

## British Naval Policy in the Mediterranean 1935-1939

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After 1935, the Mediterranean had a major role in the policy of the the European great powers. There were three important naval powers in the area with significant interests and influences. In the 1930s Great Britain, France and Italy were dominant countries, they determined the political development in the Mediterranean.

Although England did not border on the Inland Sea, her fleet surpassed the strength of the two Latin powers, both in quantity and quality. The Mediterranean had a significant part in the British naval strategy from the 18<sup>th</sup> century. London occupied Gibraltar in 1704 and Malta in 1800, so these important bases assured the English naval mastery in the Mediterranean. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Cyprus (1878) and Egypt (1882) came under the rule of Britain, and after the First World War the Empire occupied Palestine and other parts of the Middle East (Iraq, Transjordan).<sup>1</sup> After 1704 England stationed a permanent fleet with modern warships in the Inland Sea that was the famous Mediterranean Fleet, which became the symbol of the British military power in the area until 1967.<sup>2</sup>

Leaders of the English policy and the Admiralty insisted on the maintenance of the Mediterranean Fleet keeping three factors in view. The first was the significant trade with the Mediterranean countries and the defence of the British shipping. England had prosperous commercial relations with Spain, Italy Turkey, and Egypt from the 15-16<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The Mediterranean Fleet was an excellent instrument to secure the traditional continental balance of power, too. During the 18-19<sup>th</sup> centuries the employment of the naval forces, stationed in Malta, supported the South European policy of Great Britain on many occasions. In the Napoleonic Wars and later in the Eastern crises the use of the fleet had the result that neither France nor Russia could gain the ascendancy over the Mediterranean.

In the end, the Suez Canal (opened in 1869) gave a third role for the Mediterranean Fleet.<sup>3</sup> This new waterway made the Gibraltar-Malta-Suez axis the most important strategical route of the British Empire soon. The canal connected the European waters

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<sup>1</sup> The British also ruled the Island of Menorca (1708-1782) and the Ionian Islands (1814-1863) for a shorter period. Richmond, Herbert: *Statesmen and Sea Power*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1946. pp. 92-154 and p. 213.

<sup>2</sup> Famous Commander-in-Chiefs, Mediterranean Fleet: Sir John Jervis, Lord Horatio Nelson, Lord Collingwood, Sir John A. Fisher, David Beatty, Sir A. B. Cunningham. More information about the British Mediterranean Fleet: Pack, S. W. C.: *Sea Power in the Mediterranean. A study of the struggle for sea power in the Mediterranean from the seventeenth century to the present day*. London, Arthur Baker Limited, 1971.

<sup>3</sup> Balázs Réti: *Szuez és a brit tengeri stratégia 1918-1940*. (Suez and the British Naval Strategy 1918-1939) In: *Dél-Európa vonzásában*. Pécs, University Press, 2000. pp. 249-255.

with the Indian Ocean. In the 18-19<sup>th</sup> centuries, owing to the British conquest, this ocean became a "Mare Nostrum" of England. India, regarded as the jewel of the British Crown, gave a real importance of the waterway since it made the communication with the Vice-Royalty more effective. The route across the Mediterranean was the main arteria of the Empire, because not only India did become faster accessible, but the Far East, Australia, New Zealand and East Africa were easier to reach as well.

#### *Naval forces and relations in the Mediterranean*

In the period between the two world wars the strongest naval power of the area was definitely Great Britain.<sup>4</sup> Her fleet firmly guarded the entrances of the sea, Gibraltar on the west and Suez on the east. Malta was situated in the central basin, and this island was the main port of the Mediterranean Fleet. In the Eastern Mediterranean Egypt, Cyprus and Palestine made Britain's strategical position really strong.<sup>5</sup>

France was the second most powerful naval state in the area, her main colonies were in the western basin. The French ruled Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco. The triangle among Bizerta, Oran, and the greatest French naval base, Toulon was the fundamental ground of the Mediterranean strategy of Paris. The presence of France was strenghtened by Syria and Lebanon in the Levant.<sup>6</sup>

Italy had a favourable strategical position because of her central geographical location. Besides the Apennine Peninsula, she possessed the important islands of the sea, Sicily and Sardinia. Her colonial territories in Lybia, Dodecanese and East Africa were not valuable economically, but their strategical and political importance made them significant.<sup>7</sup> Italy had the weakest economy among the Mediterranean great powers, she owned only 417.000 tons of warship displacement while France had 502.000 tons and Britain had 1.265.000 tons of it.<sup>8</sup> Local naval force relations were much more favourable to Rome since Italy could concentrate her whole fleet in the Mediterranean while the French left a

<sup>4</sup> About the relations of the great navies between the two world wars: Command Papers 2036 *Treaty between the British Empire, France, Italy, Japan and the United States of America for Limitation of Naval Armaments*. Treaty Series No.5. London, H. M. S. O., 1924.; Dénes Halmosy: *Nemzetközi szerződések, 1918-1945*. (International Agreements, 1918-1945). Budapest, Közgazdasági és Jogi Könyvkiadó, Gondolat Könyvkiadó, 1983. pp. 194-207.; Hall, Christopher: *Britain, America and Arms Control, 1921-1937*. London, Macmillan, 1987.; Roskill, Stephen: *Naval Policy Between the Wars. The Period of Anglo-American Antagonism, 1919-1929*. London, Collins, 1968.; Edwards, Kenneth: *Uneasy Oceans*. London, Rich and Cowan, 1939.

<sup>5</sup> The best descriptions of the contemporary naval power relations in the Mediterranean: Slocombe, George: *The Dangerous Sea. The Mediterranean and its Future*. London, Hutchinson, 1936.; Edwards, Kenneth: *The Grey Diplomats*. London, Rich and Cowan, 1938.

<sup>6</sup> Edwards 1939: op.cit., pp. 164-168 and 219-231.

<sup>7</sup> Sándor Kürthy: *Az olasz gyarmatpolitika új útjai*. (New Ways of the Italian Colonial Policy) In: *Külügyi Szemle*, 1935. XII. évfolyam, 3. szám.; Etele Papp: *Az európai államok afrikai gyarmatpolitikája*. (Colonial Policy of the European Countries) In: *Külügyi Szemle*, 1935. XII. évfolyam, 4. szám.

<sup>8</sup> László Erdős: *A Brit Államszövetség fegyveres hatalma*. (The Military Power of the British Commonwealth) In: *Magyar Szemle*, 1937. augusztus, XXX. kötet.

significant number of naval units on the Atlantic coast and the British had lots of responsibilities all over the world.

England did not take the Italian threat into consideration until 1935. There was quite a good relationship between Mussolini and Great Britain. The Italians did not want a conflict with the powerful Royal Navy, as they knew that Italy had a long undefended coastline. A possible war against England would have resulted with a total economic collapse in the country, which depended on sea trade. Thus Mussolini acknowledged the priority of Britain, however, he did not want to accept the lead of France in the Mediterranean. Italy wanted to reach a naval equality with Paris, even through great economic sacrifices. This was the ground of the naval armament race between the two Latin countries. The Italians were not able to reach the total equality, but in certain warship classes they obtained advantages. On 1<sup>st</sup> February 1935 the naval strength of the three great powers were the following (units under construction are in brackets):<sup>9</sup>

Warship class	British Empire	France	Italy
Battleships, battlecruisers	15 (-)	9 (2)	4 (2)
Aircraft Carriers, Sea Plane Carriers	8 (1)	2 (-)	1 (-)
Cruisers	51 (13)	20 (6)	24 (6)
Destroyers	161 (26)	70 (21)	94 (8)
Submarines	51 (9)	96 (15)	59 (8)

The British naval strategical plans worked out in the 1920s reckoned with the safe use of the Mediterranean route. In accordance with these plans, the main task of the Royal Navy was the defence of the mother country that was followed by the security of the British possessions in the Far East and the Pacific Ocean against Japan. After 1922 Japan behaved in a hostile way towards England that is why the British drew up the plans of the Singapore naval base.<sup>10</sup> Singapore became the corner stone in the defence policy of the British Empire soon, however, the base itself was not ready until 1938. The most important role of the Royal Navy was to relief "the Gibraltar of the Far East" against a possible Japanese attack. The second largest British fleet was stationed in the

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<sup>9</sup> Command Papers 4817. *Fleets, the British Commonwealth of Nations and Foreign Countries*, February 1935. London, H. M. S. O., 1935.

<sup>10</sup> More information about the question of Singapore: Command Papers 2083, *The Singapore Base. Correspondence with the Dominions and India*. London, H. M. S. O., 1924.; Woodburn Kirby, S: *Singapore, the Chain of Disaster*. London, Macmillan, 1971. Grenfell, Russell: *Main Fleet to Singapore*. Oxford, Faber, 1951.; Neidpath, James: *The Singapore Naval Base and the Defence of Britain's Eastern Empire, 1919-1941*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1981.; McIntyre, W. D.: *The Rise and Fall of the Singapore Naval Base, 1919-1942*. London, Macmillan, 1979.; Higham, Robin: *Armed Forces in Peacetime Britain, 1918-1939*. London, Foulis, 1962.; Lowe, Peter: *Britain in the Far East*. London, Longman, 1981.; Kennedy, Malcolm D.: *The Estrangement of Great Britain and Japan, 1917-1935*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1969.; Louis, Roger: *British Strategy in the Far East, 1919-1939*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1971.

Mediterranean, because this fleet was considered suitable to fight in the Eastern Asian waters. On the other hands, these warships had to defend the sea route crossing the Suez Canal to Singapore. Naval units stationed in Malta had a main role because in case of emergency, they could be quickly redeployed either to the Home Fleet or the Far East. With regard to these plans the Royal Navy needed 28 days to reach Singapore from England via Suez. In case of closing the Mediterranean, the British warships needed more than 45 days to get their Far Eastern base.<sup>11</sup> With regard to the relief of Singapore it was very important to make this shorter Mediterranean route between England and East Asia absolutely secure.

### *The Italo-Ethiopian War*

Far Eastern plans of the Admiralty took a friendly Italy into account and assumed that in case of war against Japan, Britain could abandon the Mediterranean without difficulties. During the Italo-Abyssinian crisis the previous good relations between London and Rome were deteriorated. The British Government decided to stand by the ideas of League of Nations and did not leave Ethiopia without international support. The Admiralty ordered the Mediterranean Fleet to leave the anchorage of Malta in September 1935 and the warships headed for the Levantine waters that were more protected from the Italian airplanes. Only Alexandria was capable of accommodating this size of fleet, so the Royal Navy was stationed here for almost a year. In 1935-1936, owing to the Ethiopian crisis, Alexandria became the main reservoir of the British naval forces. Warships arrived there to strengthen the Mediterranean Fleet from all over the world. By October 1935 the Admiralty ordered 8 battleships and battlecruisers, 2 aircraft carriers, 20 cruisers, 50 destroyers and 17 submarines in the Mediterranean waters.<sup>12</sup> The units of this great Armada had not enough place in Alexandria that is why more warships were stationed permanently at Gibraltar, Haifa and Port Said.<sup>13</sup>

The Admiralty carried out the orders of the government, though at the same time it could not understand the enthusiasm of the British politicians towards the ideas of the League of Nations. The admirals were thinking globally and rationally that is why they did not want to break with the traditional Italian friendship. England had not real interests in the landlocked Ethiopia. In the African country there were not important British investments, the often mentioned Lake Tana was not worth a war.<sup>14</sup> It was indifferent to the British defence strategy whether Abyssinia was occupied by the Italians or not. The Admiralty did not want to sacrifice its warships and seamen, because they were needed against the more dangerous Germany and Japan. The defence of the British interests in the

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<sup>11</sup> Marder, Arthur J.: *Old Friends, New Enemies. The Royal Navy and the Imperial Japanese Navy.* Volume I: Strategic Illusions, 1936-1941. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1981. pp. 36-37.

<sup>12</sup> Edwards 1938: op.cit., pp. 145-158.

<sup>13</sup> Pack: op.cit., pp. 133-134.

<sup>14</sup> About the British interests in Ethiopia: János Melocco: *Mi van és mi lehet Abesszíniában?* (What is and what can be in Abyssinia?) Budapest, kiadó nélkül, 1935. pp. 10-11.

Far East and the North Sea diverted the admirals from the support of a war in the Mediterranean:

The strained relationship between England and Italy did not ease in the winter of 1935-1936. In March 1936 there was a significant change in the international relations. Hitler occupied the demilitarized Rhineland that is why an Anglo-German war seemed imminent. Leaders of the Admiralty were frightened since the bulk of the Royal Navy was concentrated in the Mediterranean while the North Sea remained unprotected in case of a German naval attack. The chiefs of the naval staff urged the abandonment of the fleet demonstration against Italy to relieve the warships for duty in the home waters.<sup>15</sup>

By May 1936 Mussolini conquered Ethiopia. Great Britain demonstrated her powerful fleet in vain, she could not divert the Italian dictator from the aggression. In July 1936 the Mediterranean Fleet left Alexandria and returned to his peacetime station, Malta. During the crisis, Britain could keep neither the Ethiopian independence nor the friendship of Italy. The Abyssinian conflict threw light on the military weakness of Great Britain in the Mediterranean. The British admirals knew that the state of the Royal Navy in 1935 would not have allowed them to fight a war with heavy losses. The Royal Navy, limited by the Washington and London naval treaties, was not able to cope with simultaneous challenges in different parts of the world. The Rhineland crisis proved that the English navy was not capable of lining up appropriate forces in the Mediterranean and the North Sea at the same time. In the first half of 1936 the fleet was concentrated in the Levantine waters, so there were not enough warships to defend the British interests neither against Germany nor Japan.

#### *The appreciation of the Mediterranean*

While as the result of the Ethiopian crisis the English geopolitical situation was steadily deteriorated, her position became better in the Middle East. Being frightened of the Italian expansion, Egypt was ready to give up the hostile attitude towards London, which was followed by the Treaty of Alliance between England and Egypt on 26 August 1936.<sup>16</sup> This agreement secured the military control of Egypt and the Suez Canal for Great Britain. The harbour in Alexandria was very important, because it was the only naval base relatively far from the Italian air bases. The agreement contained the free use of Alexandria until 1944. During the international crises after 1936, the British Mediterranean Fleet was redeployed several times from Malta to the Egyptian city.

Owing to the Italian expansion, Greece, Turkey, Yugoslavia and Romania appealed to England for military help. With regard to the British defence strategy, especially the security of Greece and Turkey had a great importance.<sup>17</sup> After the Montreux Conference in 1936, Ankara became the sole protector of the straits, so an appropriate support to

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<sup>15</sup> Gibbs, N. H.: *Grand Strategy*. Volume I, Rearmament Policy. London, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1976. p. 249.

<sup>16</sup> Command Papers 5360. *Treaty of Alliance between His Majesty, in respect of the United Kingdom, and His Majesty the King of Egypt*. London, August 26, 1936. London, H. M. S. O., 1936.

<sup>17</sup> Gibbs: op.cit., pp. 209-222.

Turkey was absolutely essential. Turkey got a major role in case of a war against Italy. The oil supplies of Italy depended on shipments from the Black Sea, closing of the straits would have easily stopped Mussolini's African war. In the 1930s, except of the three great powers, Turkey had the greatest military potential in the Mediterranean. It is also important to mention the role of the Soviet Union since England could neutralize the Mediterranean efforts of Moscow by the help of the Turks relatively easily.

Before the end of the Italo-Ethiopian war, there was an uprising among the Arabs in Palestine, which mandate territory was very important in the defence of the Suez Canal. The Arab-Jewish conflict endangered the security of the pipeline coming from Iraq to Haifa, so it could cause trouble in the fuel supply of the British Fleet. The Arab uprising did not finish until 1939, when the British strictly limited the number of Jewish immigrants to Palestine. In summer 1936 a civil war broke out in the western basin of the Mediterranean in Spain. Mussolini's intervention frightened the English admirals, they worried about the safety of Gibraltar. They were also anxious because of the rumours according to which Rome wanted to occupy the Balearic and Canary Isles. The trouble in Palestine and the Spanish civil war made the Mediterranean Fleet partly mobilized for two and a half years. The British warships had primarily humanitarian duties on the Iberian coasts, and they tried to protect the British merchant shipping against air and naval attacks of the fighting opponents.

The Anglo-Italian relations became worse in spite of the exchange of notes in 1937 and the agreements of 1938,<sup>18</sup> and a war seemed inevitable between the two countries. In these circumstances the naval strategy based on the relief of Singapore, which was worked out in the early 1920s seemed to be unrealizable. Against this fact, the Admiralty was reluctant to give up the plan sending the main fleet to the East. The admirals felt the increased tension in the Mediterranean, so they decided to extend the period before of relief to 70 days, which was necessary for dislocating the fleet to the Far Eastern waters.

In the first four months of 1939 Germany and Italy made aggressive steps that basically changed the Admiralty's naval strategy. In April 1939 the Italians occupied Albania and after this event the British gave guarantees to the endangered Balkan states. These guarantees made the fulfilment of the original war plan of the Admiralty impossible.

The discussions between the English and French general staffs had a major role in the change of the priority order in the imperial defence. France was against the military obligations of the British in the Far East. First they planned to defeat Italy and after the victory in the Mediterranean, they wanted to settle up Japan. The English and French admirals agreed that the eastern basin of the Mediterranean would become a British sphere of responsibility and the defence of the western basin would belong to the French. By summer 1939 the English accepted the priority of the Mediterranean and the Middle East, so they renounced the Far East. The period before relief of Singapore extended first 90, later 180 days, therefore the eastern colonies and dominions of the Empire were left alone against a possible Japanese attack.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Halmosy: op.cit., pp. 412-414 and 427-436.

<sup>19</sup> Grenfell: op.cit., p 70.

In 1939 the Admiralty gave up an almost twenty years old conception and marked the Mediterranean as the most important area after the home waters. The British admirals hoped to knock out the weak Italian fleet in a blitzkrieg then send the relieved warships to the Far East. An immediate defeat of Italy became impossible because of the French collapse in 1940 and the German military support to Rome. Therefore in the first years of the Second World War the main battlefield of the British Empire became the area of the Mediterranean and the Middle East. Between 1940 and 1943 the Royal Navy suffered heavy losses to reopen the route across the Mediterranean. Ironically, when in 1945 the main fleet was sent to the East Asian waters through the Suez Canal, the war against Japan was actually over.