience or their geographical position can best undertake this responsibility, and who are willing to accept it, and that this tutelage should be exercised by them as Mandatories on behalf of the League.

The character of the mandate must differ according to the stage of the development of the people, the geographical situation of the territory, its economic conditions and other similar circumstances.

Certain communities formerly belonging to the Turkish Empire have reached a stage of development where their existence as independent nations can be provisionally recognized subject to the rendering of administrative advice and assistance by a Mandatory until such time as they are able to stand alone. The wishes of these communities must be a principal consideration in the selection of the Mandatory.

Other peoples, especially those of Central Africa, are at such a stage that the Mandatory must be responsible for the administration of the territory under conditions which will guarantee freedom of conscience and religion, subject only to the maintenance of public order and morals, the prohibition of abuses such as the slave trade, the arms traffic and the liquor traffic, and the prevention of the establishment of fortifications or military and naval bases and of military training of the natives for other than police purposes and the defence of territory, and will also secure equal opportunities for the trade and commerce of other Members of the League.

There are territories, such as South-West Africa and certain of the South Pacific Islands, which, owing to the sparseness of their population, or their small size, or their remoteness from the centres of civilisation, or their geographical contiguity to the territory of the Mandatory, and other circumstances, can be best administered under the laws of the Mandatory as integral portions of its territory, subject to the safeguards above mentioned in the interests of the indigenous population.

In every case of mandate, the Mandatory shall render to the Council an annual report in reference to the territory committed to its charge.

The degree of authority, control, or administration to be exercised by the Mandatory shall, if not previously agreed upon by the Members of the League, be explicitly defined in each case by the Council.

A permanent Commission shall be constituted to receive and examine the annual reports of the Mandatories and to advise the Council on all matters relating to the observance of the mandates.

ARTICLE 23.

Subject to and in accordance with the provisions of international conventions existing or hereafter to be agreed upon, the Members of the League:

- (a) will endeavour to secure and maintain fair and humane conditions of labour for men, women, and children, both in their own countries and in all countries to which their commercial and industrial relations extend, and for that purpose will establish and maintain the necessary international organisations;
- (b) undertake to secure just treatment of the native inhabitants of territories under their control;
- (c) will entrust the League with the general supervision over the execution of agreements with regard to the traffic in women and children, and the traffic in opium and other dangerous drugs;
- (d) will entrust the League with the general supervision of the trade in arms and ammunition with the countries in which the control of this traffic is necessary in the common interest;
- (e) will make provision to secure and maintain freedom of communications and of transit and equitable treatment for the commerce of all Members of the League. In this connection, the special necessities of the regions devastated during the war of 1914-1918 shall be borne in mind;
- (f) will endeavour to take steps in matters of international concern for the prevention and control of disease.

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