The Axis

Germany, Japan and Italy on the road to war

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In a famous speech in Milan’s cathedral square in November 1936, the leader of Fascist Italy, Benito Mussolini, used a metaphor first invented by Hungary’s former Prime Minister, Gyula Gömbös, to describe the newly intensified German-Italian relations: an ‘axis’ had been forged between Berlin and Rome, he insisted, with a reference to the Treaty of Friendship signed between the two powers on 25 October 1936, ‘around which all those European states which are animated by a desire for collaboration and peace can revolve’.¹

In Italian and German propaganda, the ‘axis’ was celebrated as the joining of forces between two long suppressed but now re-emerging empires, with shared histories and superior cultures, as well as common foes who sought to prevent them from assuming their rightful place among the world’s great powers. For the West, the axis promised anything but ‘peace’. Instead, it raised the spectre of a combined threat to European collective security by two expansionist powers under the leadership of dangerous dictators.²

The threat became global when, within weeks of the formation of the Axis, Hitler entered into a further pact with Japan that was soon to be known as the Anti-Comintern Pact. Despite Hitler’s racial prejudices against the Japanese as an Asian people allegedly incapable of ‘creating culture’, he viewed the country as having similar geopolitical (and predominantly anti-Soviet) interests. On 27 November 1936, Hitler formally approved the

Anti-Comintern Pact, which Italy joined a year later. The pact’s main provision – recorded in a secret protocol – was that neither of the signatories would assist the Soviet Union in any way in the event of it attacking either Germany or Japan.\(^3\) As Ian Kershaw has noted, the pact was more important for its symbolism than for its actual provisions. The full military alliance that was to confront the Western powers (and the Soviet Union) in the Second World War was yet to be formalized through the ‘Pact of Steel’ of May 1939 between Germany and Italy, and the Tripartite Pact of September 1940 (subsequently joined by Hungary, Romania and Slovakia in November 1940 and Bulgaria in March 1941). Yet it was the Anti-Comintern Pact of 1936–37 that first sent a very clear and alarming message to the rest of the great powers: the most staunchly revisionist, militaristic and expansionist powers in the world had found their way to each other.\(^4\)

Such an alliance would have been difficult to predict when Hitler first came to power in Germany in 1933. For much of the early 1930s, Mussolini and his foreign policy advisors deeply distrusted Hitler’s geopolitical ambitions, notably his unconcealed aim to incorporate the German-Austrian rump state created by the Treaty of St Germain into the Greater German Reich. More worryingly, the Duce suspected that Hitler’s ambitions to swallow up all ethnic German minorities currently living under foreign rule would not stop at Italy’s borders, which contained the predominantly German-speaking population of Alto Adige/South Tyrol.\(^5\) Bilateral relations between the two countries only improved in the mid-1930s, largely due to Hitler’s support for Italy’s invasion of Ethiopia and subsequent cooperation during the Spanish Civil War.\(^6\)

German-Japanese relations in the first years of the Third Reich were also anything but straightforward. Traditionally, Germany’s (and indeed Italy’s) sympathies and economic interests lay in China, a source of indispensable raw materials for armaments production. For that reason alone, an alliance with Japan was vigorously opposed by influential Nazis such as Hermann Göring, and powerful industrialists such as the armaments magnate Gustav Krupp von Bohlen und Halbach, who rightly feared that

\(^3\) Ibid., p. 27.
any rapprochement with Japan would drive China into the camp of the Western Allies.\textsuperscript{7}

For much of the 1930s, the Japanese government and the country’s military elites had not been wholeheartedly supportive of an alliance with Berlin either, largely because it was feared that an understanding with Hitler would alienate Japan’s traditional Western ally, Britain. The primary goal of any rapprochement with Hitler was to weaken German links with China and to gain a potential ally against the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{8} Even after a meeting between the Japanese diplomat Oshima Hiroshi and Joachim von Ribbentrop in Berlin in 1935, it remained unclear what a potential agreement between the two powers might entail. While some politicians in Tokyo sought to limit the alliance to an anti-Soviet pact, there were also increasingly influential circles – notably the so-called reform bureaucrats and intellectuals of the Showa Research Association – that were pushing for a more inclusive alliance with Hitler. Led by such individuals as Shiratori Toshio, the Japanese ambassador to Rome until late 1939, the pro-Axis camp favoured a full alliance with Germany and Italy that would be directed against the Soviet Union on the one hand, and against Britain, France and the United States on the other.\textsuperscript{9}

Yet even after the signing of the Anti-Comintern Pact, the alliance was anything but frictionless. Throughout the Second World War, the Axis remained a far less coherent alliance than that formed by Britain and France (and subsequently joined by the United States). To be sure, the beginning of the Japanese war in China in July 1937 convinced Prime Minister Konoe Fumimaro that his country needed closer cooperation with other revisionist powers, and that it was in Japan’s interest to intensify relations with Italy and Germany. But neither before nor after 1939/41 did Japan, Germany and Italy produce a concerted plan of action to challenge the liberal world order that had been created in Paris in 1919 (and which all three states were eager to revise in their favour). There were no concrete agreements about global war aims or even functioning mechanisms of coordinating the war effort against the Grand Alliance.\textsuperscript{10}

\textsuperscript{9} Weinberg, \textit{A World at Arms}, p. 83.
Indeed, mutual irritations undermined the Axis from its inception. In 1939, for example, Hitler had anticipated that when he attacked Poland, Italy would fulfil its obligations under the terms of the Pact of Steel. However, while Mussolini was happy to use the international distraction caused by the German-Polish war as an opportunity to occupy Albania, the Duce felt unprepared for a more general war with the West, which Berlin was clearly willing to risk.\footnote{Weinberg, A World at Arms, p. 73.}

Japan, meanwhile, was shocked by the proclamation of the Hitler–Stalin Pact that preceded the German attack on Poland, and which looked to them like a violation of the Japanese-German Anti-Comintern Pact at a time when Tokyo was still engaged in active hostilities with the Soviet Union. Caught by surprise, the Japanese government concluded an armistice with Moscow that came into effect on 15 September. The Japanese reluctance to open up a second major front on the Soviet Union’s eastern border in 1942, in turn, put Hitler under serious pressure, as the Wehrmacht was now facing a numerically far superior enemy, whose attention was not diverted by a Japanese offensive on the Soviet Union’s eastern borders.

Against this background of continuing friction and half-hearted coordination between the principal Axis powers, this chapter will discuss what it was that actually held the ‘axis’ together. Was it an alliance simply based on common geopolitical interests and common enemies? Or was there such a thing as an ‘Axis ideology’, a set of core beliefs shared by the three major Axis powers, Germany, Italy and Japan? The answer to the latter question is likely to be ‘no’, if by ‘Axis ideology’ we mean a coherent transnational belief system similar to that offered by Marxism-Leninism, or even a shared minimum consensus about the intrinsic superiority of a certain political system over that offered by the West. After all, there existed considerable differences between the fascist regimes in Berlin and Rome, while wartime Japan can only be described as ‘fascist’ if we stretch the definition of that ideology to the point of meaninglessness.\footnote{Stanley Payne, A History of Fascism, 1914–1945 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), pp. 328–37; Rikki Kersten, ‘Japan’, in R. J. B. Bosworth (ed.), The Oxford Handbook of Fascism (Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 526–44; Hans Martin Krämer, ‘Faschismus in Japan. Anmerkungen zu einem für den internationalen Vergleich tauglichen Faschismusbegriff’, Sozial.Geschichte 20 (2005), 6–32.}

Unlike Germany and Italy, Japan...
lacked the essential fascist attribute of a single mass-based party, and no comparable attempts to those in Italy and Germany were made to violently ‘cleanse’ the body politic from broadly defined internal enemies.¹³

Nonetheless, it is possible to identify a number of comparable features between the Axis powers. Most importantly, perhaps, there was a common ideological rejection of the liberal political order on the one hand and Soviet-style Bolshevism on the other, as well as an attempt to provide authoritarian alternatives to that liberal order. In addition, all three countries harboured bitter antagonism toward ‘the West’ for the imposition of the 1919 peace treaties, which they considered detrimental to their geopolitical ambitions (or, in the case of Germany, outright criminal), notably their intention to establish imperial spheres of influence outside their existing borders, thereby achieving economic autarchy: Japan’s violent expansion into China and Southeast Asia and Hitler’s ambitions to carve out a Lebensraum in the vast space between the 1919 eastern German borders and the Urals had their functional equivalents in Mussolini’s ambitious plans for Italian dominance over northern Africa and the Mediterranean. The Fascist dream of an empire for a newly reinvigorated nation, the conquest of the spazio vitale, was Italy’s equivalent of Hitler’s fantastic plans for ‘living space’ in the East, even if the German variant proved much more deadly during the war itself.¹⁴ Racism was at the core of all three Axis powers’ expansionism and empire-building, as it legitimized the conquest of territories inhabited by ‘inferior’ races – be they Slavs, Chinese or apparently lesser Mediterranean (Greek) and African peoples – and the killing or rape of enemy civilians at will. Despite the rhetoric about its ambition to create a pan-Asian ‘sphere of co-prosperity’, the Japanese regime allowed its soldiers to massacre Korean and Chinese civilians en masse. And Mussolini adopted a policy of liquidating large sections of Ethiopia’s intelligentsia as a means of ‘pacifying’ the newly conquered territory. Biological racism certainly went furthest in Germany, where wartime anti-Semitism posed a unique case in its ambition to murder each

¹³ Payne, Fascism, pp. 333–6.
and every Jew in Nazi-occupied Europe, but Hitler’s genocidal ambitions and policies should not distract from the murderous racism that drove policies in wartime Japan or Fascist Italy.  

The historian Masao Maruyama, perhaps the most important advocate of the idea that Japan experienced ‘fascism from above’, has identified several additional features that wartime Japan shared with Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, notably a positive view of foreign expansion, the glorification of the military, and the firm belief that modernity had obscured a mythical ‘national essence’ (in Japanese, kokutai) that could be revived through war.  

It is certainly true that all three regimes sought to counter the challenges of modernity (and the ills of modern capitalism in particular) with the promise of a national rebirth that would strengthen the mythic historical core of the nation. War was endorsed by the political elites as a means to regenerate the respective ‘warrior nations’.

One important common feature that should be added to Maruyama’s list is the centrality of charismatic leadership, whether hereditary or through popular support, in all three countries. Although the Führer, the Duce and Emperor Hirohito certainly represented three different types of autocratic leaders – two dependent on ‘success’ and popular support to legitimize their rule, one consecrated by divine will – and three very different personalities, their role as leaders was crucial for the outbreak and course of the Second World War.

As in Nazi Germany, the Duce and the Emperor bridged social, cultural, generational and regional differences to help bind the nation together. Hitler’s ability to draw on cross-sectional support from the German people, well beyond the point where it had become clear that the Nazis were losing the war, is well documented by historians. And at least until the war took a bad turn for Italy, Mussolini, too, seemed to be a sacrosanct figure, however much his subordinates were reviled. Hirohito was unique in the sense that he remained beyond criticism even after the military defeat of 1945, when his subordinates accepted responsibility for the war and Japanese atrocities (and were promptly executed by the Allies), while Hirohito remained on


the throne until the mid-1980s. Unlike the post-Great War leadership cults around Hitler and Mussolini, the emperor-based ideology of wartime Japan dated back to the 1889 Meiji Constitution, which constituted an attempt to unite the nation in response to the ‘Western challenge’ and positioned the emperor at the apex of spiritual and legal authority in Japan, while at the same time leaving space for political actors to rule without reigning. The ‘Emperor System’, as described in the ideological tract *Kokutai no Hongi* (Cardinal Principles of National Polity), was built around several core principles: the divine origins of the imperial family; the essential racial and spiritual homogeneity of the Japanese; the notion of the emperor as father of the nation; and the mythical idea of a continuous line of emperors from ancient times.  

While Hitler and Mussolini depended on ‘success’ to sustain their charismatic leaderships, Hirohito did not. But this is not the only reason why the argument of structural similarities between the three regimes should not be pushed too far. Neither Hirohito nor his wartime Prime Minister, General Tojo, was a comparable dictator to Hitler or Mussolini, and their rule is better described as conservatively authoritarian rather than fascist, even if ultra-nationalism motivated the decision of all three regimes to go to war. Once they embarked on the path to total war, Japan became a military dictatorship, while the power in Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy always remained firmly in the hands of the civilian dictators.

The key question to be addressed by this chapter, then, is how the three rather different societies and regimes arrived at a historical juncture where a military alliance against the Soviet Union and ‘the West’ was considered desirable and put into practice. In order to answer that question, this chapter will place less emphasis on the war after 1941 than on the evolution of historical paths that temporarily converged in 1941. Any such structural analysis has to go back as far as the Paris Peace Conference, which opened in December 1918 and ended in the summer of 1919. Here, the victorious powers of the Great War aimed to produce a lasting settlement of the international order. Having fought a ‘war to end all wars’, however, the peacemakers created more problems than they solved.

The key issue, of course, was Germany, and how to prevent it from becoming a threat to European collective security again. In that respect,

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17 Kersten, ‘Japan’, p. 531.
the Treaty of Versailles turned out to be a complete failure. There was not a single party in Germany, either right or left, that did not reject the main provisions of the treaty. Revision of the settlement remained a powerful cause in German politics, and one of the fatal weaknesses of the Versailles Treaty was that it had been too harsh to be accepted by anyone in Germany, but not harsh enough to prevent the Reich from rising again.\textsuperscript{19}

Revisionism was not only an issue in Germany. The successor states of the collapsed Habsburg and Hohenzollern Empires, created on the basis of Wilson’s promise of national self-determination, were anything but ethnically homogeneous. Inevitably, this fed irredentism. Successor states sought expansion to include lands inhabited by ‘exiled’ ethnic minorities across Central and Eastern Europe. For Hitler and the Nazis, the ‘return’ of these minorities under German rule was imperative and laid the groundwork for the imperial project that Nazi Germany embarked on during the Second World War.\textsuperscript{20} But Germany was not alone in this. Hungary – Germany’s past and future wartime ally – lost 75 per cent of its pre-war territory in the Trianon settlement, and almost 3 million Hungarians were forced to live under Romanian, Czech and Yugoslav rule. Bulgaria, which had fought alongside Germany in the Great War, suffered a similar fate: a million ethnic Bulgarians lived under foreign rule after 1919. Austria, the German-speaking heartland of the Habsburg Empire, became a small republic. Its imperial territories were handed over by the Allies to the successor states of Poland, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia.

In contrast to Germany and the other Central Powers of the First World War, Italy and Japan were nominally victors of the Great War. But neither Rome nor Tokyo was entirely satisfied with the results of Paris. The Empire of Japan had been contemplating its peace aims for some time. As early as September 1915, the Japanese established the \textit{Kowa Junbi Iinkai} (Peace Preparation Commission) to coordinate planning among the military, the Cabinet and the Diet.\textsuperscript{21} The Japanese delegates to an inter-allied conference


in late 1917 received instructions for peace aims that prefigured more or less exactly what Japan would obtain from the Paris Peace Conference: despite its minimal involvement in actual fighting, Tokyo secured the formerly German-governed Shandong and control over the German Pacific islands north of the equator. Far less successful, however, was Japan’s proposal for the inclusion of a ‘racial equality’ clause in the Covenant of the League of Nations, as it felt itself to be the victim of racial discrimination. Strident opposition from the US government (concerned about Japanese immigration to California) and the British Dominions (notably from the Australians, fixated on maintaining Australia as a ‘White’ dominion) meant that Tokyo was left deeply frustrated and offended.22

The Italian government felt that it was left even worse off. Italy had entered the Great War against Germany and Austria-Hungary in 1915 and paid a high price for doing so: over 600,000 men were killed and many Italians had high expectations for compensation once the Central Powers had been defeated in 1918. In the peace treaty, some territory was won from Austria, most notably the partly German-speaking region of South Tyrol/Alto Adige, but nationalists were outraged by what the war poet Gabriele d’Annunzio called a ‘mutilated victory’ that prevented the country from taking control over ‘historically Italian’ territories in the Adriatic, now handed over to the new Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes.23

None of this augured well for the future. While Britain and France absorbed new territories into their respective empires (under mandates from the League), including the captured German colonies in Africa, and the formerly Ottoman territories in the Middle East (Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine and Iraq), Italy and Japan felt that they had been short-changed.

The immediate post-war period was important for the future formation of the Axis in yet another sense. The Great War had opened the floodgates of social revolution, most notably in Russia, where an extraordinarily violent civil war cost more than 3 million lives; but also in Germany, Austria and Hungary, where monarchies were toppled and replaced with fragile democratic states. The Russian Revolution was a key event, both as a


game-changer in international politics now confronted with the first Bolshevik regime openly hostile to Western liberal democracy and capitalism, and as a fantasy that mobilized anti-revolutionary forces well beyond those countries where a triumph of Bolshevism was probable.⁴⁴

In Germany and Italy, the successful consolidation of power by a determined revolutionary minority of Bolsheviks in Russia quickly injected a powerful new energy into politics and triggered the emergence of determined counter-revolutionary forces, for whom the violent repression of revolution, and more especially of revolutionaries, constituted their overriding goal. Not dissimilar to the situation in the late eighteenth century, when Europe’s horrified ruling elites feared a Jacobin ‘apocalyptic’ war, many Europeans after 1917 suspected that Bolshevism would spread to ‘infect’ the rest of the old world, prompting violent mobilization and action against the perceived menace. Fear of ‘Russian conditions’ resulted in a right-wing counter-mobilization that bred charismatic leaders such as Mussolini and Hitler.⁴⁵

During Italy’s so-called biennio rosso (the ‘Two Red Years’ of 1919 and 1920), strikes, factory and land occupations were common, while clashes with government forces led to more than 200 deaths. In the general elections of 1919, the socialists made major gains and the middle classes became increasingly worried about the possibility of a communist takeover and the inability of the liberal post-war Italian state to prevent it.⁴⁶ This was the context in which Fascism became a mass movement in Italy. In March 1919, Mussolini, a former socialist, founded the Italian Fascist movement, Fascio di Combattimento, which programmatically promoted a combination of nationalism, anti-socialism and anticlericalism, and which initially drew most heavily on the support of war veterans, but quickly attracted others as well.⁴⁷

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25 Gerwarth and Horne, ‘Bolshevism as Fantasy’.


27 Several very good general and local studies have been published on this. See, among others, MacGregor Knox, To the Threshold of Power, 1922/33: Origins and Dynamics of Fascist and National Socialist Dictatorships (2 vols., Cambridge University Press, 2007), vol. 1; Adrian Lyttelton, The Seizure of Power: Fascism in Italy, 1919–1929 (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1973); Frank M. Snowden, The Fascist Revolution in Tuscany, 1919–1922 (Cambridge University Press, 1989); on paramilitarism in Italy (and...
In the summer of 1922, when membership in the Fascist movement reached a quarter of a million, grass-roots Fascist pressure for the capture of power intensified, and in the autumn, plans for a ‘March on Rome’ were laid. The liberal Italian government faced a difficult choice. If they resisted, the army and police (who had proved rather ambivalent in their attitude toward the government) might refuse to fight the Fascists. Even if the Fascists were defeated, the radical left might profit. Politicians, business and the army agreed that it would be safest to bring the Fascists into the government. On 29 October 1922, Mussolini became the first fascist Prime Minister worldwide, and his ascent to power did not go unnoticed in either Japan or Germany.  

Hitler, at the time still the leader of a tiny fringe group of right-wing extremists with significantly less popular appeal than the Italian Fascists, tried to emulate Mussolini’s ‘March on Rome’ in 1923, when he attempted a putsch in Munich. The adventure ended in disaster, and Hitler was imprisoned in Landsberg where he had time to consolidate his ideological convictions and rethink his strategies for obtaining power.

By the time he came out of prison, Hitler had assembled the ideology of Nazism from disparate elements of anti-Semitism, pan-Germanism, eugenics and so-called racial hygiene, geopolitical expansionism, hostility to democracy and opposition to cultural modernism, which had been circulating in Germany for some time, but had not so far been integrated into a coherent whole. His political manifesto, Mein Kampf, with its emphasis on race and the quest for living space, did not, however, turn the Nazis into a mass movement. As late as the general elections of May 1928, the Nazi Party only secured 2.6 per cent of the popular vote, and a grand coalition of centrist and leftist parties, led by the Social Democrats, took office in Berlin. In October 1929, however, the Wall Street crash brought the German economy tumbling down with it. American banks withdrew the loans on which German economic recovery had been financed since 1924. German banks had to call in their loans to German businesses in response. Within little more than two years, more than one German worker in three was unemployed, and millions more were on short-term work or reduced wages.

Germany), see Sven Reichardt, ‘Faschistische Kampfbünde’: Gewalt und Gemeinschaft im italienischen Squadristmus und in der deutschen SA (Cologne: Böhlau, 2002).

The economic and political crisis in Germany undermined popular faith in democracy and benefited the radical parties of the left and right, which – without government responsibility – could make populist promises without having to put them to the test. By 1932, the Nazis were the strongest party in the Reichstag, but not strong enough to form a government of their own. It was only in January 1933, at a time when popular support for the Nazis began to wane, that Hindenburg – encouraged by conservative friends who believed they could control and instrumentalize the Nazis in a coalition government – decided to appoint Hitler to the Chancellorship. Although the Nazis had not created Germany’s economic and political crisis, they proved to be its main beneficiary.

The rise to power of Mussolini and Hitler (and the basis of their dictatorships) therefore differed substantially from the situation in Japan, largely because the political system there remained largely unchanged, and because the Emperor was neither ‘appointed’ nor a commoner, like the two fascist leaders whose power rested on a combination of public support and repression.29 Hitler’s talent as a demagogue and orator, and his ability to sway the masses is well documented. But Mussolini, too, was a charismatic leader. When Mussolini spoke in public, he was greeted by ‘fanatical scenes, delirious, mad’; of crowds ‘weeping, kneeling, shrieking, arms stretched out’.30

At the same time, there was an extraordinary degree of surveillance imposed on real or potential dissenters in both countries – far more so in Germany and Italy than in Japan, where the political police (the tokubetsu koto keisatsu) operated a less systematic regime than its European counterparts.31 The Nazis had very consciously used terror tactics from the moment of Hitler’s appointment as German Chancellor, in order to frighten the opposition into acquiescence. For Hitler, the purpose of ‘cleansing’ the nation of potential and real ‘internal enemies’ was to prepare the nation for war, without having to fear a repeat of November 1918, when – in his view – a small minority of revolutionaries on the home front had betrayed the German war effort and caused the military collapse. Open SA terror on

29 For public opinion in Italy, see Christopher Duggan, Fascist Voices: An Intimate History of Mussolini (Oxford University Press, 2013); Paul Corner, The Fascist Party and Popular Opinion in Mussolini’s Italy (Oxford University Press, 2012).
German streets in the early months of the Third Reich ultimately gave way to more sophisticated and ‘silent’ means of intimidation and suppression, largely orchestrated by the SS and, more specifically, the Gestapo. Although the Gestapo was never a huge organization – wartime Berlin, for example, a city with 4.5 million inhabitants, never had more than 800 Gestapo officers and operatives, or, in other words, one agent for 5,600 Berliners\textsuperscript{32} – it succeeded in creating a pervasive atmosphere of fear and suspicion. Making up for its relatively small size, its leaders suggested in public interviews and journalistic pieces that it was an omnipresent and omnipotent organization, rightly feared by the enemies of the state. This perception did not reflect the actual strength of the Nazis’ political police force, but it nonetheless successfully created a situation in which citizens refrained from committing ‘crimes’ out of fear of the Gestapo.\textsuperscript{33}

In Italy, too, critics of Mussolini’s regime were targeted long before the outbreak of war. Arrests, intimidation through violence and forced resettlement to remote parts of southern Italy affected outright political opponents, but also other ‘troublemakers’, such as homosexuals and petty criminals. The Gestapo’s Italian equivalent was the political police or ‘PolPol’, formed in 1926. It worked closely with local police and the Organization for Vigilance and Repression of Anti-Fascism (OVRA), which monitored the correspondence of dissidents. Similar to the Gestapo, OVRA employed former political enemies who were recruited under the threat of arrest. Some of them were former socialists or communists. The result of all this was a pervasive atmosphere of suspicion and distrust; even schoolchildren were wary of expressing criticism of the regime. As in Germany, many people sent denunciations to the police when they witnessed imprudent remarks or behaviour.\textsuperscript{34}

Japan’s path toward political radicalization bore a distant resemblance to the crisis of interwar Germany and pre-Fascist Italy, but it led to different results. Here, too, interwar domestic politics were profoundly affected by the crisis of the world economy, though in different ways from Germany or Italy. Japan had experienced a major economic boom during the Great War,

\textsuperscript{34} See diaries quoted in Duggan, \textit{Fascist Voices}.
when it gained predominance in the Asian markets previously dominated by the European colonial powers. Shortly after the war, however, foreign demand for Japanese goods collapsed, creating a deep recession and causing skyrocketing prices for basic foodstuffs and violent resistance against this development (as in the 1918 Rice Riots). The 1920s in Japan, the period of the so-called Taisho democracy, thus saw the rise of strikes and labour unrest, though never at a comparable level to post-war Italy and Germany. Following a major banking crisis in the mid-1920s and the beginning of the Great Depression, unemployment rates soared to 15 per cent of the Japanese workforce. Violence – after 1918 primarily directed against external enemies (as during the Japanese intervention in the Russian Civil War or in China) – became internalized, epitomized by various assassination attempts against Japanese Prime Ministers in 1930, 1932 and 1936. In that respect, Japan shared with post-First World War Germany and Italy the fatal weakness of liberal democracy in the face of socio-economic instability and increasing domestic violence. Public debates during this period revolved around how the country could confront the challenges of capitalist modernity. During the 1920s, Japanese statesmen had further been torn between different visions of the future of the empire, and whether Japan as a great power should pursue a **datsu A** (‘escape Asia’ or pro-Western) policy or an **ajia shugi** (pan-Asian) policy. But during the slump after 1929, Japan was increasingly denied access to markets and sources of raw materials. Not dissimilar to Germany and Italy, the Japanese military faced a particular tactical problem, in that certain critical raw materials – especially oil and rubber – were not available within the Japanese sphere of influence. Instead, Japan received most of its oil from the United States and rubber from British Malaya. Japanese nationalists reacted to Japan’s economic isolation with calls for a crusade against the West and the creation of a new order in world politics. Some intellectuals, such as Kita Ikki, or politicians like Nakano Seigo, advocated that Japan should follow the example of Fascist Italy in its attempt to create that new order.

Political radicalization in response to economic hardship was not specific to Japan, but a global phenomenon. The Great Depression ended the brief era of internationalist collaboration for which the treaties of Locarno and the

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Kellogg–Briand Pact stand. The dire economic and social consequences of the slump undermined confidence in liberal capitalism and parliamentary democracy, and pushed populations in many economies toward political extremism. In much of East Central Europe as well as in Japan, anti-democratic parties and elites built on popular resentments by articulating demands for some kind of new order in domestic as well as international politics.37

Leading circles in the Japanese military called for Japanese conquests to provide Japan with secure areas for colonization and economic exploitation, and an empire to match those of Britain and France. For Japan, the natural area of expansion was northern China. For years, large Japanese conglomerates (the zaibatsu) had operated the coalmines and iron deposits of Manchuria. Tokyo kept strong forces there – the so-called Kwantung Army – to protect Japan’s economic interests. Deteriorating relations with China and the growing Soviet threat from the north endangered those interests. At the instigation of right-wing leaders of the Kwantung Army, Japanese forces seized the whole of Manchuria in September 1931. After the Manchurian Incident, the puppet state of Manchukuo was established.38

The Manchurian crisis and the League of Nations’ lack of determination in its response to a Chinese plea for help showed that no state could expect to be protected by Geneva if it were attacked. This lesson was not lost on Mussolini. In Italy, as elsewhere, the Great Depression triggered a shift in foreign policy. Italian nationalists, like their Japanese counterparts, argued for an expansionist foreign policy in the Mediterranean and northern Africa. They planned to achieve this by enlarging Italy’s small colonial inheritance – Libya, Somalia, Eritrea – into a second Roman Empire.39

In 1932, the Italian Foreign Ministry began planning for the conquest of Ethiopia, one of the few countries in Africa not under colonial administration. Italian trade and investment were prominent in the country. To Mussolini and his closest advisors the seizure of Ethiopia seemed highly desirable. In October 1935, Italian forces invaded and victory was secured the

following spring. Similar to Hitler, whose popularity increased with every foreign policy ‘success’, Mussolini reached the height of his popularity with the successful invasion of Ethiopia, despite the indiscriminate use of poison gas and aerial bombing against military and civilian targets alike. The war in Ethiopia not only provided Mussolini with cause for optimism that Italians could be remoulded into aggressive, well-disciplined and fanatical members of a more ‘odious, tough and implacable’ new master race; Hitler’s support for Mussolini’s Ethiopian adventure also marked a turning point in the relationship between the two dictators and ultimately paved the way for the formation of the Axis in Europe. Mussolini now began to view the Germans as a kindred race – in contrast to the peoples of the West. In private conversations with his lover, Clara Petacci, the Duce insisted that only the Italians and Germans were able to ‘love that supreme, inexorable violence which is the chief motor force of world history’.

Hitler and Mussolini indeed both saw warfare as a positive way of bringing out the racial essence of their people. In the long-run, war, for Hitler, was inevitable, an existential necessity, and in that, Mussolini agreed. Mussolini himself described Italy’s intervention against the Western Allies as a war against ‘the plutocratic and reactionary democracies of the West who have invariably hindered the progress and often threatened the very existence of the Italian people’.

Hitler’s initial step toward what he considered an inevitable war with Soviet Russia (and, if necessary, the West) was to begin Germany’s rearmament in defiance of the Versailles Treaty. Italy and Japan acted more cautiously than the Third Reich, but certainly abandoned the course of expansion. If anything, the Manchurian Incident increased scepticism in Japan as to whether liberal democracy and party cabinets were capable of protecting Japanese interests in China. In November 1937, following a series of assassinations and even a putsch attempt in Tokyo, Japan began a more general war with China, mobilizing Japanese society long before the beginning of hostilities in the Pacific in late 1941. In January 1938, Japanese troops

42 Mussolini, as quoted in Duggan, Fascist Voices.
43 Knox, Common Destiny, p. 124.
moved swiftly and seized the Chinese capital at Nanjing. By the end of the year, most of northern and eastern China was in Japanese hands. In Italy, Mussolini found himself under pressure from his own party to extend Italian interests in the Mediterranean, the Mare Nostrum. He complied with these demands.  

The key reason for the escalation of the international crisis in the late 1930s, however, was Nazi Germany. While some sympathies existed in Western Europe for Berlin’s demands to ‘right the wrongs’ of the Versailles settlement and few objected even to the annexation of Austria in 1938, the mood changed in the autumn of 1938. Hitler had set his eyes on the Sudetenland, a territory in the west of Czechoslovakia, where some 3 million ethnic Germans lived. Although a European war was narrowly avoided at the Munich Conference in September 1938, London and Paris made it clear that they were prepared to fight if Hitler went any further. Meanwhile, Hitler’s gaze turned to Poland, a country whose legitimacy as a state he had never accepted in the first place. When the Polish government resisted Nazi pressure to renegotiate the country’s border with Germany, Hitler decided to resolve the issue once and for all through war.

In this situation, Mussolini proved to be a less reliable partner than Hitler had hoped. The conquest of Ethiopia in 1935, Italy’s military intervention in the Spanish Civil War (1936–39) and the long-term effects of the Great Depression had left the Italian state coffers empty. Given these pressures, further investments in the poorly equipped armed forces were impossible, leaving Italy woefully unprepared for a war against Britain and France. When it broke out, Mussolini had no alternative but to adopt a stance of ‘non-belligerence’, to the relief of most Italians. This proved to be extraordinarily popular among most Italians.

As soon as the Nazis’ military campaign turned out to be a success, however, Mussolini grew increasingly irritated at his countrymen’s evident distaste for war: ‘I have to say they nauseate me. They are cowards and weaklings . . . It’s disappointing and soul-destroying to see that I’ve failed to change these people into a people with steel and courage!’ The popular reaction to Italy’s

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declaration of war on France and Britain on 10 June 1940, which set Italy on a path of ‘common destiny’ with Nazi Germany, was mixed.\(^{47}\)

Mussolini’s anxiety grew when the Italian invasion of Greece in October 1940 turned out to be a catastrophe. Instead of the anticipated lightning victory, the poorly prepared Italian forces were humiliated by superior Greek troops, while the British quickly routed the Italians in Libya and Ethiopia. Hitler had to step in to rescue the situation, and the ease with which the Germans drove the British out of Greece, combined with Rommel’s stunning victories in North Africa, only added insult to injury from the Italian perspective.\(^{48}\)

Japan proved to be a more formidable military ally, even if the Japanese never opened up the second front in Russia that Hitler had hoped for. The Japanese, in fact, benefited more from the Nazis than vice versa. Even before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, German military successes in Europe allowed Japan to increase pressure on European colonial territories in Southeast Asia. The Dutch government agreed to provide Japan with oil supplies from the Dutch East Indies, while Vichy France agreed to an outright Japanese occupation of French Indochina. By the spring of 1940, according to Akira Iriye,

> a conscious decision was made in Tokyo to take advantage of the developments [in Europe] and to reorient its policy once again, this time not only to conclude an alliance with Germany and Italy, but also to effect a rapprochement with the Soviet Union. Tokyo’s grandiose scheme for establishing a worldwide coalition of non-democratic and anti-democratic nations pitted itself against an alliance of democratic powers, led by the United States and Britain.\(^{49}\)

But the gains Japan made from the Tripartite Pact and the Soviet pledge of neutrality in Asia through the Neutrality Pact were lost when Germany attacked the Soviet Union. In response, China and the Western Allies became even more resolute and ready to act in cooperation, even with the Soviet Union. ‘Rarely’, Iriye argues, ‘did a diplomatic initiative end in a more complete fiasco’.\(^{50}\) Events in Europe left the Japanese leadership in the late

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\(^{47}\) Knox, *Common Destiny*, p. 47.


\(^{50}\) Ibid., p. 113.
summer of 1941 in a remarkable state of uncertainty and indecisiveness; a consensus between the army, the navy and the civilians was hard to achieve.\(^{51}\)

By the autumn of 1941, and after the appointment of General Tojo Hideki as Prime Minister, the hawks had won the upper hand and Hirohito gave his consent to a war with the West in early November.\(^{52}\) Following the December 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor and the declaration of war in the South Pacific, Japan managed to conquer vast territories in the region – from Burma to Malaya, from the Dutch East Indies to Singapore and the Philippines. It was in this period, during which a one-party state (the Imperial Rule Assistance Association of 1940) was established and repression at home and violence abroad intensified, that Japan began to resemble its European allies more closely than before.\(^{53}\) The Japanese military’s overconfidence in its own abilities during the coming years was partly rooted in these easy early victories and partly in its racial stereotypes of other Asian peoples as inferior. Although the Japanese were initially welcomed in some Asian colonies by the indigenous populations as ‘liberators’ from European domination, the racial prejudices and extreme violence displayed by the Japanese military governments in these nations created great resentment and hostility that outlived the end of the Second World War. The stunning early Japanese victories over unprepared opponents had a negative side effect for Tokyo as well: they left Japan overextended and vulnerable to Allied counter-attacks that would ultimately drive the Japanese out of all of the territories they had conquered since 1941.\(^{54}\)

With the expansion of a regional war into a worldwide conflict in December 1941, the inability of the Axis to develop a global strategy became even clearer. At the time of the conclusion of the Tokyo–Berlin alliance, each side had reasons for a rapprochement that were in part strategic (the German desire for a means to offset British naval preponderance) and partly material (the Japanese interest in acquiring cutting-edge naval technology, now that access to such technology was severely restricted by the Anglo-American naval powers). From the beginning of the war, however, it was clear that great issues persisted, from enormous geographic distance to cultural and


\(^{52}\) Margaret Lamb and Nicholas Tarling, *From Versailles to Pearl Harbor: The Origins of the Second World War in Europe and Asia* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2001).


linguistic barriers; from incompatible strategic aims to the absence of any
direct contact by the top leadership of either country with that of the other.\footnote{55}

When one reflects on the dearth of opportunities for real strategic coordi-
nation between Germany and Japan in the Second World War, a counter-
factual question inevitably arises: was there no strategic theatre in which real
coordination was possible, no vital moment when the two nations, had they
coordinated their strategies, might have dealt a serious blow to the Allied
cause? Some historians have speculated that an all-out effort by the Japanese
to thrust into India and to seize Britain’s Indian Ocean bases at the same
time that German forces drove south through the Caucasus and east through
Suez might have knocked Britain or Russia out of the war.\footnote{56} Such ideas
even circulated among German navy circles in the spring of 1942. But such
plans were delusional, as they were simply beyond the capacities of either
nation to achieve.\footnote{57}

The most that was achieved through the efforts at cooperation by the
German and Japanese navies was long-range exchanges of technology, stra-
tegic resources, intelligence and personnel. At first, these exchanges were
undertaken by surface blockade runners, mostly German, slipping past Allied
blockades in the Atlantic. For Germany, this blockade-running effort offered
the possibility of obtaining vital resources from Japan’s empire of conquest:
rubber, tin, magnesium and other materials unavailable in Europe. But with
the increasing control achieved by Allied navies over the Atlantic, the Axis
powers were reduced to transporting such materials by submarines.

For the Japanese, communication and transportation by submarine offered
the possibility of acquiring German technologies and technical expertise. But
in the later stages of the war, the ability of the Allies to read both
German and Japanese naval communications traffic, and the ever-expanding
effectiveness of Allied anti-submarine warfare, made even submarine voy-
ages a thing of terrible risk for the German and Japanese navies.

By 1943, the fortunes of war were decisively turning against the Axis. The
costly German defeat at Stalingrad, the loss of control over northern


\footnote{57} Krug et al., *Reluctant Allies.*
Africa, as well as the Allied landing in Southern Italy and American victories in the Pacific, indicated the fatal weakness of the Axis once it had lost the surprise momentum of swift attacks. While in Germany and Japan the public continued to support the war effort, war enthusiasm in Italy collapsed quickly. When Mussolini was eventually overthrown in 1943, Italians welcomed the subsequent surrender. However, soon their former German allies started arresting Italian troops, sending them to the Reich as forced labourers. Over the following months the country experienced vicious fighting. The former Duce was rescued from captivity by German parachutists and installed in the puppet regime of Salò in the north, at the same time as a resistance movement emerged, meeting with brutal reprisals from Mussolini’s remaining followers and their German allies. More than 50,000 people were killed. Mussolini himself was shot by partisans while trying to flee, his body strung upside down outside a petrol station in the suburbs of Milan.

His principal Axis partner, Hitler, did not survive him for long, committing suicide in his bunker under the rubble that was left of the capital of the Third Reich. Hitler had been more ‘successful’ in mobilizing the Germans to fight until the bitter end, even after they had given up hope of military victory. A combination of brutal repression and propaganda, amplifying widespread fears of Soviet revenge and fatal loyalty to an ailing regime led to soaring casualty rates in the endgame of Nazi Germany. Japan, too, was to suffer its highest casualties in the final months of the war, but was only prepared to surrender after the dual nuclear strikes at Hiroshima and Nagasaki convinced Hirohito of the inevitability of defeat. Japan surrendered on 2 September 1945, but was unique among the Axis powers in at least one sense: the military defeat of Japan did not lead to the removal of the head of state. Unlike Hitler and Mussolini, whose charismatic leadership depended (as Max Weber pointed out and Mussolini discovered in 1943) on constant re-consecration by success, the Japanese Emperor seemed immune to the penalties of failure. In a controversial move, he was spared the public humiliation of a war criminal’s trial, and General MacArthur even decided that Hirohito should stay on as head of state to ensure the Japanese public’s acceptance of the US occupation. He continued to act as head of state until his death in 1987.

So looking back from the vantage point of the Axis’s total defeat, what can be said about the inner coherence of this alliance? It has been argued here that wartime Germany, Italy and Japan were not united by a shared and coherent ideological belief system similar to Marxism-Leninism, or by a desire to defend the values of a specific political system (such as liberal democracy in the case of Britain, France and the United States). The Axis was based on little more than fundamental opposition to those values represented by their military opponents during the Second World War. Yet all three regimes shared a common belief in the superiority of some kind of authoritarianism over liberal democracy and the desire to create new orders, both at home and abroad, notably through an expansionist foreign policy that would revise the Paris Peace system established in 1919. In all three countries between the later 1930s and 1945, ‘empire-building’ played a significant role, either as a source of radicalization (as in Japan) or the result of it (as in Germany and Italy). This comparatively thin platform of common ideological ground was one of many reasons why the Axis ultimately failed to achieve its objectives. Apart from serious economic, strategic and demographic disadvantages vis-à-vis the Western Allies and their Soviet partners, the lack of a concrete vision regarding their common post-war objectives undermined the efforts to defeat a well-coordinated global alliance of enemies.