

## To Lose an Empire: British Strategy and Foreign Policy, 1758–1790

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## BOOK REVIEWS

**To Lose an Empire: British Strategy and Foreign Policy, 1758–1790**, by Jeremy Black, London, Bloomsbury, 2021, xii + 191 pp., £22.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-3502-1605-1 (hardback), 978-1-3502-1606-8 (paperback)

Periodisation is key to historical scholarship. It gives structures and perspective to reconstructions of the past. There are, however, inherent dangers. It offers, rather in the manner of the clipped hedges in baroque parks, carefully designed vistas. It takes the reader by the hand to guide him to approved viewing points, known landmarks, and a landscape that is often reassuringly familiar. But in doing so, it all too often blocks out the wider surroundings.

It is refreshing, therefore, when a scholar seeks to break out of standardised chronological frameworks. Jeremy Black does so in *To Lose an Empire*; and he does so without, as it were, ripping out all the previously planted ornamental hedges. One of the leading scholars of eighteenth-century Great Power politics, and certainly its most prolific exponent, Black returns to ground he has trodden before. In covering the years 1758 to 1790, he offers a sequel of sorts to his recent 2015 book on British foreign policy, 1744–1757. This book starts – unusually – in the middle of the Seven Years' War, marked by a series of setbacks in the continental campaign, and terminates well after the events that lend the book its title. Therein lies, in part, the explosive force of the book's central argument. In essence, it critiques the line of argument developed by other scholars, following Michael Roberts' 1970 Stenton Lecture that alliances acted as an amplifier or enabler of British diplomacy. And, conversely, by failure to cultivate alliances with other European Powers after the premature end of the Anglo-Prussian alliance in 1762, Britain's international isolation contributed to its predicaments in North America a decade and one-half later.

By contrast, Black emphasises the contingent nature of eighteenth-century politics and the extent to which competing domestic issues, not least financial ones, buffeted political leaders as opposed to diplomats. As the envoy at The Hague reflected in 1785 – not quoted here – 'Our Principals at home are too much occupied with the House of Commons to attend to what passes on the Continent, and if any good is ever done there it must be effected through the King's Ministers abroad . . . Long experience has taught me this, and I never yet received an instruction that was worth reading'.

In pursuit of his argument, Black offers a structural analysis of the decision-making apparatus, processes, and personnel. On this is tacked a detailed examination of the contemporary context of public debate about strategy and policy that delineates the variegated shades of opinion and their varying effects on elite calculations of foreign policy. A succinct narrative of events that stresses 'the multiple unpredictabilities' of international politics in this period follows. The *ad hoc* methods of early modern states made for 'a greater degree of uncertainty in domestic politics, foreign policy, imperial affairs, and warfare', Black concludes, than what he calls modern 'pattern-makers' are apt to assume. Whirl, as Aristophanes would have it, was king in diplomacy; and warfare likewise was complicated by the 'unfixed nature of the operational dimension'. British ministers confronted events and problems in the variety of different military or diplomatic theatres. British policy was therefore, at the same time, European and oceanic, but without, as Black emphasises, this circumstance 'dictating any particular set of operational

outcomes'. All of this, he contends, makes the assumptions of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century scholars about a single British strategy, let alone grand strategy, problematic.

In emphasising the contingent aspects of international politics in his chosen period, Black offers a welcome dose of realism. His treatment of the politics of Georgian England, its key personnel, and the Great Power context within which British diplomats operated remains assured, steeped in the vast archival riches of the period, and shaped by sustained and deep intellectual engagement with it and the literature pertaining to it. To this reviewer's mind, the book raises perhaps more questions about the role of alliances than it answers. As the envoy at The Hague also noted on that same occasion, 'Single we must sink, united we may resist, probably with success, certainly with vigour'. A subject, perhaps, for another study. This is not a book for beginners. Readers to whom Sir Andrew Mitchell or the Earl of Rochford, let alone Carlos III of Spain or the Emperor Joseph II, are but names, may well struggle to grasp the many nuances and the full force of Black's analysis. It is nevertheless a highly welcome addition to the corpus of literature on eighteenth-century international history.

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**Mussolini's War: Fascist Italy from Triumph to Catastrophe, 1935-1943**, by John Gooch, London, Allen Lane, 2020, 523 pp., £30 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-241-18570-4

Ever deemed the 'junior partner' in the Axis coalition, in-depth English-language coverage of the military/strategic aspects of Fascist Italy's wars remain relatively few in number. John Gooch's important new book is thus a very welcome addition and effectively constitutes the third instalment of a trilogy, alongside his previous two covering the Italian military in the First World War and the interwar period. The primary focus, and greatest contribution, of the book is on Fascist Italy's participation in the Second World War from 1940-1943. The conquest of Abyssinia and involvement in the Spanish Civil War are covered, but with comparative brevity in the first chapter. The second chapter discusses Italy's period of 'non-belligerency' in 1939-1940, with the remaining seven chapters offering a comprehensive examination of the 'Fascist War' of 1940-1943.

That is not to say, however, that the pre-war coverage lacks important insights as to how Mussolini used these conflicts to present an image of Italian strength and modernity to the rest of the world [14], cement his power and popularity at home, and develop the Italian military for future wars [32-33]. Nevertheless, the approach and course of the Abyssinian war was often met with 'apathy' by many Italians, whilst the resultant rises in costs of living led to widespread feeling that the new empire was 'a delusion, [and] a huge burden for the Italian people' [33]. Involvement in Spain caused greater problems, with further costs to the Italian treasury and a humiliating defeat at the battle of Guadalajara. Of particular interest to the readers of this journal might be the examination of fractious Italian-Nationalist relations and military co-operation. The Italian intelligence section in