The History of the Twentieth Century
Episode 334
"Stalemate"
Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

In the game of chess, a stalemate is a situation in which the player whose turn it is to move has no legal move. If this happens, the game ends in a draw. Forcing stalemate can be a strategy in which a player with weaker pieces remaining might salvage a draw in a situation when the stronger player would ordinarily be expected to win.

Once it became clear that Britain could not be defeated either by ground invasion or aerial bombing, the German government and military sought other means of escaping the stalemate.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 334. Stalemate.

On June 30, 1940, shortly after the armistice with France, the chief of staff of the OKW, the Wehrmacht High Command, distributed a memo titled "The Continuation of the War against England." In that memo, Alfred Jodl asserted that a German victory was only a question of time, and outlined three possible ways that the United Kingdom might be forced to end its resistance against Germany.

The first was the political solution, meaning Germany and Britain would negotiate an armistice. On June 30, many people believed Britain would quit the war shortly, but you know that would not happen.

The second was, in Jodl's words, "making war against the English motherland," meaning either a ground invasion and occupation, or a combination of aerial bombing and blockade that would force the British to negotiate. The Battle of Britain was all about implementing that strategy, and you know that didn't work either.

That left Jodl's third suggestion: again in his words, "extending the war to the periphery." By that he meant picking apart the British Empire. He named Italy, Spain, the Soviet Union, and

Japan as other countries that might be enticed into cooperating with Germany in this project, if for no other reason than that they might well be interested in seizing portions of the British Empire for themselves.

Now that we know that neither of Jodl's first two ideas would pan out, I want to spend today's episode on the third: extending the war to the periphery.

Jodl had in mind that Japan might be interested in seizing British possessions in the Far East: Hong Kong, Malaya, Singapore, who knows, maybe even Australia and New Zealand. The Soviet Union might be induced to revive Russia's 19th-century competition with Britain in Central Asia and move against British India.

But foremost in his thoughts must have been the British presence in the Mediterranean. Germany does not have a Mediterranean coast, but Italy is its ally, and Italy is a long peninsula smack in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea. British land and naval forces in the British Isles posed no significant threat to Germany's dominance of Continental Europe. If the British could be forced out of the Mediterranean, it could be rendered altogether irrelevant, a nonentity in European affairs.

Britain has had a naval presence in the Mediterranean since 1704, when it took control of Gibraltar during the War of the Spanish Succession. For the next century, France and Spain each had more ships in the Western Mediterranean, while in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Ottoman Navy was still a force to be reckoned with.

This changed during the Napoleonic Wars, especially after the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805. Afterward, the Royal Navy would remain the most powerful naval force in the Mediterranean for the following 150 years. The 1814 Treaty of Paris awarded the island of Malta to Britain; Malta's strategic location in the center of the Mediterranean made it useful as a way-station and it became the headquarters of the Royal Navy's Mediterranean Fleet. In 1878, Britain took over administration of the island of Cyprus and in 1882, occupied Egypt. These two acquisitions gave Britain a significant presence in the Eastern Mediterranean.

At first impression, it may seem strange that the UK, an island nation neither in nor particularly close to the Mediterranean, would devote so much effort into establishing naval supremacy there. The Suez Canal is part of the answer. The canal represented Britain's link to its many possessions in Asia, most especially India, the jewel of the British Empire. But beyond that, something between one-third and one-half of all maritime trade passed through the Mediterranean in the 19th century. In fact, that remained true into the twentieth century and is still true in our time.

When Italy declared war on Britain on June 10, 1940, this immediately presented the gravest threat to British interests in the Mediterranean since Trafalgar. Mussolini's Italy boasted a

substantial and modern navy, the *Regia Marina,* which simply means "Royal Navy." It was not the equal of the Mediterranean Fleet, but it could not be dismissed, either.

And the rise of the airplane as an instrument of war complicated the British position. Axis propaganda would depict Italy as a giant, unsinkable aircraft carrier that could launch planes by the hundreds, making the land of Italy itself a formidable naval presence. And Axis propaganda was not too far off the mark, at least this one time.

Recognizing the new threat presented by aircraft, in 1937 the Royal Navy moved the headquarters of the Mediterranean Fleet from Malta to Alexandria, in Egypt, where it would be out of range of Italian aircraft. Nevertheless, as soon as Italy entered the war, the Mediterranean Sea became hostile waters for British merchant shipping, which was redirected around the southern tip of Africa. This increased costs and travel times to India and Australia and Britain's other possessions in Asia and the South Pacific, of course, but it also marked a major lengthening of shipping times to Egypt including the Mediterranean Fleet's headquarters in Alexandria.

As for Egypt itself, we last took a look at that nation back in episode 191. In that episode, I told you about the unusual development of Britain unilaterally declaring Egyptian independence over Egyptian objections. It wasn't that the Egyptian government objected to independence; they objected to Britain reserving the right to defend Egypt and to defend foreign interests in Egypt, principally the Suez Canal.

This awkward relationship continued until the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, which raised fears in both Cairo and London that Egypt was a potential future target for Benito Mussolini and his dream of a revived Roman Empire. Negotiations began on a new treaty that would settle Anglo-Egyptian relations.

While negotiations were in progress, Egypt's King, Fuad I, died at the age of 68. His successor was the young King Farouk, barely sixteen years old at the time. Farouk was young, handsome, and had been at school in England when his father died, which led the British government to hope for closer relations. Farouk spoke English fluently, and Arabic as well, which is notable because his father only spoke Turkish. This new king would actually be able to speak to his subjects in their native language.

His youth and good looks made him an international celebrity. He appeared on the covers of *Time* and *Life* magazines in the United States. He at least cultivated the image of a devout Muslim, which made him popular at home. In fact, he could more accurately be described as a playboy, a hedonist, and a ruler who oversaw terribly corrupt governments. Over time these faults would erode his popularity in Egypt, but in the early years, he was the nation's celebrity king.

Farouk's government concluded the negotiations with the British government and the two countries signed the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 1936. The new agreement affirmed Egypt's

independence and its right to pursue its own foreign policy. British military forces would withdraw to the Suez Canal and Alexandria and limit their numbers to 10,000 in peacetime. The new treaty did not change the status of Sudan, to the south, which since the 19th century was officially administered jointly by the governments of Egypt and the UK, though in fact, the British ran Sudan as they pleased.

Farouk was popular, and he governed under a constitution that gave the king broad powers. And he was extraordinarily wealthy, perhaps one of the wealthiest people in the world at the time. Alas, he was completely unprepared for his new responsibilities as monarch. He was frequently "advised"—and I use the term euphemistically—by Britain's ambassador, Sir Miles Lampson. Sir Miles had no qualms about barging into the palace and telling Farouk how to run his country. He would address the king as "Your Majesty" one minute, and berate him and call him a "naughty boy" the next.

When the Second World War broke out, King Farouk chose to keep Egypt neutral in the conflict, although Sir Miles successfully pressured him into at least breaking diplomatic relations with Germany. The war gave the British a justification for increasing their military presence in Egypt, until, on June 10, 1940, Italy declared war on Britain, and suddenly the frontier between Libya and Egypt became the front line of a world war.

The British Army had infantry and armored formations based as far west as the town of Mersa Matruh, an Egyptian port town on the Mediterranean coast. Mersa Matruh lies about midway between Alexandria and the Libyan border, and was the western terminus of a single-track railroad originating in Alexandria, making it the westernmost point in Egypt that could easily be supplied.

Although these British units were based in Mersa Matruh, they did have some advance units along the Libyan border, so when Italy declared war, British forces crossed the frontier into Libya to harass the Italian units guarding their frontier.

This region is a desert, and summer, when the fighting began, is the hot, dry season. Immediately to the south of the Mediterranean stretches a stony plain for about the first 250 kilometers inland. There you come up against the Sand Sea, which is exactly what it sounds like, a forbidding stretch of terrain covered by sand, devoid of life, and subject to fierce winds, and inhospitable to civilians and armies alike.

But the stony plain along the coast is excellent terrain for vehicles, as the British soon discovered. It is flat, mostly barren, inhabited only by a few Bedouin communities. Mobile British forces using tanks, trucks, and armored cars could literally run rings around the Italian defenders, because they were foot soldiers who lacked motorized transportation.

Rather than attempt to seize and hold ground against the numerically superior Italians, the British harassed them: ambushing Italian troop movements and supply shipments, and taking and

demolishing the border fortifications of Fort Capuzzo and Fort Maddalena. The British took hundreds of Italian prisoners, some of whom complained that they hadn't yet been told their country was at war when the British attacked. The Italian Army limited itself to defense and took no aggressive action during this period.

The British had things their own way the first couple of months; then they began to discover the drawbacks of fighting a war in the desert, like snakes, scorpions, and clouds of flies, for starters. Also, it's easy to get lost in a trackless plain; you have to navigate by the sun and the stars, like a ship at sea. Then there's the sirocco, a hot wind that blows north from the Sahara, sometimes with hurricane force, carrying fine particles of sand that irritate the eyes, nose, and throat, and foul any vehicle's engine unless it is equipped with specialized air and oil filters.

But the biggest problem is the very barrenness of the land, which requires that absolutely everything be shipped in through the supply lines, even a commodity as basic as water. Especially water. And replacement parts for your vehicles which keep breaking down under these conditions.

The heat and the difficulties of resupplying these British frontier forces overland from Mersa Matruh persuaded the British commander to suspend these operations in early August, after about two months, and await new equipment, resupply, and reinforcement.

It was a very different story in East Africa, where Italy controlled Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Italian Somaliland, together now styled *Africa Orientale Italiana*, or Italian East Africa. The Italian Army had stationed substantial military forces here, including two metropolitan Italian infantry divisions with artillery and air support, in addition to some 200,000 African askari. Nestled against Italian East Africa were the isolated territories of French and British Somaliland. French Somaliland was protected by the armistice, but in August, about the same time the British were winding down operations on the Libyan frontier, Italian forces in East Africa moved into British Somaliland, quickly overrunning the lightly defended territory. British forces evacuated to Aden.

Even after the fall of British Somaliland, Italian East Africa had long frontiers with Sudan and Kenya. It was vulnerable to a British invasion and isolated from resupply. Italian forces soon abandoned any offensive ambitions and settled into a defensive posture. In August, the British brought the deposed Emperor of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie, from his exile in Bath back to Sudan, clearly an act in preparation for an invasion.

After the armistice with France, Italy was free to send additional soldiers to Libya, and in September 1940, Benito Mussolini ordered the Italian Army to advance, with the goal of occupying Egypt and seizing the Suez Canal, which would force the Royal Navy out of the Eastern Mediterranean and open a communication and supply route to Italian East Africa.

Speaking of supply, Italy's supply situation in Libya was better, but still precarious. Italian forces in Libya needed supplies and reinforcements shipped from Italy across the Mediterranean

Sea. And do you know what lies smack in the middle between southern Italy and Libya? The island of Malta, controlled by the UK and potentially also an unsinkable aircraft carrier that could harry Italian ships with air attacks.

Italian supply shipments to Libya therefore avoided the most direct route. Instead, their ships traveled south from Italy to the north coast of Sicily. There they turned west, hugging the Sicilian coast and benefitting from Italian air cover, all the way to the western tip of the island. Here lies the Strait of Sicily, the shortest route across the Mediterranean to Tunisia, a distance of about 145 kilometers, far enough from Malta and close enough to Sicily to make these dangerous waters for the Royal Navy or the RAF.

Tunisia was neutral following the armistice with France. Italian ships could then proceed through neutral Tunisian waters south to Tripoli, Libya's largest port. Unfortunately for the Axis, Libya hardly had any railways; just local lines around Tripoli and Benghazi. Italian supplies bound for the frontier with Egypt had to be carried by truck along the coast, a journey of over 1700 kilometers. The Italian military had difficulty obtaining fuel even within metropolitan Italy, and half the fuel shipped to Tripoli was consumed by the truck convoys delivering supplies to the front.

The ports of Benghazi and Tobruk were closer to the Egyptian border, but they were far smaller ports, with much more limited capacity. Also, they were within range of the Royal Navy and RAF operating out of Egypt, so Tripoli it would have to be.

In spite of these drawbacks, Benito Mussolini and the Italian military were feeling pretty good about their prospects in North Africa. Once France withdrew from the war, Italy no longer needed forces along the Franco-Italian border, nor along the Tunisian-Libyan border. The Italian Army could push with all its weight against the British in Egypt…or at least, as much weight as those truck convoys could supply.

The Italian Governor-General of Libya was Marshal Italo Balbo, whom we've met before in this podcast. On June 28, Balbo took a plane to Tobruk, but unfortunately for him, his plane arrived just after the airfield had been attacked by British bombers. Italian anti-aircraft guns shot down the plane, and all aboard were killed. When the RAF learned of Balbo's death, it dropped a wreath over the airfield at Tobruk with a message offering condolences.

Balbo was succeeded by Marshal Rodolfo Graziani, whom we have also met before. He became Governor-General of Libya and Commander-in-Chief of Italian forces in Libya, and hardly had time to settle into his new office and secure a key to the officers' washroom before he received orders from Mussolini that filled him with dread: The Italian Tenth Army, the force stationed along the Egyptian border, was to invade Egypt in August.

Graziani begged for more time. Beginning an offensive in the desert in August was unwise, he warned, and his forces needed more time to build up their stores of equipment and supplies. In

fact, Graziani's time as commander in North Africa will be most notable for his constant complaints that his units needed more time before they could do anything. Mussolini had no patience with any of this; he told Graziani not to worry; that the fall of Alexandria was a foregone conclusion. Graziani didn't agree. The Italian force was substantially larger, but they were foot soldiers, while the British force opposing them was far more mobile, and the British had already demonstrated what a big advantage that was in this terrain.

Mussolini put up with Graziani's whining for a month, then he put his foot down and told Graziani either he would order an invasion of Egypt, or Mussolini would find someone else who would.

So the advance finally began on September 7, almost three months after Italy entered the war. The Italians crossed the border and captured the Egyptian town of Sollum, which lies close to the border. The British conducted a fighting retreat, withdrawing past the town of Sidi Barrani and toward their supply base at Mersa Matruh.

The old military truism applies here, that as the attackers advance, their supply lines get longer, while as the defenders withdraw, their supply lines get shorter. This was particularly important in the Egyptian desert, where supply constraints were tight. The Italians advanced far enough to take the town of Sidi Barrani, not quite halfway to Mersa Matruh. There they halted their offensive and dug in. The British fell back to the railhead at Mersa Matruh, where supply was plentiful, and also dug in. And that was that. Mussolini pressured Graziani to continue the offensive, but Graziani knew full well that the British were well supplied and insisted on a delay to resupply his own forces. That resupply was slow, because the Italians were gearing up for another offensive, this one against…well, let's just say, a very different place.

Let me just put a pin in that story for now.

[music: Vivaldi, *Concerto in G minor,* "Summer"]

Italian military pressure on the British in Africa was one piece of Germany's "periphery" strategy, but it was only one piece. Hitler and his government hoped to recruit a number of other European nations in addition to Italy to form a continental bloc opposed to Britain. High on the list of nations the Germans hoped would be amenable to this idea were Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Spain, and France.

The nation of Hungary was in 1940 still ruled by Admiral Miklós Horthy. Officially, the Kingdom of Hungary was a constitutional monarchy and Horthy was its regent. In truth, Horthy fought off every attempt by the nominal heir to the kingdom, Charles IV, to claim the throne, and the Hungarian governments of the Jazz Age answered to Horthy.

Hungarians of most political persuasions were bitterly resentful of the Treaty of Trianon, which had stripped Hungary of most of its territory and left millions of ethnic Magyars living as

minorities in neighboring countries. The nation drifted to the political right and aligned with the fascist states of Italy and Germany. This alignment paid off when Germany awarded some formerly Hungarian territory in Czechoslovakia back to Hungary in the First Vienna Award in 1938, shortly after Germany occupied the Sudetenland. When Germany seized the rest of Czech lands in 1939, Hungary was again rewarded with more of its former lands.

In June 1940, while the world was watching the collapse of France in the West, the Soviet Union issued an ultimatum to Romania, demanding the return of Bessarabia to Russian control in just four days. The Romanian government concluded that resistance was futile and capitulated to the Soviet demand.

In Berlin, this development alarmed Adolf Hitler, somehow, in spite of the fact that the secret protocols to the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Agreement signed last August specifically granted the USSR a free hand with regard to Bessarabia, along with Finland and the Baltic States. But Hitler was by this time already contemplating war with the Soviet Union. The USSR was a major supplier of petroleum to Germany. War would cut off those oil imports, leaving Romania as the only oil producing nation Germany would have access to, and Germany needed petroleum products to fuel its tanks and aircraft and other military vehicles. Hitler saw the prospect of the Red Army so close to Romania's oil fields as a grave threat to Germany.

Where some people see a crisis, other people see an opportunity. Among those people were Admiral Horthy and his government in Budapest. Hungary had won back some of the territory taken from it, but its most important outstanding claim by far was the return of Transylvania, which the Allies had awarded to Romania. If the cowardly Romanians surrendered Bessarabia to the Soviets without a fight, perhaps they would surrender Transylvania to Hungary without a fight.

You may recall that Britain and France had guaranteed Romania's borders in April 1939, shortly after the Germans took Bohemia and Moravia. Following the Soviet seizure of Bessarabia, it was pretty clear to King Carol II of Romania and his government that this Allied guarantee was now meaningless, what with France subdued and Britain driven from the continent. The King inquired of Adolf Hitler whether Germany would be interested in allying with Romania. You may recall that Romania had allied with Imperial Germany back in 1883, but had stayed neutral when the First World War broke out. Romania eventually joined the Allies in 1916, lured by Allied promises to grant Transylvania.

They had, but now Hungary began pressuring Romania to return Transylvania to Hungarian control. Mind you, this was a region that included twice as many ethnic Romanians as ethnic Magyars. Romania rejected the Hungarian demand.

Meanwhile, Berlin was looking askance at these developments. Both Hungary and Romania were prospective German allies. Germany wanted both of them as allies. But this dispute between them was making that impossible. So Adolf Hitler replied to King Carol's inquiry about

an alliance by telling the King that amicable relations with Hungary and Bulgaria were a precondition to such an alliance. When Hungary and Romania were unable to come to terms, Berlin and Rome proposed arbitration.

Well, Germany was now the supreme military power in Europe, which made it hard to say “no.” The Romanians agreed. Foreign ministers Ribbentrop and Ciano met in Vienna on August 30 and drew their own line on the map, awarding Hungary a substantial portion of the territory Budapest had been demanding, but not all of it. The population of the region awarded to Hungary was roughly 50% ethnic Magyar and 45% ethnic Romanian, with most of the rest Jewish or German.

Take the back-to-back humiliations of losing Bessarabia to the USSR and a chunk of Transylvania to Hungary within a period of two months, combined with the Romanian government acquiescing in both land grabs, and what you have is turmoil in domestic Romanian politics. Romania was officially a constitutional monarchy that gave the King a major role in choosing the government. Like Poland, like the Baltic States, like Bulgaria, Romania had slid into a kind of right-wing, anti-Communist, anti-Semitic authoritarianism, exemplified by extremist political parties such as the National Christian Party and the Iron Guard, which can safely be labeled a fascist party.

The uproar over the lost territories triggered demonstrations against the King across Romania, many led by the Iron Guard. The King attempted to deal with this problem by appointing as prime minister General Ion Antonescu, a choice seen as acceptable to both the Iron Guard and to more traditional conservatives. The King judged Antonescu to be someone the demonstrators would accept as a new head of government and thus weaken the calls for abdication.

But the demonstrations only escalated. When the King ordered Antonescu to use force to disperse a demonstration that had gathered in front of the royal palace, Antonescu refused his command. King Carol then abdicated and fled the country, barely a week after the Second Vienna Award.

Ion Antonescu would proclaim Romania the National Legionary State, with the support of the Iron Guard. That lasted five months, then the Iron Guard attempted to take control of Romania for itself. Antonescu put down the coup attempt, banned the Iron Guard, and re-established the Kingdom of Romania.

Whatever the name of the country, Antonescu was himself a right-wing, anti-Communist, anti-Semitic authoritarian who ruled as a military dictator, enacted German-style anti-Semitic laws and built a closer relationship with Germany.

On September 27, 1940, the foreign ministers of Germany, Italy, and Japan met in Berlin for the signing of the Tripartite Pact. This agreement helped smooth over relations with Japan, ruffled following the announcement of the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Agreement 13 months ago.

The new pact committed Germany, Italy, and Japan to assist each other if any of them was attacked by a power they were not already at war with, i.e., Britain and China.

You can see this agreement as another attempt by Hitler to pull his favorite diplomatic trick, subjecting a potential enemy to the threat of a two-front war. You might at first think the USSR was the target country, though the Pact did include language specifically denying that the agreement in any way altered relations between any of the signatories and the Soviet Union. Stalin was not comforted by this language, however; he wondered if the agreement included secret protocols.

It didn't; more than the Soviet Union, Hitler had in mind the United States. Hitler understood full well how much Churchill wanted the US to join the war, and how dangerous that would be for Germany. He understood that US President Franklin Roosevelt wanted to support Britain, but was restrained by domestic isolationism. The Tripartite Pact was a means of reducing the chances of US intervention in Europe by threatening the Americans with a Japanese attack in their rear. Hitler further calculated that if the US did enter the war in Europe, fending off Japan would be its first priority and it would take two years or more before the US would be able to muster enough military force to affect the war situation in Europe. By then, he believed, it would be too late.

On October 12, shortly after the signing, German troops moved into Romania in response to an invitation from Ion Antonescu. The Germans moved into position to defend Romania's oil fields and began training programs for the Romanian Army. Soon after, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia all signed on to the Tripartite Pact.

In parallel with these events in Eastern Europe, Hitler and his government were negotiating with France and Spain and already looking ahead to war with the Soviet Union. And in Rome, Mussolini was working on a little project of his own.

I'll be getting into those stories next week, but we'll have to stop here for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Matthias and Brad and Todd for their kind donations, and thank you to Bennett for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Matthias and Brad and Todd and Bennett help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, you are most welcome; just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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would be the place to go. While you're there, you can leave a comment and let me know what you thought about today's show.

I'm pleased to be able to tell you that a short story of mine appears in the just-released fantasy anthology, *Artifice and Craft*. It's a collection of stories about magical artifacts. It is available as an ebook or a paperback at Barnes and Noble and Kobo, and another online site where you can buy books. The name of that one escapes me at the moment…

And I hope you'll join me next week, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we continue this week's tale of Germany's diplomatic maneuvers aimed at turning the entire continent of Europe against Britain, and Mussolini opening up a surprising new front in the war. Pay Him in His Own Coin, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. With Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie poised to return to his realm, now might be a good time for me to point out the religion developing in Jamaica at about this time, centered on Haile Selassie and known by his former name. I am of course referring to Rastafarianism.

Rastafarianism comes in different forms, but generally accepts Haile Selassie as a larger-than-life religious figure; some versions identify him as the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Rastafarianism is also Afro-centric and focuses its attention on the African diaspora. This is a surprising development, at least to me as a white American, all the more so because Haile Selassie himself did not encourage the movement. He was a devout Christian who, when the question was put to him, denied being anything other than a mortal human being.

The Rastafari movement is perhaps best known to outsiders for believers' embrace of dreadlocks and African-style clothing, as well as its use of marijuana as a religious sacrament. It seems to have grown from the grass roots; there is no known leader central to its development or spread. It is perhaps better understood once you consider that it appeared in colonial Jamaica at a time when that land was under British rule and its rise can be interpreted as a rejection of British domination.

In our time, the number of believers is estimated at about one million, worldwide.

[music: Closing Theme]