1   Introduction

In August 1918, Second Lieutenant Piero Ugliari of the 'Caorle' Rifle Battalion of the Italian navy, engaged in the defence of Venice, wrote to my great-grandmother, Wanda Paggi Patellani, who was spending her summer in the seaside resort of Alassio:

Piero I, Emperor of the rats, toads and mosquitoes, well-beloved by his subjects who all too often surround him, inscribes, on this 2 August from his throne of sand, hearing the howl of the sea and the roar of the guns, an affectionate greeting to Mademoiselle Wanda, Empress of tranquillity and joy …

This wry postcard, evoking the misery of military service and the sadness of separation from loved ones, cuts to the heart of the human experience of the First World War. Like so many letters from servicemen, it also raises questions which after a hundred years are still hard to answer fully: How and why did men of all nations endure the terrible experiences of the war? What motivated them to fight, obey, risk their lives, kill and die? Does the explanation lie in the policies adopted by armies to manage the morale of their soldiers or does it lie within the psychological and emotional responses of individuals called to serve their nation? Explaining why men fought and endured is important not only for its innate human and humane value but also for its military and political significance; it was a critical factor in both the conduct and the outcome of the war. As scholars and the wider public move beyond individual national histories to consider the transnational nature of the war, we may also ask whether the experiences and motivations of servicemen were universal or were nationally and culturally distinctive. To address these questions, let us turn to Italy, a combatant nation whose experiences have often been neglected internationally, and where morale was in many ways a decisive factor.

Italian Performance in World War I

When Italy, least of the Great Powers, declared war on her former ally Austria-Hungary on 24 May 1915 she launched a series of attacks on

1

the Isonzo front which met with an almost immediate stalemate. By December, when the campaigning season wound down, four battles had been fought on the Isonzo at the cost of more than 170,000 casualties. High rates of sickness and episodes of indiscipline began almost immediately, while 1916 was even worse – a year of grinding attrition interspersed with major set-piece battles led to phenomenal casualties and spiralling rates of both collective and individual disobedience. As John Gooch writes, 'Tested under ever more extreme conditions, parts of the army failed, broke and mutinied'.[1] 1917 was the year of crisis. The gulf between Italian ambitions and capabilities grew ever clearer even as casualties continued to mount and war weariness set in both at home and at the front. As Chief of General Staff Luigi Cadorna's 'shoulder nudges' continued on the Isonzo, rising domestic unrest (culminating with the Turin riots in August) inevitably put more pressure on the army even before the combined Austro-German offensive beginning at Caporetto on 24 October 1917. The most important battle in the Italian theatre strategically and politically, this battle saw the complete collapse of General Luigi Capello's Second Army in the upper Isonzo sector. Within forty-eight hours thousands of prisoners had been taken and the Italians were retreating rapidly. By 28 October the enemy had taken Udine, the seat of general headquarters until that point. Cadorna planned initially to hold the line on the River Tagliamento, but by 3 November it too had been abandoned and was in enemy hands. The retreat reached the River Piave on 9 November and stabilised within a few days, but the fighting continued until 26 November as the Austrians tried unsuccessfully to resume their advance and make their decisive tactical and operational victory into a strategic one. By the end of the month-long battle Italy had lost 294,000 soldiers taken as prisoners and retreated 150 km, leaving around 1 million Italian civilians living under enemy occupation. As well as surrendering in very large numbers, some 350,000 soldiers were left 'disbanded', either losing their units in the hopeless confusion of the retreat or deserting and heading for home in the belief that the war was over.

For Cadorna, the breakdown of order, discipline and fighting spirit were clearly the cause of the defeat: he famously blamed 'the inadequate resistance of units of 2nd Army, cowardly retreating without fighting or ignominiously surrendering to the enemy' for the disaster.[2] For Cadorna

---

[1] John Gooch, *The Italian Army and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 146.

[2] Reproduced in Italia: Commissione d'Inchiesta R. Decreto 12 gennaio 1918 n. 35, '*Relazione della Commissione d'Inchiesta, 'Dall'Isonzo al Piave 24 ottobre–9 novembre 1917'* (Rome: Stabilimento poligrafico per l'Amministrazione della guerra, 1919), section 588.

and his defenders in military and political circles, the responsibility lay squarely with anti-patriotic subversion, a persistent bugbear which he had been denouncing for some time. On the left, there were those optimistically who saw it as a 'military strike' or a herald of revolution on the Bolshevik model.[3] Both interpretations were essentially political, and both assumed that the defeat was the result of a choice made by the troops themselves. In fact these explanations wholly ignored the significant military elements of the defeat, in which (at least in the early stages) Italian tactical and operational errors allowed the attackers to achieve notable successes. Only as the reality of battlefield defeat set in did mass panic and disorder develop. At this stage, personnel at every level from senior officers down to privates appeared highly demoralised and discipline broke down altogether in many units during the long retreat.

In light of Caporetto, morale has been seen as one of the key lenses through which to analyse Italian performance in the First World War; conversely, the Italian army can serve as an excellent case study for analysing the often perplexing dynamics of morale. To attribute the defeat at Caporetto solely to morale problems is grossly inaccurate. Not only did the Central Powers use highly effective and innovative infiltration tactics and artillery techniques, but also the initial breakthrough was caused by 2nd Army's ill-chosen troop dispositions, inadequate artillery response and massive failures of communication, logistics and the command chain. Poor decision making by senior and mid-level officers compounded the problem, while both the army reserve and the general strategic reserve were too far away to make any difference. In other words, tactical, operational and organisational factors can be seen as the chief causes of the Italian defeat. Despite this, at every stage, some units fought bravely and effectively, and the Italian army succeeded in stabilising the new line at the Piave before the Allied forces came up to the front, indicating that the morale crisis, though very severe, was neither universal nor permanent. 1918 was a year of reforms and recovery: Italian forces fought well in a number of important engagements (the defensive battles of the Piave and Monte Grappa in particular) and finally, a year after Caporetto, launched a major offensive which led to the ultimate defeat of Austria-Hungary at Vittorio Veneto, a significant victory. Despite the appalling physical environment; the flaws in strategy, operations and tactics; the lack of clear political consensus within the country or of convincing endorsement by all sectors of civil society; despite the weakness of Italian national identity in this period; despite high rates of desertion and

[3] Curzio Malaparte, *Viva Caporetto! La rivolta dei Santi Maledetti* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1995), 119.

indiscipline, the Italian army fought on until the enemy was defeated. To understand the morale of the Italian army in the First World War it is less the crisis of Caporetto which requires explanation than the resilience and recovery shown at other stages of the war.

Understanding Morale

Morale is the great intangible of military affairs, difficult to define and to assess, and even harder to analyse historically; it acts as both cause and effect, and is always subjective. In *War and Peace* Tolstoy described it as an unknown 'factor X', the element which could enable numerically, tactically or technologically inferior armies to defeat their theoretical superiors. Carl von Clausewitz saw it as 'among the most important [elements] in war' while for the theorist Ardant du Picq, 'Nothing can wisely be described in an army … without exact knowledge of the fundamental instrument, man, and his state of mind, his morale'.[4] Crucial to the outcome of engagements, morale is often controversial precisely because of its nebulous and imprecise nature, forming the basis for postwar allocation of blame and the development of popular myth and memory about the nature of conflicts. Ideas about morale have changed over time in tandem with socially and culturally derived notions of bravery, honour, religion, gender, patriotism, duty and psychology. The technological advances of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries demanded that morale be rethought, as the rifle and the rapid development in artillery power effectively ended the use of close-order formations and required innovative forms of tactical and social organisation on the battlefield. Although not the first modern war in technological or tactical terms, the First World War saw the employment of these new techniques on an unprecedented scale. As modes of battle evolved so too did the challenges of maintaining morale, though the central issue remained that of motivating men to fight. The question remains: How and why did the soldiers of the Great War endure up to four years of brutal combat and deprivation? How did cohesion and fighting spirit develop and survive under such unpropitious circumstances? The lively historiography on this subject has not achieved consensus, nor has the wider debate on the operation of morale produced any single comprehensive explanation.[5] This book takes a fresh approach in examining morale through

[4] Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (London: David Campbell, 1993), 216; Ardant du Picq, 'Battle Studies', in *Roots of Strategy*, Book 2 ed. Curtis Brown (Mechanicsville, PA: Stackpole Books, 1987), 65.

[5] For a survey of contemporary historiography on morale in the First World War see Alexander Watson, 'Morale', in *The Cambridge History of the First World War*, ed. by

the interaction between the military system and the men who fought. Cultural and social historians have greatly advanced our understanding of the soldier's experience but this needs to be considered alongside the actions and priorities of the army itself, to understand morale from a military perspective.

Morale is often conflated with happiness or enthusiasm, or with the mood of the troops. S. L. A. Marshall defined it as the 'thinking of an army' – its spirits, its emotions, its attitudes to both the war as a whole and to specific battles, its attitudes to discipline, its physical comforts, its feelings about leaders and many other issues.[6] However, in military terms, morale can be measured only through actual behaviour; neither cheerfulness nor orderliness necessarily correlates with high morale in battle, nor are they any use if they are not properly directed towards a goal. For John Baynes, in his classic study of morale in the First World War, it is 'the soldier's absolute determination to do his duty to the best of his ability in any circumstances'.[7] Usefully, there is no correlation here between morale and mood; however, the very concept of 'doing one's duty' requires that a certain set of values have been internalised and indeed a degree of positive morale may already be entailed within the very acceptance of 'duty'. The best definition is that proposed recently by Jonathan Fennell: 'Morale can be defined as the willingness of an individual or group to prepare for and to engage in an action required by an authority or institution'. Agreeing to perform assigned tasks in pursuit of the army's objectives lies at the core of morale. Fennell continues, 'this willingness may be engendered by a positive desire for action and/or by the discipline to accept orders to take such action'.[8] In this view, good discipline is a cause (as well, perhaps, as a consequence) of good morale.

Any analysis of morale needs to differentiate between troops' sentiments before, during and after combat. John Lynn proposes a model which describes three forms of motivation: initial (for volunteering or complying with conscription), sustaining (for training or enduring long periods of tedious non-combat duty) and combat motivation.[9] Some of

  J. M. Winter, 3 vols. (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), II, 174–95.

[6] S. L. A. Marshall, *Men against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000), 158.

[7] John Baynes, *Morale: A Study of Men and Courage* (Garden City Park, NY: Avery, 1988), 108.

[8] Jonathan Fennell, *Combat and Morale in the North African Campaign: The Eighth Army and the Path to El Alamein*, Cambridge Military Histories (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 9. See also Jonathan Fennell, 'In Search of the "X" Factor: Morale and the Study of Strategy', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37, no. 6–7 (November 10, 2014): 799–828.

[9] John A. Lynn, *The Bayonets of the Republic: Motivation and Tactics in the Army of Revolutionary France, 1791–94* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), 35.

the determinants of morale may influence any of these three variants, while others will apply only to one or two. Recreation, for instance, may contribute to sustaining motivation but will have little impact on combat motivation, while close bonds of comradeship may determine men's sentiments in battle but cannot affect their initial motivation. Morale is not static but a constantly changing, fluid phenomenon which will ebb and flow as the war goes on, and even within an individual engagement as events on the battlefield progress.

One of the most enduring explanations for behaviour in battle is the theory of primary groups, which states that the chief motivation for fighting men is their social unit: men fight for their comrades. Cohesion creates high morale, and hence effectiveness on the battlefield, via shared experiences, peer esteem, the fear of humiliation and the desire to support their fellow soldiers. After the Second World War this explanation of behaviour in battle became the new orthodoxy among historians and military professionals alike, largely thanks to the trio of influential publications by sociologists Edward Shils and Morris Janowitz, Samuel Stouffer and combat historian S. L. A. Marshall.[10] Primary group theory has an innate appeal: it is strongly supported by veterans' memoir literature and above all it seems psychologically satisfying to place human relationships at the heart of the soldier's combat motivation. However, it cannot operate as a stand-alone explanation for good morale. First, if we use Fennell's definition of morale, it is vital that men are willing to 'engage in an action required by an authority or institution', yet a strong primary group may undermine this willingness. Consider the powerful comradeship of workers on strike: from the perspective of the trade union their morale would be high; from the perspective of an employer they could be seen as demoralised. As military morale is inherently measured from the point of view of the army, we cannot consider a band of mutineers as having high morale however strong their sense of allegiance to their primary group.[11] Similarly, Shils and Janowitz found that deserters frequently had discussed their decision with comrades and received active or tacit support; a strong sense of unit solidarity acted to increase the numbers of men from the same unit deserting.[12] Strong horizontal links may undermine vertical links, so effective leadership is critical in directing the allegiance of a primary group. Second, few units experience

[10] Marshall, *Men Against Fire*; Edward A. Shils and Morris Janowitz, 'Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II', *Public Opinion Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (1948): 280–315; Samuel Stouffer et al., *The American Soldier: Adjustment during Army Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1949).

[11] Stouffer et al., *American Soldier*, 87–9.

[12] Shils and Janowitz, 'Cohesion and Disintegration', 286.

the stability necessary to preserve close personal ties through prolonged periods of fighting: casualties and replacements inevitably weaken the group, as Bartov argues in his criticisms of Shils and Janowitz's application of primary group theory to the Wehrmacht from 1940 onwards.[13] To create brotherhood and unity, 'a wise organisation insures that the personnel of combat groups changes as little as possible', observes du Picq.[14] Finally there may be structural obstacles to the creation of primary groups such as diverse origins, native languages and ages within a unit as well as the army's policies on rotation and unit deployment.

If cohesion alone cannot explain motivation in battle, what about commitment to a set of beliefs? Legitimate demand theory states that men are motivated in combat by ideology of one kind or another: morale is sustained by the soldier's belief that he is making an appropriate sacrifice in support of a shared objective to which he is committed. In the modern era, this commitment is most commonly to some form of patriotic or national sentiment, but it could also be a political ideology such as fascism or communism, a religious faith, loyalty to a monarch or to a moral cause. In 1914, the British used the image of 'gallant little Belgium' to persuade soldiers and civilians alike that they were fighting a just war against an inhumane enemy. Omer Bartov argues that, by the last years of the Second World War, many ordinary German soldiers had internalised Nazi ideals and objectives to such an extent that their combat motivation rested on Nazi ideology and the regime's stated racial aims.[15] An ideology could sustain morale in offensive or defensive war, helping both to support initial motivation in the form of volunteering or willingness to serve and to sustain it through the rigours of service. On the other hand, it is less clear that abstract ideologies can effectively maintain high morale in the face of fear in battle – indeed, Christopher Hamner's study of combat motivation explicitly notes that 'the pressures and confusion of ground combat are so intense that ideology is simply disconnected from behaviour when the bullets and shrapnel are flying'.[16] Here, a distinction between combat motivation specifically and morale in general is vital.

Closely linked is the concept of proportionality, introduced by Len Smith in his analysis of the French army in the First World War, based on a Foucauldian understanding of power relationships.[17] Men need

---

[13] Omer Bartov, *Hitler's Army* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), chapter 2.

[14] du Picq, 'Battle Studies', 122.

[15] Bartov, *Hitler's Army*, chapter 4.

[16] Christopher H. Hamner, *Enduring Battle: American Soldiers in Three Wars, 1776–1945*, Modern War Studies (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2011), 17–18.

[17] Leonard V. Smith, *Between Mutiny and Obedience: The Case of the French Fifth Infantry Division during World War I* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

to feel that their efforts and sacrifices are appropriate to the cause – a risk–benefit analysis, in other words. If troops consider that too much is being asked of them, that they are being badly led (a judgement which relies on political, cultural and military variables), or that lives are needlessly wasted, then morale is undermined. The collective indiscipline in the French army in spring 1917 fits this model, as soldiers refused to attack after Robert Nivelle's disastrous offensive, but were still willing to defend their lines. However strongly motivated men are by the cause for which they are fighting, they need to perceive that they are achieving worthwhile results or the struggle becomes hopeless. Consequently there are limits to the power of ideology to motivate troops and hence to the ability of legitimate demand theory to explain men's behaviour in battle. The need for a perception of usefulness and the possibility of success is a universal one, whether men fight chiefly out of duty or idealism. Soldiers can and will endure hardship, deprivation and losses – but not unnecessarily. The criteria by which men may make such judgements, however, will depend on their perceptions of the possibilities of their own situation, and will therefore be highly contingent on local circumstances. The prevailing political and civic culture, underlying social and cultural attitudes and military circumstances will all determine the impact of motivating ideologies, making it essential to analyse the background and context of any military unit to understand the dynamics of ideological motivation.

Beyond the forces of cohesion and ideology, the role of coercion is undeniably important. For the armies of the *ancien regime* strict discipline was indispensable for creating and maintaining motivation: Frederick the Great believed that men should fear their officers more than any other danger. Ardant Du Picq agreed: 'Man in battle … is a being in whom the instinct of self-preservation dominates … all other sentiments. Discipline has for its aim the domination of that instinct by a greater terror'.[18] However, the consistent application of a disciplinary code does more than instil fear – it helps to create well-behaved, organised and reliable troops who are equipped to meet expectations and understand the penalties of infractions. An effective disciplinary system upholds the authority of officers and cultivates those habits of immediate obedience which make an army more efficient, minimising confusion and time-wasting. To meet these positive criteria, rules must be explicit and their application impartial and consistent; the perception of discipline and punishment as inconstant or unjust generates confusion and resentment, while excessive and unwarranted severity may dismay troops and suggest that they are undervalued by the army.

[18] du Picq, 'Battle Studies', 77.

The role of discipline in combat motivation has been much debated: Can ingrained learnt behaviour overcome instinctive fear and the chaos of the battlefield? If good discipline is founded on instantaneous and unquestioning obedience, on habit not understanding, then the more unintelligent and unthinking the soldiers are, the better. Yet in modern warfare initiative, imagination and flexibility are great assets, incompatible with this model.[19] Italian discipline in the First World War was notoriously severe, but it remains to be established to what effect. A crucial comparison in this debate is the German army of 1944–5, where according to Bartov up to 15,000 soldiers were executed for military offences as the Wehrmacht strove to keep men fighting even in the face of defeat.[20] Clearly this suggests that harsh discipline can be effective in preventing desertion or surrender; but can it keep men firing and advancing? Arguably, fear, desperation and gendered ideals of personal honour also affected the actions of these German soldiers, so it was not brutal discipline alone which kept them in the line. The relationship between discipline and other policies for sustaining combat motivation in the First World War Italian army is one of the major themes of this study.

The final explanatory model for morale sees it as essentially rooted in training. Like good discipline, effective training means that the army's desired behaviours should be so well instilled in the troops that they take over instinctively in times of stress.[21] Good training not only establishes fighting abilities but can also shape combat motivation and maintain morale in the face of fear. The chaos and confusion of battle can induce panic and disorder; effective training should mean that even inexperienced troops are not paralysed by fear or indecision, having been made familiar with combat scenarios. It boosts confidence because it 'implie[s] a high degree of control over … outcomes in combat'.[22] Training increases unit cohesion, and provides the setting in which officers and men get to know one another. Even traditional training procedures such as close-order drill, which were not particularly helpful as tactical preparation by the twentieth century, could play a role in men's adaptation to army life and assimilation into their new units. Familiarity can help reduce the fear caused by many aspects of battle, such as (in the case

---

[19] Marshall, *Men Against Fire*, 22.

[20] Bartov, *Hitler's Army*, 95–104 See also Hew Strachan, 'The Soldier's Experience in Two World Wars: Some Historiographical Comparisons', in *Time to Kill, The Soldier's Experience of War in the West 1939–1945*, ed. Paul Addison and Angus Calder (London: Pimlico, 1997).

[21] Hew Strachan, 'Training, Morale and Modern War', *Journal of Contemporary History* 41 (April 2006): 211–27.

[22] Hamner, *Enduring Battle*, 15.

of the First World War) the noise of artillery and machine gun fire, the difficulties of dealing with barbed wire, the likely layout of the ground and the enemy's trench system and the tactics to be used in both attack and defence. High-quality training and effective weapons systems can increase men's confidence in their own abilities and those of their officers and comrades, while the converse is also true: facing battle ill-prepared is not unnaturally demoralising.

Despite the importance of effective training, it was often poor in First World War armies, bearing little relation to the realities of combat. Excessive emphasis was placed on drill and what soldiers saw as point-less parade-ground manoeuvres. Frustration and disillusionment with training practices have been strongly associated with other symptoms of low morale, especially where men felt they were wasting time or being sent into combat poorly prepared.[23] Further, training which emphasised immediate and unthinking obedience could be detrimental to both fighting effectiveness and to morale. Men trained only to obey a superior officer might break down or stop fighting if their officer was lost. This suppression of initiative might be perceived by more educated men as an insult to their intelligence, and suggested to all soldiers a lack of confidence in their abilities on the part of their commanders.

This book considers morale from two perspectives: that of the army and the system which it implements for the management of morale, and that of the troops themselves, as both autonomous subjects and objects of the system. Part I explores the nature and impact of the Italian army's morale policies, while Part II analyses the experiences, emotions and identity of Italian soldiers.

Part I: Army Policies and Morale

How can an army ensure that men will risk their lives in battle? Soldiers experience a variety of intersecting motivations: friendship, loyalty, a sense of responsibility (to comrades, officers, family, nation), fear of letting others down, the pressure of correct masculine behaviour, fear of punishment. How do military systems, structures, doctrines and practices shape troop morale and to what extent is it a phenomenon which can be effectively controlled by military authorities?

The army and its officers act as an embodiment of the state: they can make the troops feel valued as part of the nation, with a sense of a genuine 'stake' in the war, which will build commitment to the national cause and encourage the willing acceptance of discipline. Material conditions

23 Stouffer et al., *American Soldier*, 209–10.