

***Dulce bellum inexpertis*: Re-contextualizing Italy's inefficacies in the First World War and the Battle of Caporetto**

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On 24 October 1917, during the First World War, Austria-Hungary backed by German forces launched what would quickly become the “greatest military defeat in Italian history.”¹ The Central Powers decisively broke through the Italian Isonzo front at Caporetto, triggering a precipitous Italian retreat, first to the Tagliamento River, then even further back to the Piave; 14,000 square kilometers of land, artillery, warehouses, and over one million Italian lives were left in enemy hands in the span of a few weeks.² Far from being an unpredictable and isolated failure, the Italian defeat at the battle of Caporetto was the direct result of years of deficiencies within the Italian army and state that had culminated by 1917. Indeed, this ignominious defeat, I argue, was the crown jewel of several systemic issues within Italy, specifically its estranged political-military relationship, material, and territorial disadvantages, and a flawed chain of command. Whereas Italian memory and history generally emphasize WWI as a “moment in which the country came together, when national identity and unity were forged among the citizenry for the first time,” less patriotic historians see an “authoritarian regime at odds with an oppressed population for whom the war exercised little if any patriotic appeal.”³ Some, such as British historian Mark Thompson, go as far as to denounce the war’s “futility,” arguing that “instead of forging a stronger nation-state, the furnace of war... almost dissolved it.”⁴ The latter stance is far more compelling; Italy’s role in WWI was clumsy and ineffective, rather than a source of national pride or identity. I will argue that due to its three principal flaws listed above, Italy would have been better off not entering WWI, a war whose role in uniting the young country has been romanticized to the point of abstraction.

¹ Brian Sullivan, “Caporetto: Causes, recovery, and consequences,” in *The Aftermath of Defeat: Societies, Armed Forces, and the Challenge of Recovery*, ed. George Andreopoulos & Harold Selesky (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 60.

² Vanda Wilcox, “Generalship and Mass Surrender During the Italian Defeat at Caporetto,” in *Beyond the Western Front*, ed. Ian F. W. Beckett (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2009), 26-7.

³ Roberta Pergher, “An Italian War? War and Nation in the Italian Historiography of the First World War,” *Journal of Modern History* 90 (December 2018): 867-70.

⁴ Mark Thompson, *The White War: Life and Death on the Italian Front, 1915-1919* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), 3, 326.

There are two main reasons for which Italy's entrance in WWI was a mistake. The first and larger systematic problem was the estranged nature of the relationship between Italian political and military leaders by the time global warfare broke out. In the years leading up to 1914, when politicians and army leaders met, "they showed a marked tendency to be at odds... with one another" on all matters, including "strategy, fortification, and armaments policy."⁵ For instance, in 1915 Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti said that "the generals are worth little, they came up from the ranks at a time when families sent their most stupid sons into the army because they did not know what to do with them."⁶ This rather pejorative and dismissive attitude towards military leaders from the Prime Minister himself underlines the tension between the two sectors. Italy was also politically distanced from its allies in the Triple Entente, having had no binding prewar diplomatic understandings with them. Italy sought to achieve decisive victory "more or less alone" using General Luigi Cadorna's conventional strategy, instead of co-ordinating strategies with France, Russia, and Britain.⁷ This lack of strategic integration fundamentally stemmed from Italian national sensitivity; instead of becoming actively involved in Allied strategy, Italy "fought its own battles and clung doggedly to a military design which doomed it to attrition."⁸ The Italian political arena's condition was simply not conducive to the young country assuming a functional role in an alliance within the context of global warfare.

The second reason why Italy should not have entered the war is that its wartime goals were impossible to achieve. An unfortunate result of the distance between political and military leaders, Italian decision-makers discounted military advice, causing their wartime goals to be "set without any reference to their military capacity to attain them."⁹ The comments of the Marquis di San Giuliano, Italy's foreign minister at the outbreak of the war, suggest that this disjunction was not lost on all Italian figures in power. A few months after the July Crisis of 1914, he remarked that "the ideal situation for us would be if Austria and France were both beaten."¹⁰ Unbound by the Triple Alliance—as its quondam partners were engaged in an offensive, rather than defensive, war—Italy in fact initially maintained a neutral position, which was "neither surprising nor

⁵ John Gooch, "Italy during the First World War," in *Military Effectiveness*, ed. Allan R. Millett and Williamson Murray (London: Unwin Hyman Ltd, 1988), 158-59.

⁶ Olindo Malagodi, *Conversazioni della guerra, 1914-1919*, Vol.1 (Milan and Naples: Riccardo Ricciardi Editore, 1960), 58.

⁷ Gooch, "Italy during the First World War," 158.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 169-70.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 170.

¹⁰ Malagodi, *Conversazioni*, 20.

blameworthy.”¹¹ Indeed, the foreign minister was disinclined to change this initial declaration, being “acutely skeptical of the argument that the addition of Italian military power might decisively tilt the European military balance;” this would imply that not only did Italy have no real need to join the war, its eventual allies had no real need for it to join either.¹² Rather than enter a war to chase unattainable goals, it would have been in Italy’s best interest, then, to remain neutral.

Despite these two compelling reasons to stay out of the conflict, however, Italy nonetheless entered WWI for two manifestly poor reasons. Italy primarily entered the war to achieve territorial gains, specifically to recapture the regions of Trieste and Trentino, as well as out of interest in the eastern coast of the Adriatic Sea; yet these goals, as discussed above, were predicated upon an impossible outcome.¹³ But even more alarmingly, as with most other belligerents in WWI, Italy’s entrance into the war was at its core a matter of national hubris. Italy was the only major belligerent for which this was an “expansionist war, fought to gain new land,” and which could not even “claim to be acting defensively.”¹⁴ Civilian and troop support of the war effort depended upon people buying into the “myth that Italy was a Great Power,” and believing that the only way to “be or remain” one was to enter this Great War.¹⁵ It has even been argued that the honour of the Italian people demanded that their territorial gains “should be won and sanctified by blood.”¹⁶ Whether or not this vain glorification of warfare truly reflected the attitudes of most Italians, it played a strong role in motivating their leaders to join WWI for the sake of national honour and self-assertion—arguably a poor reason to join a long and costly war. Perhaps this attitude offers some insight as to why, decades after it ended, WWI remains prominent in Italian memory as a founding moment. Yet, as Pindar mused over two thousand years prior, *dulce bellum inexpertis* – war is sweet to those who have never experienced it.

Italy did join the war, however, and throughout its course, WWI revealed and exacerbated several of Italy’s most notable flaws as a self-professed Great Power. In addition to estranged military and political spheres, these flaws also included Italy’s material and territorial disadvantages. In the years leading up to and including the war, Italy struggled with supply issues,

¹¹ Frank Chambers, *The War Behind the War, 1914-1918: A History of the Political and Civilian Fronts* (New York: Arno Press, 1972), 91.

¹² Gooch, “Italy during the First World War,” 160.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 157-58.

¹⁴ Pergher, “An Italian War?,” 865.

¹⁵ Richard Bosworth, *Italy and the Approach of the First World War* (London and Basingstoke: MacMillan Press Ltd, 1983), 123, 126.

¹⁶ Chambers, *The War Behind the War*, 97.

economic dependencies, resource, and manpower shortages. Moreover, most of the hostilities took place in the Alps, on treacherous terrain incompatible with modern warfare. Italian forces faced and launched attacks along an 800-kilometer mountainous frontier which seemed to have been drawn with the “express purpose of giving an attacking force the strategic disadvantage at every point.”¹⁷ Unlike its allies on the Western and Eastern fronts, the Italy army was limited by year-round snow and impregnable defenses at “every pass and peak.”¹⁸ Trentino’s *altopiano* terrain made it impossible in many places to move supplies and munitions. The development of *teleferiche*, suspended cableways used to transport supplies up and wounded men down, helped mitigate the challenge of supplying troops on this rugged, vertiginous terrain. Yet taking into account the new technology’s own deficiencies and maintenance requirements, the “logistical obstacles remained immense.”¹⁹ Not only was it difficult to move supplies to the front lines, but it was also difficult to acquire them in the first place. Both the army and the navy had at best weak, and at worst corrupt, procurement policies, causing inordinate delays in obtaining necessary materials like guns and ammunitions and forcing generals to limit artillery use.²⁰ Moreover, Italy was economically dependent upon its quondam partners in the Triple Alliance, and its army had been neglected in the antebellum years, facing shortages in everything from winter clothing to coal, iron, and steel.²¹ Italy also had limited manufacturing capabilities, and thus was also dependent upon Britain, Russia, and the United States for metal and grain imports.²² As a result, by 1917, the young country was facing heavy material scarcity. Coal imports had been halved since 1911.²³ Deficient harvests on the home front meant that many cities, especially southern ones, were on the brink of famine and exhaustion; soldiers’ wives and families were granted a pittance of an allowance, and “subsisted at starvation level.”²⁴ Manpower was as scarce as supplies from farms and factories to the fighting front, where teenaged boys were being called to the trenches.²⁵ The Italian economic picture was becoming an increasingly desperate one; not only

¹⁷ Chambers, *The War Behind the War*, 99.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Gooch, “Italy during the First World War,” 168.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 162.

²¹ Chambers, *The War Behind the War*, 96-7.

²² Gooch, “Italy during the First World War,” 162.

²³ *Ibid.*, 168.

²⁴ Chambers, *The War Behind the War*, 334.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 335.

was the situation dire before the war, the strain WWI inflicted on the nation dragged Italy's goals of national glory and territorial acquisition further and further out of reach.

The third notable flaw in the Italian state, only further revealed throughout its participation in WWI, was the weakness of its chain of command. As the Supreme Command's headquarters were far from the front, the resulting command isolation alienated the troops' military functions from their humanity in the eyes of their leaders.²⁶ The Command "refused to credit stories of disaffection in the trenches," and had a history of sacking officers for vague and gratuitous reasons such as being "alarmist" or showing a "lack of offensive spirit."²⁷ The army's structure was one of "extreme authoritarianism," and its Chief of Staff, General Luigi Cadorna, commanded with egocentricity and capriciousness.²⁸ Beyond simply being abrasive, Cadorna's mental rigidity also had the effect of preventing a coherent Italian operational doctrine from evolving as was happening in other armies; individual successes could be attributed to the judgement of individual commanders, and not the Supreme Command.²⁹ The effectiveness of Cadorna's own military strategies was also dubious. The "cult of the offensive" mentality was entrenched to a fault in the general's approach to warfare, leading him to "place all his faith in exclusively offensive combat," at the inevitable expense of the ability to fend off enemy attack.³⁰ The absence of a coherent operational doctrine further hindered the effective employment of artillery, as the commanders' guiding principles were in a "state of continual confusion," leading them to withhold fire to spare ammunition in moments when it was most needed.³¹ Worse yet, by 1917 the morale amongst senior officers was nearing a state of crisis, largely thanks to the culture of blame and defeatism widespread at senior levels; this led to what has been called a "paralysis of will" amongst Italian high command.³² In armies, low morale tends to be contagious; indeed, it didn't take long before it infected the troops as well. Italian soldiers, who'd been fighting for two years and—largely due to the lack of propaganda—still had "no idea what Italy was fighting for," exhibited a plain lack of commitment to the war.³³ Men on the front line with a yet underdeveloped sense of national

²⁶ Gooch, "Italy during the First World War," 175.

²⁷ Chambers, *The War Behind the War*, 335.; Gooch, "Italy during the First World War," 176.

²⁸ Gooch, "Italy during the First World War," 175-6.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 171.

³⁰ Paolo Alatri, "L'Italia nella prima guerra mondiale," *Studi Storici* 2, no.1 (January – March 1961): 137-8.

³¹ Gooch, "Italy during the First World War," 170.

³² Wilcox, "Generalship and Mass Surrender," 39, 46.; Roberto Bencivenga, *La sorpresa strategica di Caporetto*, ed. Giorgio Rochat (Udine: Gaspari, 1997), 85.

³³ *Ibid.*, 40.

loyalty were fighting a war for unclear reasons under the orders of commanders who were at best confused, and at worst narcissistic, while their families were starving back home. Ultimately, the Italian Supreme Command's mistakes, especially those of General Cadorna, as well as the military's overall frailty, crippled the efficacy and morale of the whole Italian war effort.

All these factors culminated disastrously in October of 1917 at the battle of Caporetto, leading American historian Brian Sullivan to argue that the origins of this "catastrophe lay at least as much in Italian history as in German military skill."³⁴ Italy's territorial disadvantage at Caporetto took the form of upper Isonzo's high mountains, presenting "both military and psychological obstacles."³⁵ Its material disadvantage manifested itself primarily as a manpower shortage, with teenagers conscripted into the army to remediate the situation. One inhabitant of Friuli recalls that her brother was called to fight when he was still wearing *i pantaloni corti*, short pants which unmistakably indicated boyhood: "the 'Boys of '99,' as they were known, were called at a time when ... the military ranks were decimated and one final, great effort was needed to resist German invasion."³⁶ Additionally, the deficiencies in the Italian state's bureaucracy and cooperation amongst military commanders outlined above undercut General Cadorna's opportunity to implement the amphibious strategy he'd been considering on the Isonzo front; Cadorna never got the naval support he'd requested, and found himself instead locked into a "bitter and costly land campaign."³⁷ This rather more imaginative scheme³⁷ might have yielded more favourable results and fewer casualties, but once again Italy found itself enfeebled by its internal difficulties and had to resort to sending boys to fight on a rapidly collapsing front.

But Italy's flaw that had the most devastating impact on the battle of Caporetto was the weakness of its Supreme Command and Chief of Staff. When a small-scale breakthrough leads to an entire front folding in on itself, massive inadequacies in leadership structure and communication become impossible to deny.³⁸ The most significant problem was an utter lack of defensive preparations, despite Cadorna having received ample warning that an Austro-Hungarian offensive was coming. Reports of an impending attack had reached high command a month in advance, but Cadorna dismissed the idea of the Austrians launching a mountain-based offensive before winter;

³⁴ Sullivan, "Caporetto: Causes, recovery, and consequences," 68.

³⁵ Wilcox, "Generalship and Mass Surrender," 40.

³⁶ Nicla D'Anna Sivilotti, *La Nonna Racconta* (Kingston: self-pub., 2010), 7.

³⁷ Gooch, "Italy during the First World War," 164.

³⁸ Wilcox, "Generalship and Mass Surrender," 27.

then, on the very eve of the attack, two Romanian deserters leaked the Austrian battle plans, and again, Cadorna “refused to react.”³⁹ He instead expected only a diversionary attack, while the main thrust would supposedly hit Trentino. While Cadorna did call for some defences to be implemented, his subordinates shared his belief that “no serious attack was intended in the upper Isonzo,” and consequently implemented only “half-hearted” defences.⁴⁰ The general’s overconfident egoism stood in the way of common sense and cemented his legacy; after his dismissal from the army, “the phrase ‘doing a Cadorna’ became British soldiers’ slang for... perpetrating an utter fuck-up and paying the price.”⁴¹ It is worth noting that Luigi Capello, the general in charge of the Italian Second Army—the one hit hardest at Caporetto—had initially recognized his sector as an ideal location for a decisive breakthrough; however, he had hoped his army would be the aggressor and not the victim of such an attack.⁴² Italian command suffered from a “total lack of a shared conception of the battle.”⁴³ This massive inefficacy and confusion infected a command structure already weakened by its Chief of Staff’s arrogance, thereby playing a significant role in the defeat that ensued at Caporetto.

The casualties at Caporetto were devastating, and the defeat unambiguous. In addition to the 14,000 square kilometers lost, the million civilians abandoned to the enemy, and the artillery lost in battle, nearly 12,000 men died, 30,000 were left wounded, 294,000 taken as prisoners, and 350,000 disbanded.⁴⁴ Altogether, by the time of the armistice in 1918, the First World War had claimed an estimated 2.2 million Italian casualties, an exorbitant price to pay for some slivers of new territory and for the title of ‘Great Power,’ to say nothing of the war’s subsequent ideological ramifications.⁴⁵ Much like the battle of Caporetto, WWI hurt Italy far more than it helped it, and much like Caporetto, this outcome was both foreseeable and preventable. Before entering the war, Italy already had a problematic political configuration, an economy highly dependent on soon-to-be severed foreign ties, a disastrous material procurement policy and bureaucracy, and doubt among senior officers as to whether it should join the conflict at all. Patriotic Italian history muses

³⁹ Gooch, “Italy during the First World War,” 176.

⁴⁰ Wilcox, “Generalship and Mass Surrender,” 29.

⁴¹ Thompson, *The White War*, 324.

⁴² Wilcox, “Generalship and Mass Surrender,” 28.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁴⁴ Thompson, *The White War*, 324.

⁴⁵ William Hosch, ed., *World War I: People, Politics, and Power* (New York: Britannica Educational Publishing, 2009), 219.

that “Caporetto was an expensive lesson, but it purified Italy like a fire.”⁴⁶ Yet such portrayals of what was unmistakably a national embarrassment with disastrous consequences are both excessively romantic and deceptive, as is thinking that Italy was thereafter vindicated by “snatching its victory from the jaws of near total defeat;” although Caporetto saw a victorious aftermath at the battle of Vittorio Veneto one year later, by then the Austro-Hungarian army was “already disintegrating” and hardly capable of putting up a good fight.⁴⁷ These idealized, vainglorious recollections of an abject defeat and devastating war do little but mitigate its lessons and perpetuate a false memory in Italian consciousness. History, as well as Italian memory, would do well to rethink Italy’s role in WWI, and Caporetto’s role in Italian national identity. If Caporetto was a fire, it was one that could and should have been swiftly extinguished.

⁴⁶ Chambers, *The War Behind the War*, 337.

⁴⁷ Pergher, “An Italian War?,” 865-66.; Gooch, “Italy during the First World War,” 161.

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