

“PACT OF STEEL”

(ALLIANCE BETWEEN GERMANY AND ITALY)

TREATY AT A GLANCE

Completed

May 22, 1939 (“in the XVIIth year of the Fascist Era”), at Berlin

Signatories

Germany and Italy

Overview

Following Italy's annexation of Albania in April 1939, Germany and Italy fully formalized the Rome-Berlin Axis, which would make the two nations fateful allies in World War II.

Historical Background

By 1939 Adolf Hitler's diplomatic brinkmanship had gained him control over much of Europe without a shot being fired among the Great Powers, until now bent on appeasement of the sabre-rattling Nazis. When Hitler's occupation of Prague put to the lie all his peaceful protestation at the Munich Conference and afterward, many in Europe and Great Britain began, despite the MUNICH PACT, to speculate openly about the identity of his next “victim.” Some mentioned Romania, which had huge oil reserves. Others thought the Ukraine or Poland, with their expanses of Lebensraum for Hitler's excess ethnic Germans. A few even mentioned the so-called Germanic Netherlands.

British prime minister Neville Chamberlain, duped at Munich, had the grace to admit it publicly, and he denounced Hitler's mendacity in a speech on March 17, declaiming that not only could Hitler not be trusted, he must be stopped. Hitler's response came three days later: he demanded once again a German corridor across the Polish Corridor to East Prussia and the restoration to the German Reich of the seaport of Danzig. On March 31 Chamberlain's government declared unilaterally that it would guarantee Poland's security, and a week later signed a bilateral treaty. Rather than a sharp turn from appeasement, these were an embarrassed Chamberlain's somewhat desperate attempts to persuade Hitler to honor the policy of settling disputes by diplomacy, as they had at Munich, not by resorting to arms, as he had in Prague.

It was too late in any case. Italy's Benito Mussolini had been closely and enviously following Hitler's suc-

cession of brilliant diplomatic coups against what were quite evidently the enfeebled democracies of the West. Once Hitler, in his rise from obscurity to absolute power in Germany, had admired Mussolini as a model fascist leader, and Mussolini liked to consider the German Führer his younger protégé. But Mussolini understood that Italy traditionally fared best when playing Germany off against France, and he feared Hitler's expansion into the Danube River basin. Moreover, when the Nazis had arranged for the murder of Austrian chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss, whom Mussolini had supported on condition he establish an Italian-style fascist regime, in order to effect an Anschluss, Mussolini responded with the threat of force, which even if a bluff saved for the time being Austrian independence. In London and in Paris, the appeasers were beginning to see Il Duce as the one leader with the will to stand up to Hitler. As Hitler placed pressure on the oil-rich Saarland, Britain, France, and Italy met in the spring of 1935 at a conference in Stresa to reaffirm their joint opposition to German expansion.

But then Mussolini decided to imitate his protégé and simply take the independent African empire of Abyssinia from Haile Selassie. France and Britain felt they could not merely wink at Mussolini's Ethiopian adventure, so they pushed mild economic sanctions against Italy through the League of Nations, although these included neither an embargo on oil, which would have grounded Mussolini's air force, nor closure of the Suez Canal, which would have cut his supply line. Germany, no longer in the league, ignored the sanctions, thus healing the rift between the two dicta-

tors. In May 1936 Italian troops entered Addis Ababa and completed the conquest of Abyssinia, smashing the Stresa Front and transforming the League of Nations, according to A. J. P. Taylor, in a single day from a powerful body imposing sanctions, seemingly more effective than ever before, to an empty sham.

In June, Mussolini appointed his son-in-law, Galeazzo Ciano, as foreign minister, and in July, Ciano acquiesced in Germany's annexation of Austria. In November came the vague Rome-Berlin Axis and the equally vague German-Japanese ANTI-COMINTERN PACT, which Italy signed on to in November of the next year. In December 1937 Italy too quit the League of Nations.

By 1939, however, Hitler was leading the Axis, and he sometimes treated the preening Il Duce as the junior partner he in fact had become in fascist Europe. Increasingly, Mussolini felt he had something to prove in the face of Hitler's aggressive foreign diplomacy. Thus, on April 7 Italy annexed Albania and removed its erstwhile client King Zog. Now Mussolini was again a figure worthy of alliance with Hitler.

It was at this point that the German dictator reacted to Britain's guarantee to Poland with typical diplomatic crassness. "I'll cook them a stew they'll choke on," he spat. He renounced Germany's 1934 pact with the hapless Poles (see GERMAN-POLISH NONAGGRESSION DECLARATION) and the ANGLO-GERMAN NAVAL AGREEMENT of 1935, then entered the "PACT OF STEEL" with Italy. Far more explicit and ideologically grounded than the Anti-Comintern agreement of two years before, the pact turned the Italian-German "axis" into a true military alliance.

Terms

The treaty begins by acknowledging Italy's hegemony over Ethiopia (which it had annexed in 1935) and Albania by reference to Victor Emanuel III, titular head of the Italian government, as "King of Italy and Albania, Emperor of Ethiopia." It goes on to cite the "close relationship of friendship and homogeneity . . . between Nationalist Socialist Germany and Fascist Italy" as the basis for this "solemn pact."



The German Chancellor and His Majesty the King of Italy and Albania, Emperor of Ethiopia, deem that the time has come to strengthen the close relationship of friendship and homogeneity, existing between National Socialist Germany and Fascist Italy, by a solemn pact.

Now that a safe bridge for mutual aid and assistance has been established by the common frontier between Germany and Italy fixed for all time, both Governments reaffirm the policy,

the principles and objectives of which have already been agreed upon by them, and which has proved successful, both for promoting the interests of the two countries and also for safeguarding peace in Europe.

Firmly united by the inner affinity between their ideologies and the comprehensive solidarity of their interests, the German and Italian nations are resolved in future also to act side by side and with united forces to secure their living space and to maintain peace.

Following this path, marked out for them by history, Germany and Italy intend, in the midst of a world of unrest and disintegration, to serve the task of safeguarding the foundations of European civilization.

In order to lay down these principles in a pact there have been appointed plenipotentiaries . . . and they have agreed on the following terms.

Article I

The High Contracting Parties will remain in continuous contact with each other in order to reach an understanding on all questions affecting their common interests or the general European situation.

Article II

Should the common interests of the High Contracting Parties be endangered by international events of any kind whatsoever, they will immediately enter into consultations on the measures to be taken for the protection of these interests.

Should the security or other vital interests of one of the High Contracting Parties be threatened from without, the other High Contracting Party will afford the threatened party full political and diplomatic support in order to remove this threat.

Article III

If, contrary to the wishes and hopes of the High Contracting Parties, it should happen that one of them became involved in warlike complications with another Power or Powers, the other High Contracting Party would immediately come to its assistance as an ally and support it with all its military forces on land, at sea and in the air.

Article IV

In order to ensure in specific cases the speedy execution of the obligations of alliance undertaken under Article III, the Governments of the two High Contracting Parties will further intensify their collaboration in the military field, and in the field of war economy.

In the same way the two Governments will remain in continuous consultation also on other measures necessary for the practical execution of the provisions of this Pact.

For the purposes indicated in paragraphs 1 and 2 above, the two Governments will set up commissions which will be under the direction of the two Foreign Ministers.

Article V

The High Contracting Parties undertake even now that, in the event of war waged jointly, they will conclude an armistice and peace only in full agreement with each other.

Article VI

The two High Contracting Parties are aware of the significance that attaches to their common relations with Powers friendly to them. They are resolved to maintain these relations in the future

also and together to shape them in accordance with the common interests which form the bonds between them and these Powers.

Article VII

This Pact shall enter into force immediately upon signature. The two High Contracting Parties are agreed in laying down that its first term of validity shall be for ten years. In good time before the expiry of this period, they will reach agreement on the extension of the validity of the Pact.

In witness whereof the plenipotentiaries have signed this Pact and affixed thereto their seals.

Done in duplicate in the German and the Italian languages, both texts being equally authoritative.

Berlin, May 22, 1939, in the XVIIth year of the Fascist Era.

JOACHIM V. RIBBENTROP
GALEAZZO CIANO



The pact was especially significant for its definition of the two nations' military alliance. Customarily, treaties defined alliances that were activated in the event that one of the signatories was attacked. In contrast, the Pact of Steel was to become active "if, con-

trary to the wishes and hopes of the High Contracting parties, it should happen that one of them became involved in warlike complications with another Power or Powers." Moreover, the treaty specifically defined a state of "collaboration in the military field, and in the field of war economy."

Consequences

The Pact of Steel made it clear: these were nations poised for conquest. Hitler, his confidence soaring, felt ready to carry out his plans for attacking Poland after neutralizing the Soviets with the cynical HITLER-HITALIN PACT, comforted by the understanding that Mussolini would stand with him. Mussolini, secure in the knowledge that he would eventually share in German triumphs, could strike when the time was right, which in this case meant June 1940. Remarking to one of his generals that all Italy needed was a few thousand dead to ensure its place at the peace conference, Il Duce declared war on France and Great Britain when Germany's early victories had already ensured French defeat.