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**Reynolds M. Salerno**, *Vital Crossroads; Mediterranean Origins of the Second World War, 1935-1940*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2003. xi + 285pp. Bibliography and index. \$36.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 0-8014-3772-5.

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There are a great many works that purport to be international history but, unfortunately, many are not that international. These are often based on an archival study of just one side of the story. Yet many of the key questions to which scholars in the field of international history are increasingly turning their attention require not just one or two sides of events, but three or more. Reynolds Salerno is one of a number of young historians who, while writing their doctoral dissertations, took advantage of the considerable intellectual and financial resources available at Yale University to do just that. Asking important questions about how states interact and how the international system changes, and comparing how countries face challenges like war, they have produced valuable studies that are firmly based on extensive multi-national archival research.[1] This trend is well established; one can look back, for example, to Stephen Schuker's landmark study of the reparations question and the decline of French power in Europe after the First World War to see the illuminating power of this approach.[2] Conversely, Schuker and others also demonstrate the impossibility of coming to grips with these sorts of questions without a solid foundation in the key archives of the key countries. Despite this well-established fact, there remains a need to underscore how, even at the beginning of the twenty-first century, international history can often be anything but international.

The great strength of Salerno's work is that the perspective he brings is wide and deep, based on extensive archival work in each of the key countries involved in his study. This context allows him to demonstrate the important but often contradictory or unforeseen impact of policies by tracing their effects and reverberations not only on those at whom they were aimed but also the system as a whole. In addition, his work reinforces the studies of political scientists like Robert Jervis who have pointed out that scholars have sometimes underestimated the impact of system effects, and the unexpected or incalculable consequences of actions.[3] Calculations of strategy are rarely bilateral, as this study shows, and so, in order to understand how strategy unfolds, one needs to step back and see the indirect, as well as the direct, effects of what is being attempted.

Salerno's focus is the Anglo-French-Italian triangle between 1935 and 1940 as Europe slowly moved to war. Britain, already caught in a strategic dilemma of potentially having to fight two simultaneous wars in Europe and Asia, was loathe to add to its problems by doing anything that might tempt Mussolini to move even closer to Hitler and, in the worst-case scenario, open a third front in the Mediterranean. If that were to happen, the British would find a key line of communication with the Empire cut, and might indeed be confronted with a Solomon-like decision of having to choose what to do with their limited forces: defend Asia against Japan or the Mediterranean against Mussolini.

France had a strategic dilemma of its own. The country's defense against Nazi Germany depended in large part on the Anglo-French alliance. However, it was frequently France and her colonies who would have to pay the price of a British strategy of appeasing an ever more truculent Mussolini. The Mediterranean was central to French strategy and security in ways it was not for the British. Italy and the Mediterranean were on the country's border. While Britain and France both depended on it for access to their empires, in the French case, to lose control of the Mediterranean and contact with North Africa would be a particularly crippling blow. Crucially, it was from there that would come much of the manpower the metropole needed to defend itself. Given the perception that the coming conflict would be long and bloody, this was as at least as important to the French as was the British need to find a way to appease Mussolini and so avoid the impossible demands of a three-front war.

The third side of this triangle was Mussolini and his growing imperial ambition, which was in no small part fostered by the repeated foreign policy successes of Hitler. Mussolini's greatest asset was the Anglo-French disagreement over how to respond to the Duce's agitation for further Italian expansion into, and eventual control of, the Mediterranean. This advantage helped to cover up the profoundly unprepared state of the Italian military and economy for war.

It is this triangular relationship that is at the center of Salerno's study, and it is one of a number of important contributions that Salerno makes to the historiographical debate surrounding the question of the Mediterranean and the origins of the Second World War. He argues persuasively that events cannot be understood solely in the narrow terms of Anglo-Italian relations, but that the actions of France and the interactions between France, Britain, Italy, and their interactions with Germany are essential to understanding events.<sup>[4]</sup>

The different economic and military strengths of Britain, France, Italy, and Germany, as well as their alliance politics, differing perceptions and imperial interests only increased the complexity of the international politics of this period. Salerno weaves together this tangle of threads with great aplomb. The result is a sophisticated understanding of how these states interacted as a system and the importance and the effects, both direct and indirect, of policies like appeasement.

The 1935 Italian invasion of Ethiopia led Mussolini to embark upon a policy to split the Anglo-French alliance in order to open the road to his larger goal of constructing a Mediterranean empire. Italian ambitions raised deep concern with the Popular Front and Léon Blum, a sentiment shared by his successors. However, it prompted a contradictory reaction from Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and others in London who believed that appeasing Mussolini was an increasingly necessary policy given the mounting German and Japanese challenges. Anglo-French differences over Eastern Europe, although somewhat less divisive in comparison to the problem of Italy because neither country was directly threatened, did not help matters. Without an accord on policy towards Mussolini it was impossible to construct a coherent strategy for dealing with Hitler.

Salerno's summing up of the situation on the eve of the Czech crisis is a good illustration of what his triangular reconstruction of events shows, particularly the growing French concern that the continued refusal of Italy to improve Franco-Italian relations was dividing the Anglo-French alliance. He states, "Confident that their appeasement program for the Mediterranean could succeed with or without French participation the British remained indifferent to the enduring, and even burgeoning, French anxiety vis-à-vis Italy and the Mediterranean region during the summer of 1938. British lack of concern about a possible Franco-Italian reconciliation reflects Britain's arrogance in the Mediterranean a strange confidence that a Franco-Italian conflict would not embroil Britain. The British needed to hold this belief because they were determined to do nothing that would encourage the development of an Anglo-French alliance or place their Far Eastern empire in jeopardy. Yet the French perceived a direct connection between their talks with Italy, a general Mediterranean appeasement, and an eventual

alliance with Britain. On the eve of the Czech crisis, this stark difference in perspective over Italy further strained Anglo-French relations" (p. 59).

By the end of 1938, much of Eastern Europe was in Hitler's hands and, by 1939, the Pact of Steel had been signed. German expansion and the rapprochement between Berlin and Rome exacerbated problems inside the Anglo-French alliance. The British continued to push for a policy of appeasement despite increasing Italian demands, while France, sensing the approach of war, felt that the best Allied strategy, once fighting began, would be to attack the weaker of the two Axis powers--Italy. As in the First World War, Anglo-French disagreements over strategy arose, in part, from the search for post-war advantage and further undermined the effectiveness of their alliance.

Despite tilting towards Germany, Mussolini's continuing neutrality had the effect of maintaining British hopes that diplomacy and territorial compromise could keep Italy out of the war. Mussolini's approach bedeviled the Anglo-French alliance with problems. London and Paris proposed very different strategies and vetoed each other's proposals. The British would not support a French operation into the Balkans via Salonika, while the French were equally unimpressed with London's proposal for the construction of a neutral Balkan bloc. The Anglo-French alliance was, to an important degree, paralyzed.

To this central strand, the growing divide between London and Paris, are woven others. The French themselves suffered important internal divisions, especially in 1939, over how to deal with Italy. Admiral François Darlan, chief of the French naval staff, was amongst those convinced that the French navy was incapable of providing the necessary support for an operation into Salonika. Some politicians and senior members of the French Foreign Ministry, among them Georges Bonnet and André François-Poncet, felt that with the arrival of war, France was too weak to engage in a policy of confrontation with Italy. They argued that the country could ill afford to weaken the western front to defend the border with Italy.

Yet at other moments, the fear of Italy becoming embroiled in a war with the Allies provoked just the opposite result: grave concerns in Rome, particularly for the Italian navy. At Munich, for example, Italian participation was in no small part a reflection of Rome's concerns over just the opposite of what moved Bonnet and François-Poncet months later, a weak Italy facing a powerful Anglo-French alliance.

Adding to the Italian problem were the often inflated Allied intelligence estimates of Italy's military power. This did little to diminish Anglo-French differences. The Italian leadership had relatively better information on their own military weakness, of course, and this knowledge did little to encourage Italy's entry into a European conflict. However, fear of a strong Italy entering the war on Germany's side moved the British and French to accord the Italians trading privileges well beyond those offered to other countries. This decision undermined their long-war strategy of economic blockade against Hitler. Mussolini's weakness, along with Anglo-French miscalculation, helped to provide the Italians with many of the economic advantages of the wartime situation, including the ability to serve as a key source of supply for some badly needed German imports, but with none of the military costs of being a belligerent. By remaining threatening but neutral, Mussolini both undermined the integrity of the Allied blockade and extracted a military advantage for Hitler by forcing the Allies to maintain a military presence sufficient to deal with Italy, should Rome decide to enter the war.

The Italian problem contributed to, and helped to make more difficult, the Allied change from a long-war to a short-war strategy. As Allied calculations of the strength of Nazi Germany changed following the Nazi-Soviet pact and the fall of Eastern Europe, there developed an urgency to act. German conquest and the accord between Hitler and Stalin helped revise Allied strategy about the present and future balance of power. Time was increasingly seen as an enemy and the Allies needed to react before Germany grew even stronger from the digestion of its territorial gains and from the economic and

military advantages obtained as a result of the pact with Moscow.[5] Here as well, Salerno's account deepens our understanding of how Anglo-French-Italian-German relations unfolded in the run-up to the collapse of France. Anglo-French divisions, built on a firm foundation of differing perspectives and calculations, provided plenty of opportunity for both Mussolini's and Hitler's programs of expansion. They also minimized the impact of errors and weaknesses on the Axis side. The strength of Salerno's account is to show just how strategy, imperial interests, misperception, and other factors formed the events that led to war and the fall of France. Salerno's analysis brings out what went right, what went wrong, what was unforeseen, and, most importantly, the interaction between all three.

It is unfortunate that in the conversion from thesis to book, one aspect of this fine study was, to a large extent, lost: a discussion of the extensive historiography of the subject. Without a historiographical anchor, Salerno's argument about the centrality of the Mediterranean to our understanding of the war's origins has drifted. While his argument that the Mediterranean was a "vital crossroad" is perfectly reasonable, his suggestion that it contributed "as significantly as the western front" (pp. 8-9) to the collapse of the interwar states system leads, at times, to an overemphasis of the area's importance.

The attention paid to Darlan's 1939 efforts to persuade the Allies to opt for an offensive strategy in the Mediterranean against Italy (pp. 139-142) is one example of Salerno's underestimation of the centrality of the western front in Allied planning.[6] In fact, Salerno's work demonstrates that the global nature of imperial calculations meant that not only the Mediterranean but also Asia was an important factor in the construction of Allied and Axis strategy. With the arrival of war and the Allied adoption of a short-war strategy, areas like Scandinavia and the Mediterranean assumed even greater importance—but always as an outgrowth of what was, or was not, happening on the Rhine.

The western front remained key to the defense of the Anglo-French, but it did so in the context of increasing interdependence with the Mediterranean and Asian theatres, not to mention the Middle East and the Soviet Union. It is because Salerno is right about the need not to lose sight of the complexity of events and about the importance of studying the system as a whole and not as simply clusters around the London-Berlin axis, that the revisionist case for the importance of the Mediterranean is misplaced. If the Mediterranean assumes new importance after having read Salerno's study, it is because he has made it into an excellent laboratory in which to investigate to what extent policies worked, or did not work, in the complicated international politics leading up to the war. This does not detract from the work's importance for both historians and political scientists. Salerno's study is a significant step forward in the effort to make works of international history just that—international. Perhaps his greatest success is to demonstrate just how much a truly international study can tell us about the international system.

## NOTES

[1] See, for example, David G. Herrmann, *The Arming of Europe and the Making of the First World War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Matthew Connelly, *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria's Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); and Talbot Imlay, *Facing the Second World War: Strategy, Politics, and Economics in Britain and France, 1938-1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[2] Stephen A. Schuker, *The End of French Predominance in Europe; The Financial Crisis of 1924 and the Adoption of the Dawes Plan* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1976).

[3] Robert Jervis, *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

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[4] For example, compare Salerno's approach with that of Lawrence R. Pratt, *East of Malta, West of Suez: Britain's Mediterranean Crisis, 1936-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

[5] Talbot Imlay, "A Reassessment of Anglo-French Strategy during the Phony War, 1939-40", *English Historical Review* (forthcoming).

[6] For more on French plans to attack Italy see Reynolds M. Salerno, "The French Navy and the Appeasement of Italy, 1937-39," *English Historical Review*, 112 (1997): 66-104. For a balanced overall view of French strategy in this period see, for example, Peter Jackson, *France and the Nazi Menace; Intelligence and Policy Making, 1933-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), chapters 9-11, and Imlay, *Facing the Second World War*, chapter 2.

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