

Introduction

In the United Kingdom, the First World War has fastened itself firmly and ineradicably on the public mind. Lutyens's Cenotaph, the innumerable war memorials up and down the country, and the ordered ranks of white gravestones in the official war graves all remind successive generations of the costs of what is still called the Great War. They also act to anchor that war to the Western Front, where Britain and France fought it out with Germany over four long and bloody years. Transfixing though the great battles of the Somme and Passchendaele can be, the mighty clashes in France and Flanders were but part of a much bigger and more complex war. The pre-war alliances, designed to manage and maintain the peace, changed their clothes to become war-fighting partnerships as Great Britain, France and Russia squared up to Germany and Austria–Hungary. Both sides recruited allies, larger and smaller, as the fighting began not just in Belgium and France but also in the Balkans, in Galicia and in East Prussia. In 1915, the Entente powers were glad to woo Italy away from her pre-war partners and recruit her to their ranks.

Italy's decision to abandon Germany and Austria–Hungary and to join in arms with their enemies changed the geopolitical chessboard of the war and readjusted the correlation of forces. Now a new European front drew Austrian forces south, reducing the pressure on Russia and adding, if only indirectly and over the longer term, to the Germans' burden of supporting their weaker partner. To gauge the significance of having Rome in the war alongside London, Paris and St Petersburg we need only consider what would probably have happened if she had not joined the Triple Entente but had instead stayed a member of the Triple Alliance and come into the war in 1914 on the side of Berlin and Vienna. (Non-entry and neutrality – becoming a 'second Switzerland' – was never a realistic option.) France would have been forced to detach more troops from her western front to defend the southern Alps; the flow of French troop transports from North Africa would have been interrupted; Italian units would have joined in the German attack on the Rhône and quite possibly have influenced the battle of the Marne; and Austria–Hungary,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-19307-8 - The Italian Army and the First World War

John Gooch

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with no southern distraction, would have crushed Serbia more swiftly and put greater pressure on Russia, whose two revolutions might then have come sooner – with effects on the other combatants that are simply incalculable. And if Italy had not recovered after Caporetto but had collapsed instead, the political and military reverberations that would have caused would unquestionably have changed the shape of the last year of the war. Afterwards, Winston Churchill thought it might perhaps even have led to a compromise peace.¹ Italy's participation in the Great War on the Allied side was thus a factor of cardinal importance.

In the historiography of the war, by contrast, Italy's involvement has been commonly undervalued and frequently misunderstood. General histories of the war have tended to relegate her to the 'minor' theatres of war along with the Balkans and Turkey – something that Italy's leading military historian, Giorgio Rochat, has put down to the 'cultural imperialism' of the Great Powers 'veined with racialism'.² Whatever its causes, overlooking Italy has been a commonplace: in otherwise distinguished comparative studies of the Great War she does not appear at all.³ All too often Italy has been seen as the fourth wheel on the Allied carriage – with all the subtle denigration that that phrase embodies. Indeed as the Great War ended denigration of her efforts and her contribution by her allies was far from subtle, as we shall see.

Going to war in 1915 – which Senator Pansa at the time called 'an act of madness' and which historians have generally been inclined to regard as at best an egregious error and at worst 'one of the greatest disasters of her history' – was a very particular kind of gamble for Italy.⁴ The idea of completing the unfinished business of the Risorgimento enthused the educated volunteers who longed to liberate Trento and Trieste, but it is fairly safe to say that it cut no mustard with the vast majority of the 5,500,000 men of Italy's conscript armies who fought the war that followed. For the average Italian front-line infantryman, unlike his British, French or German counterparts, this was a war without ideals – until October 1917, when history stood on its head and the Italians found the very unity that they had lacked hitherto.

Italy's wartime leaders stood on much shakier political ground than their western allies. In France the *Union sacrée* bound the previously contending political parties together for the first two years of the war before it began to fray a little at the edges in 1917, and in Germany the *Burgfrieden* ('truce of the fortress') did the same thing for much the same length of time. Italy's leaders, by contrast, had to contend with a political society polarised by the Libyan war of 1911–12 in which pro-war elements entirely in favour of fighting and hopeful that 'a fusion of popular and elite culture might create a renewed national community'

faced a large – and largely indifferent if not hostile – populace composed of illiterate or semi-literate rural peasants and urban socialist factory workers.⁵ During the war successive administrations could count on the active support of the Right but not of the Left – the only socialist in Italy's wartime governments, Leonida Bissolati, had been expelled from the party in 1912 for being too supportive of the government. For the first two and a half years of her war, Italy fought not as a people united but as a nation divided.

With the declaration of war authority shifted from the shoulders of the politicians to those of the soldiers. Although peacetime models of civil-military relations had varied considerably, in wartime the main belligerents in the west trod a more or less common path: for the first two years the *generalissimo* held the politicians at bay and fought the war much as he thought fit. The quintessential example among the Allies was Marshal Joffre, who told the civilians as little as possible about the war and kept parliament at arm's length until the politicians mustered enough determination to remove him in December 1916.⁶ In England Douglas Haig, supported by the Conservative party and with the unobtrusive but not unimportant backing of the king, kept full control of his war until the German March offensive in 1918 gave Lloyd George, a radical premier and no great friend of generals, the chance to reconstruct the high command and subordinate Haig to an overall allied commander in the person of Foch and a Supreme War Council.⁷ In Italy, thanks partly to the common exigencies of war and partly to the particularities of Italian politics, Cadorna was able to behave in much the same way as Joffre. Indeed, but for Caporetto he might well have stayed in command for a good deal longer as there was no other real contender and no alternative strategy with which to fight the war, unlike in France.⁸ In this respect, as in others, Italy's war was a particular version of a general conundrum: how much power to allow to the soldiers and how to get it back when it turned out that too much had been given away.

Like all his fellow commanders, Cadorna had a clear idea of how to win the war. Schooled like them in the Napoleonic tradition of manoeuvre and aggression, he looked to fight a decisive battle or battles within weeks and thereby bring the war to a victorious close. British, French and German commanders learned by experience between August and December 1914 that their nineteenth-century conception of war was now outdated. In May 1915, apparently oblivious to the lessons to be picked up on the battlefields of the western and the eastern fronts, Cadorna launched his armies almost literally bare-headed – as yet they had no steel helmets – against strong Austrian defensive lines. When that strategy proved to be bankrupt, he fell back on a formula that was much

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the same as the one Douglas Haig would apply on the western front shortly afterwards: '(a) preliminary operations to wear out the Enemy and exhaust his reserves and (b) . . . a decisive attack made with the object of piercing the Enemy's lines of defence'.⁹

The story of Cadorna's eleven battles of the Isonzo is told in the pages that follow. From it readers will be able to make their own judgements about whether, and if so to what degree and in what ways, Cadorna was a poor commander. That story is partly about the exercise of command – something which would be the subject of a remarkable and revealing official inquest at the close of the war – but it is also about means and methods. As far as means are concerned, firepower played a major role in determining events on all fronts. In considering Italy's war we do well to keep in mind the Great War's almost unquenchable appetite for guns and ammunition. At Festubert on 10 March 1915, 340 guns fired 750 tons of ammunition – twenty times the amount fired at the battle of Waterloo – in thirty-five minutes. On the Somme in 1916, 1,750 guns fired one and a half million rounds weighing 52,000 tons in a week-long bombardment. At the crossing of the Canal du Nord in late September 1918, 63,000 tons of ammunition was fired off in three days. The Italian army's heroic efforts on the Isonzo take on a different perspective when its meagre resources are compared with those available – and necessary – on the western front. As far as method goes, the story that follows hinges on the Italian army's capacity – or otherwise – to learn lessons and evolve new tactical and operational methods. The British and German armies did this in the last two years of the war – the Germans evolving flexible defences and infiltration tactics, the British abandoning 'wave' attacks for 'worms' (in the advance) and 'blobs' (for attack and defence) – though the idea that the British army progressed along a seamless 'learning curve' is now starting to be questioned.¹⁰ Italy, it will be seen, had her own difficulties when it came to mastering the changing face of war.

After two or three years of bloody attritional warfare with no demonstrable gains to show for them, the armies of some of the contending parties warped or buckled under the strain. The Austrian army, although it held up almost until the end of the war, showed signs of beginning to shred as early as 1915 with mass desertions of sub-national elements on the eastern front; parts of the French army mutinied in April 1917; and the Russian army collapsed after the failure of the Brusilov offensive in July 1917. The temporary collapse of the Italian armies at Caporetto in October 1917 – the subject of bitter disputes among Italian historians long after the war was over – seems on the face of it to be of a piece with the French mutinies: a case of armies that had been asked to do too much finally reacting in the only way open to them – by withdrawing their

labour. Following this kind of thinking, it has been suggested that the French mutinies are best interpreted as a renegotiation by the rank and file of the way the generals were fighting the war whose boundaries were determined by an internalised loyalty to the polity to which they belonged.¹¹ Caporetto, readers will discover, was in fact a rather different phenomenon with a much more straightforward explanation.

In Italy, as in France, a new commander had the task of putting the army back together and making it into a reliable fighting force that could once again take the offensive. The man who was given the job and who succeeded triumphantly was Armando Diaz. Mostly unremarked and more or less unknown, he stands as an equal with General Philippe Pétain, who put the French armies back together again after the mutinies. Finally, in October 1918 Diaz led his armies to a decisive victory in the field at the battle of Vittorio Veneto. At the time Italy's allies doubted that it was a 'real' victory and many historians have since thought the same. Again, readers will be able on the basis of the evidence to judge for themselves.

Once the war was over Italy like all the other powers faced the problem of demobilising a mass citizen army and absorbing it back into civil society. Unlike them, she also faced volcanic domestic pressures for change stoked up by the war, and almost unanimous dissatisfaction with a peace that denied her some things she had been promised and others – chief among them the city of Fiume – that had never been on the table in the first place. What became known as 'the mutilated victory' did not of itself propel Mussolini to power four years later – but it played a major role in creating an environment in which for many Italians Fascism appeared to be the solution to the country's ills.

1 Before the war

As long as the army is sound there is nothing to fear.

Domenico Farini, 29 January 1894

The First World War began as a clash of contending armies but soon became a conflict that would test to the limit not just the military power but also the state machinery, social cohesion and cultural values of the countries caught up in it. Italy passed that test despite being perhaps the most poorly prepared of the Great Powers to face it. By common agreement the 'least' of them, she along with Germany was also the newest, and she was the weakest. The legacy of five decades of unification was not one that best prepared her for the maelstrom into which she plunged in 1915.

The Italian Risorgimento was a national revolution from above. After 1870 the king of Italy headed a parliamentary monarchy lacking both the popular underpinning provided for the French parliament by the traditions of the Republic and the autocratic authority through which the Kaiser and his ministers governed the German *Reich*. Italian governments stood or fell according to their leaders' success in making and maintaining majorities that were fundamentally unstable and precarious. The country was run by a narrow political and social oligarchy: on the eve of the world war the sociologist Guglielmo Ferrero concluded that thirty people were governing thirty million people for the benefit of three hundred families. The politicians presided over a predominantly rural peasant society: on the eve of the war over half of the active population worked in agriculture, and in turn half of these were rural day-labourers who were employed on average for only 150 days a year.¹ As one century came to an end and another began, reformist and revolutionary socialism and syndicalism rose to challenge the established order in the industrial cities of northern Italy, and took hold among some of the rural labouring poor. Divisive political forces on the Left and the Right were superimposed on deep-seated and fundamental regional, social and economic divisions. The result of all this, it has rightly been remarked, was that pre-war Italy was a country in which social crisis was 'an endemic phenomenon'.²

All of this was, of course, reflected in the army. Italy's particular military culture fell awkwardly between France's popular tradition of the nation in arms, dating back to the *levée en masse* of 1792, and Germany's conservative tradition in which an army of short-term conscripts officered by schooled Prussian professionals trained the nation for war. In Italy, the Left saw the army as the tool of oligarchy and the instrument of repression while the Right saw it as the final bulwark against social disorder and collapse. For its part, the army chafed at political interference which frequently caused frustration and on occasion anger. The way it ran itself – its complex organisational structures, stultifying bureaucratic procedures and distant management style – produced further difficulties and dissatisfactions. The result of all this was that on the eve of war the Italian army was not at ease with itself, with the politicians who directed it and with the society from which it emerged. For their part, politicians looked askance at a force that seemed more likely to lose battles than to win them, and a large part of the populace regarded it as at best an intrusive interruption in their lives and at worst as an enemy. The dominant tones of Italy's particular military culture percolated into the wartime existence of the army and formed an important part of the backdrop against which the course of the war was played out.³

Military culture in Liberal Italy

Two rival military traditions emerged out of the wars of the Risorgimento. The left-wing tradition of 'people's war' (*guerra del popolo*) was born out of the democrats' attempts to raise partisan war in 1848–9, Mazzini's encouragement of insurrection in the 1850s and the exploits of Garibaldi's 'Thousand' in 1860. Against it was ranged the conservative tradition of the 'royal war' (*guerra regia*) fought by the regular Piedmontese army in 1848–9, in 1859 and again in 1866. Despite having notched up several spectacular defeats, and needing first French and then Prussian help, it was the Piedmontese tradition that triumphed. Garibaldi and his sons remained iconic figures for some republican leftists, and his model of warfare was lauded from time to time: the taking of Tripoli in September 1911, the first act of the Libyan war, was hailed in the military press as the embodiment of 'the Garibaldian spirit – swift and impetuous'.⁴ But by the time that the kingdom of Italy took Rome in September 1870 the Piedmontese tradition was firmly in the saddle. It would make its presence strongly felt in the first two and a half years of the world war.

The newly installed king of Italy, Vittorio Emanuele II, needed a politically reliable army that would serve as an instrument with which

Cambridge University Press

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to create loyal Italian subjects. Given the raw materials it had to work with and the situation in which it found itself, the army could not afford to copy the French Republican model of a mass army of short-term conscripts. Nor could it follow the Prussian–German version, which utilised territorial recruitment by region. There were advantages to such a model as the spiritual father of the post-Risorgimento Italian army, Nicola Marselli, acknowledged: it made for better training, more rapid mobilisation and economies of scale. But, he went on,

I know also that Italy has been re-united for only ten years, that she is not yet consolidated, that our people are *ignoranti*, and that after administrative decentralisation the army remains like the great crucible in which all provincial elements submerge themselves in Italian unity.⁵

To achieve the goal of ‘making Italians’, the army mixed recruits from different parts of the country in the same unit. Initially they were recruited from two different regions and stationed in a third, after 1877 they came from five separate regions, and by the first decade of the twentieth century from nine. To ensure that units remained reliable and were not influenced by local interests and affections, they were rotated around the country: in the decade 1875–84 regiments moved on average three times, between 1899 and 1908 only twice. The army certainly sought to generate a sense of *Italianità* in the raw material it was able to reach but it had many difficulties to overcome, not least the illiteracy of the bulk of the population. Judging by results, the system did not do much to break down linguistic and regional barriers.

The disturbing example of the Paris Commune in 1871 reinforced the conviction that Italy needed a system of moral education to spread concepts of patriotism, nationalism and loyalty to the institutions of the new state – foremost among them the Crown. Initially the army was tasked with providing a rural peasantry with a moral education in basic civic virtues, but after 1900 as industrialisation and urbanisation began to make themselves felt it faced cohorts of increasingly better educated recruits, many of whom were either imbued with or vulnerable to the subversive attractions of Marxian socialism and syndicalism.⁶ There were frequent complaints in the military press that the officer corps was not trained for what was an increasingly demanding educational role, and that in any case that was not what the army should be doing. Another big problem was that large parts of the male population remained wholly or largely out of reach of the army’s efforts to educate it.

National conscription was introduced in 1863, initially for five years. The term of service was shortened to four years in 1874 and then to three years in 1875, where it stayed for the next thirty-five years before being

lowered to two years in 1910. This was by no means the whole story, though. From the outset the state made provision for numerous exemptions, some on social grounds such as being the only male child, others on medical grounds. The latter were especially divisive – ‘constitutional weakness’ and deficient chest development tended not surprisingly to be found more among the leisured class than among labourers – and also encouraged the practice of mimicking illness and the self-infliction of disabling injuries. The resulting contest between unwilling recruits and the authorities became entrenched in the culture and carried on up to and beyond the outbreak of war.⁷

After an initial blip when 11.5 per cent of those legally obliged to present themselves to the examining boards failed to appear, absenteeism (*renitenza*) settled down in the latter part of the nineteenth century to around 4 per cent.⁸ In the decade before the Great War it was on the rise, averaging 9.3 per cent between 1904 and 1913 and reaching 10.44 per cent in 1914. Like much else, it demonstrated that there were ‘two Italies’: Sicily, Calabria and Sardinia sent the fewest conscripts into the army, while Lombardy, Tuscany, Emilia Romagna, Umbria and the northern Marches sent the most. Absenteeism among former conscripts recalled for further spells of service was even more pervasive. In 1912, only 42.2 per cent of those recalled for training turned up at the depots, whereas 70.4 per cent appeared to carry out public-order duties – a discrepancy probably explained by the fact that after 1898 reservists recalled for public-order duties received payment. Emigration, running at almost 700,000 a year between 1909 and 1913, does much to explain the figures for absenteeism. However when the class of 1896 was called up in September 1915, 12.1 per cent were absent even though emigration had fallen from 500,000 in 1914 to only 150,000 in 1915.⁹

The complex and highly bureaucratised organisation of military service, a key component of Italian military culture, was evident in the 1888 law on the composition of the army. Military service was divided into three categories. Recruits who were to be incorporated directly into the ranks for military service went into category I. Those who were judged fit to serve but deemed in excess of the army’s needs went into category II, where they received little or no training, and became *truppe di complemento* (i.e. reserves). This category soon languished and was suppressed altogether between 1892 and 1895, and again between 1897 and 1907. In 1913 men in this category were given six months’ military training, an improvement on previous years when they had been recalled for only two months. Two years later this virtually untrained manpower pool would be called on to expand the numbers of regulars and trained reserves and go to war. Supporters of families and others

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deemed exempt from military service went into category III, received no training whatsoever, and in wartime became the *Milizia territoriale*, garrisoning and guarding the coasts and interior of Italy. At the start of the twentieth century there were no fewer than fourteen grounds on which a 20-year-old could be put into category III and absolved from military service.

Once again, there was more to the story than what was codified in the law. Despite her proportionally heavy spending on the army, Italy was a poor country. She simply could not afford to take all the able-bodied men in each annual class into category I, and she could not afford to keep even those that went into it for the prescribed term of three years. Thus the size limit was reset each year: in 1909 it was fixed at 118,469 out of a total available class size of 510,916. Not only was a large slice of the young male population able to keep its civilian clothes on and hold the army at arm's length, but those unfortunate enough to be caught in the net had to be released early for the same financial reasons. In 1902, half of the category I recruits served only two years instead of three, a proportion that dropped to a quarter in 1906–7. In 1896 financial stringency forced the war ministry to introduce a dual *forza massima–forza minima* structure in peacetime which held infantry companies at 100 men for seven months of the year and then reduced them to 60 men for the remaining five months.¹⁰

The glaring inequalities embodied in the law and in the way it was put into practice did little for the army's reputation and standing in society at large. They certainly did nothing for the army itself. Continual variations in the numbers of men to be inducted each year made planning difficult, and the bellows-like expansion and contraction in the size of infantry companies made effective training extremely difficult if not impossible. Italy's twenty-five-division army, ostensibly manpower-heavy but in practice skeletal for large periods of every year, worried the military authorities as the war clouds began to gather. In 1907 the list of entitlements to category III status was pruned and in 1909 the regulations allowing for exemption on health grounds were stiffened.

Some contemporary opinion interpreted the introduction of two-year service in 1910 as evidence that the authorities were at last prepared to subordinate the time-honoured military function of making Italians to the need to progress a genuine *nazione armata* ('nation in arms'). In fact it was just another attempt to square the circle of an excess of manpower and a shortage of money: even with two-year service, 21,000 category I recruits had to be released in 1910. The news that France had lengthened its term of conscription from two years to three in 1913 was a cause for reflection: for one thing, it was a demonstration of the increasingly widespread view among European armies that conscripts