# Parallel Wars: Strategy and the Nature of Mediterranean Conflict in the mid-Twentieth Century

# Guerras Paralelas: Estratégia e Natureza do Conflito Mediterrâneo em Meados do Século Vinte

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***Abstract***

During World War II three parallels conflicts were fought in the Mediterranean. The more straightforward was the dispute over the Mediterranean coastline, valid in itself. The second conflict was the passage through the Mediterranean. The third conflict was fought to escape the Mediterranean. The text interpret the dilemmas and contradictions of these overlapping conflicts, analyzing critically the conduct of war by Britain.

Keywords: World War Two; War in the Mediterranean; Parallel Wars.

***Resumo***

Durante a Segunda Guerra Mundial três conflitos paralelos foram travados no Mediterrâneo. O mais franco foi a disputa *pelo* litoral mediterrâneo, válida por si mesma. O segundo conflito era pela passagem *através* do Mediterrâneo. O terceiro conflito foi travado para *escapar* do Mediterrâneo. O texto interpreta os dilemas e contradições destes conflitos superpostos, analisando de forma crítica a condução da guerra pela Grã-Bretanha.

Palavras-chave: Segunda Guerra Mundial; Guerra no Mediterrâneo; Guerras Paralelas.

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Between June 1940 and May 1945 there were a series of significant land, sea and air campaigns fought *in* the Mediterranean. The great powers involved were Britain, Germany, the USA, Italy and France. The Soviet Union's direct participation was limited to small military aid missions.

In the Mediterranean Britain was the strategy-maker. The other powers were strategy takers. Only Britain had the potential to be a 'thalassocrat', the ruler of the sea. This role combined both power and desire. In the end, Britain's power failed – but by that time it had shaped the struggle for the Mediterranean to its conclusion. Italy, and to an extent France, had the desire to dominate the Middle Sea, but not the power to do so. The United States, and, possibly, Germany, may have had the power to dominate: but they had no coherent vision. In addition to the territories and colonies of the great powers, states around the Mediterranean littoral were both belligerents and battlegrounds for these campaigns: Egypt, Greece, Albania and Yugoslavia played important roles in the War; the last three mentioned were conquered and occupied. In the latter stages of the War states with no Mediterranean role volunteered to fight in the campaigns. For instance, a Brazilian expeditionary force landed in Italy in July 1944.

An analysis of these campaigns reveals that there were three parallel wars fought in the Mediterranean. The most straightforward war was *for* the Mediterranean littoral, valued in its own right. The second war was for passage *through* the Mediterranean. The third war was fought *to escape* the Mediterranean. In the 'thirties Mussolini had predicted, although not resolved, the tension that would be caused by these parallel wars. One could fight, he had said, for the 'natural space' of the Mediterranean, binding the north and south shores together as an organic whole. Yet, *Il Duce* feared, the Mediterranean would become a prison. The proper 'historical objectives' of empires were Asia, Africa and 'the Oceans', not the Mediterranean itself. Indeed Mussolini originated the term 'parallel war' in his March 1940 war plan in which he envisaged a naval offensive against Britain in the Mediterranean, and, if at all possible, beyond.[2] The Italian dictator was not the only commentator to notice the confining nature of war in the Mediterranean. Admirals Raeder and Doenitz, for instance, pointed out to Hitler that ships only entered the Middle Sea: they never left.[3] 'I thought we should', Churchill said of his own brainchild, the 1944 Anzio landings

[2] Meir Michaelis, 'Italy's Mediterranean Strategy, 1935–1939' in Michael Cohen and Martin Kolinsky (eds), *Britain and the Middle East in the 1930s: Security Problems, 1935–39* (Basingstoke, 1992), pp. 41–60; Reynolds Salerno, *Vital Crossroads: Mediterranean Origins of the Second World War, 1935–1940* (Ithaca, 2002), p. 106.

[3] Report of the Commander-in-Chief, Navy to the Fuehrer, 20 April 1941; Conference of the Commander-in-Chief, Navy with the Fuehrer at HQ Wolfsschanze in the afternoon of 25 July 1941; Report by the Commander-in-Chief, Navy to the Fuehrer in Berlin, 12 December 1941, *Fuehrer Conferences on Naval Affairs, III, 1941* (London, October 1947); German U-Boats Detailed for the Mediterranean and the Account of their Fate, September 1941 to September 1944, London, The National Archives (TNA), AIR41/54.

that failed to seize Rome, 'fling a wildcat ashore and all we got was an old stranded whale on the beach.'[4]

The ambiguities of the parallel Mediterranean wars were apparent to contemporary commentators. Strategy operated at two levels. The first level of high-level policy makers did not tend to explain themselves in detail in public. Nevertheless there was a 'strategic public sphere' in which politicians and journalists tried to work out what the Allies were fighting for. This public sphere persisted throughout the post-war period, and shaped the memory of the Mediterranean war. The question of belligerents' goals in waging their battles remained a puzzle in the 'strategic public sphere'. It was not always clear at the highest levels of policy making. In the post-war words of Sir Alan Brooke, 'we worked from day to day, a hand-to-mouth existence with a policy based on opportunism. Every wind that blew swung us like a weathercock.'[5] John North, one of the first historians of the war, noticed in 1944 that, 'the war in the Mediterranean was … only superficially a struggle between land armies for victory or defeat on the field of battle … land fighting as such … [was] no more than incidental to a vast strategic picture in which land forces … were called upon to carry to a decisive conclusion a series of campaigns which, in their deeper aspect, were essentially sea and air operations.'[6] As a result, North wrote in 1945, there would be 'the attempt to resolve [the] as yet unresolved question of grand strategy' in the Mediterranean. He also warned, in vain, that 'today, after victory, these are but arid topics'.[7]

**Through the Mediterranean**

The British described their Mediterranean as an 'artery'.[8] Armies and navies made the passage to the East through the artery, raw materials, tin, rubber, tea and, above all, oil, made their way West. On any given day in the mid-1930s the tonnage of British shipping in the Mediterranean was second only to that found in the North Atlantic. Seven million tons of commercial shipping called at Gibraltar every year.[9] The Mediterranean was not, however, Britain's only arterial route. Many of the same destinations could be reached by sailing the Atlantic-Indian Ocean route around Africa via the Cape of Good Hope. The Mediterranean's chief attraction was speed. A ship steaming from the Port of London to Bombay would take a full fortnight longer, and travel nearly

4 John Colville, *The Fringes of Power: Downing Street Diaries*, II, (London, 1987), 3 March 1944.
5 Alex Danchev and Dan Todman, eds, *Field Marshal Lord Alanbrooke: War Diaries, 1939-1945* (London, 2001). Brooke was commenting on the situation on 3 December 1941, a few days after he became Chief of the Imperial General Staff.
6 John North, 'Lessons of the North African Campaign', *Military Affairs*, 8 (Fall 1944), pp. 161-169, 161.
7 John North, 'Two Armies', *Military Affairs*, 9 (Fall 1945), pp. 270-274.
8 Elizabeth Monroe, *The Mediterranean in Politics* (Oxford, 1938), p. 11.
9 D. H. Cole, *Imperial Military Geography: General Characteristics of the Empire in Relation to Defence* (London, 8th edition, April 1935), pp. 89-112, 291-292.

four-and-a-half thousand miles more, to reach its destination if it did not pass through the Mediterranean. For the British, Mussolini charged, the Mediterranean was no more than, 'a short cut whereby the British empire reaches more rapidly its outlying territories.'[10]

A hostile Italy made it hard to imagine 'the artery' as a centrepiece of strategy. As early as 1925 the iconoclastic British military thinker Basil Liddell Hart had written that, 'when to the proved menace of submarine power is added the potential effect of aircraft attack against shipping in the narrow seas, it is time the British people awoke to the fact that, in the case of such a war, the Mediterranean would be impassable, and that this important artery would have to be abandoned.' The Suez Canal was really of little use, since shipping would have to sail instead around the Cape. Returning to the subject in the wake of the Italian conquest of Ethiopia in the spring, and the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in the summer, of 1936, Liddell Hart was satisfied that his predictions had proved accurate.[11]

In public navalists rejected new thinking on Mediterranean strategy.[12] Yet for all their protestations about the sanctity of their battleships, the Admirals were, in reality, far from sanguine. Dudley Pound, the wartime British First Sea Lord, then commanding the Royal Navy's Mediterranean Fleet, organised naval and air manoeuvres to test the possibilities of moving slow and fast convoys through the Mediterranean. His conclusions were not encouraging. The movement of a convoy through the Mediterranean, if opposed by Italian submarines and aeroplanes, would become a major fleet operation. As a result, 'the Central and Eastern Mediterranean, though seemingly one of the nearest of the foreign stations, becomes ... the most distant of all'.[13] In 1938 General 'Tiny' Ironside, subsequently Chief of the Imperial General Staff, was sent to inspect British military preparations in the Mediterranean. He confided to his diary, 'that it would be far too dangerous for our ships to think of going into the Mediterranean until we have cleared the air properly'. Ironside concluded that, 'the Mediterranean was now much more vulnerable than the Navy will ever admit'.[14]

The Royal Navy used a friendly defence correspondent, Hector Bywater, later famous as the man who predicted Pearl Harbor, to put their doubts into the public domain. Bywater made it his business to lay to rest some 'myths' about the Mediterranean. 'In my experience four people out of five are convinced that denial of the Mediterranean route would lead to grave shortage of foodstuffs

10 'Italian Role in Europe; Mediterranean Interests; Duce and British Policy, *The Times*, 2 November 1936, 14.
11 Basil Liddell Hart, 'The Strategic Future of the Mediterranean', *Yale Review*, 26/2 (1937), pp. 232-245.
12 Admiral Sir Herbert Richmond, 'The Strategy of the Mediterranean', *Foreign Affairs*, 14 (1935/36), pp. 274-282.
13 Lawrence Pratt, *East of Malta, West of Suez: Britain's Mediterranean Crisis, 1936-1939* (Cambridge, 1975), p. 119.
14 Roderick Macleod and Denis Kelly, eds, *The Ironside Diaries, 1937-1940* (London, Constable, 1962), 26 June 1937 & 2 October 1938.

and raw materials in Britain, if not to famine conditions. And yet that belief is unfounded.' Few people seemed to realise, 'what an appalling liability the Mediterranean was to us during the last war'. 'It is,' Bywater concluded, 'quite probable that a compromise policy would be adopted, the effect of which would be that we should retain ... our strategic grip on the Mediterranean route between Gibraltar and the Suez Canal by the conjoint use of naval, military and air power, while declaring that route our of bounds for all non-combatant traffic.' Bywater's account proved an accurate description of the strategy Britain adopted when it went to war with Italy in the summer of 1940.[15] Within days of becoming prime minister Churchill declared: 'I regard the Mediterranean as closed'.[16]

The 'compromise policy' narrowed the bounds of debate about the artery from grand strategy to mainly operational concerns. It set up a persistent discord between Churchill and his admirals as to whether military convoys could, or should, sail through the Mediterranean. In July 1940 Churchill said that he was 'going to insist that convoys should come through the Mediterranean'.[17] The admirals, on the whole, took a cautious line. The result was that between 1940 and 1942 each convoy sent through the Mediterranean, beginning with HATS in August 1940, was the subject of detailed and pressured debate. The convoys were infrequent, carefully planned, and resource intensive. Their purpose was threefold, to transfer naval forces into the eastern Mediterranean for offensive operations, mainly against Axis shipping, reinforcing Middle East Command in Egypt, and latterly to re-supply Malta.

Sea power thus became the servant of land and air power, rather than vice versa. This subordination was extraordinarily costly. In February 1942 the *Kriegsmarine* were able to report to Hitler that, 'the most significant factor at this time is that not a single heavy British ship in the Mediterranean is fully seaworthy. The Axis rules both the sea and the air in the Central Mediterranean … the Mediterranean situation is definitely favourable at the moment … the British position is at present weakest in the North-Africa-Suez area.'[18] The British naval commander-in-chief in the Mediterranean, Andrew Cunningham, admitted in March 1942 that although he had the largest command in the Royal Navy, 'there is now no fleet to go to sea in'.[19] In his valedictory report Cunningham charged that Britain had lost sight of why it was fighting in North Africa. 'The strategic reason for our presence in Gibraltar, Malta and the Middle East,' he wrote in June 1942, 'is

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15 Hector Bywater, 'The Changing Balance of Forces in the Mediterranean', *International Affairs*, 16 (1937), pp. 361-387.

16 Churchill to Ismay, 29 May 1940 printed in *Churchill War Papers* (New York, 1993 onwards), II, p. 191.

17 Bernard Freyberg, *Diary*, 8 July 1940 printed in *CWP*, II, pp. 494-95.

18 Report by the Commander-in-Chief, Navy to the Fuehrer, 13 February 1942, *Fuehrer Conferences on Naval Affairs, IV, 1942* (London, June 1947).

19 Michael Simpson, ed. *The Cunningham Papers, Volume I: The Mediterranean Fleet, 1939-1942* (Aldershot, 1999), 15 March 1942.

in order that we may have control of the Mediterranean Sea. At the moment that control has lapsed to an alarming extent owing to our weakened sea power which is due in part to war losses and weakness in the air and in part to the enemy success on land in capturing the important air and sea bases which we need. ... Until our strategical direction is fully alive to the implications of sea power we shall fail to achieve our objects. Within the Mediterranean the problem is principally that of application of sea power and our fighting ashore should be directed to assist in that application.'[20]

The Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Alan Brooke, believed that Churchill did not understand the true import of what Cunningham was telling him: 'the situation as regards shipping [without Mediterranean route] is most disturbing and one that the PM will not face,' he wrote in February 1942, 'and yet it is the one situation that will affect our whole strategy during the coming year.'[21] When he returned to the Mediterranean in November 1942, as naval commander for the *Torch* landings in Morocco and Algeria, however, Cunningham discomfited Brooke by pointing out that the arterial Mediterranean strategy was different from 'the Mediterranean strategy'. He told the Combined Chiefs of Staff at Casablanca that he could command the Mediterranean without the possession of Sicily. He openly doubted whether possession of the island, 'would add very greatly to the security of the sea route through the Mediterranean.' 'If we were in Sicily,' Cunningham observed, 'he would estimate the route as being 90% or more secure, without Sicily it would be 85% secure once we held the whole of the North African coast.'[22] Nevertheless when General George Marshall, the Chief of Staff of the US Army, came to justify the American Joint Chiefs of Staff's eventual support for an invasion of Sicily in July 1943 he said it was because the capture of Sicily would make the Mediterranean more secure for Allied shipping and save merchant vessels from the long haul around South Africa.[23]

In retrospect the 'arterial strategy' made the most sense of the North African campaigns. This was not a 'Desert War'. There was nothing remotely strategically interesting about 'the desert'. The British, Italians and Germans were fighting for a coast road, and a series of port settlements, and aerodromes. Coastal Cyrenaica was not a desert: the irrigated coastal towns and the terraces of the Green Mountain were fertile if delicate ecosystems. In 1934, when Libya had been created by decree, there had been no roads linking Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, the main form of transport was a weekly boat between Tripoli and Benghazi. Marshal Balbo built a one-thousand three-hundred-mile highway from the Tunisian border to the Egyptian frontier – the 'Balbia'. Construction began

[20] Cunningham, 'Memorandum on Command in the Middle East', 10 June 1942, *Cunningham Papers*, I.
[21] Brooke, *War Diary*, 4 February 1942.
[22] Brooke, *War Diary*, 18 January 1943.
[23] US Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States: The Conferences at Washington, 1942, and Casablanca, 1943* (Washington, 1968), p. 631 quoted in David Reynolds, 'North Africa in Anglo-American Strategy and Diplomacy, 1940-43', *La Guerre des Sables: Projets, Plans et Operations Militaries*, *École française de Rome*, 5 et 6 *octobre* 2012.

in October 1935 and was completed in January 1937.[24] Churchill speculated at the outset of the desert war, 'it may be … that the desert itself affords free movement to the enemy's supplies. I wonder whether this is so, and if so, why the Italians were at pains to construct this lengthy road.'[25]

British ambition was defined by how far they intended to go along the road. When the British recaptured Sollum, 'the most distinctive spot in the Western Desert', where immense six hundred foot high cliffs, falling from the desert plateau, clipped the Mediterranean coast, in December 1940, the commander-in-chief, Middle East, Sir Archibald Wavell, agreed with the commander-in-chief Mediterranean, Sir Andrew Cunningham, and the Air Officer Commanding Middle East, Sir Arthur Longmore, that their target was the Mediterranean ports, first Bardia and ultimately Tobruk.[26] In the spring of 1941, 'the Chiefs of Staff were of the opinion that we should make certain of our hold of the Eastern Mediterranean ... to carry out this policy, we must first of all clear out Cyrenaica, and secure Benghazi. This would deprive the Italians and the Germans of all the first class aerodromes within striking distance of Alexandria.'[27] Following the fall of Crete in May 1941, Andrew Cunningham defined strategy as 'to try and close [the] southern flank.' 'If,' he said, 'the army can advance sufficiently to reach, say, Derna, a good deal will have been done … the whole object of thus clearing the Southern flank is to provide a series of airfields'.[28]

Derna was less than 200 miles by ship from Egypt. Its position on the bulge of the Libyan plateau, which pushed out into the Mediterranean, gave it its strategic attraction: not only was it a short flight from the Sicilian Narrows but it was in range of Greece and the Aegean. A key reason for the slow advance of the 8th Army in November 1942, after El Alamein, was a belief in the pivotal importance of Derna. 'My final objective', Montgomery recorded in his 'pursuit diary', 'was to establish the RAF in the [Derna] triangle of aerodromes; from this area the RAF could dominate the Mediterranean'.[29]

In retrospect the land campaigns in Libya and Tunisia could be reconfigured to be, once more, the handmaidens of a naval strategy. Indeed that strategy could be portrayed as a specifically British triumph. It was the proof that Britain combined the power and the desire to unify the Mediterranean. On Trinity Sunday, 20 June 1943, King George VI sailed in triumph from Tripoli to Valletta. 'I thought,' Cunningham wrote, 'a visit to Malta would have a great effect all over the

[24] Steven Morewood, *The British Defence of Egypt, 1935-1940: Conflict and Crisis in the Eastern Mediterranean* (London, 2005), pp. 124, 133.
[25] Churchill to Ismay, 10 July 1940 printed in *Churchill War Papers*, II, p. 499.
[26] I. S. O. Playfair, *The Mediterranean & Middle East*, I (London, amended edition, 1974), pp. 257-275; Victoria Schofield, *Wavell: Soldier and Statesman* (London, John Murray, 2006), pp. 145-164.
[27] Minutes of Defence Committee (Operations), 20 January 1941 printed in *CWP*, III, pp. 101-104.
[28] Cunningham to Pound, *Cunningham Papers*, I, 28 May 1941.
[29] Nigel Hamilton, *Monty: Master of the Battlefield, 1942–44* (London, 1987), pp. 56–7.

British Empire.'[30] 'The Mediterranean route to the East,' the British declared in June 1943, 'was again open'. By this they meant that 'super convoys' of well over a hundred ships at a time could sail west through the Sicilian Narrows, passing beyond Malta to points in the eastern Mediterranean. Due to their size these super convoys had a relatively low proportion of escorts to merchant ships. Their composition was thus in stark contrast to the 'compromise policy' in which a few merchant ships were fought through the Mediterranean by a much larger flotilla of warships. A ship sailing from Liverpool to Egypt now had its journey time shortened by forty-five days as a result of cutting through the Mediterranean instead of having to sail around South Africa. The 'opening' of the Mediterranean actually increased Allied ship casualties in the short term: there were now many more merchant ships to sink.[31] As a proportion of the whole, however, such losses were annoying rather than serious.

By the summer of 1944 well over eight-hundred convoys, comprising twelve-thousand ships, had passed through the Mediterranean.[32] In his immediate retrospect of the North African campaign John North argued that although the southern shipping route via South Africa, 'was never seriously imperilled by submarine or air attack, the route itself represented an almost intolerable strain on Allied shipping … at a time when U-boat warfare was still a prime factor in the outcome of the war in the west, the clearing of the North African coastline, as a preliminary to the re-opening of the Mediterranean route to Allied shipping, was a major strategic objective from the transportation angle alone.'[33] He went on to acknowledge, however that a belief in the primacy of the arterial strategy, 'the safety of the Mediterranean route – the first priority of the whole Allied strategy of the war', posed difficult questions for the later conduct of the war.[34]

**Escaping the Mediterranean**

In the 'thirties Mussolini had predicted that the Mediterranean would become a prison. As an existing global empire the British had historically been less concerned about becoming trapped in the Mediterranean. As a result thinking about 'the escape from the Mediterranean' was much less developed than the 'arterial strategy'.

In March 1940 Winston Churchill, then still First Lord of the Admiralty, wrote that 'the question that stares us in the face is "How are we going to win the war?"'[35] Churchill argued that

30 Cunningham to Aunt Doodles, 24 June 1943, Michael Simpson, ed., *The Cunningham Papers, II: The Triumph of Allied Sea Power, 1942-1946* (Aldershot, 2006).
31 'The Story of the North African Coastal Convoys', AIR23/7511.
32 *Mare Nostrum*, 14 September 1944, AIR23/920; 'British, Allied and Neutral Merchant Ship Losses in the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean due to Enemy Action', AIR41/54.
33 John North, 'Lessons of the North African Campaign', p. 161.
34 John North, 'Two Armies', pp. 270-274.
35 Churchill to Pound, 23 March 1940 printed in *CWP*, I, pp. 910-912.

the 'supreme strategic operation' should be an escape from the Mediterranean. The argument about the form and direction of this escape from the Mediterranean is what came to be known as 'the Mediterranean strategy' in Michael Howard's classic use of the phrase.[36] The argument formed the centrepiece of Anglo-American debates in the middle years of the war. By that time the British and the Americans had a complex system of strategic decision-making: large staffs produced endless papers on the subject. They indulged in what became known as a transatlantic essay contest. At root, however, Allied strategy rested on some nebulous British assumptions held over from the early years of the war. These assumptions boiled down to two beliefs. First, that Britain's enemies could indeed be 'bottled up' in the Mediterranean. 'Should war be forced upon us by Italy in the Mediterranean,' Churchill wrote to his naval commanders just before he became prime minister, 'I do not see why we are obliged to take immediate offensive action. By closing Gibraltar and the Canal we inflict immense damage on Italy, and it is for her to come far from her bases to retaliate or try to break this distant blockade.'[37] Second, that some kind of *coup de main* in the Mediterranean would provide a 'quick fix' that would unravel the Axis.

The 'quick fix' had, in fact, been abandoned as a strategy before the outbreak of the war. Mediterranean war planning reached a crescendo in the spring and early summer of 1939. Then the bubble of expectations burst. In May 1939 Sir Roger Backhouse, the most outspoken British champion of the 'quick fix' died in office. His successor as First Sea Lord, Dudley Pound, who would hold the post until his own premature death in 1943, arrived at the Admiralty fresh from commanding the Mediterranean Fleet. From his headquarters in Malta, Pound had regarded the stream of scenarios for a 'knock out' blow against Italy that had flowed from London with contempt. The Royal Navy performed a *volte-face*. 'Britain,' it now stated, 'could not, as hitherto contemplated … undertake offensive naval action' in the Mediterranean.[38]

Although Pound killed off the specific war plans, the belief in the 'quick fix' proved too strong to shake for long. This belief was most publicly resuscitated in the propaganda and political initiative of Churchill's Christmas 1940, 'Appeal to the Italian People'. 'One man and one man alone has ranged the Italian people in deadly struggle against the British Empire,' Churchill claimed, 'to stand up to the battery of the whole British Empire on sea, in the air, and in Africa'. As a result Italy had to 'call in Attila over the Brenner Pass with his hordes of ravenous soldiery and his gangs of Gestapo policemen to occupy, hold down.' The response should be clear, 'the Italian nation will once more take a hand in shaping its own fortunes; surely the Italian army … [which]

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36 Michael Howard, *The Mediterranean Strategy in the Second World War* (London, 1968) & Michael Howard, *Grand Strategy, August 1942-September 1943* (London, 1972).
37 Churchill to Pound & Phillips, 1 May 1940 printed in *CWP*, I, pp. 1181-82.
38 Salerno, *Vital Crossroads*, p. 131.

evidently has no heart for the job, should take some care of the life and future of Italy.'[39] The first stage of either 'bottling up' or the 'quick fix' would be the seizure of the 'delectable prizes on the Libyan shore'.[40]

With regard to both 'bottling up' and the 'quick fix' it could be argued that others' assumptions about what the British could do were as important as actual British plans. In December 1940 it was Hitler who believed that it was 'important to frustrate English efforts to establish … an air base that would threaten Italy in the first place and, incidentally, the Rumanian oilfields.'[41] His answer was the planned seizure of important points on the north Mediterranean littoral, particularly Salonika, and the immediate deployment of significant air forces in the Mediterranean. In January 1941 Hitler directed that 'the situation in the Mediterranean area, where England is employing superior forces against our allies, requires that Germany should assist for reasons of strategy, politics and psychology'.[42] In February 1941 Hitler decided to intervene with land forces in North Africa. His reasoning was based on the fear of 'bottling up'. The loss of Libya in itself was bearable, but it might cause Italy to drop out of the war. Germany would then be hemmed into the south coast of France. After the war Kesselring argued that Germany had played into Britain's hands by taking a half-hearted approach to the threat of being bottled up. The 'main error,' he claimed, 'lay in a total misunderstanding of the importance of the African and Mediterranean theatre. I never understood the ideas of Hitler and the *Wehrmacht* operations staff. Their fundamental mistake was completely to misjudge the importance of the Mediterranean theatre. They would not or could not see that from the end of 1941 the colonial war had taken on a different aspect, that Africa had become a theatre in which decisions vital to Europe were maturing.'[43]

'Bottling up' could be a conservative strategy. In an argument with the senior US army officer in the UK the Vice-Chief of the Imperial General Staff produced a glum version of 'bottling up' in North Africa: Britain could 'fight Germans there, add to her difficulties, keep away from her material resources she needs and hold the same for ourselves, and produce a "bloc" to impede her south-eastwards expansion.' 'Surely,' Sir Henry Pownall argued, 'these are all worth doing? Wars are won by a combination of a number of conditions ... one can't reject any one of them because in itself it is not sufficient to deliver a knock-out blow.' Pownall concluded that 'we can't beat Germany in the Middle East ... but we can fight Germans there.'[44] The act of fighting in the

39 'Mr. Churchill Speaks to the Italian People', *The Times*, 24 December 1940.
40 Churchill to Ismay (for COS), 6 January 1941 printed in *CWP*, III.
41 Directive 20, 20 December 1940 in Hugh Trevor-Roper (ed.), *Hitler's War Directives, 1939–1945* (Edinburgh, 2004).
42 Hitler Directive 22, 11 January 1941.
43 Albert Kesselring, *Memoirs* (London, 1953), p. 157.
44 Brian Bond, ed., *Chief of Staff: The Diaries of Lieutenant-General Sir Henry Pownall*, II, (London, 1974), 20 September 1941.

Mediterranean, it sometimes seemed, had a metaphysical rather than a strategic value. 'Far more important than the loss of ground is the idea that we cannot face the Germans and their appearance is enough to drive us back many scores of miles,' Churchill wrote in April 1941. 'Sooner or later we shall have to fight Huns.'[45] Such arguments did gain traction. Roosevelt himself had declared, as early as October 1941, to the consternation of his advisers, a serious interest in fighting in North Africa.[46] In 1943 General Marshall said that he supported the decision to invade Sicily from Tunisia 'because we will have in North Africa a large number of troops available'.[47]

Churchill always argued that 'bottling up' would require more than action in North Africa. He was willing to run many risks to strengthen the Mediterranean bulwark. At the beginning of 1941, 'the PM said that he was anxious to give the war a more active scope in the Mediterranean. We were being attacked at Malta ... and we should not doubt see the Germans arrive at Salonika. Greece might be ruined. We would find it difficult, if not impossible, to parry these blows and therefore, we must take steps to counter them by aggressive action at some point.'[48] The subsequent Greek expedition had more to do with politics than strategy. The permanent under-secretary at the Foreign Office noted in February 1941 that 'it *must*, in the end, be a failure … [but] better to have failed in a decent project than never to have tried at all.'[49] Churchill cabled the Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, then in the Mediterranean shaping British strategy, that it was 'difficult … to believe that we have any power to avert fate of Greece ... [but] loss of Greece and Balkans by no means a major catastrophe for us'. He calculated that, 'our ignominious ejection from Greece would do us [less harm] … than the fact of submission of Balkans, which with our scanty forces alone we have never been expected to prevent.'[50]

Contemporaries made even greater claims for counter-factual 'bottling up'. *The Spectator* argued in April 1941 that 'the importance of [the Mediterranean] is beyond exaggeration … it is the scene today of a strategy vast in its conceptions … German pincers movement is notorious … in the Mediterranean area two such movements, or attempted movements, are in progress, the one directed from the north and south of that sea, with the remainder of the Balkans, Turkey, Syria, Palestine, Iraq and Egypt as its destined prey, the other, geographically still more ambitious, aiming at securing Spain, Morocco, Tunis, Algeria and Libya, as well as the eastern spoils, and thus adding the whole of the Iberian peninsula, with the northern and much of the western coast of Africa, to the

45 Churchill to Eden, 3 April 1941 quoted in *CWP*, III, p. 445.
46 Nigel Hamilton, 'Torch', *La Guerre des Sables: Projets, Plans et Operations Militaries*, *École française de Rome*, 5 et 6 *octobre* 2012.
47 *Foreign Relations of the United States: The Conferences at Washington, 1942, and Casablanca, 1943* (Washington, 1968), p. 631.
48 Minutes of Defence Committee (Operations), 20 January 1941 printed in *CWP*, III, pp. 101-104.
49 David Dilks (ed.), *The Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan 1938–45* (London, Cassell, 1971), 24 February 1941.
50 Churchill to Eden, 5 March 1941 printed in *CWP*, III, pp. 311-312.

projected booty … both more practical and more attractive than the invasion of Britain. And imaginative though the conception may be, let us not suppose for a moment that it is merely visionary. It can be, and may be, realised unless we take prompt and vigorous measures to prevent that.'[51] In 1946 Norman Angell claimed to have 'put again and again to American anti-imperialists the question: 'Would not Germany and Japan have won their war against the West and its institutions if there had been no British Empire in 1940 – no Gibraltar, Malta, a base in Egypt to prevent the junction of the totalitarian powers?'[52]

The actual importance of Egypt, as the stopper in the bottle remained a moot point. Some commanders had doubts about either metaphysical or physical bottling up. Sir Arthur Longmore, the commander of the RAF in the Middle East, said 'it really didn't matter whether we held Egypt or not. All we had to do was to fall South and let the Mediterranean look after itself.'[53] Military doubts about 'bottling up' culminated in a confrontation between Churchill and Sir John Dill, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, which resulted in an irreparable breach between the two men. Dill told Churchill that, 'the loss of Egypt would be a calamity which I do not regard as likely and one which we should not accept without a most desperate fight; but it would not end the War. Churchill replied contemptuously that, 'I gather you would be prepared to face the loss of Egypt and the Nile Valley, together with the surrender or ruining of the Army of half a million we have concentrated there ... I do not take that view'.[54]

In the great crisis of the summer of 1942 when Churchill himself went to Cairo to replace Britain's army commanders, there was a discussion between him and Dill's successor, Alan Brooke. 'We discussed the relative importance of Egypt as opposed to Abadan,' Brooke recorded, 'and all agreed that the latter's importance was paramount.'[55] Churchill announced that a Persia-Iraq Command would be split off from Middle East Command. The military commanders whom Churchill left behind in Cairo, however, pointed out that the grand strategies discussed during the prime minister's visit were not necessarily relevant: the future lay not in great imagined sweeps across the Caucasus in months to come but in what happened in North Africa in days to come. General 'Jumbo' Wilson, although appointed to head the Persia-Iraq command, headed west rather than east, taking command of the force that would fight on in Egypt if Rommel destroyed the field army at Alamein.[56]

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51 'The Mediterranean War', *The Spectator*, 25 April 1941, pp. 440-441.
52 Sir Norman Angell, 'America-Britain', *The Spectator*, 20 September 1946, pp. 281-282.
53 Trefor Evans, ed., *The Killearn Diaries, 1934-1946* (London, 1972), 14 April 1941.
54 Alex Danchev, 'Dilly-Dally, or Having the Last Word: FM Sir John Dill and PM Winston Churchill', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 22 (1987), pp. 21-44.
55 Brooke, *War Diary*, 4 August 1942.
56 Field-Marshal Lord Wilson of Libya, *Eight Years Overseas, 1939-1947* (London, Hutchinson, 1948), pp. 134-135.

The ambiguous strategy of 'bottling up' always ran, in British minds, in parallel with the even more ambiguous 'quick fix'. In 1941 Churchill had demanded an escape from the Mediterranean via Greece. Even before any significant victory had been won in North Africa he was confident that the deployment of American military power in French North Africa would make escape both a genuine political and military possibility. He proposed a spacious definition of the 'Second Front' as comprising 'both the Atlantic and Mediterranean coasts of Europe' along with the idea that 'we can push either right-handed [in the Mediterranean], left-handed [across the English Channel], or both-handed as our resources and circumstances permit.' When Churchill travelled to Moscow in August 1942 to sell this version of 'escape' to a sceptical Stalin he drew a sketch of a crocodile. Northern France, he said, constituted the hard snout of Hitler's Europe; it was better, therefore, first to strike at the enemy's 'soft underbelly' in the Mediterranean.[57]

The concept of the 'soft underbelly' was to some extent a political convenience for Churchill and Roosevelt. 'We believe,' they jointly assured Stalin after Casablanca, 'that these operations … may well bring Germany to its knees in 1943'. There were, however, genuine military adherents of the Mediterranean 'quick fix'. Alan Brooke said to his staff officer, John Kennedy, before they set off for the Casablanca conference in January 1943 that he was, 'quite determined to go flat out in the Mediterranean: if we can get near enough to bomb the Rumanian oil fields and cut the Aegean and Turkish traffic there is a real probability that the Germans may collapse within a year.'[58] The main focus of the 'quick fix', however, remained Italy. There was a consistency in British assumptions. When Brooke himself took office in December 1941 he wrote 'I am positive that our policy for the conduct of the war should be to direct both our military and political efforts towards the early conquest of North Africa. From there we shall be able to re-open the Mediterranean and to stage offensive operations against Italy.'[59] On first day of the Alamein offensive he confirmed that, 'just after taking on CIGS I had planned my policy for running the war. I wanted to clear North Africa, open the Mediterranean, threaten Southern Europe and at some later date liberate France'.[60] Under Brooke's chairmanship the British Chiefs of Staff in London continued to talk of dramatic advances that could be made in the Mediterranean, in Sicily, Sardinia, Italy or even Turkey at relatively little cost.

Actual experience in North Africa led some to doubt the validity of the 'quick fix'. At the beginning of December 1942 Churchill had predicted that the campaign in North Africa would be

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57 Prime Minister to Chiefs of Staff, 23 July 1942 quoted in David Reynolds, 'North Africa in Anglo-American Strategy and Diplomacy, 1940-1943'.

58 Kennedy Diary, 8 December 1942 quoted in Nicholas Tamkin, 'Britain's Relations with Turkey during the Second World War', (Ph.D thesis, Cambridge University, 2006), 142.

59 Brooke, *War Diary*, 3 December 1942.

60 Brooke, *War Diary*, 23 October 1942.

over 'by the end of the year'.[61] Harold Macmillan, the British resident cabinet minister sent to the Mediterranean in January 1943 observed, on the other hand, that 'the trouble is that no one really has any idea as to the future course of the war. ... and the experts cannot give them any guidance. The better they are, the less willing I find them (I mean men like Cunningham, Tedder and Alexander) to express a view. Certainly there is no sign of any break in German morale on this front. They are fighting fiercely and valiantly.'[62] Dwight Eisenhower, the Allied commander in North-West Africa, complained that, 'so many people are considering the war already won and are concerning themselves with considerations of "after the war" jockeying for position.' Like Macmillan he emphasised 'the toughness and skill of the Germans, both in offensive and defensive battle'.[63] Visiting the Salerno beachhead, after the invasion of Italy, Eisenhower similarly concluded, 'there was every indication that the Germans had expended their energy and were battle-weary: signs of withdrawal were evident all along the front; but it was a certainty that this withdrawal would be planned to impede our advance and to inflict the greatest number of battle casualties on us'.[64]

The 'quick fix' remained, however, at the heart of Allied strategy. In July 1943, Eisenhower and his three chief subordinates, all British, met at La Marsa on the Bay of Tunis. They agreed that caution needed to be thrown aside. The Italian collapse on Sicily made an ambitious assault on the Italian mainland, not just a hop across the Straits of Messina into Calabria, the Toe of Italy, a viable prospect. 'I recommend carrying the war to the mainland of Italy immediately Sicily has been captured,' Eisenhower wrote to his reluctant bosses in Washington. Ike's conversion to the operation long advocated by his British colleagues was something of a coup.[65] Eisenhower said his that his biggest failure in North Africa had been the result of diverting forces to the Atlantic coast. He should have opposed the pointless invasion of Morocco and concentrated solely on the Mediterranean, as the British had advocated.[66] 'There might occur,' Eisenhower advised Marshall, 'a vast but possibly fleeting opportunity to accomplish all we are seeking in the Italian peninsula'.[67] As late as December 1943 he argued that, 'the most important land objective in the Mediterranean, from a strategic standpoint, is the Po Valley because of the fact that land forces based there are extremely threatening to the German structure in the Balkans, France and in the Reich itself ... from

61 Reynolds, 'North Africa in Anglo-American Strategy and Diplomacy, 1940-43'.
62 Harold Macmillan, *War Diaries: The War in the Mediterranean, 1943-1945* (London, 1984), 1 April 1943.
63 Alfred Chandler (ed.), *The Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower: The War Years* (Baltimore, 1970), Eisenhower to Marshall, 5 April 1943.
64 C. J. C. Molony (ed.), *The Mediterranean and the Middle East, V: The Campaign in Sicily and the Campaign in Italy to 31 March 1944* (London, 1973), pp. 323-24.
65 Eisenhower to JCS, 18 July 1943, *Eisenhower Papers*.
66 Harry Butcher, *My Three Years with Eisenhower: The Personal Diary of Harry C. Butcher, Naval Aide to General Eisenhower, 1942 to 1945* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1946), 14 August 1943.
67 Eisenhower to Marshall, 29 July 1943, *Eisenhower Papers*; Brooke, *War Diary*, 15 August 1943.

that position, landing operations either to the east or the west can be more readily supported'.[68] As the critical American historian Richard Leighton regretted in 1963, for the rest of the War, US, no less than British, 'strategy evolved as a process of constant adjustment to the consequences' of Britain's pursuit of a 'quick fix' in the Mediterranean. General Marshall described this pursuit as a 'suction pump' that inexorably drew in resources.[69]

**Conclusion**

The ambiguities of the parallel Mediterranean wars were apparent to contemporary commentators. In 1952 the British geopolitical writer Gordon East, a champion of the 'pivotal' importance of the Mediterranean, returned to a subject that he had first tackled in 1937. Then he had been sure that the Mediterranean 'should be regarded in its entirety . . . as part of the continent of Europe, with which its relationships, physical and human, have been closest'.[70] Fifteen years later he still maintained that the Mediterranean had been vital to victory in Europe. 'Allied sea power,' East argued, 'taking advantage of the peninsular character of Europe, thus made practicable the invasion of Italy … the "Mediterranean" school of strategists had justified its views,' he wrote in his post-war retrospect. 'The grandiose strategy of the enemy, which would have outflanked the Allied position in the Mediterranean by a gigantic pincer movement directed toward the Middle East from the Caucasus and from Libya, came to nothing,' he observed. The British had thus fought a rational and successful 'war of escape' that contrasted favourably 'with the failure of the Mediterranean strategists' of the First World War, 'the Easterners'. But, East admitted, the war *to escape* the Mediterranean had, in fact, become a war *for* the littoral, and had had entirely unpredicted consequences: 'the revolutionary advent of the state of Israel and the creation of an independent Libya in place of Italian North Africa'.[71]

War in the Mediterranean, on the testimony of contemporary accounts, was a strange beast. It rested on a series of counter-factuals. The North African campaigns made perfect sense if the Allies had been pursuing the arterial strategy. It is the Italian campaign that can be challenged on that score. But from the beginning Britain was playing a bigger, if ill-defined, game in the Mediterranean. This game was more open to the accusation of being a 'weathercock'.

68 Robert Ferrell (ed.), *The Eisenhower Diaries* (New York, 1981), 6 December 1943.
69 Quoted in Reynolds, 'North Africa in Anglo-American Strategy and Diplomacy, 1940-43'.
70 Gordon East, 'The Mediterranean Problem', *Geographical Review*, 28 (January 1938), pp. 83–101.
71 Gordon East, 'The Mediterranean: Pivot of Peace and War, *Foreign Affairs*, 31 (1952/1953), pp. 619–33.