



Anglo-Italian Relations during the First World War

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*To the memory of my grand-grandfather,
Corporal Vincenzo Nicolini, awarded
the Silver Medal of Military Valour
during the retreat from Caporetto,
and his son, Faustino.*

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Abstract

This thesis examines how the newly-born Anglo-Italian alliance operated during World War I, and how it influenced each of Britain's and Italy's strategies. It argues that Britain was Italy's main partner in the conflict: Rome sought to make Britain the guarantor of the London treaty, which had brought Italy into the war on the side of the Allies, as well as its main naval and financial partner within the Entente. London, for its part, used its special partnership with Italy to reach three main objectives.

The first was to have Rome increasingly involved in the Entente's global war, thus going beyond the national dimension of the "fourth war of independence" against Austria-Hungary. Britain aimed in particular to complete the blockade of the Central Powers by securing the Mediterranean. This result was achieved slowly – Italy declared war on Turkey in autumn 1915 and on Germany in summer 1916 – and not without contradictions, such as Italy's persistently self-reliant trade policy.

The second British goal was to keep Italy in the war when the Caporetto crisis hit: British financial, commercial and military support was crucial to restore Italian forces and morale, and allow Rome to pursue to fight.

Finally, in a wider geo-political sense, Britain took advantage of its good relations with Italy to balance French influence in the Mediterranean and the Middle East. London acted as a mediator in the controversies between Rome, Petrograd and Paris, taking upon it the task of keeping the alliance together.

Anglo-Italian relations worsened in 1918. Britain's leadership within the Entente declined and was gradually replaced by American leadership. President Wilson's "politics of nationalities" produced a significant revision of the London pact: Italy felt betrayed by its main partner, Britain, and this caused a long-lasting resentment towards London which had far-reaching consequences in the post-war period.

Prologue: The Treaty of London.

Among the many stereotypes characterising First World War literature and collective memory, one of the most widespread and solid is surely that of the “treacherous,” “faithless” and “opportunist” Italian, ready for anything in search of personal gain. No high opinion has ever been held of Italy, who joined the war a year after the great continental powers, and did so by changing alliance opportunely. Italy was the country which in true Machiavellian fashion, had for months – from August 1914 to April 1915 – offered its services for sale to the highest bidder.¹ On its side, Italian historiography has almost never looked at other schools, simply justifying the actions of its country in those crucial months and in the following war, often called the Fourth War of Independence, only to Italians.²

This separation has left several shady areas in the First World War literature. Some crucial elements which lie at the heart of the relations between Italy and its future Entente allies during the months of Italian neutrality are still rather obscure. British historians have been unable to grasp some of the reasons for Italy’s ambiguous attitude, which were motivated by feelings running through the ruling classes and in public opinion, as well as by the complex dynamics of domestic politics.

Italian historians, on the other hand, afflicted by an intellectual narrow-mindedness, as well possibly by an inferiority complex towards the western great powers, have long denied a crucial aspect of Italian foreign policy in those years: an attitude which we could define as quite simply imperialist, a desire to expand which set its sights particularly on the Balkans, and which moved alongside the official reason for Italian intervention: the liberation of the *terre irredente*.³ Such a relentless impulse, spurring on a politics of power, which in many ways could not match the real capacity of a newly-unified but still internally divided country, did not, however, escape Anglo-Saxon historians. Richard

¹ H. Strachan, *The First World War: A New Illustrated History* (London: Simon & Schuster 2003), 120.

² E. Decleva, *L'Italia e la politica internazionale dal 1870 al 1914. L'ultima fra le grandi potenze* (Milan: Mursia, 1974), 167.

³ Italian territories still under Austrian control, particularly the provinces of Trento and Trieste.

Bosworth traced a link between Liberal and Fascist Italy's foreign policies,⁴ arguing that the break between the two periods, highlighted always in Italian historiography,⁵ is much less clear-cut than Italians often like to think.

These two contrasting lines of thought have one defect in common: trying to find a unilateral explanation of the facts, as a result either of a hasty judgement on Italian foreign policy, or of an apologetic attitude towards it. There is however a third reason for Italian intervention which has so far escaped historical analysis by both traditions: the bond which united Italy and Britain. Although not bound by a formal alliance with Britain, Italy had always had very close relations with His Majesty's government, from both the political and the economic points of view. Italy's imperial impulse sat side by side with another completely different instinct: the need for peace which translated into a sincere wish to keep the *status quo*, European equilibrium, which in large part was based on the *pax britannica*. In other words, if that balance were in some way to be upset, it was crucial for Italy to be on the side of Britain.

These three elements shaped Italian behaviour during the months of neutrality: the influence of internal policy, which can help better understand the apparent double-dealing of Italian foreign policy; the imperialist impulse, which reveals some of the often forgotten reasons for Italian intervention; the non-official yet deep bond with Britain, which explains the talks in London, and the quite abrupt change of alliance. The first two reasons were not perhaps enough to push Italy into taking the final step towards war; the third was.

It is not possible here to provide a new history of the Treaty of London. However, before studying in greater detail the history of the alliance between Italy and Britain, and the development of their relations during the war, the way in which this alliance was built up needs to be considered. Some of the implications which the Treaty of London held for the signatories should also be outlined. For in actual fact it was from these premises that relations between Italy and the new Entente allies, particularly Britain, Italy's main political, financial and, at some moments during the war, military partner, sprang.

⁴ R. Bosworth, *Italy, the Least of the Great Powers: Italian Foreign Policy before the First World War* (London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 18-19.

⁵ See, for example, B. Croce in *Il Giornale d'Italia*, 9 July 1924.

British academics have been interested in the negotiations which culminated in the Treaty of London, primarily because Britain was at their forefront. But the interpretations which they have provided were limited due to their inability to analyse in depth dynamics which were so distant politically, linguistically and culturally. First, the material used by most British researchers was essentially made up of documents available in French or English translation. Secondly, it is never easy, when dealing with another country's politics, to free oneself of the underlying prejudices which every culture carries when considering the "other."⁶

So C.J. Lowe and F. Marzari in *Italian Foreign Policy 1870-1945* restrict themselves to listing the diplomatic stages of the progressive distancing of Italy from the Triple Alliance to move towards the Triple Entente.⁷ David Stevenson, in his important work on the First World War, dedicates a mere three pages to the whole affair.⁸ A closer study, W.W. Gottlieb's *Studies in Secret Diplomacy during the First World War*, emphasised above all Italy's double-dealing, without any attempt to explain the reasons behind it other than a vague, albeit long-lasting, imperialist ambition.⁹

The studies of Italy by Bosworth, probably the leading Anglophone expert on Italian affairs and one of the very few to have worked on documents in the original language, stand apart. His books, *Italy, the Least of the Great Powers* and *Italy and the Approach of the First World War*, debunk many of the myths of the Risorgimento and stress the flimsy nature of the expansionist dreams of a part of the Italian political *élite*.¹⁰ On the Italian approach to foreign policy, Bosworth quoted a famous remark by A.J.P. Taylor: "There were few real secrets in the diplomatic world [before 1914], and all diplomats were honest, according to their moral code." This was accompanied by a footnote: "It becomes wearisome to add 'except the Italians' to every generalisation. Henceforth it may be assumed". The apparent absurdity of this note, commented Bosworth, does in actual fact hold some

⁶ This holds, naturally, the other way round.

⁷ J.C. Lowe, F. Marzari, *Italian Foreign Policy, 1870-1945* (London-Boston: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1975), 133-150.

⁸ D. Stevenson, *1914-1918: The History of the First World War* (London: Penguin, 2004), 110-112.

⁹ W. Gottlieb, *Studies in Secret Diplomacy during the First World War* (London: Allen & Unwin 1957), 146-149, 198.

¹⁰ R. Bosworth, *Italy and the Approach of the First World War* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1983), 28-50.

element of truth. That a country which did not have sufficient strength should have expected to act as a great power was, in his view, at the heart of the “dishonesty” of which Taylor speaks. In an earlier chapter of the same book, Bosworth was even more explicit: he defined Italian foreign policy, not only during the months of neutrality, but practically from unification onwards, as “totally unreliable.”¹¹

Less severe, but just as limited by his search for a single interpretation to give events some logical coherence, is Mark Thompson’s *The White War*, the first English-language work to consider the whole Italian experience during the Great War. Thompson stressed the rather obscure (and unconstitutional) action on the part of Antonio Salandra and Sidney Sonnino,¹² prime minister and foreign minister, respectively, who, in agreement with the king and fully aware that they would have the support of the army and irredentist intellectuals, negotiated and signed the Treaty of London, prevaricating with parliament and dragging the country into war for their reckless, disastrous policy of “sacred egoism.”¹³ Here again, not a wrong interpretation in itself, but an incomplete one. More recently, John Gooch has published an excellent study on Italy’s war, and has stressed the relevance of Balkan politics in determining Italy’s choice to join the war on the Entente’s side. But he only briefly touched the relevance of Italian domestic dynamics.¹⁴

Most British writers did not deny that the Austrians were also responsible for the outcome. They admitted that the defensive nature of the Triple Alliance did not give rise to a *casus foederis*; that Austria-Hungary tended to treat Italy as a client rather than an ally, not least by failing to consult it before war with Serbia; and that Article VII of the Treaty of the Triple Alliance governed Italy’s right to “compensations” in the case of unilateral Austrian expansion in the Balkans.¹⁵ The conclusion

¹¹ ID., *Italy, the Least...*, 199, 299.

¹² M. Thompson, *The White War. Life and Death on the Italian Front (1915-1919)* (London: Faber, 2008), 25.

¹³ Taken from a speech by Salandra, 18 October 1914, in which the prime minister announced that Italian politics would from then on be handled with “the firmest strength of spirit, serene vision of the real interests of the country, maturity of thought which should not exclude, where necessary, promptness of action; fervour not of words but of actions is needed; a spirit free from every preconception, every prejudice, every feeling other than boundless and exclusive devotion to our Homeland, of *sacro egoismo* for Italy.” See: A. Salandra, *L’intervento, 1915: ricordi e pensieri* (Milan: Mondadori, 1930), 150.

¹⁴ J. Gooch, *The Italian Army and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 70-78.

¹⁵ Bosworth, *Italy, the Least...*, 196-254; Gottlieb, *Secret Diplomacy...*, 162 ff.; J.C. Lowe, F. Marzari, *Italian Foreign Policy...*, 130 ff.; Thompson, *White War...*, 23.

regarding Italy's behaviour is however always more or less the same: "Italy was for sale to the highest bidder."¹⁶

This seems true, but the real reasons for the Italian position were far more complex. It is in fact necessary to broaden the analysis to consider two issues in internal politics which played a decisive role in Italian foreign policy on the eve of and during the war.

The first is a sense of fear: quite the opposite of the arrogance noted by Bosworth. The political *élite* of Liberal Italy from the years immediately after unification lived in fear of losing what they had gained with such difficulty – Italy. This can be found in part in their memoirs and in the literary works of poets and writers of the time;¹⁷ and in part in military provisions drawn up immediately after the entry to Rome in 1870. The main fear, which would remain alive for many years, was of a French attack undertaken with Vatican complicity. Visual evidence of this are the ruins of the so-called Campo Trincerato Romano, a line of fortifications now part of the city and almost entirely forgotten (fifteen forts of Prussian type and four hexagonal battery positions) erected to defend the strip – then open country – of territory immediately surrounding the city. Work continued until 1891, an indelible symbol of a permanent state of fear.¹⁸

The involvement of Italy in the Triple Alliance (1882) was in large part dictated by the need to have the support of a great European power, in this case Germany. But the fear in the Italian establishment, strengthened over time by the awareness of the structural limits of the country, did not disappear: rather it evolved into constant mistrust of everyone, be they allied or hostile countries – and on the other hand, one of the two newly-acquired allies, Austria-Hungary, was none other than the most recent and deadliest enemy. Precisely for this reason there was no lack, across the whole range of forces within the country, of doubts, reservations, uncertainties, withdrawals and opposing views regarding the road to be taken and the travelling companions with whom to share it.

¹⁶ Strachan, *The First World War...*, 120.

¹⁷ B. Croce, *L'Italia dal 1914 al 1918: pagine sulla guerra* (Naples: Ricciardi, 1919); ID., *Storia d'Italia dal 1875 al 1915* (Bari: Laterza, 1915); E. Corradini, *La patria lontana* (Milan: Treves, 1910); ID., *La guerra lontana* (Milan: Treves, 1911); A. Oriani, *Fino a Dogali* (Milan: Galli, 1889); ID., *La lotta politica in Italia* (Naples: Ricciardi, 1892); *La disfatta* (Milan: Treves, 1896); ID., *La rivolta ideale* (Naples: Ricciardi, 1908).

¹⁸ Va. A.a. eds., *Operare i forti. Per un progetto di riconversione dei forti militari di Roma* (Rome: Anna Giovannelli Gangemi ed., 2009), 11.

Naturally, this was not a purely Italian situation. For any country, the choice to stand with one side or the other means taking a risk and responding to both internal and international rationales, to fears and hopes; and no decision of this kind has ever been taken elsewhere as well without contrasting and conflicting positions. Yet it seems that the internal politics had implications for Liberal Italy's foreign policy that went far deeper than was the case for other European powers. Foreign policy in Italy took on more dramatic hues because national unification had not really overcome many deep fragilities.

The years between 1870 and 1914 were, moreover, full of traumatic moments and unknowns for Italian foreign policy: from the precarious construction of the new national state to the frustrations of the Congress of Berlin, the French seizure of Tunisia, and thus the Triple Alliance. The list continues: the beginning of the British-aided colonial adventure, Dogali, Adowa, the end-of-century crisis, the flirtations with France, Algeiras, the Bosnian crisis, the Moroccan crisis, the conquest of Libya, the Balkan Wars and finally the war in Europe.

Liberal Italy was hard put overall to find its way. Due to its recent origins and to the complex way in which the process of unification had been carried out, Italy could not call on consolidated traditions of foreign policy to guide it. Liberal Italy depended for its very survival on the international context, being too weak itself to dictate the rules of the game but not so resigned that it would passively accept those of others. A nation struggling between two opposing lines of conduct: resign itself to being a second class power, content to concentrate only on internal consolidation; or behave like a great power, albeit the most recent, spurred by its own destiny to forge ahead through obstacles and difficulties. The choice, then, lay between "*concentrazione*" or "active politics." Whichever of the two paths was followed, it would be necessary to garner support from a people far more concerned with more urgent social and economic needs.¹⁹

This climate of general uncertainty was made grimmer by the knowledge that what was ultimately at stake was not this or that colony, or, in the end, national prestige or honour, but the unity of Italy, the very survival of the nation: this lay at the root of *sacro egoismo*. The idea, that is, that everything should be subordinate to national unity and security. This is what the British ambassador to Rome, Sir Rennell Rodd, himself thought. Referring to the policy of *sacro egoismo*, he remarked: "Removed

¹⁹ E. Decleva, *L'incerto alleato. Ricerche sugli orientamenti internazionali dell'Italia unita* (Milan: Angeli, 1987), 13.

from their context the words might no doubt be interpreted not too benevolently, as recommending the exclusion of any but purely selfish national motives from consideration. Taken in their context there is nothing ungracious in their point. The speaker was indicating the qualities indispensable to a statesman who in so grave a moment had to maintain the continuity of policy.”²⁰

Naturally, the concept of “national security” is relative and can be extended indiscriminately. For this reason, in the logic of “sacred egoism,” the defence of national unity and an expansionist thrust co-existed without any evident contradiction. That too was why even a liberal and later decidedly anti-fascist intellectual, such as Benedetto Croce, while not approving the war in 1914, did not oppose it with the strength one would have expected. In his major work *Storia dell’Italia dal 1871 al 1915*, Croce evoked the atmosphere of disappointment in the newly-unified Italy, born at the cost of so much sacrifice (his metaphor of the “prose” of the administrative settling-in period following the “epic” which were the feats of the Risorgimento is famous). It was a collective humour which characterised the political *élite* in particular, marking their approach to foreign policy: so also Croce spoke with satisfaction of Italy’s new attitude in 1914-15, a more active, ruthless one, proof of a renewed will to take a risk, to gain glory, to take control of its own destiny.²¹

Nonetheless, the obsession of yet another failure, which might have seriously compromised the future and very unity of Italy, forced the country to avoid the risk of being rushed into the war and to make sure that it found itself on the side more likely to win. It was not, therefore, a matter of immature and rather cowardly opportunism as has so often been thought. At its heart was something much more legitimate – survival.

It is essential to bear these feelings in mind as they were to characterise Italian behaviour during the months of neutrality and in subsequent relations with the new allies. Some tensions, mutual suspicions and misunderstandings which arose during the course of the war cannot be understood unless we start from here.

²⁰ J. Rodd, Sir Rennell, *Social and Diplomatic Memories, 1902-1919*, 3 vols. (London: Edward Arnold & Co., 1925), III, 224.

²¹ B. Croce, *Storia d’Italia dal 1871 al 1915* (Bari: Laterza, 1928), 399.

The second issue of internal policy, which is also difficult to grasp, concerns the complex power dynamics at play among the different parties – and in the groups within each of these – competing for the government of the country. Far from a single, compact body, the ruling classes of Italy were divided and in disagreement.

Here again, such a situation was not peculiar to Italy: Britain too was politically divided over the advisability of entering the war on the side of France. On 24 July 1914 Prime Minister H.H. Asquith believed that, should war break out in Europe following the Austrian ultimatum to Serbia, Britain could remain a “spectator.”²² Deeply involved in the Irish question, Asquith did not fully realise until 1 August how seriously the internal divisions of his Cabinet risked bringing about a crisis in his government. That day the Cabinet rejected the request of its foreign minister, Sir Edward Grey, that Britain intervene on the side of France should Germany violate Belgian neutrality. Grey was forced to communicate to the French ambassador that Paris would have to decide on its own how to respond to the German ultimatum, without any guarantee from Britain.²³ The foreign minister himself threatened to resign on 2 August and Asquith was ready to follow if the Cabinet did not reunite. This they did on 3 August thanks also to the political action of Lloyd George.²⁴ Grey could therefore declare that Great Britain was ready to fulfil its “obligation of honour” to France – and Belgium.²⁵

Every country, then, has its own history and reworks it more or less profoundly to show up its rights and good faith. The image of complete and enthusiastic support from the people for the war, often claimed by the great European powers, is itself probably, at least in part, a myth.²⁶ No other country, though, appears so clearly split into neutralists and interventionists as was Italy. Moreover, such a long-drawn out debate over neutrality or intervention in the press and in the squares of Italy diluted the intensity of emotion which had swept through the masses of Paris, Berlin and London: all the others had had much less time to question, reason and weigh up the pros and cons.

²² H. Strachan, *The First World War: Volume I: To Arms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 94.

²³ Stevenson, *1914-1918...*, 35.

²⁴ Strachan, *The First World War: I...*, 96.

²⁵ See: H.H. Asquith, *Letters to Venetia Stanley*, E. and M. Brock eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

²⁶ S. Audoin-Rouzeau, A. Becker, *La violenza, la crociata, il lutto: La Grande Guerra e la storia del Novecento* (Turin: Einaudi, 2000), 62.

For an idea of these internal dynamics – which left a “representative vacuum” filled by the demagogues, the intellectuals, the press and extremists on both sides – it is worth considering the main actors on the stage.

Within the vast spectrum of party labels – Nationalists, Liberals, Radicals, Republicans, Democrats, Catholics, Socialists – were many other shades which made Italian political world extremely complex and fluid.²⁷ The Centre-Right harboured strong, deeply-rooted divisions between Liberals and Catholics; within these, some looked to the Right, to Salandra and Sonnino, and others to the Left, to Giovanni Giolitti. The neo-Nationalists, in turn, were in some cases irredentist and anti-Austrian and, in others, pro-German and anti-liberal. The position Alfredo Rocco, one of the most influential nationalists and founder of the Associazione Nazionale Italiana in 1910, is emblematic: he first wanted to see Italy siding with the Alliance and then with the Entente, just as long as it entered the war and stirred the energy of the nation. The Radicals, in theory close to interventionists, in actual fact rallied around Giolitti, the only statesman in recent times capable of leading the forces of reform. The Republicans, numerically less influential than the Radicals, had a stronger identity and were determined to offset the authoritarianism of Salandra. The Socialists, the great party of the Left, were perhaps the most internally divided. Filippo Turati, Camillo Prampolini, the group of the *Avanti!* daily, and the extremist wing of Armando Borghi supported peace; but many others, from Benito Mussolini to Leonida Bissolati, were pulled in the opposite direction. On 2 August, the same day as the official declaration of Italian neutrality, Bissolati wrote to his colleague Ivanoe Bonomi, that “the soul of the Italian proletariat must be prepared for war.”²⁸ The Left was split and so incapable of playing a decisive role. The Catholics too, did not present a united front, ranging from the absolute pacifism of Guido Miglioli to a more flexible position, subordinated to the national interests of Giolitti; and from the fatalist neutrality resigned to its own defeat of the young Alcide De Gasperi to Filippo Meda’s open support of the Triple Alliance. Then there was the intricate, ever-seething area which collected a broad spectrum of interventionist opinion, from the Giulia and Trento irredentists (the most famous

²⁷ The composition of the Parliament was as follows: 199 Liberals under Giolitti; 73 Liberal-Conservatives led by Salandra; 53 Socialists; 29 Democrat-Constitutionalists (“democratico-costituzionali”); 11 Democrats; 20 Catholics; 9 Catholic conservatives; 19 Riformist Socialists under Bissolati and Bonomi; 8 Independent Socialists under Arturo Labriola; 17 Republicans.

²⁸ L. Ambrosoli, *Né aderire né sabotare. 1915-1918* (Milan: Avanti! ed., 1961), 22.

being Cesare Beccaria), to militant intellectuals such as D'Annunzio, Marinetti, Corradini, Albertini, and many others. And the bourgeoisie? Conservatives and notables were not averse to supporting Germany and Austria-Hungary. Regretfully they distanced themselves, not because of some ideal of "Latin brotherhood" with France or as a result of calls for "justice among nations," but for domestic political reasons.²⁹

The Italian ruling classes, in particular the Liberals and Conservatives, painfully aware of the remoteness of the newly unified state, realised that their legitimation in the eyes of the nation, depended above all on the success which they could gain on the international stage. The home policy-foreign policy link, when it works in one direction because of the repercussions of the former on the latter, also works in the opposite direction because international success or failure, consolidates or crumbles the country's political and institutional system.³⁰

As well as being a great unknown, then, war was also an opportunity: to acquire territory, but also to legitimate an entire leading class in the eyes of the nation; to solve once and for all the serious divisions in internal politics and to simplify the fragmented and fractious Italian party system by uniting it through a state of war; and, in the end, it was also an opportunity to extract personal political revenge.

One reason why the Rome government chose to intervene was Salandra's ambition to create a new balance within the Liberals, which Giolitti had tended to move to the Left, and shift power back to the Right.³¹ Naturally the prime minister's authoritarian manner, and the exceptional speed with which he took the decision to announce Italy's neutrality, distancing himself from the Central Powers, did not mean that the system of power built up by Giolitti over the years would shift direction as quickly.

On 4 December Olindo Malagodi, editor of the Rome daily *La Tribuna*, commenting on a forecast by Giolitti, clearly articulated the mood of the bourgeoisie: "Should the war end without any advantage for us, there will be trouble. Even today's supporters of neutrality will throw stones." Eight days later the new foreign minister, Sonnino (who took over from Di San Giuliano who had died in office) said something similar to Malagodi: "The war will be a long one," he repeated. "We must enter

²⁹ M. Isnenghi, G. Rochat, *La Grande Guerra, 1914-1918* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 2000), 100-130.

³⁰ Decleva, *L'incerto alleato...*, 8.

³¹ Isnenghi, Rochat, *Grande Guerra...*, 137.

as late as possible; without however leaving it too late.”³² As Isnenghi and Rochat have commented,³³ this sense of realism stretched to the point of cynicism has long been interpreted by foreign historians (but also by many Italian intellectuals³⁴) as the politics of subterfuge; today, perhaps, such pragmatism might be elevated to the level of political science or taken as a model for “geopolitics.”

It took time to make the final decision to intervene. It was necessary to pave the way with the ruling class, the country and the army; above all, the risk of getting the strategic-political position wrong had to be minimised. If Italy’s intervention were to have the decisive effect on the Central Powers, the advantages which would accrue would be greater than those from remaining neutral.

However, we should still ask whether these reasons for intervention on the Entente’s side were sufficient. Most probably they were not, because the ties with Germany were not easy to break, for both military reasons (its army was rightly considered the strongest on the continent), and for well-rooted political and financial ones. In the same way also, some historians have exaggerated the vision of Austria as the “historic enemy” of Italy. It was certainly a widespread feeling in Italy but it was not an absolute. It was not shared, for example, by significant fringes of the right made up of small but very noisy groups of anti-Mazzini and anti-liberal Nationalists such as the above-mentioned Corradini and Rocco, little disposed to distance themselves from the “block of order.”³⁵

All in all, then, the situation was sufficiently intricate to paralyse the government of any country for months. The decision to be taken was a colossal one and the months of “bargaining” – as it was seen abroad – were characterised in Italy by dramatic internal debates and tensions. The balancing of all these tendencies first led the prime minister, Salandra, and the foreign minister, Antonino di San Giuliano, to decide for neutrality. A pragmatic decision, it cannot – despite Salandra’s own claims to

³² O. Malagodi, *Conversazioni sulla guerra 1914-1919*, 2 vols., B. Vigezzi ed. (Milan-Naples: Ricciardi, 1960), vol. I, 32-37. The work was made public only in 1960, for by then all parties involved had died.

³³ Isnenghi, Rochat, *Grande Guerra...*, 103.

³⁴ G. D’Annunzio, *Per la più grande Italia* (Milan: Treves, 1920), 105. The poet-seer rails against “hesitation, subterfuge, quibble, reticence, wiliness, cowardice, shame”.

³⁵ Many were later to align themselves for intervention purely for love of war, anyhow and against anyone: Isnenghi, Rochat, *Grande Guerra...*, 84.

the contrary³⁶ – be read as a necessary intermediate stage designed to upset the Triple Alliance before entering the war on the side of the Entente.³⁷

Just as time was needed to redeploy the Italian army and have it take up position on the opposite side to where it was, so it was also needed for the diplomatic, political and psychological positions of the ruling classes to shift, and for them to gather support among the public.³⁸ In the final analysis, then, Italian neutrality and talks with the Entente were not simply a trivial *Giro di Valzer*. Italy's detachment from the Triple Alliance was clear-cut only in summer 1914, when Italy wished to avoid being rushed into a war to support Austro-Hungarian ambitions. What followed during the months of neutrality was a long, difficult process of reorientation, contested as it was happening and not all obvious in its outcome.

We have so far tried to concentrate on some of the issues which have escaped the attention of English-language historians. But even Italians have interpreted Rome's behaviour in ways that are inadequate.

Their main aim has been to track a reasonable, progressive and honourable shift in the axis of alliances from Vienna and Berlin to London, Paris and Petrograd, justified by the somewhat hostile attitude of the old allies and the legitimate national claims of Italians subject to the Austro-Hungarian empire. Italian historiography, from the years immediately following the end of the war, took upon itself the burden of reasserting that in 1914-15 Italy had not followed the line of an interventionist minority: the change of alliance was but the last step on a road undertaken some time before, a road to which Italy had been committed not by some Machiavellian policy or the bad faith of its governors, but by the hostility of the Austrians to every reasonable mediation.

It should be noted that what was being questioned was not the decision to join the Triple Alliance in 1882 – and to stay with it for seven subsequent renewals: the circumstances in which it was originally signed offered no alternative. In 1916-17, for example, Gaetano Salvemini, already one of the most heeded intellectuals, admitted that the alliance had brought advantage to Italy: it had sheltered Italy

³⁶ Salandra, *L'Intervento...*, 193.

³⁷ Isnenghi, Rochat, *Grande Guerra...*, 84.

³⁸ F. Martini, *Diario 1914-1918*, G. De Rosa ed. (Milan: Mondadori, 1966).

from a possible reopening of the “Roman question” – the dispute between Italy and the Papacy over Papal sovereignty over Rome; it had not hindered some freedom of action for Italy in the Balkans and in the Mediterranean, backed by the agreement with Britain and the “peaceful and loyal” policy of Germany and Austria-Hungary in the “Eastern Question”; it had enabled Italy to confront France, the Mediterranean rival at the time, with its back covered by powerful allies. Salvemini hastened, however, to specify that these conditions would not last long: “As any of these wavers or fails, the Alliance goes through a settlement crisis. As soon as all, one after the other, should fail, the alliance will lose all reason for being and rather will give way to war.”³⁹

More than a few global reconstructions (beginning from the later, and more mature, work by Salvemini, *La politica estera dell'Italia dal 1871 al 1914*, and that of Francesco Tommasini, *L'Italia alla vigilia della guerra*),⁴⁰ and several more recent monographs seem to accord with this interpretation. Some episodes on the road to detachment from the Alliance were: the management of the Greek crisis in 1897 – when Italy’s position appeared closer to France’s rather than Germany’s; the rapprochement with France itself with the Prinetti-Barrère accord in 1902 – explicitly presented as the “necessary prologue to our intervention of 1915”;⁴¹ the naval agreement with Britain in the same year; the part played by Italy in the Algeiras conference in 1906; and the understanding reached with Russia at Racconigi in 1909.⁴² The account given by these Italian historians offers an apparently safe point of reference for an often intricate and contradictory sequence of events which was not easy to unravel.

The first to attempt a more nuanced interpretation was Luigi Salvatorelli, who on the eve of the Second World War pointed out in his *Storia Diplomatica* of the Triple Alliance that the coalition did, over time, assume an ever vaguer and far less co-operative nature but this did not necessarily imply it would be extinguished: “The Naval Convention which governed the co-operation of the Italian and Austro-Hungarian fleets and a German squadron in the Mediterranean is dated 1913. Against Serbian

³⁹ G. Salvemini, *La politica estera italiana dal 1871 al 1915* (Milan: Barbera, 1944), 20.

⁴⁰ F. Tommasini, *L'Italia alla vigilia della guerra: la politica estera di Tommaso Tittoni* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1934).

⁴¹ I. Bonomi, *La politica italiana da Porta Pia a Vittorio Veneto (1870, 1918)* (Turin: Einaudi, 1944), 206.

⁴² Decleva, *L'Italia...*, 167.

ambitions in Albania, Italy and Austria were in agreement. Giolitti was not, in his way, less loyal to the Triple Alliance than Crispi; Di San Giuliano was no less behind the alliance than Blanc,⁴³ and had occasion to proclaim Italo-Austrian solidarity in the Mediterranean.” Again: “As regards currents among the Italian people, necessarily anti-Austrian irredentists were counterbalanced by prevalently anti-French colonialists.” Yet, Salvatorelli admitted that ultimately “by means of Austro-German politics” the elements of “clarity” had finally prevailed over the alliance’s case, bringing about its collapse.⁴⁴

Close analysis of the Treaty of London would have to wait until Mario Toscano’s *Il Patto di Londra*. In his study, the power relationships and the legal grounds of the treaty were analysed with unprecedented accuracy, but the historic breadth is rather limited, a long way from the perception of the profound causes and mood which accompanied those long talks.

Federico Chabod’s *Considerazioni sulla politica estera dell’Italia dal 1870 al 1915* (1974), and also the broader work by Brunello Vigezzi, *L’Italia di fronte alla Prima Guerra Mondiale* (1969), which argued the need for a more radical historical perspective, widened the debate regarding the troubled relationship between Italy and its allies, but even these scholars did not manage to get to the heart of the imperialist urges of a part of the Italian political *élite*. Italian historians only woke up to these less obvious factors with the publication of important works, like Mario Isnenghi and Giorgio Rochat’s *La Grande Guerra*. But even here Italian imperialism was not analysed in depth. Nor, perhaps, could it have been, because many of the secret reasons for Italian intervention in the First World War have emerged only in recent years, following the publication of the diaries of the Italian ambassador to London, Guglielmo Imperiali di Francavilla, and the release of his personal papers which are still being catalogued.

The expansionist ambition, which emerges from his memoirs, is not new, but for the first time it assumes a clearer, more precise and more determined profile. The plan developed over several months, and so did not have a precise imperialist aim from the outset. With the death of Di San Giuliano, who had held the reins of Italian foreign policy for four years and had set up the first talks with the Entente

⁴³ Alberto Blanc was the diplomat who, more than anyone else, brought Italy into the Triple Alliance.

⁴⁴ L. Salvatorelli, *La Triplice Alleanza. Storia diplomatica 1877-1912* (Milan: Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale, 1940), 17.

powers in the summer of 1914 out of prudence, an imperialist aim begun to take shape. Sidney Sonnino, who took over the office, as well as being a more difficult character and less expert, was also more ambitious and impatient.⁴⁵

On 8 November 1914 Salandra sent Sonnino a document with a series of attachments concerning Italian claims from the Entente. The documents contained the *Telegrammone*, the long telegram sent to Imperiali on 4 October with the first draft of proposals for the Entente, and the correspondence (from Sonnino to Salandra, Salandra to Giacomo De Martino,⁴⁶ De Martino to Salandra and Sonnino to Salandra again) of the preceding weeks. Italian requests up to this date were still in great measure inspired by the principle of nationality with a few adjustments to be made regarding northern Trentino and Istria.⁴⁷

In the following months the Italian requests became more explicit, surprising Imperiali himself. On 16 February 1915, when negotiations with the Entente finally speeded up (after several months' stalemate as Italy tried to repair relations with Austria once more, through German mediation), Imperiali received a memorandum in which Sonnino set out the final draft of Italian conditions for joining the Entente: this was the basis on which the ambassador would negotiate the details of the pact. For some days, Imperiali, on Sonnino's explicit orders, did not speak to the Entente powers about the Italian proposals, limiting himself to studying them. His first laconic comment was: "There may be too much Dalmatia, but Fiume, indisputably an Italian city, is left out. This omission may lead to serious domestic complications at the time of victorious peace."⁴⁸ As at that time Sonnino was deaf to claims on Fiume, on 4 March Imperiali delivered the memorandum to Grey.

Imperiali's dismay was justified. Compared to the earlier talks with the British, he would now suddenly have to negotiate claims for territories which were much harder to justify. The telegram of 4 October 1914 set the Italian frontier at Quarnaro, so as to include Trieste and Istria. Article V of the

⁴⁵ Imperiali noted several times in his diary that Sonnino's stormy character did not help make his job any easier. See: Imperiali, G., *Diario 1915-1919* (Rubbettino: Soveria Mannelli, 2006), 140.

⁴⁶ Under-secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

⁴⁷ S. Sonnino, *Carteggio 1914-1916*, P. Pastorelli ed. (Bari: Laterza, 1974), 51-63.

⁴⁸ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 131. Prophetic words, indeed.

new memorandum,⁴⁹ on the other hand, had provided for Italy to be granted a large part of Dalmatia as well.⁵⁰ In his diary, the Italian ambassador noted:

On the subject of the memorandum, I should like to remember also that during the November talks there was no mention of Dalmatia. Other factors must have come into play (perhaps the Navy?) to persuade them to ask for Sebenico, Zara and Spalato. If, as is likely, this request should be met, it will give rise to a wealth of problems from the promoters of the principle of nationality!⁵¹

It should be noted that Imperiali was in no way a liberal like Woodrow Wilson, the principal architect of the final settlement. He was a marquis of the old Neapolitan nobility, part and parcel of the mentality and values of late 19th century European aristocracy. He was in some respects himself an imperialist. It was not by chance that he should lay great store on colonial compensation.⁵² On 25 March, even without instruction on this point from the Consulta,⁵³ he had talks with Grey: he raised the issue very openly with “Edward,” who, however “appeared very irritated.”⁵⁴

Imperiali ended up wittingly in concert with Sonnino on Italian ambitions in the Balkans, adopting the latter’s battles as his own. “After all,” he would note in his diary “if we risk so much we are quite within our rights to ensure, in great part, our absolute supremacy in the Adriatic!”⁵⁵ Beyond this self-persuasion,⁵⁶ however, as a well-seasoned diplomat, Imperiali had realised the dangerous path that Italy was about to tread, presenting territorial claims grounded on two very different principles: one of

⁴⁹ ASSR, Fondo Imperiali, b. 2, f. 10, Patto di Londra, Telegrammi, sf. Memorandum delle condizioni e dichiarazioni di non concludere pace separata, 16 February 1915.

⁵⁰ Around 230,000 German-speaking Tyrol people, 700,000 Slovenes and Croats and 650,000 Italians lived in the territories claimed by Italy: Stevenson, *1914-1918...*, 112; Thompson, *White War...*, 31.

⁵¹ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 132.

⁵² In this Imperiali showed far more colonialist fervour than Sonnino himself: *ibid.*, 135, 139-141.

⁵³ The *Palazzo* which at that time housed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

⁵⁴ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 39.

⁵⁵ When Grey told him that Russia was raising difficulties concerning Dalmatia, Imperiali replied: “Six centuries of Venetian domination as against forty-four years of forced, intense Austrian assimilation”: Imperiali, *Diario...*, 132-136.

⁵⁶ On 20 March, Imperiali replied harshly to Sir Arthur Nicolson, the British permanent under-secretary in the Foreign Office, who claimed that Italy would be striking a handsome bargain by signing the treaty: “What is the point of having all the advantages if we do not ensure absolute predominance in the Adriatic and strategic security”: *ibid.*, 143.

unification of the “unredeemed lands” according to the principle of nationality; the other of pure imperialist expansion, albeit masked by the principle of “strategic security.”⁵⁷

In any case, on 3 April, Imperiali received a telegram from Sonnino which was more explicit than ever:

Not possible we accept list amendments Asquith on behalf Triple Entente. Powers of Triple Entente must understand only serious reason for our participation in war alongside them, as we do not require any direct sacrifice by them on our behalf, is to assure our military predominance in Adriatic excluding possibility having or finding naval base any other Power. You shall explain this Government’s reasons, should the Powers maintain their amendments, for having regretfully to withdraw our proposals and considering they never happened.⁵⁸

Sonnino had clarified his position in person to Rodd on 30 March: the Italians wanted to ensure predominance in the Adriatic, notwithstanding Russia’s preoccupation with its Slav client-states.⁵⁹ In the light of such a clear-cut and uncompromising position, Imperiali noted irritably in his diary that Sonnino “would himself do well not to try their [allied] patience too far, for if it runs out we may well find ourselves in a rather unpleasant position.”⁶⁰

These documents show that Italy was motivated by an urge to dominate the Adriatic coastal regions of the Balkans, even though Italian historiography has long denied or minimised it. It is at this point possible to ask if this imperialist urge alone would have been enough – as Bosworth believes – to drag Italy into the war.

As with everything concerning Italian politics in those months, it is not obvious. The ambitions of Sonnino and Salandra were balanced by the prudence of many other, even more influential, political leaders. On 2 February 1915, *La Tribuna* of Rome, which supported Giolitti, published a letter from him which said:

⁵⁷ “Nothing, however, contrary to sacred British interests,” Imperiali sardonically remarked: *ibid.*, 132.

⁵⁸ *I documenti diplomatici italiani* (DDI) Quinta Serie (5^a), vol. III, doc. 260, Sonnino to Imperiali, 3 April 1915. This reference to the legal basis of Italian claims by virtue of the fact that no direct help was asked of the Allies was not forgotten by the British and French after aid supplied by them to the Italians in the winter of 1917-18.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, III, doc. 225, Sonnino to Imperiali, 30 March 1915.

⁶⁰ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 143.

Of course I do not consider war to be a stroke of good luck, as do the nationalists, but rather a misfortune, which must be faced only when necessary for the honour and greater interests of the Country. I do not believe that it is right to take the Country to war out of sentimentalism towards other nations. One may out of sentiment throw away one's own life, not that of the Country. But should it be necessary I would not hesitate to face war and I have proved it. I strongly believe, considering the present situation of Europe, that very much (*parecchio*) can be obtained without war.⁶¹

Italy was not deaf to the reasoning of Germany, which had for months worked to reconcile its two allies.⁶² Sonnino himself had not shut the door completely on the old allies. In a confidential message to Imperiali, he confessed: "I could not prevent Prince Bülow and the German press pushing Austria to offer us the earth. [...] I little believe that anything concrete would be achieved by this road", but if "we were actually freely offered what we might want there would be no Government which could not accept given our present situation."⁶³

Once again, therefore, the uncertainties and fears were compounded by the need to weigh every move as best as possible. Perhaps, in the final analysis, even the imperialist urge alone would not have been enough to drag Italy into war. So, there remains one frequently neglected cause of Italian intervention that needs to be examined. It is the most important of all, and in the end, really did make the difference.

This cause was the bond between Italy and Britain. The reasons for the long friendship burst onto the scene during the European crisis of 1914. Italy could not have been consolidated as a newly unified state without the *pax britannica*. Its imperialist urge, had always been tightly controlled – or had been developed only outside Europe – precisely for this reason. The country – as the shapers of its foreign policy knew very well – depended economically on British imports; militarily it could not

⁶¹ G. Giolitti, *Memorie della mia vita*, 2 vols. (Milan: Treves, 1922), II, 529-530. In his letter, Giolitti had used the word "firmly" which the publisher chose to reduce to "strongly."

⁶² In the end, following pressure from Germany, Austria resigned itself to the loss of the Trentino but was adamant in not giving in Trieste. Vienna's position has always been seen by many Italian historians as evidence of arrogance and contempt on the part of Austria-Hungary. In reality, it is comprehensible in view of both the strategic importance of a rich city like Trieste and its port, and the ethnic situation in the region, which was more complex than in Trentino. Giving in to Italy on Trieste would have sparked off a series of repercussions and conflicts with the Slav peoples. So the government in Vienna remained deaf to Giolitti's overtures, and with its exasperating delays discouraged those who in Italy favoured negotiations, thus bolstering the party which preached war: Isnenghi, Rochat, *Grande Guerra...*, 140-143.

⁶³ DDI, 5^a, III, doc. 71, Sonnino to Imperiali, 10 March 1915.

compete with the British empire and politically it was in a European concert largely conducted by London. Italian expansionism was to occur through diplomacy or, as Bosworth has it, through “diplomatic conjuring.”⁶⁴ The Italian *élite*, then, so divided and frightened by the idea of losing national unity in the event of a massive failure in foreign policy, depended, for all their ambitions, on peace, balance and the *status quo*.⁶⁵

Britain, in turn, knew it could draw advantage from its friendship with Italy, a country which posed no threat but which could be of use to balance French and also German power. From this point of view, Britain had had no need to sign an official treaty with Italy: rather, Italy could be most useful precisely because it was a weak member – an easily influenced one – of the Triple Alliance.⁶⁶

It is worth remembering that the Triple Alliance had been signed at a time when the tensions between France and Britain were almost equal to those between France and Italy. The Italian minister, Pasquale Stanislao Mancini, who concluded the alliance, had obtained from Berlin and Vienna that a declaration stating explicitly that the alliance “shall not in any case be directed against Britain” was annexed to the treaty. This clause, inserted at Italy’s insistence, proves that Rome, even as it joined the Central Powers, did not wish to find itself at war with London. The Mancini declaration was omitted from the first renewal of the alliance in 1887, signed by Robilant, and in the subsequent one signed by Di Rudinì in 1891: it probably appeared unnecessary in view of the fact that Italy and Austria had drawn up a three-way agreement in 1887 with Britain. Moreover, in 1891 talks had taken place in Rome and Vienna on the advisability of favouring Britain’s entry into the alliance. Rudinì realised his mistake in having omitted the declaration in 1896 when he asked that it be re-entered. His reason was that Britain had not renewed the three-way agreement because of the increasing tension with Germany, which from this time on would gradually ruin Anglo-German relations. Berlin brusquely rejected the Italian request.⁶⁷ The Rudinì government which had just replaced the Crispi cabinet, caught up in the

⁶⁴ Bosworth, *Italy, the Least...*, 297.

⁶⁵ Giocchino Volpe, a leading militant intellectual, stressed, not without some contempt for the liberal political establishment of the time, that joining the Triple Alliance was an enforced choice. Even though he hailed the “radiant May” and then the fascination of the “young thrust” of Fascism, he admitted that joining the Triple Alliance had been proof of wisdom in defence of the *status quo* which, alone could guarantee the survival of Italy. See: G. Volpe, *L’Italia in cammino* (Milan: Treves, 1927), 108.

⁶⁶ Bosworth, *Italy, the Least...*, 255-298.

⁶⁷ L. Albertini, *Le origini della guerra del 1914*, 3 vols. (Milan: Bocca, 1943), 334.

Adowa disaster, was probably the weakest that had ever sat at the negotiating table with the Austrian and German allies. Unsurprisingly, its negotiating power was low, and the initiative was dropped. But there is no doubt whatsoever that Italian foreign policy was constant in its desire to exclude any danger of Italy finding itself in an opposing camp to Britain.

Relations between the two countries were always good, there were many moments of co-operation: the Anglo-Italian Convention on the spheres of influence in East Africa signed on 5 January 1894,⁶⁸ the Anglo-Italian treaty which defined reciprocal spheres of interest in the Mediterranean of 1902, and the cordial talks of 1912 during which Italy repeated its intention not to fight Britain, notwithstanding the seventh renewal of the Triple Alliance in the same year.⁶⁹

On 23 July 1914, when the Austro-Hungarian empire gave its ultimatum to Serbia, the anxious eyes of Italian diplomats looked to London first rather than to Vienna. On 25 July, San Giuliano instructed Imperiali to communicate to Grey that Italy looked favourably on joint peace initiatives even though its position with Germany was rather delicate.⁷⁰ In Rome, Rodd, surprised by the crisis and caught up with other preoccupations (his family was in Hamburg and was desperately trying to get back home), was also of the opinion that both Britain and Italy should remain out of the war, and act in concert to conserve peace.⁷¹ The following day, after Austria had finally broken off relations with Serbia, Grey officially proposed to all the powers involved in the crisis a conference of ambassadors to be held in London. That same evening, notwithstanding the lateness of the hour, Rodd telegraphed Italy's reply, telephoned to him by San Giuliano who was in Fiuggi: Italy was in favour of and would take part in the conference but, as regards suspending military preparations during the talks, it would first have to discuss this with Berlin and Vienna.⁷² This reservation defused the British initiative, but the Italian government had no other choice, if it was not to irritate further its partners, in particular Austria, where, said San Giuliano to Rodd, "*le triomphe de l'imbecilité*" reigned. This was not an encouraging

⁶⁸ In 1898 Italy established closer ties also with France leading to the signing of a Franco-Italian Commercial Agreement (21 November).

⁶⁹ Giolitti, *Memorie...*, II, p. 329.

⁷⁰ DDI, Quarta Serie (4^a), XII, San Giuliano to De Martino, 15 July 1914.

⁷¹ Rodd, *Memories...*, III, 183.

⁷² *British Documents on the Origins of the War 1898-1914* (BD), vols. I-IX (London: G.P. Gooch and H. Temperley eds., 1926-1935), XI, 154.

starting-point. “So began the hectic week of desperate effort to close the flood-gates against the tide,” noted Rodd in his diary.

San Giuliano however appeared to be aware that only the British threat, backed by Italian mediation, could make Germany pause on the edge of the precipice. Rodd was not hopeful:

San Giuliano expressed to me the opinion that at this stage the only thing which would have given Germany pause, and which might have induced her to make Austria listen to reason, would have been a frank declaration on our part that we should stand by France. Such a declaration, however, it was not in our power to make, while it might still have served such a purpose.⁷³

San Giuliano tried again on the 28th, presenting once more the British proposal for a conference of ambassadors in London, this time informing Britain that Italy would fully support any British peace initiative. But it was too late and his initiative was unsuccessful, not least because London, after the conditional support for Grey’s proposal, did not take it seriously. In British eyes Di San Giuliano had an impossible problem on his hands:

Italy wants to square the circle: without exposing herself to a change of faith she wants to remain in the Triple Alliance and yet not go to war with France in accordance with its stipulations. No Anglo-Italian “formula” can solve this ethical problem.⁷⁴

On 29 July, Russia and then Germany began general mobilisation. The more the situation worsened, however, the more Italy’s position fell into line with the British one: London remained the only real interlocutor. San Giuliano said to Malagodi: “After all, it is a question of power and Bismarck knew it. Our decision depended necessarily on Britain’s.”⁷⁵

Personally, the Italian minister would rather Britain stayed out of the war even if it were to become a general war: in such a case, Italy would not be isolated and the two powers together would be able to act as a neutralist pressure group. By the same token, if London were to enter the battle, the room for manoeuvre for Italian diplomacy would be drastically reduced. As a neutral power, Italy would not be able to exert influence; as a “great power,” the inevitable need to take part in the conflict would make

⁷³ Rodd, *Memories...*, III, 196-201, 213.

⁷⁴ BD, Vol. X (2), doc. n. 449, Crowe Memorandum, 29 July 1914.

⁷⁵ Malagodi, *Conversazioni...*, I, 17.

itself felt.⁷⁶ The then-senator Luigi Albertini wrote as much to his wife on 30 July: “Heaven help us if we stay out of this conflict, unless Britain also stays out of it. In other words, if England enters, we shall have to march, either with Austria or against her.”⁷⁷

News of British intervention on the evening of 4 August made it impossible for Italy to remain neutral but made it risky also to support her old allies. Militarily, the Italian army could hope to defend the Alps successfully against possible Austrian invasion but the Italian coasts, for the most part low and sandy, were completely exposed to naval attacks by the Royal Navy. Furthermore, the Italian colonies, conquered only recently and with such difficulty, would be cut off from the motherland in the event of war with Britain. The British navy would have no difficulty in applying a rigid blockade around the peninsula, cutting off imports which were vital to Italy and causing the collapse of the country. Some of the more influential Italian politicians began to hope for an Entente victory. The foreign minister, then still Di San Giuliano, hoped with his famous pragmatism that the war would end up in the mutual exhaustion of France on the one side and Austria-Hungary on the other.⁷⁸ Prime Minister Salandra was more explicit: while he instructed the colonial minister, Ferdinando Martini, to strengthen his contacts with the British embassy in Rome, he confided to Malagodi that a victory of the Central Powers would mean certain servitude for Italy and even perhaps reprisal attacks for not having leapt immediately to their side, weapons drawn: “Their ambassadors, already strong in the past, would govern as imperial pro-consuls.” And yet hoping for the Entente’s success, whether total or partial, was one thing, risking all-out war another. For the moment, Di San Giuliano “was turning a deaf ear.”⁷⁹

As the days passed, however, Italy found itself ever-more pushed towards the war by the British. As the Italian navy’s Chief of Staff Admiral Paolo Emilio Thaon di Revel explained quite plainly to Salandra, with Britain in the field “the likelihood of a Triple Alliance victory has become far less likely.”⁸⁰ The battle of the Marne had already proved that the German army was not invincible. Now,

⁷⁶ Bosworth, *Italy, the Least...*, 377.

⁷⁷ Albertini, *Epistolario: 1911-1926*, 4 vols., Ottavio Barie ed. (Milan: Mondadori, 1968), I, *Dalla guerra di Libia alla Grande Guerra*, 392.

⁷⁸ DDI, 5^a, I, San Giuliano a Salandra, 4 August 1914.

⁷⁹ Malagodi, *Conversazioni...*, I, 17.

⁸⁰ A. Salandra, *La neutralità Italiana* (Milan: Mondadori, 1928), 198.

as the war continued to spread and looked set to last longer than predicted, the greater resources of the British empire would in the end prevail. It was therefore vital for Italy to be on the side of Britain, not only for the war ahead, but also for the post-war balance of power.⁸¹ As Imperiali wrote to San Giuliano: “The friendship between Italy and Britain [...] considering the common interests of the two governments in maintaining an acceptable balance [...] will enable us to count always on British aid should such a balance be threatened by a victorious and strengthened France”.⁸²

In the meantime, the diplomacy of promises and offers had been set in motion, secret talks which would lead Italy finally into the arms of the Entente. Once again, Britain was in the first line. Two days after the illness and sudden death of Di San Giuliano on 16 October, Salandra, as *interim* foreign minister, delivered his famous “sacred egoism” speech. Italy would now move with greater decisiveness and greater obstinacy. Sonnino, taking over as foreign minister on 31 October, was considered pro-British, and with his strong character was the right man for a policy of “sacred egoism.”⁸³

It was now too late to enter the war in 1914, with winter on its way. In the following months negotiations went ahead to draw up the terms of Italian co-operation with the Entente. Talks took place in London, as wanted by Italy. Each of the three foreign ministers in office during the summer and autumn of 1914 – Di San Giuliano, Salandra and Sonnino – insisted on this point. The reason for this Italian request was secrecy: “The Foreign Office does not release statements to the press,”⁸⁴ but the political message was just as clear, that Italy wished the leading partner in the new alliance to be Britain.⁸⁵ It was not by chance that the agreement came to be called the Treaty of London and not, for example, of Paris.

It is clear, therefore, how the destiny of Italy came to be bound up with that of Britain, in peace as in war. On the one hand, British intervention unleashed the starving dogs of Italian imperialism: once the balance failed, diplomatic games were no longer possible; it was necessary to fight, and fight for

⁸¹ ASSR, Fondo Imperiali, b. 2, f. 10, Treaty of London, Telegrammi, Sonnino a Imperiali, 16 February 1915.

⁸² DDI, 5^a, I, doc. n. 242, Imperiali a San Giuliano, 14 August 1914.

⁸³ Gottlieb, *Secret Diplomacy...*, 233.

⁸⁴ Salandra, *L'intervento...*, 21-24.

⁸⁵ This particularly annoyed Russia, as became clear during negotiations. See: M. Toscano, *Il Patto di Londra* (Pavia: Pubblicazioni Facoltà di Scienze Politiche, R. Università di Pavia, 1931), 35.

the greatest possible advantage. On the other hand, for Italy, in the final analysis, being on the side of Britain was more important than being on that of Austria and Germany.

A need for peace but also expansionist ambitions; the fear of witnessing the collapse of a country which had just been reunited after centuries of foreign domination but the desire to complete the unfinished process of unification; a wish to have internal legitimation for the Italian ruling class but the opportunity to use war to favour the establishment of one political party over another; the fear of yet another failure but the knowledge of being before an enormous opportunity: all these elements were linked, melded and fell over one another in Italian international politics. A single reading of the facts, a single overall interpretation would risk being partial, for there never was any real coherence. This ambiguity would continue to mark Italy's behaviour during the war and even during the Paris peace conference.

In the midst of this tangle, the decisive element, the only unshakeable pillar of Italian foreign policy – when all its other paradigms were put into question – was friendship with Britain. The need, partly for economic interests, partly out of fear, to be on the side of the British was the deepest reason which pushed Italy to take the final step towards war.

Having analysed the causes which prompted Italy's move from the Triple Alliance to the Triple Entente, we need to consider the implications of the Treaty of London for both sides. It is essential, first, to establish whether the Alliance sprang from an offer by Italy, or from an invitation from the Entente powers. This is no trivial matter for it is evidence of the balance of power at the time of the talks and of the approach which the parties to the Treaty took towards one another. Once again, British and Italian historians differ. For the British, it was the Italians who offered their co-operation to the Entente, asking for generous compensation in return. For the Italians, it was the Entente powers who contacted Italy, suggesting they change sides.

Stevenson touched only on the final part of the negotiations, those (started up again after months of stalemate) based on Sonnino's telegram to Imperiali of 18 February 1915.⁸⁶ Thomson, on the other

⁸⁶ Stevenson, *1914-1918...*, 111.

hand, also considered the very early talks in the summer of 1914 but had them occurring as an exchange of opinions between Di San Giuliano and Salandra on 9 August 1914, following which Italy began to weigh the idea of changing alliances.⁸⁷ Bosworth spoke quite openly of an Italian approach. He referred⁸⁸ to a telegram from San Giuliano to Imperiali of 11 August, and stressed that Grey cleverly let Italy take the initiative.⁸⁹

The Italian historians who have most studied the negotiations, on the other hand, argued the opposite, that it was the Entente who tried to “get Italy on their side.”⁹⁰ This is the version put forward by Luigi Albertini in his study on the origins of the war,⁹¹ and by Toscano in his book on the Treaty of London,⁹² while Mario Caracciolo goes so far as to talk of the “wranglings of governments, later allied, to get us to intervene.”⁹³

Which of the two schools of thought is right? Anglo-Saxon historians refer to official contacts started up by Imperiali with His Majesty’s government, and here it was the Italians who “went knocking at the British door.” The fact is, however, that talks had been going on for some time.

The first telegram which concerns possible Italian intervention alongside the Entente is dated 1 August 1914, a few hours before the wider war broke out – so far there was war only between Austria-Hungary and Serbia and between Germany and Russia, but not yet between Germany and France or between Russia and Austria-Hungary.⁹⁴ It was a note⁹⁵ sent from Paris by the Russian ambassador to France, Alexander Iswolsky, to his foreign minister, Sergei Sazonov, reporting that French President Raymond Poincaré, had stated that it was convenient to draw Italy “to our side, promising Valona and freedom of action in Albania.” Sazonov replied on 3 August, stating he had “no objection” and

⁸⁷ Thompson, *White War...*, 24.

⁸⁸ Bosworth, *Italy, the Least...*, 401.

⁸⁹ ID., *Italy and the Approach...*, 132.

⁹⁰ M. Caracciolo, *L'Italia e i suoi Alleati nella Grande Guerra* (Milan: Mondadori, 1932), 21.

⁹¹ Albertini, *Le origini...*, 356.

⁹² Toscano, *Patto di Londra...*, 28.

⁹³ Caracciolo, *L'Italia e i suoi...*, 21.

⁹⁴ Declarations made on 3 and 6 August, respectively.

⁹⁵ C. Sabini, *Le fond d'une querelle (Documents inédits sur les relations franco-italiennes 1914-1915)* (Paris: Grasset, 1921), *Livre Noir*, II, 299-230.

pressing France to move in the same direction.⁹⁶ The British foreign secretary, Grey, upon being informed of the situation, recognised its “extraordinary importance” and instructed the British ambassador in Russia, Sir George Buchanan, to present to the Russian minister a memorandum which stated: “The greatest advantage can be gained by this cooperation and for this reason the British Government would be prepared to grant Valona, Trentino and Trieste to Italy in a final peace settlement.” Rome was then contacted through its ambassador to Petrograd, Andrea Carlotti, and replied officially only on 14 August.⁹⁷ Negotiations progressed and moved finally to London with fits and starts until the following spring.

The British made their own move through unofficial channels. On 6 August Imperiali reported to Di San Giuliano that he had just received an unexpected visit from Alfred Rothschild, who had been Director of the Bank of England for the previous twenty years:

In top secrecy he told me that he found it appropriate to act as an interpreter of the impression that was taking shape in the [British] political, financial and military circles, that if Italy sided with Great Britain, France and Russia it would give the cause of peace enormous advantages [as] it is certain that Austria and Germany could not hold at length against all the great powers. [...] He begged me insistently to do so in such a way that nothing would transpire from our meetings.⁹⁸

Rothschild visited Imperiali again on 9 August:

After various conversations and assertions to speak on a personal level without having been sent by anybody, he ended telling me that if Italy had any wishes to express or concrete proposals to formulate leading to advantageous benefits for its future interests and its decision [...] I should share them with him unofficially, and that he would have hurried to communicate them to whoever would have considered them with benevolence. In any case there would be no official trace of evidence either of consent or of refusal.⁹⁹

It was not, then, Grey, but the other allies and Rothschild who made the first approach to Italy; however the British foreign minister was informed and in total agreement with his allies regarding the Russian proposal, and it is hard to believe that he was unaware of Rothschild’s move. Nonetheless, the

⁹⁶ F. Payot ed., *Documents diplomatiques secrets russes* (Paris: Payot, 1928), 215.

⁹⁷ Salandra quotes the text of these telegrams in full in *L'intervento...*, 5-6, 23-24.

⁹⁸ DDI, 5^a, I, doc. 85, Imperiali to Di San Giuliano, 6 August, 1914.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, doc. 155, Imperiali to Di San Giuliano, 9 August, 1914.

British continued to hold that Italy had not been invited but had volunteered.¹⁰⁰ And the Italians, for their part, claimed that they had not begged entry into the alliance, but had it offered to them.¹⁰¹ These were crucially different standpoints.

Once the Treaty of London was signed on 26 April 1915, what did this difference mean?¹⁰² The Treaty was made up of three documents: the memorandum presented by Italy with its requests and accepted (after agreed amendments) by the Entente powers; a declaration in which the parties undertook not to agree a separate peace during the war and not to propose peace conditions without the prior agreement of each of the other allies; and the undertaking that the foregoing declaration would remain secret and be substituted by another, identical declaration to be signed and made public immediately after Italy had actually entered the war, to occur within a month from signature of the treaty.¹⁰³

Individual articles defined the post-war frontiers of the territories of Italian interest,¹⁰⁴ and others set the conditions of co-operation between the new allies. A military convention was to be drawn up “immediately” between the allied general staffs which would set the minimum number of military forces which Russia undertook to employ against Austria-Hungary in order to prevent the latter from concentrating overwhelming forces against Italy, while Russia directed its maximum efforts against Germany (Art. 1). The navies also were to work together, particularly in the Adriatic (Art. 3). For its part, Italy undertook to use its combined resources in the war alongside France, Great Britain and Russia “against all their enemies.” This last was a crucial point: the Italian government had originally proposed the following wording: “Italy, for its part, undertakes to employ its maximum effort to fight Austria-Hungary and Turkey and all who come to their aid, on land and on the sea.”¹⁰⁵ But in this way

¹⁰⁰ Gottlieb, *Secret Diplomacy...*, 198.

¹⁰¹ Toscano, *Patto di Londra...*, 32-33.

¹⁰² As Italy was negotiating with countries who, at least in part, had interests that contrasted with its own, Sonnino believed it was necessary to define the terms of the Alliance in detail to avoid embarrassing situations at the end of the war: Sonnino, *Diario, 1866-1912* (Bari: B.F. Brown ed., 1972), vol. I, 51, 112.

¹⁰³ ASSR, Fondo Imperiali, b. 2, f. 10, Patto di Londra, Telegrammi, Testo del Patto di Londra, Art. 16.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, Arts. 4, 5, 6, 7, 8. Victory would bring with it Trentino and South Tyrol, with the frontier at the Brenner; Trieste and Istria as far as Quarnaro – but without Fiume; Dalmatia; some sort of protectorate over Albania and undefined compensation in the case of a break-up of the Ottoman empire and colonial acquisitions on the part of Britain and France.

¹⁰⁵ Salandra, *L'intervento...*, 157.

it was too clearly showing its own reluctance to declare war on Germany, the “true” enemy of the Entente powers. The allies demanded a more explicit wording of the article and got it, but suspicion of Italy would soon resurface.

Another key point was colonies. Article 9 recognised that Italy had a role to play in keeping a balance in the Mediterranean and, in the event of the total or partial partition of Turkey, would “obtain a just share of the Mediterranean region adjacent to the province of Adalia.” Furthermore, Article 13 stated that in the event that France and Great Britain should increase their colonial territories in Africa at the expense of Germany, they would agree in principle that “Italy may claim some equitable compensation.” This rather vague form of expression was a far cry from the detailed wording providing for Italian compensation in the Balkans: clear evidence of the direction in which Italian imperialism was tending. Salandra would regret having taken such a negligent position regarding colonial compensation.¹⁰⁶ Finally, but no less importantly, the treaty contained the promise to Italy of “a share of any eventual war indemnity corresponding to her efforts and her sacrifices” (Art. 11), and the undertaking by Britain to extend an immediate loan of £50,000,000 (Art. 14).

This chapter has reconstructed the climate in which Italy’s move towards the Entente occurred, from the summer of 1914 to the spring of 1915, and has gone beyond the limits of both British and Italian historiography by linking them. It has established the agreements which were drawn up between the parties, what these meant, the moods out of which Italy’s relations with its new allies developed, and the many ambiguities which were present from the start and which were destined to multiply. It is now possible to go onto to a detailed analysis of relations between Italy and Great Britain during the war itself.

¹⁰⁶ Imperiali did try to introduce into the final draft a more precise wording regarding the colonial arrangement but Sonnino gave in to Grey’s immediate opposition, content with an assurance that the matter would be further examined together: Imperiali, *Diario...*, 177.

Part I

(Spring 1915-Summer 1917)

1. Cultural and Political Background.

1.1 – “British Masters, Italian Children.”

The student of European international relations in 1914 could argue that relations between Italy and Britain had been friendly *despite* the Italians and the British. Culturally very different peoples, they were not without some common traits and a certain mutual respect; and yet what prevailed were the deeper-rooted stereotypes by which the two countries knew each other. For the British, the Italians were an immature, disorganised and essentially faint-hearted people. The Italians for their part reacted with a mixture of admiration, envy and resentment.

What the British public knew about Italy on the eve of the First World War, excluding ancient Rome and the Renaissance, had to do with the Risorgimento and its protagonists, Garibaldi above all. This hugely popular character aroused great enthusiasm among the British (who were generous with donations and investment in the Italian cause), as evidenced by the triumphant welcome Garibaldi received during his visit to Britain in 1864.¹⁰⁷ British public opinion, from the working classes to the aristocracy, warmed to a hero who fought for the freedom of his country and for that of any other enslaved people he chanced to meet during the course of his extraordinary life. But neither this legend, nor that of ancient Rome, however powerful, ever led to a real interest in Italy as a new European power. The “Bel Paese” was viewed primarily as a holiday destination. For the British, once the adventure of the Risorgimento was over, Italy was largely unknown and the Italians an essentially indecipherable people.¹⁰⁸

The attention of the British public was revived in 1911 with the publication of G.M. Trevelyan’s

¹⁰⁷ P. Milza, *Garibaldi* (Milano: Longanesi, 2013), 388.

¹⁰⁸ J.L. Glanville, *Italy’s Relations with England 1896-1905* (Baltimore: J.H. Furst Company, 1934), 21, 27-31.

Garibaldi and the Making of Italy: again, the inspiration was the “Hero of Two Worlds.” Trevelyan, a well-known British historian, had started writing a trilogy covering the Risorgimento in 1907. *Garibaldi and the Making of Italy* was the final volume, published to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of Italy’s unification.¹⁰⁹ The Risorgimento, in Trevelyan’s view, was a step forward in “man’s long march to civilisation.” Garibaldi was the hero, “the rover of great spaces of land and sea, the fighter against desperate odds, the champion of the oppressed, the patriot, the humane and generous man all in one.” Italy was described as a nation reborn, rising up from the ruins of a hundred-year long thralldom, no longer “the home of ghosts, but the land which the living share with their immortal ancestors.”¹¹⁰ Italy was the land of love and eternal sun, of romantic heroism and of the most glorious past in human history. At the same time, however, Trevelyan believed that “the comic element is never long absent in Italy” and that the Italy of Iago, Saint Francis and Garibaldi was a place where “materialism and idealism” were in “sharper contrast” than in Britain.¹¹¹

In the same year another book on Italy showed a very different side. Published in Germany and translated across Europe, Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice* described the “Bel Paese” with heavy and, at times, grotesque traits: the Italians were a nation of greedy liars, and Italy the country of decadence, corruption, poverty, and both physical and moral illnesses.¹¹²

These were the two view points from which the British public viewed Italy. A British tour guide in 1905 warned its readers, potentially naïve “lovers of Italy,” that it was only the sun which helped redeem “Italy from a sort of vulgarity or the suspicion of a kind of hideous squalor.”¹¹³ Some found this predilection for the morbid, this kaleidoscope of beauty and poverty, singularly odd, even exciting. As Bosworth noted, a British noblewoman travelling around Italy wrote: “Civilisation,

¹⁰⁹ The other volumes were *Garibaldi’s Defence of the Roman Republic* (1907), *Garibaldi and the Thousand* (1909). The third volume came out in October 1911, just as British public opinion was at its most excited about the Libyan War: Bosworth, *Italy and the Approach...* 2.

¹¹⁰ G.M. Trevelyan, *Garibaldi’s Defence...*, 11, 16.

¹¹¹ ID., *Garibaldi and the Thousand*, 41. See also: ID., *Scenes from Italy’s War* (London: T.C. & E.C. Jack Ltd. 1919), 12.

¹¹² T. Mann, *Death in Venice* (London: Hamilton, 1932).

¹¹³ N. Douglas, *Old Calabria* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1915); Bosworth, *Italy and the Approach...*, 3.

cleanliness and comfort are excellent things, but they are sworn enemies to the picturesque.”¹¹⁴

This view of Italy as a young country taking its first steps towards civilisation was confirmed by Italian politics.¹¹⁵ *The Times* correspondent, Henry Wickham Steed, described Rome as a place of “bedraggled untidiness” where “public affairs seemed to be managed and the game of politics to be played according to other rules than those to which I had been accustomed.”¹¹⁶ Even more extreme, Sir Francis Bertie, British ambassador to Rome from 1903 to 1905, declared: “Italy was like a woman with two lovers whose jealousy of each other she utilised for her own profit.”¹¹⁷ The basic idea was that the Italians were all potential thieves or at best exploiters, and, worse, this sprang from their parochialism and ignorant, childish behaviour.¹¹⁸ One British journalist wrote: “To find an English resident in Italy who is not perpetually in a state of only semi-suppressed irritation with the Italians is a thing so rare as to be remarkable. ‘They are like children,’ is the stock criticism.”¹¹⁹ Not by chance, Lord Salisbury described the Italians as “sturdy beggars”¹²⁰ and was convinced that a few “small sugar plums” were enough to keep “Italy in England’s camp.”¹²¹

Bosworth dedicated several pages to this “metaphor of childhood” and the stereotype of the “childish,” “grotesque” and “rascally” Italian, governed by corrupt, Masonic politicians. He underlined that such impressions were not misplaced, common beliefs arising from the immature politics of the newly united state, but well-rooted convictions in the Anglo-Saxon mentality which were to prove long lasting:

Such comments do not deserve to be dismissed with derision as mere period pieces. Foreigners continued to say much the same things about the Italy of Mussolini. *The Times* graciously forgave or understood the Matteotti murder on the ground that “homicide” was “commoner” in Italy than in most

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*; see also: R. Cooper, “The Image of Italy in English Writing 1815-1915” (unpublished M. A., University of Sydney, 1967), 57.

¹¹⁵ J. Tilley, *London to Tokyo* (London: Hutchinson, 1942), 32.

¹¹⁶ H.W. Steed, *Through Thirty Years 1892-1922* (London: W. Heinemann Ltd., 1924), vol. I, 103-104.

¹¹⁷ BP, FO 800/173, Bertie to Mallet, 15 April, 1905.

¹¹⁸ Not that such ideas were not shared by the Italian political and intellectual élite. Italian literature is full of examples of fierce self-criticism on the part of the political, artistic and intellectual *avant garde* directed at state disorganisation, egoism, parochialism, not to mention unmasculine and anti-military laziness. See: *supra*, *opp. cit.* from D’Annunzio, Corradini, Oriani, Marinetti.

¹¹⁹ R. Bagot, *My Italian Year* (London: n.e, 1911), 2.

¹²⁰ Glanville, *Italy’s Relations...*, 31.

¹²¹ Bodleian Library, Oxford, Rodd private papers [uncat.], Rodd to Cromer, 8 September, 1902.

other civilised states. Even after the Second World War, the popularity abroad of the cynicism of Luigi Barzini junior owed something to traditional Anglo-Saxon convictions about Italy inferiority.¹²²

There were other voices, however. The British political and diplomatic élite often showed its envy for the history and values bequeathed by ancient Rome, when London was only an outpost of its empire, and for the artistic conquests of the Renaissance.¹²³ Appreciation of the Italians as a people was different in such circles and went beyond the common stereotypes. Rodd, successor to Bertie, who lived longer in Italy and had to try to understand the real nature of the Italian people and the reasons for the barely coherent political choices made by the Rome governments, painted a rather more flattering portrait of the Italians:

I have sometimes been asked by my countrymen how far I was responsible for the entry of Italy into the war. Such a question reveals, I think, a rather insular misapprehension of what really took place in Italy. It no doubt suited our enemies to attribute the miscarriage of their calculations to the guile of their antagonists who, as they expressed it, encouraged the blackmailing instincts of the government. But they had throughout disregarded and had never understood the Italian people. The latter, it should be remembered, was not aware of the conditions laid down in the Pact of London [...]. I have never doubted and have constantly affirmed both at the time and since that the moving impulse which drew the people together and led them to unite with the Allies against the forces of aggression was in the main that elemental love of justice which is in their nature.¹²⁴

The ambassador appears to have appreciated the humility and tenacity of a people who, often, had to rely solely on their own energy and resources, on the so-very Italian “art of getting by,” to make up for the failings of a disorganised state perceived as far removed from its people. The Italians, for the most part opposed to the war and ignorant of what was awaiting them on the cauldron of the Carso plateau or on the snow-covered peaks of Trentino, would face the trenches with the same remarkable obstinacy with which they had always faced their poor social condition: their sacrifices would make up for the limits and weaknesses of the economic and institutional system.

How were the British seen by the Italians? Here again, there was little beyond the stereotypes. Many Italians, above all the intellectuals and politicians, admired the British, rulers of a large part of

¹²² Bosworth, *Italy and the Approach...*, 5.

¹²³ Glanville, *Italy's Relations...*, 31-34.

¹²⁴ Rodd, *Memories...*, III, 257.

the world. This feeling was accompanied, however, by a sense of frustration which turned into a real inferiority complex. Italian intellectuals knew their people were considered “inferior” and at times reacted angrily, with a narrow-mindedness similar to that of the politicians in Rome, a reaction mistakenly viewed abroad as pure egoism. At its root was the British stance as “masters” of Europe, adopted with an arrogance that was often felt to be unbearable, particularly when British success rested not on battles fought in pursuit of ideals, as in revolutionary France, but on commercial and financial wealth.¹²⁵ For many Italians, the British were a nation of bankers and shop-keepers, and even Imperiali during the talks leading to the Treaty of London said that Britain would have accepted Italian conditions, if it had found them advantageous: “Business is business, above all for the British.”¹²⁶

Many in Italy commented sarcastically that both sectors, banking and commerce, had originally developed in Italy, as had law, the art of western war and political science. Hence, the Italians despised Anglo-Saxon swagger even more, precisely because they did not see themselves as so different: they could not bear the thought that the British would not admit as much. For writers such as Oriani,¹²⁷ Italy had lived a long mediaeval period, from the fall of the Roman empire to the “liberation” of Rome in 1870, during which the best Italian virtues and the lessons left by ancient Rome had borne fruit elsewhere, but now that it “had awoken,” it could and should make up lost ground and return to the heights of a more glorious past which would elevate it far above Britain.

The British image of Italy was on the whole based on the reports of diplomats and journalists, or the impressions of travellers and visitors. That held by Italians of Britain, however, was founded also on the experience of a large group of Italians with a first-hand, long-standing relationship with Britain: immigrants. Emigration plagued Italy (and other European countries) during the crisis at the turn of the century, and was a factor in slowing Italy’s industrial take-off.¹²⁸ In 1914, the number of Italian expatriates was close to a million and, of these, over twenty thousand lived in Britain.¹²⁹

The stereotyping and the racism Italians might encounter in Britain was counter-balanced by the

¹²⁵ Glanville, *Italy's Relations...*, 27-30.

¹²⁶ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 150.

¹²⁷ Oriani, *La lotta...* (Turin: Roux&Frassati, 1892), 369-370.

¹²⁸ Bosworth, *Italy and the Approach...*, 8.

¹²⁹ F. Coletti, “Dell’emigrazione italiana,” in P. Blaserna, *Cinquanta anni di storia italiana* (Milan: Hoepli, 1911), III, 81.

awareness that, if they adapted to the rules of their new country and proved to be honest, hard workers, they would be treated, if not entirely benevolently, at least with a modicum of justice and fairness.¹³⁰ The culture shock, which it is often claimed was experienced by emigrants, should not be exaggerated, nor should that feeling of frustration at an often only partly achieved, and not entirely authentic, integration be over-emphasised. As Bosworth noted, the same sense of humiliation was felt also by those Southern Italians who moved to the regions of Northern Italy, rather than abroad. Furthermore, the problem of not quite “complete” integration was exacerbated by the policies of the Rome government which tried to keep in touch with emigrants, so that they would feel they were “Italian citizens.” In the “Ten Commandments for the Italian Abroad,” the strongest advice was, along with obedience to the laws of the host country, the need to remember that one was always Italian, to speak Italian, to introduce oneself as Italian, and as far as possible to marry within the Italian community so that the children would be educated as Italians. This policy discouraged complete integration.¹³¹

Several Italian committees were set up and blossomed in Britain, the most important being the “Pro Patria,” which organised interventionist and propaganda events co-ordinated by the Italian embassy in London. The main purpose of these committees was to spread awareness of the Italian cause, above all to contrast similar initiatives organised by the corresponding committees of Balkan minorities. There were also support programmes for the families of those called up and fund-raisers for mobilisation and the Italian Red Cross, such as Italian Flag Day.¹³² As will become clear, the results were rather poor.

Nonetheless, the outbreak of war awoke in the Italian emigrants to Britain a sense of belonging and Bosworth stated that “in a moment of crisis, [...] with the *intervento* and the First World War, many Italians abroad felt more Italian than ever before.”¹³³ After all, the war was a great opportunity to show the British and the whole world that the stereotype of a faint-hearted, cowardly Italian was wrong and that the “new Italy” would know how to fight with honour to win its place among the great powers.

¹³⁰ R.E. Foerster, *The Italian Emigration of our times* (New York: Russel & Russel, 1919). Available at: https://archive.org/stream/italianemigratio00foeruoft/italianemigratio00foeruoft_djvu.txt

¹³¹ Bosworth, *Italy and the Approach...*, 5, 97.

¹³² Imperiali, *Diario...*, 207, 347.

¹³³ Bosworth, *Italy and the Approach...*, 96.

1.2 – *Men and Governments.*

Liberal governments were in power in both countries when the Anglo-Italian alliance came into being. Both were forced to take up more conservative positions to garner support from other parliamentary forces to ensure their survival. But cracks were appearing in each's cohesion.

The prime minister in Britain was Herbert Henry Asquith, who had been in office since 1908. It had not all been plain sailing. Having suffered a series of setbacks during the summer of 1914, as war began, Asquith had been on the verge of having to resign.¹³⁴ He managed to hold on by reshuffling a few cabinet posts: John Morley, ex-secretary for India, then lord president of the Council, and John Burns, minister for trade, both resigned to be replaced by William Lygon, seventh Earl Beauchamp, and Walter Runciman. The crisis worsened in May 1915, and on the day after Italy entered the war, 25 May, Asquith widened the basis of his government. He formed a coalition. The two key figures of war policy, Lord Kitchener (secretary of state for war) and Winston Churchill (first lord of the Admiralty) had to move backstage. The former's role as manager of munitions and industrial mobilisation was taken on by David Lloyd George,¹³⁵ the latter, having proposed the disastrous Gallipoli campaign, was dropped and replaced by Arthur Balfour. Along with Lord Robert Cecil (under-secretary for foreign affairs and later promoted minister of Blockade between 23 February 1916 and 18 July 1918) and Andrew Bonar Law (secretary of state for the colonies), Balfour was one of the conservative members of the Cabinet. During 1916 he would become one of the main opponents of Asquith and his war policies.¹³⁶

Sir Edward Grey remained as secretary of state for foreign affairs, and was created Viscount Grey of Fallodon on 27 July 1916. Head of the Foreign Office since 1905, he was a man of long experience, and one of the strongest advocates for drawing Italy into the Entente. His very close relationship with Imperiali was based on mutual respect, despite the fact that the weighty issues they were to deal with did lead to some stormy moments. Imperiali in his diary praised Grey's honesty and affirmed that the

¹³⁴ Strachan, *The First World War*, I..., 94-97.

¹³⁵ Kitchener nevertheless remained in the government.

¹³⁶ Lord Hankey, *Government Control in War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1945), 32.

Italian cause could count on him as a man willing to listen and talk.¹³⁷ This vision of Grey as a pro-Italian diplomat should be taken with caution. Grey was certainly one of the more convinced that the alliance was useful and should be supported, but that he should do it out of pro-Italian feeling cannot be proven.

In the final analysis, Asquith's cabinet was united both when it took up its position on the war and when it welcomed Italy into the Entente. However, it was not able to provide effective political leadership in war. Maurice Hankey, Lloyd George's future chief aide in government, highlighted some of its limits:

The Cabinet was too large to meet day in and day out, and too cumbersome to be called together rapidly at short notice. It did not work to an Agenda Paper and had no Secretary and no records. Ministers sometimes misapprehended the decisions, and the Staffs of the Admiralty and War Office and the Civil Service Chiefs were often in the dark as to what had been decided and what action they had to take.¹³⁸

By autumn 1915 the Cabinet was once more barely a step away from a crisis, or so it was claimed, because of Asquith's weak management. The difficulty in this case was to be found in the lack of effective co-ordination of military operations on the most distant fronts: Sinai, Gallipoli, Mesopotamia and Salonika.¹³⁹ Friction within the government would continue up to the fall of Asquith in December 1916.

In Italy, Salandra's government was of the Liberal Right and the prime minister also had charge of the Interior Ministry. Rodd wrote of him that he was "a man of the highest principle and integrity."¹⁴⁰ Sidney Sonnino, "a traditional conservative leading man in the old governing party of the national bourgeoisie,"¹⁴¹ was foreign minister. He was the main supporter of the shift in Italian foreign policy towards the Entente and so the first point of reference for the new allies. In Rodd's words:

It was a great relief for me to have Sonnino at the Foreign Office. We had known each other for many

¹³⁷ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 84, 343-344.

¹³⁸ Hankey, *Government Control...*, 33.

¹³⁹ Stevenson, *1914-1918...*, 269-271.

¹⁴⁰ Rodd, *Memories...*, III, 221.

¹⁴¹ Isnenghi, Rochat, *Grande Guerra...*, 312.

years, and had a mutual confidence in each other's discretion. Sonnino once observed to me: 'I may not always say everything that is in my mind, but I have a natural indisposition to lie.' He could not have better summarised his ministerial attitude.¹⁴²

And again:

Sonnino was essentially an Italian, but if he had strong sympathies for England, that was only an advantage, because the interests of Italy and ours were, he considered, absolutely identical. Italy must work hand in hand with England not only during the war but after the war.¹⁴³

The colonial minister, Martini, was of the same political bent. Probably the most interventionist of the cabinet ministers, he was one of the few who could extend his view beyond Rome, where decisions by the two demiurges of Italian intervention, Salandra and Sonnino, were taken. He was a great traveller and knew Italy well, particularly his neutralist Tuscany, and he had a good measure of the anti-war feelings of his countrymen.¹⁴⁴ Rodd praised his contribution to the Anglo-Italian alliance for the clarity it brought to colonial affairs.¹⁴⁵ Together with Salandra and Sonnino, he represented what could be termed the "pro-Britain party," a group of the most active supporters of a special partnership with Britain. Vittorio Emanuele Orlando, justice minister, represented the central area of the Conservative-Liberal party, being considered by most one of Giolitti's men. His appointment and the replacement of Di San Giuliano by Sonnino in the summer of 1914 marked the transition from the first to the second Salandra government, which would last until the following summer.

Salandra, in his memoirs, countered the criticism of those who considered his government, which had lost the support of Giolitti and much of his large parliamentary following, to be a fragile makeshift group. He pointed out that the Cabinet had been able to take crucially important decisions, such as for neutrality (promptly and firmly), and then for intervention on the side of the Entente (with "wisdom and after serious talks").¹⁴⁶

The prime minister managed to present the alliance with the Entente to parliament as a *fait*

¹⁴² Rodd, *Memories...*, III, 227.

¹⁴³ PRO FO, 371/2685/126986, Rodd to Grey, 26 June, 1916.

¹⁴⁴ Isnenghi, Rochat, *Grande Guerra...*, 316.

¹⁴⁵ Rodd, *Memories...*, III, 226.

¹⁴⁶ A. Salandra, *Memorie politiche, 1916-1925* (Milan: Garzanti, 1951), 112.

accompli and to gather an apparently solid majority. In late spring 1915, the war served to bond parties, compacting – at least in part – the political and economic forces of the nation, as many political sociologists argued. The tussle between Giolitti and Salandra had been resolved with a clear victory for the latter; beneath the surface, however, there remained the difference between those who wanted war and those who had learnt to adapt to it. With time, the friction and difference in humours between men of “the institutions” and men of the *piazza* would increase, as would those between one and the other groups of the war supporters’ front.¹⁴⁷

1.3 – *The Two Embassies.*

Much of the credit for the development of relations between Britain and Italy during the war was due to the two ambassadors, Rodd and Imperiali. Both had long served their embassies in Rome and London and this was important, for they would often succeed in understanding each other’s position far better than did their respective foreign ministers.

Rodd, born on 9 November 1858, was the only son of Major James Rennell Rodd (1812-1892) and Elizabeth Anne Thompson, and a descendant of the geographer James Rennell. A graduate of Balliol College, Oxford, he began his diplomatic career in 1883, and earned his first major posting in 1894, under the British consul-general of Egypt, Lord Cromer, with whom he worked on the Anglo-Ethiopian Treaty of 1897, immediately after the Italian defeat at Adowa.¹⁴⁸ At the end of 1901 he was promoted to first secretary to the British embassy in Rome where he arrived in 1902, to remain for two years working under the ambassador, Lord Currie, “an old friend.” Here is how the young diplomat described his arrival at Rome:

In order not to be too far from the Embassy at Porta Pia, I had taken a large detached house, the Villino de Renzis, at a rental which absorbed two-thirds of the modest salary which in those days was considered adequate for a Counsellor of the Embassy. There, about a fortnight later, my wife joined me, bringing with her a second daughter, who had been born on the last day of the old year.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁷ Isnenghi, Rochat, *Grande Guerra...*, 314.

¹⁴⁸ *The London Gazette*, 22 October 1901.

¹⁴⁹ Rodd, *Memories...*, III, 2.

In later years, Rodd was posted to Sweden but returned to Rome in 1908 as ambassador, and he served in the Eternal City until 1919. Unanimously recognised as a cultured classicist and pro-Italian, by nature he was a reserved and gentle man.¹⁵⁰ He had a number of aides to assist him at the British embassy in Rome. Some left during the war and others arrived with the creation of the Military and the Adriatic Missions. Rodd described the atmosphere at the Embassy when Britain entered the war:

My staff was at present restricted to the ordinary peacetime effective, and as our military difficulties increased, all the younger men were impatient to volunteer for the Front. [...] I must admit that the decision of the Foreign Office to retain all hands at their posts and to make no exception was quite sound. I was more successful in bringing about the release of the naval attaché, who was in a condition bordering on melancholia at being chained to a desk in war time, and my friend Boyle soon found an opportunity to add new laurels to a name famous in naval annals. He was replaced by Captain Larking, who had retired before the war as a commander, but had at once rejoined. [...] The military attaché, Colonel Peter Grant, was also soon to be recalled, and his place was taken by Colonel Sir Charles Lamb, who had already acted in that capacity in the days of Lord Currie.¹⁵¹

Rodd carried out his job in Rome with true dedication and sought always to explain the peculiarities of Italy to London, encouraging his superiors to look beyond preconceived notions that in any case could hardly be applied to Italy.¹⁵² The British embassy was also involved in cultural and commercial activities, aiming to promote stronger ties between the two nations: Rodd sponsored the foundation of the British Institute in Florence and the British Italian Corporation. Finally, the British embassy became an important co-ordinating centre for the propaganda campaign.¹⁵³

Guglielmo Imperiali, son of the Campanian Marquis Francesco Imperiali and of the noblewoman, Clementina Volpicelli, was of the same age as his British colleague, born on 19 August 1858. He went to the University of Naples and entered the political division of the Italian Foreign Ministry in 1882. He entered the limelight for the first time in Washington in 1891, on the occasion of the so-called “New Orleans Lynching” which sparked off the most serious diplomatic incident between Italy and

¹⁵⁰ Bosworth, *Italy, the Least...*, 7-8.

¹⁵¹ Rodd, *Memories...*, III, 219, 221-222.

¹⁵² Rodd papers: Rodd to Balfour, 17 March, 1917.

¹⁵³ Rodd, *Memories...*, III, 276.

the United States until the Second World War. Following the massacre of Italian emigrants,¹⁵⁴ the Di Rudinì government recalled Ambassador Fava leaving Imperiali – then Fava’s aid – to manage the situation alone. The young diplomat found a brilliant solution to the crisis, advising his government against calling on the European allies, managing to obtain from the US government reparations for the families of the victims, and so restoring relations with the United States to their “close” and “cordial” status.¹⁵⁵

After several postings (Brussels, Berlin, Sofia, Belgrade), Imperiali eventually arrived in Constantinople where his mission was to defend the European balance of power in the Balkans and the Mediterranean, in line with traditional Italian foreign policy. By the time he was posted to London at the beginning of 1910, Imperiali had built up a solid reputation for himself both in America and in the Ottoman empire.

Imperiali arrived in May, replacing Di San Giuliano, the future foreign minister. He could call on the goodwill which Di San Giuliano had built up during his mission, particularly with Grey. Notwithstanding diplomatic successes – an end to the haggling over the boundaries between Italian and British interests in Cyreniaca, Eritrea and Benadir, as well as the Anglo-Italian agreement on the spheres of influence in Ethiopia of 13 December 1906 – Di San Giuliano informed his successor that London still doubted whether Italy could be relied upon to play a part as a great power in Africa and in the Balkans, and that it would be a good thing to concentrate on proving that Italy was a politically, economically and, above all, morally strong country.

To promote the image of Italy as a fully-fledged modern state, Imperiali immediately set about improving the embassy building in Grosvenor Square, which, despite his predecessor’s efforts, had remained inadequate. Raffaele Guariglia, one of his aides in 1912-13, left a vivid record of the state of the embassy at the beginning of Imperiali’s mission:

Our embassy [...] was neither large nor grand and the furniture all belonged to the ambassador [...]
Yet, thanks above all to the good taste and sophistication of Marquis Imperiali and his wife, both far

¹⁵⁴ In New Orleans, 14 March 1891, a furious mob lynched eleven Italians after a not-guilty verdict had cleared them of murdering a police officer: F.G., Orsini, “Vita diplomatica di Guglielmo Imperiali,” preface to Imperiali, *Diario...*, 43.

¹⁵⁵ G. Martelloni: *La missione diplomatica di Saverio Fava nella sede di Washington 1881-1901*, PhD Dissertation (Lecce: 2005), 96.

from wealthy [...] our embassy was able to cut a grand figure. And the ambassador's kitchen was always open to us secretaries, his receptions were a great success and once a year he entertained the King [of Britain] as his guest.

Among Imperiali's aides, the most important was Prince Livio Borghese, *chargé d'affaires*, with whom he built up a very frank relationship, even if they did not always share the same political views. There were also a group of secretaries (Pietro Arone di Valentino, Ascanio Colonna, Paolo de Parente); a military attaché (Count Edmondo Greppi); and two officers (Roberto Brusati and V. Doria Lamba).¹⁵⁶

Imperiali's mission to London was not always easy, but he gained the respect of the Foreign Office diplomats. Rodd recorded Grey's esteem for his "old friend Imperiali:"

His task had often been far from easy. But he had, while sustaining the point of view of his Government with vigour, always kept the discussion on a friendly plane and, even when differences were acute, shown a good faith which, met with the frankness it invited, helped greatly towards a solution.¹⁵⁷

The results obtained in London by Imperiali represent a *chiaroscuro*. The height of his success was undoubtedly the Treaty of London. In later years, however, he gradually lost touch with the ever-changing diplomatic situation. He realised that Italian interests were threatened by unseen dangers lurking in the "new diplomacy" of the United States and the "politics of nationalities", but could not adequately explain this to Rome. Although not openly an imperialist, he fought to the end to defend the spirit of the Treaty. In consequence, he was considered responsible, along with Orlando and Sonnino, for the failures of the "old diplomacy" which at "the peace table lost what had been gained on the battlefield."¹⁵⁸ Imperiali noted in the margin of his *Ricordi e appunti* in 1937 that he felt he should "significantly amend," for the better, his opinion of Orlando and Sonnino and of their actions, performed in good faith, at Versailles.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁶ Orsini, "Vita diplomatica...", 24, 45, 48.

¹⁵⁷ Rodd, *Memories...*, III, 178.

¹⁵⁸ Orsini, "Vita diplomatica...", 66.

¹⁵⁹ Imperiali, *Ricordi e appunti sulla mia partecipazione alla conferenza di Parigi, maggio-luglio 1919*, Appendix of *Diario...*, 565 ff.

Imperiali's reassessment of Orlando (more convincing than that for Sonnino) was "an act of truth and loyalty," but it was probably also a question of self-absolution: an attempt to clear of blame an entire political and diplomatic class which had been made the scapegoat of savage nationalist and fascist propaganda.

1.4 – Press, Public Communication and Propaganda.

Propaganda played a major role in the First World War. What is most interesting for the present study is not so much an analysis of the internal propaganda which Italy and Britain employed, but rather the strategies each used for propaganda overseas, which influenced the dynamics of international politics: the action of the Italian government in Britain to promote the Italian cause, British propaganda in Italy, and joint Anglo-Italian propaganda directed at the Central Powers. After the battle of Caporetto, the latter became crucial and will be considered in more detail in the second part of this work. To fully appreciate the role of propaganda in shaping and influencing Anglo-Italian relations it is important to outline the approach to public communication and the role of the press in the two countries when the Great War broke out.

Italy's attitude towards propaganda was different from that of the other Entente members. With a few exceptions, such as the war in Libya, during which the paladins of intervention had enthusiastically described the Libyan desert as a sort of "promised land," propaganda in Italy was viewed with indifference and antipathy by both intellectual elites and political establishment.¹⁶⁰ The ways in which the belligerent countries' reputation was traduced by foreign journalists, correspondents, intellectuals and politicians shocked Italians, a point exemplified in an article which appeared on 17 March 1915 in *La Tribuna*:

Behind the lines of fire are fanatics who lead a campaign of mutual tawdry, venomous insults. There are governments who in multi-coloured books, diplomatic circulars, and parliamentary speeches treat each other as sly liars. There are the professors who cross neutral countries on missions of hate, calumny and arrogance or who, instead, take great pleasure in hurling insults with rage and disparagement from their academies at all that is the adversary's intellectual background. There are the journalists who without posing, endeavour to ignobly offend the enemy, to prick his sensitivity

¹⁶⁰ P. Murialdi, *Storia del giornalismo italiano. Dalle gazzette a internet* (Bologna: il Mulino, 1996), 116-121.

with an attentive brutal hand, to inflict mortal wounds which never heal, which are never forgotten and which are not forgiven.¹⁶¹

However, the outbreak of hostilities, the explosion of interventionist pressure, and the need to exalt the Italian cause in national and international public opinion, very soon brought the question of propaganda before the Italian government. It realised that not only did it have to motivate the Italian people but also it should bring its new Entente allies closer to the Italian cause, so as to remove the latent distrust of Rome. The ideals motivating Italy's war – the desire for legitimate unification and national security – had little hold on much international public opinion, whilst expressions such as “our war” and “sacred egoism” had a remarkable – and negative – impact.

At the outbreak of the war, the Italian foreign minister, Di San Giuliano – a typical politician of the Giolitti school – was convinced that politics should be carried on only in the offices of power and by a handful of able persons. However, he was not totally deaf to the new factors at play in international politics: his political acumen led him to believe that national and international public opinion was something which should not be undervalued. So he kept a keen eye on Italy's reputation abroad.¹⁶² From the very first moves in the European war, Di San Giuliano understood the risk of anti-Italian propaganda campaigns in the Entente countries, above all from Slav ethnic minority committees. Twice he telegraphed Imperiali to inform him of what he believed was “pan-Slav propaganda tending to create false opinions regarding ethnic pertinence of some regions of the Adriatic coast,”¹⁶³ and to ask him to work on a counter-propaganda campaign, co-ordinating Italian newspaper correspondents in Britain and irredentist committees.¹⁶⁴ In both cases, however, Imperiali opposed propaganda activities, arguing that “it would not be journalistic campaigns which could influence, but only the action which the king's government believes it should implement.”¹⁶⁵

Imperiali, like many of his colleagues, still attributed little importance to public opinion. Italian representatives abroad, as Luciano Tosi has stressed, were not in the habit of shifting from the

¹⁶¹ N. Nordau, “E dopo?,” *La Tribuna*, 17 March, 1915.

¹⁶² L. Tosi, *La propaganda italiana all'estero nella Prima Guerra Mondiale* (Udine: Del Bianco, 1977), 12-13.

¹⁶³ DDI, 5^a, I, doc. 855, Di San Giuliano to Imperiali, 30 September, 1915.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, doc. 919, Di San Giuliano to Imperiali, 8 October, 1915.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, doc. 927, Imperiali to Di San Giuliano, 10 October, 1915.

traditional patterns of diplomatic behaviour: they dealt with sovereigns, prime ministers, foreign ministers, their peers, but rarely with the political, journalistic or cultural world of the countries to which they were posted.¹⁶⁶ Imperiali was more open than most, for he systematically scanned the British press, reporting on the contents to Rome. But his attitude was still rooted in the diplomatic make-up of the previous century which had shaped him.

Sonnino too was a convinced follower of traditional 19th century diplomacy and an ardent defender of state secrecy, opposed to any “leak” to the Italian press and public opinion.¹⁶⁷ His attitude in the first two years of the war was more or less the same with regard to the international press and public opinion: he did not consider it necessary to give either of them any explanation of Italy’s position. On 20 May 1915, a few days before Italy entered the war, he presented to parliament his so-called *Libro Verde* (Green Book), a collection of documents setting out the official reasons for Italian intervention: it was the first and only official “information” to explain Italy’s decision communicated by Sonnino to parliament, to the Italian press and to international public opinion.¹⁶⁸ From then on, when he received news of false or imprecise statements made by allied governments or the international press, he would restrict himself to instructing Italian representatives abroad to deny them. The dynamic communication Di San Giuliano had in mind, and which could be glimpsed in his attempts to tack together an overseas propaganda policy, was replaced by an intermittent and inefficient information policy which was always “negative,” made up solely of denials or rectifications. Contacts with journalists were limited to the (scarce) availability of Sonnino himself or of his under-secretary, or again, of a few aides in the Consulta.

The situation in Britain was very different. Here, although many diplomats had a similar elitist approach to public communication and propaganda, it was realised from the beginning of hostilities that in order to conduct the country’s foreign policy, international public opinion needed to be cultivated, just as internal public support needed to be harnessed for the conduct of the war. The British government nurtured relations with the press which was trusted to boost public morale; at the same time, money was invested in propaganda abroad with the dual intent of acquiring allies and

¹⁶⁶ Tosi, *Propaganda...*, 13.

¹⁶⁷ Sonnino, *Diario*, I, 321-322.

¹⁶⁸ Archivio Storico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri (ASMAE), Carte Italia, 1916-1918, b. 111, f. 87.

damaging the enemy. The psychological dimension of political action was recognised as was the vast resources needed: propaganda was a tool to be entrusted to specialists. Technological inventions were still limited but new methods were already being refined and the impact of publicity on public opinion was beginning to be understood.¹⁶⁹

According to Rodd, this new management tool of national and international public opinion, called propaganda, was based on two principles: “The effect which it is likely to produce will be diminished rather than intensified by the recognition of acknowledged and much-discussed organisations for its promotion; and secondly that no form of propaganda will have more than an ephemeral success which is not inspired by conviction and based on truth.”¹⁷⁰

At the outbreak of the war, no organ of propaganda existed. For this purpose, several agencies were set up and co-ordinated by Charles Masterman, ex-president of the National Insurance Commission. Thus the first Bureau of Propaganda came into being, with offices at Wellington House, Buckingham Gate. Its activity was so secret that it was mostly unknown, even to the British parliament. Masterman surrounded himself with leading experts, including academics like J.W. Headlam, Arnold Toynbee and Lewis Namier, and the novelist Anthony H. Hawkins (or Anthony Hope). The team of experts met daily to take the most important decisions.¹⁷¹

The work of the Bureau in propaganda matters abroad was distinguished by nationality and language: one section handled Scandinavia, another Spain, Portugal and South America, yet another the US, and one scrutinised the German press.¹⁷² Around 1916, the number of Bureau staff was increased to enhance propaganda action in allied Entente countries, with particular focus on Italy. Here is how M.L. Sanders described the initial structure put into place by Masterman:

A pattern of work was laid down for each of the “national” sections. First, each had to study the foreign press and keep in touch with the trend of public opinion in the country with which it was dealing. Secondly, each section was to translate and publish any matter likely to have a favourable effect on that opinion [...]. Thirdly, each was to deal directly with individuals, sending them

¹⁶⁹ Tosi, *Propaganda...*, 15, 37.

¹⁷⁰ Rodd, *Memories...*, III, 198.

¹⁷¹ M.L. Sanders, “Wellington House and British Propaganda during the First World War,” in *The Historical Journal*, vol. 18, n. 1 (March, 1975), 119-146.

¹⁷² PRO INF, 4/5, 1st Report of the work of Wellington House, 7 June, 1915, 1.

information or receiving reports from them, or [...] encouraging press correspondents in England and any distinguished visitors to the country “to take a right view of the actions of the British government since the commencement of the war.” At intervals, special representatives were sent [...] abroad to report on the condition of public opinion and to recommend methods of allaying dissatisfaction with or opposition to British policy.

There were three other offices in addition to Wellington House. The first was the Committee for National Patriotic Organisations, whose task was to support resilience of the populations in the British empire. The second was the Foreign Office News Department which handled relations with the international press and was also the main source of information for foreign diplomats. Finally, the Neutral Press Committee, as the name suggests, supplied information about the British war to the press of neutral countries.

Through the action of these organisations, the Bureau built itself a narrative of the war, a “literature” of the British contribution which was also, in the wider sense, a literature of peace, for it emphasised that the aim of British intervention was to defeat German militarism and guarantee a “just peace.” This type of literature, which was precisely what was missing in Italy, took the form of books, pamphlets, posters, publications of various types including official speeches by statesmen and sovereigns. All these documents were distributed abroad and by June 1915 two and a half million copies were already in circulation; eight months later this figure was seven million. Illustrated papers were published in several languages, and telegraph agencies opened branches in larger cities in Europe, such as Bucharest, Bilbao and Amsterdam, to propagate specific messages. Wellington House suggested producing propaganda films early in 1915, and the first, “Britain Prepared,” was distributed throughout the world that December. In 1916 came the most famous of British propaganda films, “The Battle of the Somme.”¹⁷³

Finally, London also resorted to “Atrocity Propaganda,” which used articles of rather strong content to spread news of crimes committed by the Germans in occupied territories. The “Bryce Report” of May 1915, based on 1,200 witness reports, described the atrocities committed against Belgian civilians by German troops. Translated into thirty languages and distributed across the world, it had a particularly strong impact in the United States where it was published just after the sinking of

¹⁷³ Sanders, “Wellington House...,” 120-121.

the *Lusitania*.¹⁷⁴ Italy could not really use this sort of propaganda, since it was fighting an offensive war. Nonetheless, Rome did hardly anything to publicise Austro-Hungarian indiscriminate bombings of cities in northern Italy or the sinking of Italian civilian and merchant ships by German submarines. Events of this kind provoked the indignation of Imperiali, who several times noted in his diary: “And that’s your *kultur!*” and who called the Austrians and Germans “Huns.”¹⁷⁵ But for the purposes of official propaganda, Italian civilian victims received no attention, which surprised the British.¹⁷⁶

British propaganda, then, was much more effective than the Italian. This did not mean that it was without fault. The main problem was co-ordinating the efforts of the various bodies under the control of Wellington House. In January 1916 the British government reorganised the Bureau. The Neutral Press Committee was taken over by the News Department and the Bureau itself was placed under the direct control of the Foreign Office. Masterman opposed this decision, fearing it would bring with it a loss of independence. Despite his objections, the reorganisation was completed by the spring. Sanders described the result:

Control of propaganda was placed in the hands of the Foreign Office, and all departments present at the conference were invited to appoint liaison officers whose duty it would be to supply the News Department of the Foreign Office with any relevant information from their own department. The Foreign Office was prepared to reciprocate. The distribution of material was to be ensured by Mair’s [head of the Neutral Press Committee] department, which was to be fully absorbed within the News Department, and by Wellington House, which was to come under the direct control of the Foreign Office.¹⁷⁷

The reorganisation appeared to solve the problem at its root, but it did not escape criticism from the British press. In January 1917, Robert Donald, editor of the *Daily Chronicle*, carried out an investigation into the state of British propaganda, revealing a rather patchy situation. His first conclusion was that “the condition into which publicity and propaganda work has drifted at the present time is due to the casual way in which it originated and to the promiscuous way it has expanded.” The

¹⁷⁴ C. Haste, *Keep the Home Fires Burning: Propaganda in the First World War*, (London: Allen & Penguin, 1977), 93-95; M.L. Sanders, P.M. Taylor, *British Propaganda During the First World War, 1914–18* (London: McMillan Publishers, 1982), 143.

¹⁷⁵ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 176.

¹⁷⁶ Rodd papers, Hardinge to Rodd, 23 August, 1916.

¹⁷⁷ Sanders, “Wellington House...,” 122.

absence of any official propaganda structure before the war, and the lack of a real minister for propaganda during the early years of the conflict resulted in poorly co-ordinated action which lacked a single strategy. Donald held, moreover, that the spring 1916 reorganisation had not significantly improved matters, above all in terms of speed of decision and execution. The only positive note, in his view, was the propaganda in the United States which “could not have been handled more successfully and with more tact and better results than it has been.”¹⁷⁸

This report reached Lloyd George’s desk. He had just become prime minister and decided to implement changes which, in 1918, would produce a real Ministry of Information. For the moment, the point remains that, beyond inevitable, objective limits, the British system was already much more advanced than anything Italy could (or wished to) offer. How this influenced Anglo-Italian relations will become clear in the following chapters.

¹⁷⁸ PRO INF, 4/4b, Report on propaganda arrangements by Robert Donald, 9 January, 1917, 3-19.

2. “La nostra guerra:” Austria-Hungary.

2.1 – The “Solemn Hour” Strikes.

Imperiali wrote in his diary on Monday 24 May 1915:

At 2 o'clock yesterday war was declared on Austria. *Alea jacta est*. Long live Italy. With all my heart, with all my soul and with all strength this shout explodes from my lips. In the name of God, forward, for King and country. [...] We shall fight to the end and we shall win. Amen.¹⁷⁹

Thus began the war which for Italians would be *la nostra guerra*, “our war,” a “holy war”¹⁸⁰ for national unification which would finally hoist Italy into the club of great European powers. From the start, however, the Italian war was dogged by the contradiction between the ideal notion of *la nostra guerra* and the reality of a coalition war. Political and diplomatic relationships with the new allies, therefore, were very important and perhaps a great deal more so than military developments. Within the new context of the Entente, Italy sought to establish a privileged relationship from the start with Britain, which, because of the long tradition of friendship between the two countries, was considered a more suitable partner to guarantee the rights of the new arrival, Italy.

Britain intended to involve Italy as much as possible in the Entente’s war. With the Italian army entering the fray, the Central Powers could be surrounded and an economic and military stranglehold placed on Germany. Italy’s intention, in theory, was to honour its obligations, and to play a part in partitioning the Ottoman empire and the German colonies, but all this was subordinate to the main effort, which was aimed at Austria-Hungary.¹⁸¹

Italy’s relations with Britain, and more generally with the Entente, in the first two years of the war were characterised by four main issues, corresponding approximately to four distinct phases in the relationship. First, the alliance began to function from a practical point of view, drawing up war and

¹⁷⁹ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 163.

¹⁸⁰ “Our war is a holy war:” were the words used by Salandra in a speech at the Campidoglio, on 2 June 1915: *La nostra guerra è santa* (Roma: Tipografia del Senato, 1915).

¹⁸¹ L. Riccardi, *Alleati non amici. Le relazioni politiche tra l’Italia e l’Intesa durante la prima guerra mondiale* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1992), 31.

financial conventions. In this phase, Italy was central to the “Balkan question,” taking part in the war against Turkey and in the allied diplomatic offensive in Bulgaria, Romania and Greece. The second issue, which produced the first real tensions between Italy and its allies, was Italy’s delay in joining them in the war against Germany. In the middle of this latter dispute came the crisis in Salandra’s government. His successor, Boselli, agreed to take the (risky but necessary) step of declaring war on Germany, thus opening a new phase (the third) in the diplomatic confrontation between Italy and its allies, when attention shifted to the “colonial question.” This series of problems left Italy isolated and diplomatic relations stagnant until 1917 when the fourth phase began. Britain made overtures to Italy, directed above all by the new Prime Minister Lloyd George. This last phase coincided with a more general attempt to refine political co-operation between allies, to go beyond the limits of “national wars.”

2.2 – *The Military and Naval Conventions.*

In the months following the signature of the treaty, Italy and its new allies worked to put the conditions into effect. Military and naval conventions were signed by all the allies and a financial convention agreed between Italy and Britain. Such conventions shaped the political framework within which Italy was supposed to move after entering the war: their purpose was to regulate in detail the relationships within the Entente. In practice, however, their application was always difficult and, instead of simplifying inter-allied relations, they provided a diplomatic and political battleground. In this context, Britain had a particularly important role for two reasons: it was Italy’s partner in the most important of the three conventions, the financial one, and it was the country that committed itself to mediate between Italy, Russia and France with regard to the other two conventions.

The core of military co-operation was regulated by an inter-allied convention drafted on 21 May 1915.¹⁸² It proved ambiguous from the beginning: its text spoke of “Austro-German” troops (meaning troops from Austria-Hungary and Germany) as the target for the Italian army. However, article 4 provided for Italy and Russia to concentrate their biggest efforts against Austria-Hungary: Italy’s allies acknowledged the anti-Austrian character of the Italian intervention, provided that it was set within the

¹⁸² G. Rochat, *La Convenzione militare di Parigi (2 maggio 1915)*, in “Il Risorgimento”, III, 1961, 155.

more general context of the Entente's war. Close Italo-Russian co-operation with the Serbian army was also considered to be of the utmost importance in order to crush Austria-Hungary on three sides.¹⁸³

However, on 2 May a joint Austro-German offensive routed the Tsarist forces in Galicia and drove them back more than 130 km. On 14 May, the Austrians crossed the river San, taking 400,000 prisoners.¹⁸⁴ The co-operation between Italy and Russia, planned as a joint offensive, was virtually impossible even before it started. Serbia's attitude also disappointed Italy: Serbia had been fighting its own war of survival and did not make any real attempt to co-ordinate its operations with Italy, toward which it harboured strong suspicions.¹⁸⁵ Serbia was not a signatory of the Treaty of London or of the military convention, and so was not obliged to follow their dictates. From the beginning, therefore, the foundations of the mutual distrust which were to characterise Italy's relations with its new allies were laid.

The naval convention provided for very close co-ordination between the Allies. Signed in Paris on 10 May, it made art. 3 of the Treaty of London immediately operative, by providing for Italo-Franco-British action to destroy the Austro-Hungarian fleet.¹⁸⁶ Italy was particularly eager to carry this out. There were strategic reasons for gaining control of the Adriatic as soon as possible, but Italy also wanted to avoid suffering such heavy losses in the process that it risked losing supremacy in the Aegean to the French.¹⁸⁷ The Italian chief of naval staff, Thaon Di Revel, was concerned that "France will have an overwhelming maritime superiority and will certainly exercise it to the benefit of its own interests and contrary to ours, when we discuss the new political organisation."¹⁸⁸ So the convention was also meant to limit France's influence in the eastern Mediterranean: in this respect the goals of Italy and Britain were similar. Italy formed a preferential naval partnership with Britain not just

¹⁸³ DDI, 5^a, III, doc. 687, Carloti to Sonnino, 14 May, 1915.

¹⁸⁴ B.L. Hart, *A History of the World War 1914-1918* (London: Faber&Faber, 1934), 172; Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 23.

¹⁸⁵ A. Salandra, *La neutralità italiana. Ricordi e pensieri* (Milan: Mondadori, 1928), 324.

¹⁸⁶ DDI, 5^a, III, doc. 644, Naval Convention.

¹⁸⁷ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 25.

¹⁸⁸ DDI, 5^a, III, doc. 577, Thaon Di Revel to Sonnino, 5 May, 1915.

because of the latter's glorious maritime tradition, but also for common geopolitical reasons.¹⁸⁹

For Britain the Mediterranean was a secondary theatre, but, as Paul Halpern stressed, it was important to test inter-Allied naval and commercial co-operation. In particular, Italy was crucial in completing the blockade of the Central Powers. In a military sense, the Italian naval war was a very peculiar affair: it did not involve the capital ships in a classic naval engagement; rather it was a war of light cruisers, torpedo boats and submarines.¹⁹⁰

The British priority in 1915 in the Mediterranean was the Dardanelles campaign, but the entry of Italy into the war brought the Royal Navy new obligations. The British engaged in a wide range of duties, from helping to defend the Suez Canal¹⁹¹ and supporting the expeditionary force in the Middle East,¹⁹² to the endless patrol, escort and convoy work alongside the Italians off the coasts of Egypt and Libya. The attempt to destroy the Austrian navy was even more important.

The Italian forces in the Adriatic had only a slight superiority over the Austro-Hungarians, and the British were to supply the margin of victory. They would never really match the French or the Italians in the Mediterranean in terms of capital ships, but they had the greatest volume of shipping in the Mediterranean and could provide more destroyers and small craft for anti-submarine work.¹⁹³ However, they had not much confidence in the efficiency of the Italians, and in the ability of combined forces of different fleets to work together.¹⁹⁴

Western scholars have often stressed the cautious attitude of the Italian Navy.¹⁹⁵ They have been influenced by the reports of the British naval attachés, which made a lot of Italian deficiencies and

¹⁸⁹ Winston Churchill, first lord of the Admiralty, had gone to Paris to discuss the issue of naval command with the French: he hoped for the command in the Dardanelles after the seizure of Gallipoli, to be assigned to the French; the British were to be assigned the control of Egyptian waters; Italians were to take command in the Adriatic. See: DDI, V, III, doc. 606, Imperiali to Sonnino, 7 May 15.

¹⁹⁰ P.G. Halpern (ed.) *The Royal Navy in the Mediterranean* (Aldershot: Gower Publishing Company Limited, 1987), 2.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 5 ff.; National Museum of the Royal Navy, Limpus MSS, Vice-Admiral Richard Peirse to Vice-Admiral Arthur Limpus, 18 April, 1915. See also: British Library, Jackson MSS, Peirse to Admiral Sir Henry B. Jackson, 20 December, 1915.

¹⁹² Limpus MSS, Peirse to Limpus, 18 November, 1915.

¹⁹³ This is quite remarkable, given the lack of these in the Atlantic for the protection of commerce: Halpern, *Royal Navy...*, 4.

¹⁹⁴ Limpus MSS, Rear-Admiral Cecil F. Thursby to Limpus, 5 July, 1915; *ibid.*, Thursby to Limpus, 2 August, 1915.

¹⁹⁵ P.G. Halpern, *A Naval History of World War I* (London: UCL Press, 1994), 153; A. J. Marder (ed.), *Portrait of an admiral: the life and papers of Sir Herbert Richmond* (London: J. Cape, 1952).

lack of offensive spirit, and barely if ever took into account the Italian side of the story. The reason for such misunderstanding is to be found in the discussions that led to the London pact. Despite the fact that the Italian government was anxious to keep its fleet-in-being for political purposes,¹⁹⁶ a plan for an inter-allied naval operation in the Adriatic to neutralise the Austro-Hungarian fleet was drawn up by the Italian naval staff in early May 1915.¹⁹⁷ This was to be Italy's first military action following the declaration of war, and it clearly showed a readiness on the part of the Italian navy to fight. Italy's allies rejected the proposal, on the grounds that the risk in entering a major sea-battle in narrow waters such as the Adriatic was too great, without proper intelligence regarding the enemy. This was the foundation for the mutual misunderstanding, which lasted for the rest of the war and was reflected in post-war literature: the Italians blamed their allies for the failure to catch the Austrians by surprise; the allies reacted with increasingly bitter comments on Italy's persistent failure to intercept Austro-Hungarian ships raiding the Italian Adriatic coast. Such failures were ascribed by the British and the French to hesitation on the part of the Italian naval staff.¹⁹⁸ In reality, they were more the result of a lack of co-ordination between Italian forces at Bari and Venice and Anglo-French forces at Taranto.¹⁹⁹

The main strategic problem the Allies faced in the Adriatic was how to induce the Austrians to sortie from Pola for a naval battle under conditions favourable to themselves. The possible courses of action included a blockade of the Strait of Otranto, bombardments of Austro-Hungarian ports such as Fiume and Trieste, the temporary occupation of Adriatic islands such as Lagosta and Curzola, attacks on Austrian signal and semaphore stations, and the mining of the channels between the islands.²⁰⁰

The convention created the "First Allied Fleet" in the Adriatic under Thaon Di Revel. It consisted of the bulk of the Italian fleet, 12 French destroyers, 4 British light cruisers, 1 division of four British battleships, and as many submarines and minesweepers as possible. When necessary – and in particular if the First Allied Fleet was to be moved to the northern Adriatic – a "Second Allied Fleet"

¹⁹⁶ The Italians were still obsessed with the memory of Lissa, the naval defeat suffered against the Austrians in 1866.

¹⁹⁷ Thaon Di Revel's *relazione* is quoted in full in DDI, 5^a, III, doc. 637, Sonnino to Tittoni, 9 May, 1915.

¹⁹⁸ PRO FO, 371/2685/65037, Nicolson to Rodd, 21 January, 1916; Rodd papers, Hardinge to Rodd, 28 June, 1916 and 23 August, 1916.

¹⁹⁹ C. Manfroni, *Nostri alleati navali: ricordi della guerra adriatica, 1915-1918* (Milan: Mondadori, 1927), 224-231.

²⁰⁰ Halpern, *Naval History...*, 140.

would be assembled in the south, under the commander-in-chief of the French fleet, consisting of allied ships not already allotted to the first fleet.²⁰¹

The First Allied Fleet, however, was deployed unfavourably: part of it was based in Venice, the remainder at Brindisi. Such a deployment was necessary to control both the north and the south of the Adriatic, but neither part was independently strong enough to anticipate a success, if it met the whole Austro-Hungarian fleet.²⁰² The Allies needed to converge from north and south. As the enemy were not passive – they raided numerous Italian coastal towns – the plan seemed reasonable, but its implementation – not least given the difficulties in signal communications – was always unlucky.

Thaon Di Revel resigned in October 1915, because of chronic divergences of view with the ministers of Marine and disputes over the power and functions of the chief of the naval staff.²⁰³ The naval command passed on to Luigi di Savoia, Duke of the Abruzzi, the commander of the fleet (*Armata Navale*). He planned a campaign in three phases. First, the Italians needed to clear the Adriatic of enemy torpedo boats and submarines; then the Allies could proceed to the destruction of the bases for the Austro-Hungarian light craft at Ragusa, Gravosa and Spalato; the third phase, aimed specifically at provoking the Austro-Hungarian fleet and attracting it to the south, would be the occupation of islands such as Lagosta, Lissa, Cursola and Meleda.²⁰⁴

However, shortly after Italy had entered the war, German submarines arrived at Pola and Cattaro: as Halpern commented, this was an unfortunate consequence of the Dardanelles campaign.²⁰⁵ The German and Austrian submarines inflicted heavy losses on Italian shipping.²⁰⁶ Moreover, the Austro-Hungarian fleet refused to be tempted into a move to the south.

Therefore Abruzzi's only real achievement in the first months of the war was the evacuation of the

²⁰¹ ID., *The Anglo-French-Italian naval convention of 1915*, "The Historical Journal," vol. XIII, n. 1 1970, 106-129.

²⁰² A. Thomazi, *Guerre navale dans l'Adriatique* (Paris: Payot, 1925), 82-5; Ufficio Storico della Regia Marina, *La Marina Italiana nella Grande Guerra*, 8 vols. (Florence: Vallecchi, 1935-42), I, 435-9.

²⁰³ After resigning, Thaon Di Revel took the command of the naval base at Venice. He was appointed chief of general staff again in February 1917, and kept the post until 1919: V. Grigenti, L. Merlini, *Navi al Fronte. La Marina italiana e la Grande Guerra* (Parma: Mattioli, 2015), 33.

²⁰⁴ Halpern, *Naval History...*, 137-138.

²⁰⁵ The Dardanelles campaign was interrupted on 8-9 January 1916.

²⁰⁶ Limpus MSS, Thursby to Limpus, 2 August, 1915; Halpern, *Naval History...*, 138-139.

Serbian army from Albania between December 1915 and February 1916.²⁰⁷ Italy provided the largest part of the naval force which took off the Serbs – defeated by the Germans and Austrians, and cut off from Salonika. The whole operation was implemented brilliantly under aerial attack.²⁰⁸

In the following months, naval operations stalled. The Italians approached the Admiralty for reinforcements of at least two to four of the Royal Navy's latest light cruisers. The request was politely denied. In October 1915 the British had already sent five old B-class submarines to Venice. They were replaced approximately a year later by three of the more modern H class, which were eventually transferred to Brindisi in August 1917. The British operations in the northern Adriatic achieved no striking success, but they helped inhibit the movements of Austro-Hungarian heavy ships.²⁰⁹ In this respect, their contribution, although appreciated by the Italians was counterproductive.

The German and Austrian submarines soon came to be the greatest maritime threat both to the vital but vulnerable allied trade routes of the Mediterranean and to the lines of communication with the allied expeditionary force in the Dardanelles. Until the beginning of 1916 the British commanders were uncertain about how to deal with them. Vice-Admiral Arthur Limpus, superintendent and senior naval officer at Malta, thought mainly in terms of “hunting” the submarines, patrolling routes and directing traffic away from areas where submarines were known to be operating, and also of escorting individual ships – but there was no mention of convoys yet.²¹⁰

In autumn 1915 the Allies established the Otranto barrage, following the hope that enemy submarines could be blocked from passing through relatively narrow straits. Such a tactic worked in the English Channel, which is 33.1 km wide in the Strait of Dover. But it was much more difficult to implement it in the Otranto Channel, which is 85 km wide. Furthermore, it was misleading to talk of a barrage, or even of a “line” of drifters. That suggested a continuous line of small ships with nets, but Halpern rejected both definitions in the view of the fact that on the Otranto line, at least at the beginning, only a portion of the over 60 drifters involved was in service at the same time: many were

²⁰⁷ See: P. Giordani, *Per l'esercito serbo. Una storia dimenticata* (Roma: Informazioni della Difesa, 2014).

²⁰⁸ Limpus MSS, Thursby to Limpus, 2 December, 1915; Thursby to Limpus, 13 December, 1915; Thursby to Limpus, 22 December, 1915.

²⁰⁹ Halpern, *Naval History...*, 151.

²¹⁰ Jackson MSS, Limpus to Jackson, 18 October, 1915; *ibid.*, Limpus to Jackson, 9 November, 1915; ADM 137/1136, Limpus to Admiralty, 7 December, 1915.

transferred to Taranto for repairs or because of a lack of personnel.²¹¹

Another problem was that neither the Italians nor the French were willing to put the majority of their fleet under the command of the other. This resulted in a substantial waste of resources: the French forces at Corfu became a sort of reserve, but larger than was necessary for a reserve. The geography of the mouth of the Adriatic and the limited capacity of Brindisi to handle the entire Italian fleet meant most of the Italian battleships remained in Taranto, where it would have been much more difficult to intercept Austro-Hungarian forces, had they tried to come out of the Adriatic.²¹²

The Otranto barrage would become one of Britain's major naval commitments in the Mediterranean. It would absorb an ever-growing volume of resources as the war progressed, with little effect until its last months. For the moment, the war in the Adriatic resulted in a substantial stalemate.

2.3 – *The Financial Convention.*

The most important aspect of Anglo-Italian co-operation was the financial convention. From the beginning, it tied Italy's war to Britain more than to the other countries of the Entente. London used its financial power with the twofold purpose of increasing Italy's military strength and of blackmailing its government into a greater commitment to the Entente beyond Italy's borders. To appreciate how this co-operation worked it is important to understand Italy's approach to the economic war, which was distinctive.

In 1914 Italy's annual national income was 20 billion lire. The cost of the war quickly rose to about one billion lire per month.²¹³ The financial issue assumed a political dimension: success or failure in obtaining funds would decide whether it was possible to continue the war or not.

Unlike many of the other belligerents, Italian politicians did not delude themselves into thinking they could pass the cost of the war on to the defeated. The dominant idea was that "the longer the war, the less easy it would be to make the defeated pay [an] indemnity, whichever of the two groups came out victorious." Instead, Italian politicians cherished the hope that the war would be financed by their

²¹¹ Limpus MSS, Thursby to Limpus, 28 September, 1915; Halpern, *Naval History*..., 159.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 166.

²¹³ L. Einaudi, *La condotta economica e gli effetti sociali della guerra italiana* (Bari: Laterza, 1933), 30.

allies. The use of external finance was dictated in part by the Italian dependence on imported raw materials, but it also reflected a political awareness that standards of living could not be compressed without breaking the fragile political and social equilibrium that allowed the newly-unified country to sustain the sacrifices which the war required.²¹⁴ The war was thus financed only in small proportion (16%) by increased taxation, a proportion comparable with France's 14% and Germany's 13%, though far below Britain's 30%.²¹⁵

Not surprisingly, the lira weakened steadily throughout the war: by early 1918 it had lost over 40% of its value relative to the pound. External weakness and political constraints on taxation meant that the war was also funded by monetary expansion. It financed the war by another 16% and took place in two episodes: the early months of the conflict, when opposition had not yet been silenced by censorship, and after the defeat at Caporetto in October 1917. Together with strained distribution channels and spreading shortages of labour and goods, this contributed to sharp bouts of inflation at politically delicate moments.

Francesco Galassi and Mark Harrison highlighted three main aspects of the Italian war economy: first, the management of domestic supply, and the creation of industrial giants such as FIAT, ILVA, Ansaldo, Breda; second, the issue of war finance, both public and private, the choice between monetisation, taxation and debt, and the role of the Bank of Italy in directing public policy; third, the external balance, exchange, debt, and imports.²¹⁶

The problem of Italy's external balance during the conflict was to put an economy lacking raw materials, and especially fossil fuels, in a condition to fight an extended modern war. Italy's balance of payments "was under attack on all sides": its domestic resources were being reallocated away from exports to military goods, the substantial emigrants' remittances and tourist revenues were shrinking, and the foreign private capital market was mainly gone. Having suspended convertibility, two options remained. The first was to let the currency depreciate and compress domestic living standards; the

²¹⁴ B. Stringher, *Su le condizioni della circolazione e del mercato monetario durante e dopo la guerra* (Roma: Toniolo, 1920), 92.

²¹⁵ In Britain there was also a substantial rise in the number of people paying income tax: in 1914 the figure was 1.13 million, by 1918 it was close to 3 million: C.P. Kindleberger, *A Financial History of Western Europe* (London: Allen&Unwin, 1984), 292; Strachan, *First World War...*, I, 864-873.

²¹⁶ F.L. Galassi, M. Harrison. "Italy at war, 1915-1918," in S. Broadberry and M. Harrison eds., *The Economics of World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), ch. IX., 5.

second, to borrow abroad. Depreciation did occur but it is not clear that any resources were freed for the war as a result. Instead, Italy had to borrow from its allies, not knowing whether its postwar export prospects would earn the foreign exchange necessary to repay the debts.

Financial matters were not dealt with in detail in the London treaty. Article 14 stated rather airily that Britain would “assist” Italy in raising a loan of “no less than” £50 million on the London market “at equitable terms.” Turning these fine words into reality proved difficult.²¹⁷

Allied finance ministers first met in February 1915, establishing a close liaison between their central banks and agreeing on a policy for joint foreign loans and credit for lesser allies.²¹⁸ But the agreement between Italy and Britain, ratified with the financial convention, was not an inter-allied agreement: it was a bilateral treaty, signed in Nice on 5 June.

Britain confirmed that it would grant Italy a £50 million loan on the London market. The withdrawal of the credit was not to be made in instalments in excess of £2 million per week. The rest of the loan was secured by Italian annual treasury bonds.²¹⁹ The British however were concerned by the weakness of the pound relative to the dollar. The Italians for their part were reluctant to export much gold just as they were entering the war. The agreement seemed to Rome less satisfactory than expected, not least because the British did not want to grant a real loan, but only an opening of credit. This restricted the possibility that Italy could independently resort to the British financial market. Rome was irritated by this, since finance was the most important sort of support for Italy. Sonnino defined the British stance as “mean.”

In the end Italy agreed to deposit one sixth of the sum in gold with the Bank of England and secure the rest with a bond swap, pegging the lira at 28 to the pound (up 2.20 lire from the prewar rate, but down 3 lire from the average 1915 exchange rate of 31.00 lire) and agreeing to do “everything possible” to avoid encouraging gold flows from Britain.²²⁰

²¹⁷ Galassi, Harrison, “Italy at war”..., 5, 17-18.

²¹⁸ W. Philpott, *Attrition. Fighting the First World War* (London: Little Brown, 2014), 189.

²¹⁹ DDI, 5^a, III, doc. 609, Sonnino to Imperiali, 8 May, 1915.

²²⁰ Galassi and Harrison, “Italy at war...,” 19, 21.

2.4 – *Exploiting British Financial Supremacy.*

The financial convention did not end Italy's financial problems. Rome remained worried throughout the summer that the credit obtained would run out too quickly. The secretary of the Treasury, Paolo Carcano, was soon the object of strong criticism in the Italian parliament, for not asking the British for a bigger loan. Carcano, however, considered the war against Austria-Hungary the last of Italy's wars of independence, and thought it shameful that it was heavily financed by others.²²¹

Britain took advantage of Italy's financial weakness to make further loans conditional on Italy's declaration of war on Germany and Turkey, and on Italy's greater commitment to inter-allied supplies. The German question went on for more than a year, whereas Italy's involvement in the war against the Ottoman empire and the policy of inter-allied supplies took off thanks to the British "blackmail."

On 23 May, the Italian government had declared war on Austria-Hungary only. Italy's allies were not made party to this decision even though the Italians knew that they considered Germany to be the principal enemy – not only because of the size of its army but also because Berlin was the political leader of the Central Powers.²²²

London believed that Rome would honour its undertakings. The meeting between Victor Emmanuel III and Rodd on 21 May had been most cordial. The king expressed strong criticism of German policy.²²³ In reality, Germany and Turkey lay just beyond Italy's immediate military horizons. This was not immediately understood in London: the Foreign Office actually sent Rodd a telegram congratulating him on his ability and wisdom during the recent negotiations.²²⁴ In his memoirs, the ambassador did not mention the embarrassing situation in which he subsequently found himself, but it does emerge from his private papers.²²⁵ Paris was quicker on the uptake regarding Italy's real

²²¹ Einaudi, *Condotta economica...*, 33.

²²² F. Martini, *Diario 1914-1918*, P. Pastorelli ed. (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1974), 172.

²²³ Rodd, *Memories...*, III, 278.

²²⁴ PRO, FO, 371/2376/66250, Grey to Rodd, 25 May, 1915.

²²⁵ Rodd papers, Rodd to Grey, September 16, 1915; Nicolson to Rodd, 30 November, 1915; Hardinge to Rodd, 23 August, 1916.

intentions, as recorded in the memoirs of President Poincaré.²²⁶ Nonetheless, the allies waited a few days before demanding a clarification of Italy's position.

In the meantime, Italy decided to break off diplomatic relations with Germany, considered a hostile-enough action for the time being. With Turkey, neutrality only was chosen.²²⁷ It was not until June that the Italian government decided to deal more firmly with the Turkish question. It was necessary, first to establish whether a declaration of war on Turkey would undermine the government's already feeble popularity. How a war on Turkey would help the Entente took second place.²²⁸

Britain brought the greatest pressure to bear on Italy to declare war. They were convinced that Italian intervention would unblock the situation in the Dardanelles, where British forces formed the bulk of the allied contingent. A swift defeat of Turkey would, furthermore, enable Britain to concentrate its forces in Europe.²²⁹

The Consulta was aware of London's position. Imperiali felt the tension in every meeting with British diplomats. He telegraphed that His Majesty's government was obsessed by "the ever-more apparent difficulties of action in the Dardanelles."²³⁰ Rodd was increasingly explicit on this point when dealing with Salandra and Sonnino.²³¹

On 9 June, Sonnino told Rodd that the Italian government was assessing the possibility of bringing forward the declaration of war against Turkey ahead of that on Germany, as to meet at least in part British requests. Rodd reported that the Italian minister believed "the Italian declaration of war on Turkey might have good effect at Sophia." Rodd's pressure seemed to bear fruit: "I strongly urged him to take this step, as probable effect on Constantinople would also be considerable if it were believed that Italian troops might be sent to support Allies at Gallipoli."²³²

²²⁶ *J'apprends que l'Italie a déclaré qu'elle se considérait comme en état de guerre avec l'Autriche. Mais en dépit de l'accord de Londres, elle ne parle pas de l'Allemagne: R. Poincaré, Au Service de la France. Neuf années de souvenirs*, 10 vols. (Paris: Plon, 1926-1933), VI, 224.

²²⁷ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 56.

²²⁸ Salandra, *L'intervento...*, 198.

²²⁹ F. Ponteil, *La Méditerranée et les Puissances* (Paris: Payot, 1964), pp. 118-125.

²³⁰ DDI, 5^a, IV, doc. 86, Imperiali to Sonnino, 3 June, 1915.

²³¹ Rodd, *Memories...*, III, 288.

²³² PRO FO, 371/2376/74983, Rodd to Grey, 9 June 1915.

However, the Italian government had no intention of following up any declaration of war with an immediate deployment of military forces. Co-operation within the alliance should not jeopardise the main objective of the Italian war: operations against Austria-Hungary on the Alpine and Isonzo fronts. Sonnino was not deaf to British arguments: he understood the Balkan problem well and agreed with London that an Italian declaration of war on the Ottoman empire could well have significant repercussions for the Entente's policy in the Balkans. But his position was mainly conditioned by military issues and internal politics, which he had no intention of pushing into second place.²³³

As the weeks passed, the minister became convinced that the declaration of war against Turkey could no longer be postponed: on 12 June, he issued the order to draw it up.²³⁴ Once Sonnino and Salandra had made up their minds, the debate moved to the cabinet. Here some including the colonial minister, Martini, and the treasury minister, Carcano, supported them; but others were hostile. The education minister, Pasquale Grippa, opposed war on Turkey because he feared that such a move would provoke a German attack. The public works minister, Augusto Ciuffelli, pointed out that a mere declaration of war, without any military or naval commitment, would be an act of useless defiance. Giannetto Cavasola, the minister of agriculture, stated he was against the initiative, fearing that Italy would then have to send troops overseas. Vittorio Emanuele Orlando, the justice minister, and Vincenzo Riccio, the post office minister, declared themselves "not entirely favourable."²³⁵

Salandra pointed out to his colleagues that Italy could hardly benefit from the division of Anatolia, as provided for under article 9 of the Treaty of London, if Rome did not declare war on Constantinople. But the majority of his ministers remained hostile, and he feared a split in his government: so he decided to retreat, stating that "at least until the general conditions of the war changed" it was better to avoid direct involvement in the Balkans. However, he reassured his allies that there were no reasons to doubt Rome's good faith. The obligations of the Treaty of London would be honoured, sooner or later.²³⁶

Isolated, Sonnino sought the backing of the king himself, writing to him that "a declaration of war

²³³ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 61 ff.

²³⁴ PRO FO, 371/72729, Rodd to Grey, 14 June, 1915.

²³⁵ Martini, *Diario...*, 445.

²³⁶ DDI, 5^a, IV, doc. 342, Salandra to Imperiali, 5 July, 1915.

on our part might well push Bulgaria to join the campaign alongside the Entente for fear that Italy should take direct action to storm the Dardanelles, reducing the effectiveness thereby of any Bulgarian action.”²³⁷ Whilst continuing his persuasive tactics with the king and the government, Sonnino toed, as he had to, the prime minister’s line. On 2 July, he presented the government position to Rodd, who reported to London that he found Sonnino worried by potential isolation of Italy within the Entente.²³⁸

On 5 July, pressure was brought to bear by the Russian and French ambassadors in Rome.²³⁹ The following day, Rodd once again tried to persuade Sonnino, who replied that personally he agreed with London but his hands were tied by the veto of his cabinet colleagues. He asked the British ambassador to inform Grey that the more numerous the expressions of annoyance and suspicion regarding Italy, the greater the difficulty he would have in pulling the rest of the government over to his side.²⁴⁰ But Grey was not moved. He replied: “Baron Sonnino puts all blame on his colleagues, criticises all the allies and advances matters in no possible way.”²⁴¹ Sonnino’s attempt to gain more time had failed. The British wanted clarity, and Italy’s position was all too ambiguous.²⁴²

The diplomatic stalemate was broken when the Russians involuntarily offered London another card to play. At the end of June, they had asked the Italians for 300,000 Wetterli rifles.²⁴³ Sonnino had replied that Italy needed the weapons for itself. The Foreign Office, however, realised that the Russian appeal for help gave it the opportunity to propose an exchange to Sonnino: if Italy agreed to hand over the rifles to Russia and follow the Entente’s line regarding Turkey and Germany, it could contract a new loan with the British Treasury on advantageous terms.²⁴⁴

Sonnino could not immediately guarantee the Russians would get the arms – first he had to overcome the opposition of the minister of war, Zupelli – but he welcomed the opportunity of a financial arrangement additional to that of Nice: a foreign loan seemed the only way to cope with the

²³⁷ Sonnino, *Carteggio...*, Sonnino to Victor Emmanuel III, 21 June 1915, 510.

²³⁸ PRO FO 371/2376/89957, Rodd to Grey, 2 July, 1915.

²³⁹ ADMAEF, *Guerre 1914-1918, Italie*, vol. 564/223, Barrère to Delcassé, 5 July 1915.

²⁴⁰ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 70.

²⁴¹ PRO FO 371/2376/89957 *cit.*

²⁴² That idea was shared by Imperiali as well: DDI, V, IV, doc. 364, Imperiali to Salandra, 7 July 1915.

²⁴³ Sonnino, *Diario...*, 168-169.

²⁴⁴ DDI, 5^a, IV, doc. 781, Sonnino to Imperiali, 22 September, 1915.

huge increase in spending, since the domestic market was almost completely saturated. Sonnino thought it was necessary to raise \$200 million as soon as possible, \$100 million on the London market and \$100 million on the American. Rodd relayed the request to Grey, but on condition that Italy reciprocated with a greater military effort, including direct participation in the war against the Ottoman empire and Germany. Sonnino initially replied that those funds were to be used to increase the military pressure on Austria-Hungary, but the firmness of the British forced Sonnino and Salandra to bring the declaration of war against Turkey to the council of ministers on 14 July.²⁴⁵ That day a vibrant speech by the colonies minister, Martini, swung the balance in Sonnino's favour.²⁴⁶ British blackmail was proving successful.

Sonnino gave the go-ahead for both a massive press campaign to prepare Italian public opinion for the break with Turkey and guaranteed the allies on 24 July that Italy's declaration of war on Turkey would not be long coming. Imperiali explained to London that a few final details were being discussed concerning the safety and repatriation of Italian subjects still in Turkey.²⁴⁷ Finally, on 21 August, the declaration of war was sent to the Italian minister at Constantinople.

Now that the first of the British requests had been fulfilled Sonnino telegraphed Imperiali the official text of Italy's loan request.²⁴⁸ The first half of the loan was to be quickly negotiated in the United States as part of the credit that the other allies were also contracting. The second part was to be obtained by the opening of a credit with the Bank of England. The latter operation, to be performed in two phases, was to be secured by the transfer of Italian Treasury bonds maturing after one year but renewable. Sonnino also requested the elimination of the clause in the Nice agreement concerning the need to back the loan with gold, or at least its reduction to the equivalent of one-tenth of the value of the loan.²⁴⁹

Imperiali presented the proposal to Grey at the end of September. Grey forwarded it to the

²⁴⁵ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 83 ff.

²⁴⁶ Martini, *Diario...*, 490-491.

²⁴⁷ DDI, 5^a, IV, doc. 577, Imperiali to Sonnino, 12 August, 1915.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, doc. 788, Sonnino to Imperiali, 23 September, 1915.

²⁴⁹ PRO FO 371/2374/135852, Rodd to Grey, 1 October, 1915.

Chancellor of the Exchequer, Reginald McKenna,²⁵⁰ but the British eventually replied that the supply of rifles to the Russians was a precondition for any negotiation on financial issues.²⁵¹ Imperiali complained that Italy had already satisfied Britain by declaring war on Turkey, but Balfour forced his hand by responding that, if Italy refused, Britain would reduce the number of its submarines in the Mediterranean.²⁵²

On 11 October, a meeting between Imperiali, Grey and McKenna speeded up the negotiations. Imperiali came out of it heartened: the British seemed willing to find an agreement.²⁵³ The next day McKenna gave Imperiali a memorandum with the British counter-proposals: the document confirmed British willingness to grant a loan to Italy, although it did not make clear on which markets.²⁵⁴ Rome agreed to give the Wetterli rifles to Russia, as long as negotiations were concluded as quickly as possible.²⁵⁵ Nicolson, permanent under-secretary for foreign affairs, expressed his satisfaction.²⁵⁶

However, just when it seemed all was settled, a problem arose regarding the timing of the transfer. McKenna put forward the argument that British finances had also to support the other allies and proposed to delay the transfer until the end of 1916; Imperiali proposed it be delivered within nine months.²⁵⁷ At a meeting on 25 October, a further obstacle arose. McKenna demanded that 10 percent of the loan be covered by gold, a request that Sonnino had anticipated and was willing to accept; however, McKenna also proposed a payment of the loan in instalments: £8 million per month from December 1915 to March 1916 and £10 million per month for the subsequent period until the end of 1916. Britain was to compensate for this deferment of the loan with an additional £5 million.²⁵⁸ On 30 October McKenna laid down one more condition: the Italian government had to predetermine its purchases from each individual country and then submit them to the British authorities. This would

²⁵⁰ DDI, 5^a, IV, doc. 781, Imperiali to Sonnino, 28 September, 1915.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, doc. 894, Imperiali to Sonnino, 11 October, 1915; doc. 897, Imperiali to Sonnino, 12 October, 1915.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, doc. 890, Imperiali to Salandra, 10 October, 1915.

²⁵³ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 208.

²⁵⁴ DDI, 5^a, IV, doc. 897, Imperiali to Sonnino, 12 October, 1915.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, doc. 925, Sonnino to Imperiali, 18 October, 1915.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, doc. 930, Imperiali to Sonnino, 18 October, 1915.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, doc. 937, Imperiali to Sonnino, 19 October, 1915; doc. 942, Imperiali to Sonnino, 20 October, 1915.

²⁵⁸ ASMAE, t. gab. 2188/519, Imperiali to Sonnino, 25 October, 1915.

have much limited Italy's purchases from markets other than the British; in particular, France was to be excluded.²⁵⁹ Britain, therefore, tried to use its financial relations with Italy to strengthen its economy at the expense of its strongest ally, who was a potential future competitor.

Imperiali saw in this clause an unacceptable restriction of his government's freedom of action. He criticised the British for accepting Italy's requests in principle and later subjecting them to unacceptable conditions.²⁶⁰ McKenna replied that he was trying to do everything possible to satisfy Italy but that he could not harm British interests, and therefore asked to know what was the share reserved to the British market in Italy's purchase plans. The ambassador did not want to compromise himself and asked McKenna to suggest the share that Britain wished to allow for Italian purchases outside the British market.²⁶¹

On 3 November, the British Treasury proposed a new arrangement: Britain would provide £125 million, of which £52 million were to be available for purchases on markets outside Britain. Furthermore, McKenna made the British contributions to Italy from April to December 1916 conditional on Britain's ability to raise in the US funds adequate to meet its promises to the other allied governments.²⁶²

The director of the Bank of Italy, Bonaldo Stringher, found these clauses unsatisfactory. He proposed to raise the figure for Italian purchases on foreign markets to £74 million, while Sonnino specified that the exclusion of the French market was "completely inappropriate."²⁶³ Imperiali told Grey of Italy's disagreement with McKenna's proposal.²⁶⁴ Grey spoke bluntly of the financial difficulties which even Britain was facing and Imperiali reported to Rome that "here the intention to support us is really genuine and the difficulties raised are determined not by ill will nor a whim, but only by reasons that Stringher, in his own special expertise, recognises as important and grounded." In Rome, Rodd pointed out to the Italian government that Britain's control on Italian purchases "has no

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 2259/531, Imperiali to Sonnino, 30 October, 1915.

²⁶⁰ DDI, 5^a, V, doc. 40, Imperiali to Sonnino, 1 November, 1915.

²⁶¹ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 88.

²⁶² DDI, 5^a, V, doc. 55, Imperiali to Sonnino, 3 November, 1915.

²⁶³ ASMAE, t. gab. 1396, Sonnino to Imperiali, 3 November, 1915.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 237/550, Imperiali to Sonnino, 5 November 1915.

object except to ensure that we shall not compete against each other as buyers in the same market.”²⁶⁵

On 5 November, Italy agreed to “expand as much as possible” its purchases in Britain.²⁶⁶

However, on 6 November, McKenna raised the stakes further by laying down one more clause for Stringher: the right for Britain to cease the transfer of funds in case of a financial crisis.²⁶⁷ Moreover, he rejected the Italian request to raise to £80 million the credits to be spent outside the British market, granting no more than £60 million (later increased to £65 million). Imperiali’s protests fell on deaf ears.²⁶⁸ McKenna, for his part, complained about the difficulties Rome had made, arguing that London had already treated Italy much better than the other partners of the Entente.²⁶⁹

On 12 November Grey met Imperiali and “alluded to our [Italian] situation *vis à vis* Germany with a tactful, delicate allusion to the financial operation.”²⁷⁰ Britain was raising its requests yet further, demanding an Italian declaration of war on Germany. The Italian government refused to link the financial operation to its attitude towards Germany, but it did accept all other British terms.

The agreement was signed on 19 November. Imperiali and Stringher did not conceal their discontent.²⁷¹ Another reason for Italian complaints – made repeatedly by Carcano – was the fact that Britain had not signed any agreements with Italy like those made with France “to assist the exchanges between Great Britain and France.” London replied that “similar arrangements” had “only been possible because France was able to send a substantial amount of gold in proportion to the credits set up.” To ease the situation, Britain trebled the monthly sum which was made available to the Italian government for exchange purposes, raising the allowance from £1 million per month to £ 3 million per month.²⁷² The new funding was to be granted based on “Italian requirements,” that is, the requests that proved to be indispensable for war purposes. These requests were based on the programmes of the Commissariat of Supplies and the Ministry of Weapons and Ammunition, whose representatives in

²⁶⁵ Rodd papers, McKenna to Rodd, 4 May, 1916.

²⁶⁶ ASMAE, t. gab. 2359/547, Imperiali to Sonnino, 5 November, 1915.

²⁶⁷ DDI, 5^a, V, doc. 64, Imperiali to Sonnino, 6 November, 1915.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, doc. 68, Imperiali to Sonnino, 6 November, 1915.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, doc. 64 *cit.*

²⁷⁰ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 217.

²⁷¹ DDI, 5^a, V, doc. 100, Imperiali to Sonnino, 14 November, 1915; Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 92-93.

²⁷² Rodd papers, Bonar Law to Rodd, 23 March 1917.

Rome formed the General Committee of Procurement chaired by Vincenzo Giuffrida.²⁷³

The British were satisfied with the result.²⁷⁴ They had persuaded the Italians to accept almost all of their clauses. In addition, the financial issue had proved decisive in getting Italy to declare war on the Ottoman empire and to increase Rome's commitment within the Entente's supply chain.

For its part, Italy had succeeded in getting a larger loan than originally planned, but on conditions that were already limiting its financial autonomy. Delays, and less than full co-operation on the part of Britain's already hard-pressed war industries in delivering the Italian contracts, caused further grumbling in Rome throughout the early months of 1916. Equally resented was the condition imposed by Britain that Italian purchases abroad be handled exclusively through allied supply organisations. London would not yield because it wished to avoid further pressures on the pound. As the war went on these concerns only grew, so that London increasingly insisted that Italian purchases involving US raw materials or component parts had to be paid for in dollars. In 1915, however, Italy still retained some room for manoeuvre because the extent of its external weakness had not yet become fully apparent.²⁷⁵

2.5 – The Entente's Diplomatic Offensive in the Balkans.

In summer 1915, the Balkan question took on greater importance. Both blocks attempted to win over the Balkan states as allies, in particular Bulgaria, Romania and Greece. The Entente tried to reach an agreement with all three powers, the most complex negotiations being with Bulgaria who, understandably, had ambiguous political relations with neighbouring Turkey.²⁷⁶ Greece was torn by deep internal division, and proved undecided about whom to back. Romania seemed closer to the Entente. However, the political and strategic interests of the Entente and the national interests of the three Balkan states appeared to be inextricably competing with each other.

A reconstruction of the complex talks which took place is beyond the scope of this work. However,

²⁷³ S. Crespi, *Alla difesa d'Italia in guerra e a Versailles* (Milan: Mondadori, 1937), 127.

²⁷⁴ PRO FO 371/2371/175822, Note of the Foreign Office on Anglo-Italian Financial Agreement, 22 November, 1915.

²⁷⁵ Galassi, Harrison, "Italy at War...", 20.

²⁷⁶ The two countries had tight commercial relations, but Bulgaria had seized much of European Turkey in 1913, and so there were tensions too: H.J. Burgwyn, "Italy's Balkan Policy, 1915-1917. Albania, Greece and the Epirus Question," in *Storia delle Relazioni Internazionali*, n. 1, 1986, pp. 3-61.

it is important to understand the positions of Italy and Britain during those negotiations in order to understand better the development of Anglo-Italian relations as the war went on.

Italy was favourable to an allied diplomatic effort in the Balkans: any support against Austria-Hungary was welcome, especially in view of Serbia's disappointing contribution.²⁷⁷ Britain, for its part, because of its difficulties in the Dardanelles and the eastern Mediterranean, urgently needed to draw at least some countries into the conflict on the Entente side. The diplomatic task was not easy. Rodd remembered:

In all these negotiations the Allies laboured under a great disadvantage, because it was necessary to bring into line four great powers, each of which had its own prejudices and predispositions, whereas the enemy, after the entry of Italy into the war, seemed to act under a single direction and initiative.²⁷⁸

The Allies made their first overtures to Bulgaria on 29 May. They offered sizeable territorial gains: 1) immediate occupation of Thrace up to the Enos-Midia line, then in the hands of the Turks; 2) possession of part of Macedonia, between the Vardar and Ohrid in the north-west and the Serb-Greek and Serb-Bulgarian frontiers in the south. There were other conditions as well: Serbia was to give up Macedonia to Bulgaria, gaining, in exchange, compensations in Bosnia-Herzegovina and on the Adriatic coast; Bulgaria would not occupy the Macedonian territories promised until the end of hostilities; the Entente powers would put pressure on Athens to cede Kavala to Bulgaria in exchange for gains in Asia Minor; the powers stated they were in favour of talks between Bulgaria and Romania on Dobruja which had passed from Bulgaria to Romania at the end of the Second Balkan War; finally, they pledged financial aid to Bulgaria.²⁷⁹

The main issue with this package was that the Entente offered territory which was only in part within its power to dispose of. Only such territory as the four powers might win from Turkey could actually be offered in an exchange; the rest depended on the consent of neighbouring countries. To these difficulties was added the fact that Italy, albeit in principle in favour of the diplomatic

²⁷⁷ Caracciolo, *L'Italia e i suoi...*, 49-53.

²⁷⁸ Rodd, *Memories...*, III, 262, 264.

²⁷⁹ DDI, 5^a, IV, doc. 54, Cucchi Boasso to Sonnino, 30 May, 1915.

negotiations in the Balkans, was not so keen to have a stronger Serbia along the Adriatic coast.²⁸⁰

Sonnino knew that Bulgaria, from the very start as uncertain and ambivalent – if not more so – as Italy had been in previous months, kept a very close eye on military developments. For this reason the Allies should exert pressure on Serbia to co-ordinate its military efforts with Italy. Serbia was at that moment under massive Austro-Hungarian attack. If it was knocked out of the war, it would not be able to play any part in diplomatic manoeuvres in the Balkans. For Italy, it was crucial that Serbia remain alive, but as a weaker – and therefore more malleable – partner. In this event, it could more easily be persuaded to make concessions to Bulgaria. At the same time, an Italo-Serbian success would, in Bulgarian eyes, make up for Russian reversals on the eastern front. The Serbian army, however, remained inactive and co-ordination with the Italians was never implemented.²⁸¹

The Italians were greatly disappointed for they saw their only real opportunity for a rapid conclusion to the war on the Austrian front vanish. On 12 June, Imperiali wrote: “I meet Nicolson and renew complaints and protests regarding unspeakable behaviour Serbia. He tells me [he] has already telegraphed as we wanted.”²⁸² Reasons for this failure to co-operate lie in the fact that Serbia did not like Italian expansion in the Balkans and, perhaps dazzled by its successes against the Austrians the previous year, thought it could withstand the invasion without any need to co-operate with its cumbersome Italian neighbour. Belgrade’s diffidence was justified on the ground that it had been kept in the dark about the agreement reached between Rome and its allies regarding Italian claims on Dalmatia. London suggested disclosing to Serbia the provisions of the Treaty of London, thereby setting up open, fair negotiations with Belgrade and encouraging closer co-operation. On 15 June, Rodd put this proposal to Sonnino.²⁸³

The Italian foreign minister opposed it. He held that such an initiative would not soften Serbia, but rather increase its claims on Macedonia, perhaps even pushing it to demand a round of negotiations regarding the London treaty itself. Sonnino believed the Entente should act with greater firmness and

²⁸⁰ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 111.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 113 ff.; Caracciolo, *L'Italia e i suoi...*, 62-103.

²⁸² DDI, V, IV, doc. 155. Imperiali to Sonnino, 11 June, 1915. Again on 14 June he commented in his diary: “All the same, these dear Balkans:” Imperiali, *Diario...*, 171.

²⁸³ DDI, 5^a, IV, doc. 189, Sonnino to Imperiali, Tittoni, Carlotti, Squitti, 15 June, 1915.

choose the partner who would guarantee the greatest support without attaching conditions to already signed agreements. Obviously his preference was for Bulgaria, rather than Serbia.²⁸⁴ Rodd commented:

Sonnino throughout adopted a practical and unsentimental line. He was convinced that we ought to concentrate our efforts on attracting Bulgaria, even at the risk of alienating other Balkan States. The presumption that he anticipated an eventual conflict of claims between Italy and the Southern Slavs does not impugn the logical force of his argument. It was clear that we could not satisfy everyone. He held that a huckstering policy of offering a little here and a little there was a mistake. You will never get to the end of certain appetites.²⁸⁵

Sonnino's line was not wholly shared by Imperiali. The Italian ambassador noted: "I met Crewe [Lord President of the Council]. To my mind there was too much of a rush to talk of Bulgaria: Greece [is] upset²⁸⁶ and Serbia too and [I am] not sure [the terms offered to Bulgaria] would be accepted by those people upon whose honesty no-one can depend. But they are in a hurry here due to the difficulties in the Dardanelles."²⁸⁷

The "hurry" of the allies was justified, as Germany, acting leader of the Central Powers with no need to mediate with Austria-Hungary or with Turkey, was gaining ground in the race to involve Bulgaria.²⁸⁸ In order to persuade Belgrade to cede Macedonia to Bulgaria, London proposed that Serbia acquire Croatia.²⁸⁹ It proved to be a bad choice, for it did not convince Belgrade and it widened the gap between Italy and its allies over policy in the Balkans.²⁹⁰

The deadlock caused Crewe and Nicolson to push again for the contents of the Treaty of London to be disclosed to Serbia, at least as far as those regarding the Balkans. Imperiali commented on 9 July: "Sonnino has no intention of listening because, quite rightly, he is afraid of recriminations and unrest

²⁸⁴ P. Pastorelli, "Le relazioni fra l'Italia e la Serbia dal luglio 1914 all'ottobre 1915," in AA.VV., *Miscellanea in onore di Ruggero Moscati* (Napoli: Ed. Scientifiche, 1985), 749.

²⁸⁵ Rodd, *Memories...*, III, 263.

²⁸⁶ In this regard Imperiali wrote to Sonnino: "Serb complaints worry me less than do the Greek. Serbia is now in the game and will have in any case to play. Greece, on the other hand, is at the crossroads and in part, to a certain extent, under Austro-Hungarian influence:" DDI, V, IV, doc. 92, Imperiali to Sonnino, 4 June 1915.

²⁸⁷ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 167.

²⁸⁸ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 113.

²⁸⁹ DDI, 5^a, IV, doc. 322, Imperiali to Sonnino, 1 July, 191.

²⁹⁰ Pastorelli, *Le relazioni...*, 749-750.

in Italy.²⁹¹ I added that revelations would not calm greedy Serbs but would encourage them to declare themselves dissatisfied.”

Sonnino outlined his reasons for refusing London’s proposal:

I said I was against this for the reasons I had given several times; in the first place, the Serbs are already fully aware of the substance of what was agreed in London and if a formal notice were made now, they would use it as a pretext to condition any move on their part on the promise that they would receive Croatia and maybe Fiume, a promise that no one could make in all good faith today. Furthermore, revealing details of the London agreements would only serve to create agitation in Italy, where tempers would flare against all the supporters of Italian Dalmatia.²⁹²

Sonnino’s counter-proposal to the British was that, instead of giving Romania satisfaction at the expense of Serbia, Bulgaria at the expense of Macedonia, and Serbia at the expense of Italy, it would be better to concede Russian territory in Bessarabia to the Balkan powers. If Russia wished to be the “protector” of the Balkan states, it should demonstrate benevolence, granting what for Russia, given its size, would be “minimal” concessions to its precious client-states. Sonnino insisted that chasing the neutral states would only increase their appetites. It would foster the idea that these states were indispensable and that therefore they could ask for greater and greater compensation from an Entente perceived as weaker than the Central Powers, whose Balkan diplomacy moved in step with the firm march of Germany.²⁹³

Italy, then, suggested breaking off negotiations in an attempt to force the Balkan powers into a corner, while Britain insisted there should be a joint agreement. On 13 July the Entente reached an outline agreement, at least as regards a communication to Bulgaria. Imperiali wrote:

We agree: firstly on notice to Bulgaria asking in the first place whether it really intends to enter the fray; secondly notice to Serbia to explain the need to leave all Banat to the Romanians, offering Semlin and part of Syrmia in exchange.²⁹⁴

Italy had reluctantly supported this communiqué. In a conversation with Rodd, the gap opening up

²⁹¹ Above all on the part of nationalists, unhappy with any compromise of expansionist dreams.

²⁹² Imperiali, *Diario...*, 178.

²⁹³ Sonnino, *Carteggio...*, 515, Salandra to Sonnino, 26 June, 1915.

²⁹⁴ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 180.

between the British and Italian positions became evident. London proposed that, in exchange for the loss of Macedonia to Bulgaria as far as Vardar, the Allies should offer:

[...] the precise guarantee that Serbia, Montenegro and Croatia shall receive, on condition that it be shared between them, the entire territory West and South of the Drava and Danube, stretching west as far as and including Agram, and south to the frontier with Dalmatia, with part of the Adriatic coast including Fiume, Spalato, Ragusa, Cattaro, S. Giovanni di Medua and the relative hinterland.²⁹⁵

The Italian government obviously rejected such proposals, which violated the Treaty of London. On 3 August, Salandra repeated that it was time to do as the Germans did, that was not “negotiate” but “impose.”²⁹⁶ These differences were faced at the same time as the Serbs occupied north-west Albania. This move seriously irritated Rome: deaf to Italy’s entreaties to co-operate against Austria-Hungary, Serbia decided to detach troops from the Austrian front to conduct an operation which the Allies deemed useless and which, it was no secret, was against Italian interests.²⁹⁷ London, Paris, and Rome jointly condemned the move,²⁹⁸ but Serbia remained unperturbed. Once again, allied combined strategies broke up.

As tensions rose in Rome, London sat on the fence. Imperiali reported that Nicolson was of the opinion that Serb action, although not lawful, was comprehensible because Belgrade had no knowledge of the Treaty of London.²⁹⁹ From now on, as Luca Riccardi noted, allied diplomacy systematically attributed Serbia’s attitude to an understandable fear of being excluded from future territorial partitioning. Sonnino’s attempt, to keep the two matters – the unilateral Serbian action in Albania and the negotiations with Bulgaria – separate, failed.³⁰⁰

The Italian government thus found itself isolated on the Albanian question. Sonnino had to give in to some Serbian claims. On 6 August, the Entente made another offer to Serbia providing for

²⁹⁵ DDI, 5^a, IV, doc. 510, Sonnino to Imperiali, Tittoni, Carloti, 1 August, 1915.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, doc. 525, Salandra to Imperiali, Tittoni, Carloti, August 5, 1915.

²⁹⁷ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 124.

²⁹⁸ DDI, 5^a, IV, doc. 105, Sonnino to Imperiali, Tittoni, Carloti, 6 June, 1915, on Italian reaction; doc. 115, Imperiali to Sonnino, 7 June, 1915, on British reaction.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, doc. 133, Imperiali to Sonnino, 9 June, 1915.

³⁰⁰ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 125.

Macedonia to be ceded to Bulgaria, in exchange for territorial compensation.³⁰¹ The problem was determining the conditions for such an exchange. In the end, Italy's Entente allies agreed to reduce pledges to Serbia regarding Croatia.³⁰² This "relief" for Italy on the Adriatic coast was solely due to Grey who had forced Paris and (above all) Petrograd's hands. The Russians even wanted to exclude Italy from the communiqué.³⁰³ Grey made a further effort to reconcile the Italians and the Serbs, but with little result. Serbia's reaction proved that, as Sonnino believed, the Entente approach was wrong: Belgrade agreed to give up Macedonia, but significantly raised its claims. It demanded key cities such as Skopje (to be detached from Macedonia) and Fiume, in Croatia; it expected to join the Entente as a full partner; and it required substantial financial aid.³⁰⁴ All this affected negotiations with Bulgaria, which needed swiftness and clear political vision.

Talks within the Entente continued in an attempt to break the stalemate. On 4 September, Rodd presented Sonnino with a new resolution which originated with Sazonov and suggested offering the whole of Macedonia to Bulgaria and direct allied support to Sofia.³⁰⁵ It puzzled Sonnino, not so much because of its contents but because of its timing, since he doubted (rightly) whether it could be implemented in short order. Furthermore, Belgrade's reaction might well prove less conciliatory than its previous one.³⁰⁶ The Italian minister still opposed any Italian military undertaking abroad, and was concerned that a military operation could excite fear rather than relief in Sofia, with the result that Bulgaria would be thrown even more swiftly into Germany's arms.³⁰⁷

In the end, Grey was persuaded to adopt Italy's line and he pressed France and Russia to exclude, in a new note to Bulgaria, any explicit reference to military intervention.³⁰⁸ The note, which in any case confirmed the offer of Macedonia, was sent to Bulgaria on 14 September.³⁰⁹ The Allies preferred

³⁰¹ DDI, 5^a, IV, doc. 542, Squitti to Sonnino, 6 August, 1915.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, doc. 598, Squitti to Sonnino, 15 August, 1915.

³⁰³ Toscano, *La Serbia e l'intervento dell'Italia in guerra* (Milan: Mondadori, 1939), 128-129; Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 130-136.

³⁰⁴ DDI, 5^a, IV, doc. 695, Squitti to Sonnino, 1 September 1915.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, doc. 710, Sonnino to Imperiali, Tittoni, Carlotti, Cucchi Boasso, 4 September 1915.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, doc. 713, Sonnino to Imperiali, Tittoni, Carlotti, Cucchi Boasso, 5 September 1915.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, doc. 718, Sonnino to Imperiali, Tittoni, Carlotti, Cucchi Boasso, 7 September 1915.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, doc. 730, Sonnino to Imperiali, Tittoni, Carlotti, Cucchi Boasso, 10 September 1915.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, doc. 747, Cucchi Boasso to Sonnino, 14 September 1915.

to say nothing more whilst they waited for Bulgaria's reply.

It never arrived. A few days earlier Sofia had signed a secret convention with the Central Powers, under which Bulgaria would declare war on Serbia within thirty-five days. It did so on 6 October. Bulgarian intervention made it possible for the Central Powers to crush Serbia.³¹⁰

The Bulgarian affair was instructive in several ways. In the first place, Entente strategy had proved to be patchy, divided and paralysed by cross-vetoing. Such vetoes resulted from different political visions and priorities, and the Treaty of London, notwithstanding the precision with which its clauses were set down, was never actually applied to the letter, by either Italy or its allies. The Italians in particular considered their priorities to be incompatible with wider co-operation within the Entente. Sonnino's policy was based on the premise that Italy should not give an inch where its claims were concerned. Britain for its part had tried to mediate, but this time with little success.

2.6 – Failure and Frustration.

The Entente's diplomatic defeat created concern. In France it contributed to the collapse of the Viviani cabinet and the *Union Sacrée*,³¹¹ and, within the Entente it sparked mutual recrimination.

Imperiali said of the affair:

I have never in all these years seen such a massacre as that of the negotiations between Bulgaria and the Entente powers. Sazonov's stubbornness, his impulsiveness, British vacillation. [...] All contributed to this deplorable result.³¹²

Rodd, too, brooded over the outcome. He did not resort, in his memoirs, to the frustrated and bitter language that might have been set down in the pages of a diary, but his analysis expressed regret that a firmer but united line, such as that proposed by Sonnino, had not been followed:

Looking back on the discussions which continued throughout the summer and into the autumn, I cannot but think that had the Allies rejected all sentimental considerations the chance was at one time open to them of securing the co-operation of Bulgaria. But we left her far too long without a definite

³¹⁰ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 135.

³¹¹ Poincaré, *Au Service...*, VII, 197.

³¹² Imperiali, *Diario...*, 183.

decision.³¹³

The political repercussions of the diplomatic failure continued for several days. For the British, Italy was not free of blame for it had always looked on Serbia with suspicion. On 2 November, Asquith delivered a speech to the Commons which Imperiali described as “long and very shrewd.”³¹⁴ He declared Britain’s firm intention “in agreement with her Russian and French allies” not to permit the annihilation of Serbia.³¹⁵ Italy was not even mentioned, Imperiali complained to Grey, “almost as if Italy did not share allied viewpoints.” Grey conceded the point and talked of an “unintentional” oversight.³¹⁶ Intentional or otherwise, it was in any case symptomatic of a mood. It was a blow to Sonnino, who retaliated by denying once more Italian support to the allied expedition to the Dardanelles which had been discussed since September.³¹⁷

The clash between Rome and Belgrade had repercussions on other negotiations taking place to involve the Balkan powers, Romania in particular. This country was in theory bound to the Central Powers by a secret treaty of 1883 but when war broke out between Austria-Hungary and Serbia, it had proclaimed its neutrality, claiming, like Italy, that Austria was the attacker and not itself under attack. Now Bucharest demanded that its frontiers were redrawn from the great rivers which separated it from Russia on one side, and from Serbia on the other, in exchange for joining the Entente.³¹⁸ For this reason Romania kept an interested eye on Italy, anxious to understand its intentions and ambitions in the Balkans.³¹⁹ The Italian government for its part looked favourably on Romania, for its intervention would relieve Austro-Hungarian pressure on the Italian front and contribute to taming Serbia. Rome therefore worked to persuade Russia to accept Bratianu’s terms. On this point, France and Britain agreed with Italy: Romanian military co-operation would also relieve Austrian pressure in Poland,

³¹³ Rodd, *Memories...*, III, 268.

³¹⁴ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 215.

³¹⁵ DDI, 5^a, V, doc. 47, Imperiali to Sonnino, p. 35-36.

³¹⁶ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 263.

³¹⁷ On 14 September Sonnino had telegraphed the ambassadors to inform them of the Italian refusal to participate in the expedition because “the Supreme Command rules out absolutely that men and arms and resources could be diverted”: DDI, 5^a, IV, doc. 742, Sonnino to Imperiali, Tittoni, Carlotti, 14 September 1915.

³¹⁸ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 136.

³¹⁹ DDI, 5^a, IV, doc. 50, Carlotti a Sonnino, 29 May, 1915.

allowing the Russians to recover. Sazonov was not enthusiastic about this plan but the permanent military crisis pushed him to accept.

The main problem was the Serbian territory to be offered to Romania. Bucharest claimed Torontal, in the Banat, which Belgrade, predictably refused. London was firm in supporting Serbia, and Italy favoured Romania. The basic question was the structure and role of Serbia after the war, which Italy alone among the Allies preferred to see downsized.³²⁰ A further obstacle to the negotiations was allied reserve concerning Bucharest's policy. "Even if completely satisfied, Bratianu would be quite capable of putting forward other pretexts to delay intervention," wrote Imperiali.³²¹

With the intransigence of Serbia and the equally resolute position of Romania, the weeks went by without producing a great deal and Rome soon feared that, again, nothing would be concluded. Salandra wrote to Sonnino on 5 August 1915:

It seems to me certain that Romania will not engage – if it ever shall – but at some indeterminate time, which is the same as not engaging seriously.

The Italian prime minister attributed this failure not only to Bratianu's insistence, but also to the allies' dithering diplomacy: the Bulgarian failure, the growing military crisis in Serbia and the obstinacy of Belgrade, together with the divisions within the Entente itself, had pushed Bratianu to adopt a waiting policy.³²²

The chances of dragging Romania into the war increased when the allied landing at Salonika materialised.³²³ On 12 October, Grey invited Romania to engage, promising 200,000 allied soldiers in support. Sonnino, who had from the start tried to avoid the Salonika operation, once again expressed his scepticism to Rodd: the operation, far from being enough to give Romania the decisive push, would end up depending on Romania itself.³²⁴

Furthermore, Italy was not entirely clear as to how the allied plan had originated. On 24 November, after Anglo-French troops had landed, Imperiali requested an explanation from Balfour: "He replied

³²⁰ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 138-139.

³²¹ DDI, 5^a, IV, doc. 106, Imperiali to Sonnino, 6 June, 1915.

³²² *Ibid.*, doc. 525, Salandra to Sonnino, 5 August, 1915.

³²³ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 161-165.

³²⁴ Sonnino, *Diario...*, 247-248.

that they did not want to know there. It was the French.”³²⁵ Imperiali wrote that same day to Sonnino:

From Balfour’s language I gather that this [British] General Staff would not support increasing troops to number previously agreed. Until proved otherwise my overall impression is that [the] Anglo-French for one reason or another have embarked on new adventure for which I cannot yet see a real opportunity for true success, whereas on the other hand I do not feel it is wise to deny the unforeseeable and the dangers, given the clearly insufficient troops available in the case of attack by Bulgaria, Austria and Germany with, at this point, probably Turkish co-operation.³²⁶

Despite Italian doubts, the allied campaign in the Balkans, along with Brusilov’s success in June 1916 on the eastern front, would produce the desired effect on Romania. Bucharest required more guarantees, including control of Austro-Hungarian Transylvania and strong military support to thwart an attack on two fronts by Bulgaria and Austria-Hungary. The agreement was only signed almost a year later, on 17 August 1916. Romania entered the war on 27 August.³²⁷

For the moment, however, in autumn 1915, the Entente’s policy in Romania once more had resulted in a diplomatic stalemate. The situation in Greece made matters even worse. The Greek problem took on a different form compared with the Bulgarian and Romanian, and was even more important for the development of future relations in the Entente. Theoretically, Greek sympathies should have lain with the Allies in the light of Greece’s traditional antagonism for Turkey. Greek expansionist ambitions, though, were set on Epirus and so clashed with Rome’s – which had been granted primacy in the area under the London pact.

Greece had burst onto the stage of Entente policy with the allied note to Bulgaria of 30 May, which, in return for Sofia’s commitment, promised it Kavala, an Aegean port in Greek territory. This concession would be compensated by Greek acquisitions on Turkish territory, but it nonetheless irritated Athens. Once again, Riccardi commented, Entente policy had revealed its fatal flaw: requiring immediate sacrifices in exchange for future compensation, without being in any condition to fulfil the promise.³²⁸

³²⁵ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 221.

³²⁶ DDI, 5^a, V, doc. 149, Imperiali to Sonnino, 24 November 1915.

³²⁷ M. Mitrasca, *Moldova: A Romanian Province under Russian Rule. Diplomatic History from the Archives of the Great Powers* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2002), 56.

³²⁸ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 148-149.

The upcoming elections in Greece further complicated the matter. London and Paris supported the ex-Prime Minister Venizelos so they preferred to play for time, nurturing the hope that Venizelos would return once more to power. Italy, on the other hand, did not like Venizelos, whose ambitions in Albania and Asia Minor were well known in Rome, and hoped that king Constantine I, who was openly hostile to Venizelos, would get rid of him once and for all.³²⁹ The problem was, Constantine I looked to the Central Powers for dynastic reasons (he was German).³³⁰

The new Greek prime minister, Dimitrios Gunaris, reacted negatively on 13 August to the Entente's proposal to grant Bulgaria the port of Kavala in exchange for Ottoman territory.³³¹ His reply brought the talks to a halt. In mid-August 1916 the situation seemed to change again with the fall of Gunaris and the unexpected return to power of Venizelos in October,³³² but for the moment the situation resulted in yet another stalemate.

From May 1915 to the end of the year, the Entente had suffered one set-back after another in the Balkans. Greece remained firmly anchored to its neutrality; Bulgaria had joined the Central Powers; Serbia was defeated and completely occupied by Austria-Hungary and Bulgaria by February 1916.³³³

British strategy to involve Italy in the global war of the alliance had so far been a *chiaroscuro*. It had been successful in increasing the inter-allied supply exchanges and it had brought about Italy's declaration of war on the Ottoman empire. But it had failed to conciliate the conflicting positions of Russia, France and Italy on the Balkan question. Italy for the moment fought "our war;" Britain had a wider vision of the alliance and held that single national interests should be sacrificed to its better operation. These two different attitudes would diverge even more in the following months, but would one day have to compromise.

³²⁹ DDI, 5^a, V, doc. 131, Imperiali to Sonnino, 9 June, 1915.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*, doc. 403, Imperiali to Sonnino, 11 July, 1915.

³³¹ *Ibid.*, doc. 581, De Bosdari to Sonnino, 13 August, 1915.

³³² Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 161-163.

³³³ Imperiali remarked on 13 January 1916, regarding the Serb defeat: "The brutal fact is there and nothing can excuse us for not having prevented it, by taking timely action. I recognise the difficulty but... if we wish to dominate the Adriatic we must know how to act accordingly." Serbian defeat sparked off more rancour in the Entente, as Imperiali remembered, in particular between London and Rome: "Great irritation in Italy for the criticism [made in London] of our supposed inaction to protect Montenegro and its Lowcen": Imperiali, *Diario...*, 235-236.

3. The Entente's War: Germany.

3.1 – *The Reasons for the Italian Position.*

Declaring war on Turkey only in part tempered allied irritation regarding Italy. What the Entente really wanted was a declaration of war against Germany. That Italy could not be trusted to do so was a deep-rooted feeling among British diplomats even before the London treaty was signed: during the talks in April 1915, Nicolson complained to Imperiali that the Italians were, even then, skimming over the question of war with Germany. “Usual suspicion,” Imperiali commented. “It is beyond belief how much they distrust us.” The Italian ambassador was convinced that his government would immediately honour all its agreements. He was the most surprised when it did not, and was the first to put pressure on Rome to immediately fulfil allied requests.³³⁴

Some Italian ministers were also taken unaware. The colonies minister, Martini, noted in his diary: “Germany has done nothing. So it is fair to ask: are we at war with it?”³³⁵ Notwithstanding the pressures he received from various sides, Sonnino chose to let Berlin take responsibility for an attack.

France reacted strongly to Italy's stand. Ambassador Cambon immediately tried to force Italy to fulfil its obligations under the Treaty of London, threatening otherwise to make the treaty public so as to hold the Rome government to its word.³³⁶ London, on the other hand, opted for a softer approach. Rodd did everything possible to persuade Grey that Salandra's decision was prompted by internal divisions within his government and it was just a question of time. Once the cabinet fell into line again, the declaration of war on Germany would follow.³³⁷

France too, after its initially stormy reaction, could do nothing but wait. The French headquarters was actually less perturbed than the Paris government. The French commander-in-chief, Joseph Joffre, while negotiations for the Treaty of London were ongoing, had declared to Colonel Herbillon (who in turn told Poincaré), that Italian reluctance to immediately engage militarily against Germany was “all

³³⁴ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 144, 258.

³³⁵ Martini, *Diario...*, 430.

³³⁶ ADMAEF, *Guerre 1914-1918, Italie*, vol. 563/61 Cambon to Delcassé, 25 May, 1915.

³³⁷ Rodd papers, Rodd to Grey, September 2, 1915.

right”:

The essential thing is that they should join the fight, and that it be with us. Sooner or later, [Italy] will be dragged in against Germany. For the time being it is preferable that she deal only with Austria. [...] Declaring war on Germany might well be an invitation to Germany to launch a hard offensive, which the Italians alone might not be able to bear. In such a case we would have to go to assist them, which we could not do as we do not have forces enough.³³⁸

By summer 1915, however, the war on other fronts was stalling. In France, a series of bloody and unsuccessful counter-offensives by Anglo-French troops against the German invaders had produced a stalemate which would last more or less until the armistice. In the Dardanelles, the Turks had managed to contain the invasion. The only front which showed some movement was the eastern, where the armies of the Tsar had been on the retreat since the middle of May with the Central Powers fast on their heels.³³⁹ Italy’s allies, therefore, after a brief waiting period, began to put pressure on it to join them in the war on Germany.

The reasons for Italy’s position have often been trivialised in both Italian and Anglo-Saxon accounts. The former have attributed it mainly to the fact that the army was not ready.³⁴⁰ The latter have seen it as yet further proof of Rome’s Machiavellian, disloyal policy.³⁴¹ Once again, justification on one side and deep-seated stereotypes on the other have prevailed. To better understand how things really stood, a wider range of factors must be considered.

First of all, thirty years of the Triple Alliance had left their mark. Italy’s ties with Germany ran far deeper than the ever ambiguous ups and downs of its relationship with Austria-Hungary. They touched every sphere, from finance, economics and industry to newspaper partnerships, scientific and technological research, philology, philosophy, art and tourism. Some Italians admired Germany’s military power, others its social discipline and yet others were attracted by Marxist theories. It was not by chance that an intellectual such as Croce, before the criminalisation of German *Kultur* by supporters of French *civilisation*, launched his famous “cry of pain.” The error, too often committed

³³⁸ Quoted by Caracciolo, *L’Italia e i suoi...*, 55.

³³⁹ Liddell Hart, *A History...*, 168-186.

³⁴⁰ Caracciolo, *L’Italia e i suoi...*, 44-53.

³⁴¹ Gottlieb, *Secret Diplomacy...*, 145.

by Italian and foreign historians, was to confuse the Germans with the Austrians, to identify them all as *crucchi* (“krauts”), the “historic enemy of Italy.” In truth, the “historic enemy,” in Risorgimento tradition, was Austria; Prussia was Italy’s ally in the Third War of Independence, and in 1866 had made the annexation of the Veneto possible. In 1915, then, there was not yet true anti-German sentiment in Italy.³⁴²

Other, more contingent reasons prompted the Italian government, still suffering from an “international failure phobia,” to play for time and not run excessive risks. As mentioned above, Russian reversals on the eastern front nullified the effects of Article 1 of the Treaty of London. That article required Russia to co-ordinate its military effort against Austria-Hungary with Italy, but as it was impossible for the Russians to mount any offensive the premise collapsed. From Rome’s point of view, since Russia was unable to honour the military convention, Italy could hardly be expected to respect the Treaty of London *in toto*.³⁴³ The fact that the Italian army did not yet feel prepared for total war against Germany also played a part. Italy’s fear of the German army was almost reverential, and the British Foreign Office was aware of it: “The Italian fear of a big German attack against them is visible everywhere.”³⁴⁴

Further uncertainty arose over the issue of the Italo-Swiss frontier. A violation of Swiss neutrality by Germany – as had already happened with Belgium – would threaten Italy’s borders at their weakest point. In the first months of the war, the main body of the Italian army was ranged on the Italo-Austrian border and the Swiss frontier was “totally undefended.”³⁴⁵ Finally, and this was probably the strongest fear, the Salandra government was already picking up signs of disappointment among its people. Most of the Italians were, from the very start, against the war. The interventionist minority, although very noisy and backed by so-called “strong powers,” was able to rouse the nation’s spirit for only a few months at the beginning of the conflict. When the illusion of a rapid victory shattered against the Austrian defences on the Isonzo, popular support for the war (and thus for the government)

³⁴² Isnenghi, Rochat, *Grande Guerra...*, 82-83.

³⁴³ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 34.

³⁴⁴ This dialogue between Rodd and Sonnino is summarised in PRO FO, 371/2376/89957, note by Rennell Rodd, 2 July 1915.

³⁴⁵ L. Cadorna, *Altre pagine sulla Grande Guerra* (Milan: Mondadori, 1925), 44.

began to wane. In such a situation, declaring war on the major land power would have had serious repercussions on Italian public opinion.³⁴⁶

The reasons for Italy's position, then, were not insignificant. Had this not been the case, Salandra would not have run the risk of alienating his new allies. The government of Rome was well aware that delay would do little to earn respect from the other powers of the Entente:³⁴⁷ neither Sonnino nor Salandra was naïve or self-destructive.

It can be presumed that the government in Rome highlighted its difficulties before its allies to justify its delaying tactics; but it is hard to believe that – as some in the Russian and French camps thought – this was really a ruse behind which lay a secret Italo-German agreement.³⁴⁸ Salandra's strategy remained the same from the very start: blame the Germans for any declaration of war on them, should they attack first; but Italy should not provoke its ex-ally.³⁴⁹

Nonetheless, agreements were agreements, and the failure to declare war on Germany complicated Rome's relations with its new allies from the start. This problem, which arose as a dispute over Italy's military effort, would become worse during 1916, as deeper divisions began to appear within the Entente over the post-war colonial balance of power.

3.2 – *Unrest in the Entente.*

Italy's allies waited confidently for the government of Rome to fulfil all its obligations under the Treaty of London. As time passed, however, they began to exert greater pressure on Italy. The toughest were the French and Russians. The British appeared to be less rigid and impatient because of both the more diplomatic nature of their foreign policy and the far better relations they had always had with Italy. But they too would not consider Rome as entirely trustworthy until it declared war on Berlin.³⁵⁰ Imperiali became aware of this on 9 November 1915 during a reception in London. The

³⁴⁶ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 35.

³⁴⁷ Salandra, *L'intervento...*, 193.

³⁴⁸ In a meeting of Russian and French diplomats, the former expressed their suspicion that behind Italian uncertainty lay a tacit non-belligerence agreement between Italy and Germany according to the "*traditions de la politique italienne*": ADMAEF, Guerre 1914-1918, Italie, vol. 563/2, Paléologue to Delcassé, 11 July, 1915.

³⁴⁹ Sonnino, *Diario...*, 163.

³⁵⁰ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 36.

ambassador noted in his diary: “Lord Mayor’s Banquet. Asquith talks of Italy... well. Grand applause. But underlying all, the same worry: why do the Italians not declare war on Germany?”

On 15 November, taking advantage of Rodd’s presence in London on home leave, the two ambassadors met for lunch. Of the conversation which took place there is only the account in Imperiali’s diary. The British ambassador complained about the “poor patriotic behaviour of Roman society.” Imperiali, apparently not very surprised, added: “Fortunately that counts for nothing.” During the meeting, Rodd reserved some “great praise” for Sonnino: “All faith in him.” However, he mentioned that “Asquith is worried and diffident.” Even Imperiali had occasion to complain to his colleague: “I have found Cambon and Benkendorff at Nicolson’s: [the latter was] most mysterious about Grey’s and other minister’s trips to Paris. Rather odd way to behave. One of these days I shall speak out... plainly.” However, the meeting ended positively with Rodd promising to set things in order. Two days later, though, the British diplomats were again cold, barely courteous, towards Imperiali: “Nicolson kept me waiting half an hour whilst he chatted with Cambon and Benkendorff. It was a lack of respect. I left and I have spoken my mind to Rodd. I do not let anyone step on my toes. I shall find a way to make this understood.”³⁵¹

What impression did these rather unpleasant events have on the British ambassador? Here is his account:

The chief disadvantage arising from this condition of affairs was a certain withholding of confidence, due to the feeling among some of the Powers that Italy was as yet only half-involved in the European struggle, and was fighting her own battle rather in association than in complete co-operation with the Allies. [...] On the other hand, discussions had been initiated between London, Paris and Petrograd, with regard to the ultimate fate of the Turkish Empire, with which the rest of the Allies had been fighting for nearly a year before Italy had entered the war, and a general understanding was reached without the new Ally having been consulted. [...] This was unfortunate, as the conditions contemplated were bound to become known sooner or later. [...] The situation thus created presented one of the most troublesome problems with which I had to deal, and it led to graver complications later on when the claims of Italy came to be discussed.³⁵²

Up to that point, Imperiali was unaware that the other Entente powers, exploiting Italy’s ambiguous

³⁵¹ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 216-217; 218-219.

³⁵² Rodd, *Memories...*, III, 266-7.

position, were discussing secret agreements for the colonial partitioning of the Ottoman empire, keeping Italy in the dark. The ambassador would realise this gradually during 1916. The situation was instead much clearer to Rodd, who realised from the very start that relations within the Entente powers were heading for a crisis.

In an attempt to placate its allies, the Italian government made public Italy's decision to join the pact drawn up between the Entente powers on 5 September 1914, with its undertaking not to sign any separate peace with any enemy: on 30 November 1915, the Quadruple Alliance was thus formally proclaimed. It was one way of asking the other allies to be a little more patient: Italy would fall in line with their global strategy as soon as possible. However, the Italian decision to make its commitment to the pact public – a move which presumed complete strategic solidarity among the Allies – made Rome's delay over the German question even more incomprehensible.³⁵³

There was no improvement in the situation in the days that followed. The new year started off with a frosty exchange of opinions between Imperiali and Bernardo Attolico, Italian minister of agriculture, and commerce and industry representative on the inter-allied organisations in London (and later delegation leader for war supplies in 1916). Imperiali complained: "Great irritation [in Italy] against Britain, and consequently against myself upon whom they are trying to pile the responsibility. Let them pour it on. I suffer but my conscience is clear. I have not failed in my duty: I have done more and shall continue to do so if... they do not clear me out." Imperiali began to fear that Salandra was thinking he should be replaced. The continued pressures from the British provoked an angrier reaction from Salandra who blamed his ambassador for not being able to calm British nerves. Imperiali's suspicion seemed to be confirmed when news arrived on 15 January of the imminent arrival of Edmondo Mayor, the Italian government delegate for supplies: "Let's hope he's not here to set up the scaffold."

The first meeting between the two took place on 31 January and Imperiali described it as "cordial" but the ambassador remarked to Mayor that he should feel free to judge and report to Rome regarding Anglo-Italian relations without reservation: "My conscience is clean and I believe I have done my duty and obtained some success in the most delicate position in which I find myself. If they are not

³⁵³ PRO FO, 371/2685/65037, Nicolson to Rodd, 21 January, 1916.

pleased, let them choose.” Imperiali’s frustration was increased by the fact that, perhaps for the first time since the relations with the new allies had begun, Rome failed to understand that the British were not digging in their heels as a matter of form: they were seriously worried about the “half-way” nature of their alliance with Italy: “[in Italy] voices are raised against Britain who, according to the illustrious Marconi does not sufficiently appreciate our military action. This is not true, or is so only partly. Here all authoritative persons are fully aware of that, but the larger mass of the public sees only one thing: Italy at peace with Germany.”³⁵⁴

In such a tense climate it was inevitable that suspicions should arise of plots behind the scenes. According to some reports which reached the Foreign Office the real reason for Italy’s attitude was that, should the Central Powers win, the Germans would be willing to reopen the “Roman Question”. That fear prevented Italy from taking a decisive line with Germany.³⁵⁵

Rodd declared he did not subscribe to such theories: any intention on the part of Germany to reopen the “Roman Question” should have spurred the Italian government to co-operate fully to achieve the complete defeat of the Central Powers. The failure to declare war on Germany, said Rodd, was to be attributed to those ministers who feared a joint Austro-German offensive and preached caution in military affairs. He suggested therefore that the Foreign Office should not exaggerate the question of German influence over Italy.³⁵⁶

Thanks to Rodd’s mediation, Britain again moved to meet Italy half way and avoid head-on confrontation. On 7 February 1916, Imperiali was overjoyed to see headlines in some British newspapers showing signs of benevolence towards Italy. “Wonderful article in *The Times*, ‘What Italy has achieved,’” exclaimed the ambassador. “*Pour une fois*. Even the *Westminster Gazette* has a friendly article: ‘Italy and the Adriatic.’ Let us hope that on our side recrimination and reproach against the allied nation will cease!”

Unfortunately, Imperiali’s optimism proved excessive and on 10 February Grey complained to him “of the language of our press, of the anti-British feeling. [...] He mentions rumours circulating here regarding Italian exports to Germany. [...] I reply that at most there may be cases of smuggling,

³⁵⁴ Imperiali, *Diario*..., 228, 240 (see in particular Imperiali’s comment on 28 January 1916).

³⁵⁵ PRO FO, 371/2684/31640, MacDonough to Grey, 3 February, 1916; Riccardi, *Alleati*..., 266.

³⁵⁶ PRO FO, 2685/45813, Rodd to Grey, 4 March, 1916.

inevitable in every country.” British complaints about the “unceasing recriminations against selfish Britain” continued over the following days.³⁵⁷

When the ambassador pressed Rome about the attitude of the Italian press, he received a very cold reply from Salandra. The Italian prime minister was irritated with the British: he said they postponed negotiations regarding the supply of material and goods to Italy as retaliation for the Italian failure to declare war on Germany. Salandra described the British as “insular merchants,” condemning their “mean mercantilism and economic exploitation even of allied nations.” He rejected any accusation of failure to honour the Treaty of London and stressed that, in order to remain true to its commitments, he had taken several decisions which did not coincide with Italy’s interests: among others, the Wetterli question, Italy’s declaration of war on Turkey and Italy’s unconditional support to a heedless Serbia.³⁵⁸

In Toscano’s view, British reproofs of Italy were merely pretexts: Italy’s failure to declare war on Germany was a secondary matter, an excuse to which the British clung in order to vent, from the great heights of their presumption of superiority, their ill-will towards Italy.³⁵⁹ However, Toscano failed to take into account the difficult situation in which the Entente found itself at that moment of the war.

From February 1916 the battle of Verdun absorbed the full attention of the Anglo-French commands. To many it seemed that that battle, in which the very fate of France appeared to hang in the balance, might turn out to be the decisive fight of the war. The absence of Italian troops in that theatre, as well as in Salonika, could not but raise suspicion. Italy’s attitude provided grist to the mill of those who had always suspected that Rome was pursuing its own objectives, rather than espousing the strategy of the Entente.³⁶⁰

These issues were well-known to Imperiali. On 13 March 1916, he surprisingly received permission for a short leave in Italy. Even more convinced by the signs – the arrival of Mayor, the coolness of Salandra, the sudden leave – that he was soon to be replaced, the ambassador left on 26 March. His intention was to point out once again to the prime minister that for the British the German

³⁵⁷ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 244-249 (see in particular Imperiali’s comments between 15 February and 8 March 1916).

³⁵⁸ DDI, 5^a, V, doc. 236, Salandra to Imperiali, 26 December, 1915.

³⁵⁹ Toscano, *Gli Accordi di S. Giovanni di Moriana* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1936), 139.

³⁶⁰ Stevenson, *1914-1918...*, 103-104; Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 263.

issue was not a ploy.

On 30 March Imperiali met Salandra and Sonnino, who were visiting Paris. The three had a tough but frank meeting. Imperiali, honest and direct as was his style, presented his opinions and concluded: “You are either happy or not happy with me. If you are happy, have faith. Two ambassadors cannot exist side by side. Let Mayor do his job and I shall help him, but let him stay out of politics, otherwise I shall be the one to leave.” The two, pressed into a corner, confirmed their confidence in the ambassador.

Imperiali reached Rome the next day. The impression made on him was disappointing: “The atmosphere in the capital, with a few exceptions, is not of the most pleasant. Indifference, dumb hostility against the war, unfair criticism and unfounded complaints. How sad that our world is not distinguishing itself in this supreme national crisis for either its virility or for its patriotism. I deeply deplore it.” On 29 April, still in Italy, he had a further talk with Salandra. This time Imperiali was impressed, almost moved:

I find him depressed and tired. I get the impression of a person frightened by the burden of the responsibility he has shouldered and almost regretting it. I told him clearly what I think about the disadvantage of the ambiguous position with Germany. ‘Slowly, slowly, we’ll get there,’ he replied but... I told him that the issue could have been considered (and I had told him as much) a year ago, but now that our word has been given... *marche!* ‘Yes, yes, you are right. Try to persuade them to show patience.’ Fine, but it won’t be easy.³⁶¹

At the end of April, in an attempt to show some “spiritual closeness” between the two countries, Asquith also visited Italy. He was welcomed with warmth and friendliness by the Italians, but the visit did not lead to any real political understanding.³⁶²

3.3 – The Limitations of Italian Propaganda Abroad.

Italy’s failure to create a closer empathy with its allies and to fully explain to them the real reasons behind its delay in declaring war on Germany was strongly influenced by the limitations of Italian

³⁶¹ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 256, 258.

³⁶² Rodd, *Memories...*, III, 289.

propaganda abroad. In many cases, even worse than a lack of propaganda strategy was the lack of information about the views of the Consulta that paralysed the action of Italian representatives abroad.

No justification was given to the Italian ambassadors for Rome's delays to declare war on Turkey, then on Bulgaria and finally on Germany, except in vague terms. Hence Italy's failure to participate in operations in minor war theatres, such as the Middle East and the Balkans, received greater attention abroad than, for example, the Italian navy's part in the rescue of what remained of the defeated Serb army – which was almost completely ignored. It was from the Italian representatives abroad that Sonnino received the first requests for more information from Rome.³⁶³ Tosi acutely noted, though, that it was a request for information, not propaganda, which the majority of Italian diplomats did not yet perceive to be necessary.³⁶⁴

A letter from Salandra was added to this series of requests, which emphasised to Sonnino that “everywhere, especially in the Balkan capitals, the spread of Austro-German news to our detriment is very active.” On the Italian side, instead, there was inertia, and Salandra remarked that “even where we should have [...] bodies willing to publish our news, it does not even reach our diplomats.” Something had to be done: “It is not enough to get on with the newspapers. Transmission of our news must be organised, at great expense if needed.”³⁶⁵

Sonnino, however, continued to oppose any propaganda activity abroad. Throughout autumn 1915, Martini and Salandra tried to convince him to explain in detail to the Entente allies and the neutrals why Italy delayed declaring war on Germany and participating in joint military operations, but without success.³⁶⁶ Not that Salandra had any greater consideration of public opinion than Sonnino: but he was aware that the growing isolation of Italy, and the little allied empathy for Italy's position and its sacrifices, were dangerous and needed to be dealt with as soon as possible, even at the cost of

³⁶³ This was the case for Macchi di Cellere, ambassador to Washington, [see: Justus, V. *Macchi di Cellere all'Ambasciata di Washington* (Florence, 1920), 42] of Bonin Longare, ambassador to Madrid [DDI, V, IV, docs. 157, 226, 315, 432, Bonin Longare to Sonnino, 10, 11, 30 June, and 15 July, 1915], of De Bosdari, minister in Athens [see anonymous Note with no specified date, but probably from De Martino to Sonnino, in ASMAE, b. 54.], and of Squitti, minister in Serbia [See: DDI, V, IV, docs. 17, 413, 617, 689, Squitti to Sonnino, 26 May, 12 July, 18, 26, 31 August, 1915].

³⁶⁴ Tosi, *Propaganda...*, 20.

³⁶⁵ Sonnino, *Carteggio...*, 499-500.

³⁶⁶ Martini, *Diario...*, 580; Sonnino, *Diario...*, 687.

revealing some of the conditions of the Treaty of London to Yugoslav representatives.³⁶⁷

In mid-February De Martino, albeit belatedly, drew up a proposal for Italian propaganda. His report began with an analysis of the aims of anti-Italian enemy propaganda abroad, which were: 1) to attempt to diminish the legitimacy of the Italian war with the “betrayal” thesis (this from Austria particularly); 2) to damage thereby Italian prestige with the neutral countries, especially the United States; 3) to credit rumours of public regret about the choice to enter the war (“in Roumania, the argument of the enemy: Italy was neutral, it wanted to enter the war and now it regrets doing so; let this serve as a warning”); 4) to devalue Italian military action by spreading false information. In such a situation, De Martino concluded, Italy risked facing hostile international public opinion at the end of the war – a scenario which would make negotiations very difficult. To mend this situation, he proposed: first, setting up a propaganda body under the control of the Consulta; second, asking Italian representatives abroad to provide a detailed series of reports, for the government to decide on the best propaganda strategy to adopt overseas; finally, dispatching abroad trusted employees of the Consulta in an attempt to explain to Italian diplomats – many of them deaf to such issues – the importance of a systematic propaganda campaign. The cost estimated by the under-secretary for such activity was Lit. 700,000 over six months.³⁶⁸

This report showed that De Martino had a far more modern concept of propaganda than Sonnino, and even Salandra, who had not gone much beyond simple intuition. Instead of revealing the content of the London pact to neutrals, the under-secretary suggested setting up a vast “defensive” and “counter-offensive” operation against Italy’s enemies: he proposed a real propaganda operation, not a simple increase in the amount of “information” released regarding Italy’s war. His report, however, was limited by the lack of a concrete proposal regarding the content of such an operation.³⁶⁹

Sonnino forwarded the report to Salandra with a letter. The foreign minister agreed in principle with De Martino’s observations but raised an objection with regard to the costs of the operation, which he feared would be far higher. Germany and Austria-Hungary, for example, had acquired many

³⁶⁷ Salandra, *L'intervento...*, 16.

³⁶⁸ ACS, Carte Presidenza del Consiglio, b. 19-29-7, De Martino to Sonnino, Relazione, 14 February, 1916; Tosi, *Propaganda...*, 21.

³⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

newspaper companies: Italy could not afford to do so, and it did not own banking organisations abroad which could finance such initiatives. Sonnino's advice was to encourage greater personal engagement by Italian diplomats. Salandra objected that, if it was not possible to prepare a "publicity" campaign as vast as that of Austria and Germany, it did not follow that "half measures are useless." Sonnino, however, let things drop once again and Salandra did not push the issue.³⁷⁰ The prime minister's prerogatives allowed Salandra to impose his ideas on Sonnino, but he tended not to contradict his most important minister whose disciple, in politics he considered himself to be.³⁷¹

This lack of government initiative was, in part, compensated for by the action of pro-Italian committees and organisations abroad. Already during the months of neutrality, private associations of interventionists had sprung up all over Italy: the most active were "Trento e Trieste," "Dante Alighieri," and "Pro Patria." When war broke out, these committees often opened branches abroad and were joined by other institutions set up by emigrants. "Pro Italia" was set up in London, for example, on 11 June 1915. Imperiali described the day:

I expressed my ideas very clearly: to not waste efforts; concentrate on helping families called-up. I recommended above all peace and harmony. They applauded but... among themselves they do not agree at all. Rivalry, jealousy, ambitions.³⁷²

Imperiali cannot have had much faith in the activities of the movement. His main recommendation was not to take political initiatives. It would have been difficult to do so, in the absence of clear directives from Rome, and, furthermore, differences between interventionists and nationalists were already generating conflict. The irredentists from Trentino, for example, clashed with those of the Adriatic over the priorities of Italy's war aims and within the two groups were political divisions: Nationalists, Liberals, Socialists and Republicans often fought amongst each other.³⁷³

There was an even bigger problem. These irredentist groups, when they took political initiatives, reflected their own hopes for annexations. No-one realised that, at least at the propaganda level, it was necessary to give the war an idealist veneer, above all abroad. Promoting the nationalist slogans of

³⁷⁰ Sonnino, *Carteggio...*, Salandra to Sonnino, 15 February, 1916, 690.

³⁷¹ Tosi, *Propaganda...*, 22.

³⁷² Imperiali, *Diario...*, 170.

³⁷³ DDI, 5^a, IV, Imperiali to Sonnino, 9, 10, 11, 18 August, and 17 September, 1915.

“holy war” and “our war,” or the annexationist claims of the irredentists, made things worse, for it gave international public opinion the impression that Italy was not fighting for the ideals of justice and freedom, as all the other powers claimed to be, but for personal gain.³⁷⁴

A clear example is propaganda in Britain. Here, where the activity of Yugoslav committees was more vigorous, Italian propaganda was for the first year and a half of the conflict very weak. It was based essentially on the publication, in an English translation, of the war bulletins of the Italian chief of general staff, Luigi Cadorna. For the most part barely more than a few lines long, very similar and often not so truthful, they were distributed with great delay, and did not really help their readers understand how the Italian war was progressing. Italian newspaper correspondents tried through personal contacts to influence the local press, but that was not the best solution to the problem.³⁷⁵

The only action of any importance to combat Yugoslav anti-Italian propaganda in London was taken by Antonio Cippico, Professor of Literature at London University and a member of the Royal Literary Society. A nationalist-liberal, he responded to the Yugoslav committees with a proudly pro-annexationist campaign which, however, increased the hostility of Slav ethnic minorities. This at least was the conclusion reached by another, less extreme irredentist, Edoardo Schott Desico, from Trieste, as a result of a series of fact-finding missions abroad. In his view, the Italians should not “stir souls with writings, words and imperialist speeches,” in dealing with the Slavs. He suggested “a policy of forethought, of friendly approach,” elusive on Italian ambitions and war aims so as to “prevent many Serbs and Slavs harming us.”³⁷⁶

Salandra took only two real propaganda initiatives, both in the summer of 1916. The first was the financial support (Lit. 45,000) given to the publication of war booklets and of a monograph on the Italian contribution to the war, proposed by the “Union of Teachers” and the “National Association of Italian University Professors.”³⁷⁷ The second initiative was the establishment at the beginning of June of the “Central Committee of Propaganda for the Italian Adriatic,” with deputy Giovanni di Cesarò,

³⁷⁴ Tosi, *Propaganda...*, 40.

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 41; Albertini, *Epistolario*, O. Barié ed. (Milan: Mondadori, 1968), Emanuel to Albertini, 25 May, 1916, 563-565.

³⁷⁶ ACS, Carte Presidenza del Consiglio, b. 19-11-10, Organizzazione dell'azione di propaganda all'estero, con speciale riguardo alla Svizzera. Milan, 21 June, 1916.

³⁷⁷ ACS, Carte Presidenza del Consiglio, b. 19-11-10, f. 4.

Sonnino's nephew, as chairman, which took on the co-ordination of active pro-Italian groups abroad. The association considered itself "an Italian body opposed to the Yugoslav committee." Its aim was not so much to promote Italian war aims, but to separate the Czechs from the Yugoslavs, and to induce them to support Italian ambitions in the Adriatic.³⁷⁸ Neither initiative was enough.

The first Italians to realise their limits were newspaper correspondents abroad.³⁷⁹ On 7 February 1916, Antonio Albertini, wrote from Petrograd to his brother, the editor of the *Corriere della Sera*, that Russian public opinion considered Italy a second-rate ally. Russians wondered why Italy did not send troops to the Balkans, did not declare war on Germany and did not advance "ten kilometres a day on the Carso." The Russian press could not give any explanation of this because they had no information from Italian diplomats.³⁸⁰ Renzo Larco made similar observations on the *Corriere* at the beginning of April. He stressed the difference between the Italian approach and that of France and Britain in Russia. An unsigned comment, which Tosi attributed to the editor Luigi Albertini,³⁸¹ followed the article and criticised the Italian government: "What is being done in Rome to this end? Where is our propaganda action? How and with what means are we working for Italy abroad?" The comment continued:

In this war, nations need to be "cultivated" for them to keep producing trust, and trust between nation and nation is no less necessary to the fortunes of war than trust of each in his own government.³⁸²

The following month, Mario Borsa, correspondent of the *Secolo* in London, submitted a memorandum through journalist Ugo Ojetti to the Information Office of the Italian Comando Supremo,³⁸³ which described British propaganda activity point by point, in the hope that Rome would take it as an example. Already in March 1916 Guglielmo Emanuel had described the new organisation of the Wellington House Bureau in the *Corriere della Sera*: the British had learnt from the limitations of their propaganda policy in the first two years of the war and had remedied the situation. The attitude

³⁷⁸ G. Pitacco, *La passione adriatica* (Bologna: Cappelli, 1928), 56.

³⁷⁹ Tosi, *Propaganda...*, 38-40.

³⁸⁰ Albertini, *Epistolario*, 552-555.

³⁸¹ Tosi, *Propaganda...*, 39.

³⁸² "Il pubblico, la stampa e l'Italia" in *Il Corriere della Sera*, 12 April, 1916.

³⁸³ U. Ojetti, "L'Italia e l'Inghilterra e la guerra di domani," in *Il Secolo*, 31 May, 1916.

of British diplomats had moved from a sort of “splendid isolation” to a more open and courageous attitude:

After realising the damage which the strange veil of official mystery which had descended on the British effort produced on public opinion in allied and neutral countries, Britain today is treading a different path. Not only has it sent groups of Italian, French, Russian, American, Dutch and Swedish reporters to visit both the front and the fleet, but it has also invited a group of Russian writers [...] to visit Britain, its arms factories, military camps, yards and fleet. This visit, which precedes and prepares that of members of the Duma, is considered a huge step towards a more adequate appreciation of the action Britain has already carried out and, even more so, of that which it is preparing to carry out.³⁸⁴

Emanuel praised the new British policy of “cultivating contact with public opinion abroad.” A further step in this direction was “the appointment of Lord Newton as new under-secretary to the Foreign Office, to head the department of international publicity which had recently been set up, with the delicate and important mandate of informing the neutral and allied press about British action.” The article concluded: “the British example needs to be copied more than anywhere else in Italy, where, as we have several times pointed out, government contact with foreign public opinion does not seem to exist at all.”

The lack of a strategic vision of the role of propaganda was critical in Rome’s failure to explain fully the sacrifices which Italy was making in the war and to clarify to its allies the real reasons for its reluctance to be dragged into a larger conflict by declaring war on Germany. This failure resulted in political and media isolation.

3.4 – *The Fall of Salandra.*

The issue of the Italian declaration of war on Germany was strongly influenced by the political crisis that occurred in Italy in June 1916. Its main cause was the Austro-Hungarian offensive in Trentino (15 May-27 June), and it materialised when relations between Italy and Britain were cool. British domestic policy was in ferment due to the increasing tension between Asquith and Lloyd

³⁸⁴ G. Emanuel, “Quel che fa l’Inghilterra per mettere in rilievo il suo sforzo,” in *Il Corriere della Sera*, 8 March, 1916.

George, and the crisis in Ireland: on the one hand, internal instability increased British irritation with Italy's ambiguous attitude; on the other hand, some comments in the British press on the "full agreement" between Britain and Russia on Turkey roused Italian suspicions over the prickly colonial question. Imperiali had two meetings with Grey, on 9 and 15 May, seeking clarification, but he was left in both cases with an unpleasant impression: coldness and irritation, both unusual in the minister. The Italian ambassador telegraphed Sonnino: "I have found a different atmosphere on my return."³⁸⁵

This was the climate of Anglo-Italian relations, when on 15 May the news of the long-feared Austrian offensive in Trentino broke. Called the *Strafexpedition*, a "punitive expedition" against the treacherous ally, its objective was to break through the Italian lines south of Trentino and to spread across the Venetian plain, cutting off the main body of the Italian army engaged on the Isonzo.³⁸⁶

At first the offensive, exploiting superior strength, seemed unstoppable and reached Asiago. Imperiali followed the progress of the battle with great anxiety and increasing irritation, for the British press made much of the Austro-Hungarian advance. "What haste in these pages to proclaim our small failure! Are we friends or enemies?" Personal relations with Grey were not improving ("so tight-lipped: he has something on his chest"). When, however, the threat of a final push on the Veneto became real, British criticism of Italy was tinged with anxiety. Imperiali wrote in his diary on 23 May:

Newspapers highlight [the] importance of Austrian effort: I seem to pick up some preoccupation. Good article by *The Times*, 'The Part of Italy.' *The Morning Post* announces return of Giolitti and his talks with Carcano. Is there a union on the cards? It would make me happy, because I do not share many people's opinion of Giolitti. Defects [...] he surely has, but, unless I am seriously mistaken, he is a gentleman, a patriot and a loyal subject of the King. And were he to run the war...

Imperiali's words reveal a suspicion that the military crisis might trigger a no less serious political crisis. On 25 May, the ambassador at last had a more relaxed meeting with Grey, who, worried about the situation in Italy, showed greater empathy for his ally and explained the reason for the Entente powers' silence over the agreements on Turkey: "[The allies] expected [Italy] to take the final decision regarding our relations with Germany." There was no argument for Imperiali: "It is a question of Turkey, with whom we are at war, not Germany." All the same, "I did not wish to reply to avoid

³⁸⁵ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 183, 264.

³⁸⁶ Isnenghi, Rochat, *Grande Guerra...*, 188.

starting up a regrettable discussion.” The ambassador brooded on the behaviour of the British and on 31 May wrote:

I telegraphed Sonnino my opinion regarding Grey’s words. This is not the moment to increase the danger of the country with a declaration of war on Germany. Whether it should have been done earlier or not, I shall not consider. But now *no*. But we need to talk openly and not continue this evasive policy of silence. For goodness’ sake we are serving the cause quite enough not to need to be evasive!

For the first time, Imperiali, till then determined that Rome honour its obligations, suggested it should go against the wishes of its allies. The coldness and ill manners he had encountered, together with his concern about the effect a declaration of war would have on morale in Italy, made him change his mind.

Fortunately, at the beginning of June, relations with the British showed signs of mending. The Austrian offensive was eventually halted and at the War Office “satisfaction was expressed at our valour and resistance.” On 4 June the Russians begun the Brusilov offensive. The following day, an Italian war bulletin stated that the enemy had been repulsed across the entire front. “I hope, however, that the heroism of our soldiers won’t be over-shadowed by the malicious belief that the Russians had saved us,” commented Imperiali, revealing once again that Rome’s propaganda regarding its military effort was inadequate.

The army’s resistance, however, could not prevent a government crisis. On 10 June, the Chamber of Deputies voted by 197 votes to 158 not to approve the budget, thus bringing down Salandra’s government. “I am not surprised,” wrote Imperiali the following day. “Already in Italy I had realised there was a wind of revolt blowing against the cabinet.”³⁸⁷

The British were rarely ready to sympathise with, or understand, the political instability of their young ally, and so did not look at all kindly on a ministerial crisis even if they probably considered it to be inevitable. Grey, in particular, expressed regret at the fall of the government, along with the hope that Sonnino would remain at his post.³⁸⁸ Rodd reported:

The situation presented a paradox in that the minister who had brought Italy into the war was really

³⁸⁷ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 265, 267-269, 272-274.

³⁸⁸ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 284.

defeated by a section of the war party. They believed that there was danger that the Giolittian combination would succeed in upsetting the Government. To prevent it from claiming victory they asserted the necessity of creating a national Government and voted with the opposition. Giolitti himself, on the other hand, was reported to have advised his adherents not to oppose Salandra. If he did so there was evidently some lack of co-ordination, as some of them voted one way and some the other. The orthodox Socialists of course refused the vote of confidence. But it was the interventionists who really placed the Government in a minority.

The British ambassador had reason to be upset by the fall of Salandra, above all because, as a result, some very positive personal ties he had formed with Italian ministers were severed: "I greatly regretted the retirement of my old friend Ferdinando Martini. He had, however, an efficient successor at the Ministry of Colonies in Signor Colosimo, hitherto a consistent Giolittian, with whom negotiations connected with the Senussi problem now brought me into constant relations."³⁸⁹

On 13 June the first names of potential replacements for Salandra began to circulate. The idea of Giolitti as a candidate collapsed almost immediately. He would not have been welcomed by Italy's allies who (quite rightly) considered him the leader of the neutralists. Instead, Paolo Boselli began to figure. Imperiali wrote: "It would appear that Boselli is the man of the moment. He indubitably has merits, but... 78 is too old for a prime minister at the present time. Tittoni [Italian ambassador to Paris] is rumoured to be bound for the Foreign Office (they grimace over here, do not love him nor have any trust in him). They also talk about me. But... that is just newspaper gossip. I do not believe, in all conscience, that I am the man necessary." The allies considered Tittoni a member of the neutralist camp. On 15 June, Imperiali noted: "At the Foreign Office they are worried, quite definitely they would rather have nothing of Tommaso Tittoni. It is odd that a man who is really superior can garner such little support. Grey, I know, cordially dislikes him and I believe that such a feeling is cordially reciprocated."

The new cabinet won a vote of confidence on 1 July by a large majority, with only the 45 votes of the Socialists against (people "without a country," commented Imperiali).³⁹⁰ The Italian cabinet grew under Boselli, both numerically (eighteen ministers as opposed to Salandra's sixteen) and politically, although the new prime minister lost control of the Ministry of the Interior. The Catholic Filippo Meda

³⁸⁹ Rodd, *Memories...*, III, 294-296.

³⁹⁰ Imperiali, *Diario*, 275, 283.

was appointed to the Finance Ministry; two transformist socialists, Ivanoe Bonomi and Leonida Bissolati (the most prestigious new figure in the government) also entered the cabinet. The former was appointed to the Public Works Ministry. The latter, relegated without portfolio to the Ministry of Government Assistance, was now less suitable (having been expelled with Bonomi from the Socialist party in 1912) as a link between the government and the proletariat; he would, however, successfully keep Cadorna in check, thereby improving the normally terrible relations between the government and the Comando Supremo.³⁹¹ In the end, Sonnino was confirmed as foreign minister and remained the leading contact figure abroad. Another key figure in the new government was Ubaldo Camandini, a republican and minister without portfolio, whose political role grew along with the increasing importance of propaganda in the war effort. The *homo novus* of the cabinet was the fifty-five-year-old Orlando, minister of Justice and the Interior, to balance, at least in part, the role of Sonnino.³⁹²

Italian public opinion viewed the new government with some scepticism. Boselli was considered too old, and the broad coalition he led too wide and not very compact. Furthermore, and curiously enough, Boselli was leading a “national coalition” which months before he had considered would be “foolishness.”³⁹³ Imperiali himself was not optimistic. His comment was sarcastic: “18 Italians, 10 of whom are lawyers, is a team which from one moment to the next might not be a ‘happy family.’” The ambassador found some consolation in the news of the Austrian retreat in Trentino released on 26 June: “It was a pleasure to walk through the streets of London today and read posters which read *Italian Victory*.”³⁹⁴

Contrary to what might have been expected, the resolution of the government crisis, perhaps simply because it had been reached swiftly, was viewed positively in Britain. Rodd’s private papers reveal British hope that the Italian government might work better. Rodd expressed a few doubts regarding the high number of ministers, which he thought would hinder the efficiency of the government, but his political assessment was optimistic.³⁹⁵ Charles Hardinge, the British under-secretary for foreign

³⁹¹ L. Bissolati, *Diario di guerra* (Torino: Einaudi, 1935), 224.

³⁹² Isnenghi, Rochat, *Grande Guerra...*, 312-317.

³⁹³ Martini, *Diario...*, 744; P. Melograni, *Storia politica della Grande Guerra 1915-1918* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1969), 193.

³⁹⁴ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 278, 281.

³⁹⁵ PRO FO, 371/2685/126986, Rodd to Grey, 26 June, 1916.

affairs, responded to him on 28 June: “The new combination sounds full of promise, and I hope that it will be a little bit more energetic than the past Ministry.”³⁹⁶ The best aspect for Britain was that Sonnino remained: despite his stormy character he was a guarantee of continuity in Rome’s foreign policy.

Despite his final failure, Boselli’s job has recently been reassessed by Italian historians. The prime minister was an important mediator. As Isnenghi and Rochat pointed out, Boselli was an old patriot, called upon by the king to take on a delicate role. This was the first time Italy had attempted to set up a “national government” along the lines of the French *Union Sacrée*. The establishment of a political equilibrium made it possible to mobilise the nation better for war. A Ministry of Arms and Munitions was created to co-ordinate political and technical mobilisation, and was entrusted to the energetic General Alfredo Dallolio.³⁹⁷ Italy now faced the First World War with fresh commitment and awareness, and the solution to the “German issue” seemed closer.

3.5 – War on Germany.

Boselli believed that the Entente allies were using the Italian failure to declare war on Germany as a pretext to mask their disapproval of Italian ambitions in Asia Minor and of Italy’s colonial designs more generally. France and Russia hesitated about involving Italy in colonial agreements, signalling once again that, until Italy declared war on Germany, it would not be considered a full member of the alliance.³⁹⁸

London’s position, although less strident than that of Paris and Petrograd, was no less inflexible. There were those in the British cabinet who wanted to take a much sterner, even a threatening, line with Italy, and, as time passed, this minority grew. Fortunately, Grey had always managed to keep them under control. As Hardinge wrote to Rodd:

There has been much discussion here as to whether anything further should be said to Italy as to her not having declared war against Germany [...] Some of the Cabinet have been very strongly in favour

³⁹⁶ Rodd papers, Hardinge to Rodd, 28 June, 1916.

³⁹⁷ Isnenghi, Rochat, *Grande Guerra...*, 318.

³⁹⁸ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 305.

of very pointed remarks to the Italians, but I am glad to say that these have been resisted and at present nothing further has been either done or said. I hope, however, that it will now not be long before they really declare war.³⁹⁹

Grey was still just about managing to hold London to its role as mediator. In a meeting with Imperiali on 11 July, Grey confirmed that an exchange of views had taken place between Britain, France and Russia on Asia Minor, but that nothing further had been discussed.⁴⁰⁰ Imperiali realised that the declaration of war on Germany had become a condition for sharing reserved information with Italy. In the following days, as the ambassador noted, the British king himself “asked me once more about our declaration of war on Germany. And I gave him the usual reply... it’s a mass obsession, but it is necessary to take account of it for the present and the future. And then, when a promise is made it must be kept.”⁴⁰¹

As the military emergency in Trentino passed, Imperiali returned to his original position: a pact is a pact and must be honoured. In the face of renewed allied pressure, even Sonnino became convinced that Italy would now have to declare war, but he remained sceptical about when. The new government needed time to define the repercussions which it would have on the country’s social and political balance.

Nonetheless, little by little, there were more encouraging signs: the breakdown of the Italo-German commercial agreement; a more hostile attitude in the Italian press towards Germany; and, last but not least, the judgement expressed by the chief of general staff, Cadorna.⁴⁰² On 11 July 1916 he declared that the Swiss-Italian frontier was now fortified and that the information in the hands of Italian intelligence suggested that Switzerland would oppose a possible German attack with every means available and thus any offensive would not be so rapid as to take the Italian troops by surprise. In short, a declaration of war on Germany, in Cadorna’s opinion, would not substantially worsen Italy’s military situation but would improve, and significantly at that, its political position.⁴⁰³

³⁹⁹ Rodd papers, Hardinge to Rodd, 23 August, 1916.

⁴⁰⁰ DDI, 5^a, VI, doc. 105, Imperiali to Sonnino, 11 July, 1916.

⁴⁰¹ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 288.

⁴⁰² Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 310.

⁴⁰³ DDI, 5^a, VI, doc. 103, Cadorna to Sonnino, 11 July, 1916.

As a further concession to its allies, Rome decided to grant another of their requests: Italian participation in the Salonika campaign. This decision on 12 July did not immediately produce much in military terms, but it would do so later. For the time being, the move was certainly appreciated, above all in London. The Italian contingent – one brigade, later increased – was to take part in a renewed offensive to put pressure on Bulgaria.⁴⁰⁴ Apart from the military implications, Rome's move was important for it marked an Italian step towards more concrete co-operation: it was the first time that an Italian contingent would be used outside national territory, thus breaching the principle of “our war.” An even more encouraging signal was Italy's signing of the agreement undertaken by the other allies at the Economic Conference in Paris (14-17 June) which bound the Italian government to cease trade relations with the neutral countries such as Germany and other nations, companies and private persons whose business was in whole or in part under enemy control.⁴⁰⁵ Thus the British objective to complete the blockade of the Central Powers seemed achieved.

Just as Italy was changing its attitude, the British began to question the diplomatic line they had so far taken towards Rome. At the end of July, London and Paris debated the effectiveness of their policy of linking Italy's declaration of war against Germany to the agreements on Asia Minor.⁴⁰⁶

A note of 31 July to the French Foreign Office minister stated: “*Il semble à Lord Grey douteux que cette action amène en fait l'Italie à déclarer la guerre à l'Allemagne. Il est très possible que, vu le caractère du Baron Sonnino, cela ait le résultat contraire.*”⁴⁰⁷ The British believed that the main objective of Anglo-French policy with regard to Italy should be to strengthen the cohesion of the alliance by every means. They feared that the “hard” line pursued until then could distance Rome irremediably. Grey slowly became convinced that it was right to share the plans for Asia Minor with their Italian ally, even though he believed that Italy did not have the right to claim the same interest in that region as did Britain, France and Russia. The British note ended: “*Lord Grey estime que la continuation de la ligne de conduite maintenant l'Italie dans l'obscurité, tend à créer une atmosphère*

⁴⁰⁴ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 286.

⁴⁰⁵ J. Brown Scott, *Economic Conference of the Allied Powers*, in “The American Journal of International Law”, vol. 10, n. 4, October 1916, pp. 845-852.

⁴⁰⁶ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 213.

⁴⁰⁷ ADMAEF, *Guerre 1914-1918, Italie*, vol. 571/109, 31 July, 1916.

malheureuse de froideur et de suspicion vis à vis des Alliés”, and, as a result, revealing allied agreements on Asia Minor might encourage, rather than further delay, the Italian declaration of war on Germany.

Paris replied to this British approach to Italy negatively. This may seem strange if one thinks that the only issue complicating internal relations for the alliance was the formal declaration of war by Italy on Germany. In reality, France had other worries. As the new prime minister, Aristide Briand, mentioned to Tittoni, Paris had the feeling that Italian claims in Asia Minor clashed with its own. The French saw Italy not just as an ally who needed to be recalled to its duty, but also as a dangerous rival who must be involved as late as possible in negotiations concerning Asia Minor. In this respect, French ambivalence was equal to the Italian: Rome was expected to honour the alliance while Paris was not willing to do the same. All in all, more than a few at the Quai d’Orsay hoped that Italy would not shift from its position regarding Germany, so that it could be kept out of the talks on Asia Minor. French opposition counter-balanced British support and prevented a change in policy: Grey thought that any initiative had to be taken jointly with the French.⁴⁰⁸

Nevertheless, between the end of June and the beginning of August, both in Rome and in London, there was a shift towards conciliation. Italy was finally fulfilling allied expectations one by one. Its allies, in turn, appeared to remain divided between the Franco-Russian line and the British, but at least Britain was showing renewed benevolence towards Italy. The decisive turn in this complex diplomatic dance was determined by events on the battlefield.

Having successfully repulsed the Austrian offensive in Trentino, Cadorna – who, in the early days of the attack, had felt in danger of being replaced – decided to risk everything in a renewed effort on the Isonzo front. The Italian plan was prepared back in June when containment of the Austrian effort in the Altipiani was still the priority. As Austrian reserves had been used up in Trentino and in containing the Russian offensive at the end of June, Cadorna launched the 6th battle of the Isonzo on 6 August. The Austrian front was finally breached at several points and the 3rd Italian Army took Gorizia on 9 August.⁴⁰⁹ The “liberation of Gorizia” did not cause a crisis in the Austrian defence

⁴⁰⁸ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 314-315.

⁴⁰⁹ Thompson, *White War...*, 175.

system, which reformed on the second line of mountains above Trieste, but it did have a resounding effect in Italy and abroad. It was the first great Italian victory of the war. “British press enthusiastic,” wrote Imperiali. At last congratulations were showered on Italy for its success on its front as well as its commitment at Salonika.⁴¹⁰ The victory boosted morale throughout the peninsula and the army.

The government at this point felt strong enough to take the step which till then it had deemed too risky. On 27 August, Imperiali wrote: “At 8am Borghese telephoned me with the great news of the declaration of war on Germany. Let them not bother me with this issue again.” On 28 August, the Romanian government also entered the fray against the Central Powers: Rome decided to release the two communiqués together for a stronger political effect.⁴¹¹

As Albertini noted, Rome’s move marked a personal success for Sonnino, but showed also that Italy’s political approach of May 1915, based on the principle of *la nostra guerra*, was no longer viable in an ever-changing diplomatic and strategic situation.⁴¹² In fact, the Italian failure to declare war on Germany was a real cause of disharmony between the allies only in the first year or so of the Italian war. The real discord in the Entente soon ran deeper as events after August 1916 proved. Now that one reason for serious tension had been cleared away, the game moved to another minefield: the “colonial question.”

⁴¹⁰ Imperiali, *Diario...* 297, 301.

⁴¹¹ Sonnino, *Diario...*, 201.

⁴¹² Albertini, *Venti anni di vita politica*, part. 2, I, *L’Italia nella Guerra Mondiale* (Bologna, 1951), 305.

4. The War for Colonies: The Ottoman Empire.

4.1 – *Allied Plans for Asia Minor.*

Whilst their relations with Italy were focused on the dispute over the Italian declarations of war on Turkey and Germany, the original Entente powers had other preoccupations. Among these was the colonial issue: the assignment of enemy, particularly Ottoman, territories in the event of victory. To understand how relations with Italy concerning the colonial question developed later, one needs to know the secret agreements which were drawn up without Italy's knowledge and to have an idea of Entente ambitions in Asia Minor. Two phases in these negotiations should be distinguished: one in spring 1915 and another in 1916.

During the first phase, Italy was not yet allied with the Entente. When the Treaty of London was agreed, Britain, France and Russia signed a memorandum, unbeknownst to Rome, stating that Italy's entry into the alliance could not modify already agreed conditions.⁴¹³ The allies probably did not inform Rome of their agreement because they were sceptical about Italy's real military commitment. Inter-allied talks to determine how to behave towards Italy continued over a long period of time.⁴¹⁴ Grey's line, as mentioned, was that the allies should respect the Treaty of London, but would reveal the content of agreements on the Orient only when Italy fell into line regarding Germany.⁴¹⁵ Italy, for its part, did not understand the connection between declaring war on Germany and sharing in the agreement on Asia Minor, but in any case felt safeguarded by Article 9 of the Treaty of London.⁴¹⁶

During the second phase of their talks, between February and May 1916, Britain, France and Russia began to define the remaining Ottoman territories they would share. Under the Sykes-Picot agreement, Russia was to push its frontier south-westwards into Asia Minor, taking Armenia, Erzerum, Trabzon and northern Kurdistan. France was to annex a strip of Asia Minor west of the new Russian frontier, running down to Adana and the gulf of Alexandretta, and continuing along the Syrian

⁴¹³ See the Anglo-Franco-Russian memorandum of 27 April, 1915: Toscano, *Gli Accordi...*, 64-65.

⁴¹⁴ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 273-279.

⁴¹⁵ ADMAEF, *Guerre 1914-1918, Italie*, vol. 569/231, Cambon to Briand, 25 May, 1916.

⁴¹⁶ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 273.

coast to northern Palestine. Britain was to be given Mesopotamia from Baghdad to the Persian Gulf.⁴¹⁷ This time, Italy was a full member of the alliance. Although the other three powers continued to reassure Italian diplomats that no decision would damage Rome's interests, the exclusion of Italy could hardly be to its benefit.⁴¹⁸

The only concession Imperiali managed to obtain from Grey was that Italy and Britain should deal together with the Senussi insurrection, which was raging in Libya. This is indicative of the better treatment Britain allowed Italy, compared with what the other two allies were prepared to do. The Senussi revolt (from the name of the Islamic sect founded by Muhammad ibn Ali al-Sanusi) had broken out in Libya at the same time as the war in Europe. Turkish financial support enabled it to cross the borders of Cyrenaica into Egypt. In a meeting between Imperiali and Grey on 2 August 1915, the foundations for an Anglo-Italian agreement were laid: "Grey assures the British and Egyptian governments wish to see order and tranquility re-established in Cyrenaica. They are doing, and shall continue to do, all that is in their power to promote peace by the Senussi and persuade him not to pursue hostilities against Italy."⁴¹⁹ Subsequently, Anglo-Italian military co-operation in Cyrenaica and Egypt became tighter and on 18 February 1916 Grey finally granted Italy what Sonnino most wanted,⁴²⁰ that the British "would not negotiate any peace with the rebels behind Italy's back."

Where political issues involving Italy and Britain only were concerned, London proved not to be ill-disposed towards Rome. After all, in the case of the Senussi, both British and Italian interests were at stake. However, Britain could not operate on its own initiative on the question of Asia Minor, a point Grey repeated constantly to Imperiali.

Contrary to what had happened in the early months of the war, in summer 1916 the Consulta was well aware that agreements on Asia Minor had been signed, and that the allies had linked the revelation of their contents to the Italian position towards Germany. With this knowledge, it was a hopeful Imperiali who met Grey on 28 August 1916: Italy had just declared war on Germany, so now, at last, the colonial question could be discussed.

⁴¹⁷ Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, 2 vols. (London: Odhams Press, 1938), II, 1084.

⁴¹⁸ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 272.

⁴¹⁹ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 186.

⁴²⁰ DDI, 5^a, V, doc. 477, Sonnino to Imperiali, 18 February 1916.

Grey welcomed the ambassador. He did not even wait for Imperiali to mention the colonial agreements, but introduced them himself: "I am going to stir up the question of Asia Minor." A few days later there was another meeting between the two, which was, for Imperiali, even more positive:

Grey said: "Either the agreements reached with France and Russia are *consistent* with what was agreed with Italy, which must be fully honoured, or they are not. If they are, there is nothing to discuss; if they are not, there must be discussion to make them *consistent*." A clear and honest reply which seems to me such that we can be reassured. [...] Hardinge wrote to me to confirm the declarations made to me by Grey yesterday. So everything is all right.⁴²¹

It would of course be necessary to contact the other two allies and obtain their consent. Yet the Italian ambassador had no reason not to believe that, once a reasonable period of time for the diplomatic process to be completed had passed, he would be satisfied.

Whilst Imperiali waited for news from the Foreign Office, Rome quivered with impatience. Sonnino was far less patient than his ambassador and felt that Rome had already waited far too long. Italy had now done its part and there was no reason why it should not be treated with the fairness and respect due to an ally.⁴²² Every day that passed without news from the Entente powers, therefore, increased his fear that the allies might not have been completely sincere in their promises. The minister told Rodd in no uncertain terms:

I cannot accept on behalf of my country the part [...] of inferiority and pupillage. Rather I shall leave my post telling my fellow countrymen that they can condemn me because I was lacking in prudence and in awareness, trusting in the loyalty and good faith [...] of [the] allied governments.⁴²³

Sonnino reproached London for having accepted the wishes of the Russians and French to exclude Italy from the talks, and for not doing enough now at least to inform Rome of their results. At the heart of Sonnino's worries was his fear that Italy's geo-political vision was not shared among its allies. He considered the balance of power in the Mediterranean a question of major importance and wanted to be sure that the Italian area in Asia Minor would keep its own autonomy, and would represent for

⁴²¹ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 245, 303, 311.

⁴²² Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 338.

⁴²³ PRO FO 371/2780/179796, Hardinge to Crewe, 11 September, 1916; Rodd papers, Rodd to Hardinge, 9 September 1916.

Rome a real gain both economically and politically.⁴²⁴ As the Italian ambassador to Paris, Tittoni, had suggested to Sonnino, the Adalia area, mentioned in the London pact, would not bring Italy any advantage if it was not closely linked to Adana, Adin and Konia, or to at least one of these.⁴²⁵ There were, furthermore, Italian designs on Smyrna, which, because of its location and the commercial ties it already had with Italy, would be the high point of the Italian demands in the eastern Mediterranean.⁴²⁶

The other allies found themselves once more unable to settle on a common line regarding Italy. Britain, again, was in favour of pursuing a close, co-operative line; the Russians and French were much less conciliatory. A dispatch from Hardinge to Rodd sheds light on the main reason for the allied delay in communicating with Italy:

Imperiali has been much excited over the question of our agreements with France and Russia in connection with Asia Minor and Constantinople. Our attitude has always been in the first instance that we could not communicate them until Italy had declared war against Germany, and finally that it was necessary to consult both the Russians and the French. I may say that we ourselves have always been in favour of treating the Italians with the utmost frankness, but the French have, I hear, succeeded in giving the idea that it is they who are ready to give the Italian government the information that they required, but that it is we who are holding back. There is not one word of truth in this statement – the real fact being that it is the French who are making difficulties over showing the Italians the agreements which we are anxious to do.⁴²⁷

The reasons for the French and Russian attitudes have been considered by Riccardi. Petrograd feared that a major Italian involvement might upset the Anglo-Russo-French agreement and enable Paris and London to reduce the obligations they had already entered into concerning Russia's control of Armenia and the Straits. France was in direct competition with Italy in the region. If the Italians were to be assigned a larger strip of territory than that established under the London treaty, the first zone of influence to be weakened would be France's, as it bordered on the Italian.

The allies considered Italy's presence to be unjustified. In the interpretation given by Riccardi, based on studies of secret Franco-Russian documents, Russia and France agreed to grant, under the

⁴²⁴ DDI, 5^a, VI, doc. 417, Imperiali to Sonnino, 12 September, 1916.

⁴²⁵ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 346, 351.

⁴²⁶ DDI, 5^a, VI, doc. 400, Tittoni to Sonnino, 12 September, 1916.

⁴²⁷ Rodd papers, Hardinge to Rodd, 5 September, 1916.

London pact, vague assurances of concessions to Italy in the event of a break-up of the Ottoman empire purely because, otherwise, Rome could not have been pressed to enter the war; but neither of them had any intention of transforming Italy into a “real” great power in the Mediterranean.⁴²⁸

In autumn 1916, therefore, tensions, which until then had seemed to be the consequence of Italy’s partial failure to honour the London pact, were developing into a more specific geopolitical competition. Allied meetings hinged more and more on defining what had been left unclear in the Treaty of London. Italy very soon found itself isolated, despite its good relationship with Britain.

4.2 – *The Price of Italian Isolation.*

Towards the end of September, pressure on London from both Sonnino and Rodd produced some result. On 24 September, Rodd informed Sonnino of Grey’s intention not to consider “the question of Asia Minor complete until the sphere which was due to Italy had been defined, thus becoming the scope of a four-way agreement.”⁴²⁹

This opening meant not only that the agreements would soon be notified in part or *in toto*, but that they were open to discussion; until that moment, Rome had been given the impression that the content could not be modified.⁴³⁰ London further pressed Paris to give its consent and, at last, on 4 October Grey called Imperiali to give him the long-awaited news. The balance agreed by the allies was: the French area to stretch to Cape Anamur, including Syria, Cilicia with Mersin and Adana, plus the territory lying between Aladagh, Caesarea, Akdagh, Jldizdagh, Sara, Eghin and Charpout; the British zone would consist of Mesopotamia, and the ports of Caiffa and Acri; finally, the Russian zone was to comprise the region of Erzerum, Trabzon, Van and Bitlis to a point to be determined on the Black Sea west of Trabzon. The borders of the so-called “Arab Kingdom” remained to be agreed. Imperiali’s comment in his diary was: “*Habemus Pontificem!* At 4 Grey delivers the famous documents. [...] *À tout prendre, the devil is less ugly than I feared.*”⁴³¹

⁴²⁸ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 332-333, 342-345.

⁴²⁹ DDI, 5^a, VI, doc. 478, Sonnino to Imperiali, Tittoni, Carlotti, 24 September, 1916.

⁴³⁰ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 346.

⁴³¹ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 319.

In Rome, the Consulta reacted rather less calmly. Sonnino saw all his fears materialise and would not accept the disproportion between the Anglo-French concessions and the Italian. In the first place, he wanted to ensure that the allied governments had not entered into any obligation with Greece regarding Smyrna, which he intended to claim for Italy.⁴³² Once reassured on this point,⁴³³ he decided to inform the British, at first unofficially, of Italy's dissatisfaction with the Asia Minor partition scheme. Sonnino asked for the "assignment of all the Vilayets of Aidin and Konya, as well as that of Adana. [...] Without Adana and the port of Mersin, the territory of Konya would have no value."⁴³⁴

Sonnino's "preliminary" claims were presented to Grey by Imperiali on 18 October and the British minister did not seem particularly put out. Rather, he repeated that there was a determination to reach an agreement as soon as possible.⁴³⁵ The Consulta's next step was to present its claims through official channels to the French and British governments on 1 November and to the Russian on 4 November, together with two memoranda covering Italian claims in Asia Minor and the balance in the Mediterranean. Smyrna was added to Sonnino's requests, which stretched the Italian zone so that it bordered directly on Alexandretta, the area allocated to France. Italy would prove to be no longer just an Adriatic power but a fully-fledged Mediterranean one.⁴³⁶

Predictably, French and Russian reaction was negative. Britain moved that Italian claims should be discussed in "four-way" talks during which common issues should be settled on an equal footing.⁴³⁷ Although the British did not conceal their surprise at the size of Italy's claims, they did not dismiss them.⁴³⁸ However, the inflexible position of the other allies caused London to pursue delaying tactics.

In the autumn of 1916 the Greek question further deepened the tensions between Italy and its allies. Anglo-French pressure on Athens to enter the war in exchange for territorial gains in Asia Minor increased, and would lead to the landing of a small allied contingent at the Piraeus on 1 December.

⁴³² DDI, 5^a, VI, doc. 552, Sonnino to Imperiali, Carlotti, Ruspoli, 11 October, 1916.

⁴³³ *Ibid.*, doc. 555, Ruspoli to Sonnino, 12 October, 1916.

⁴³⁴ *Ibid.*, doc. 572, Sonnino to Imperiali, Carlotti, Ruspoli, 16 October, 1916.

⁴³⁵ *Ibid.*, doc. 587, Imperiali to Sonnino, 19 October, 1916. See also: PRO FO, 371/2780/190952, Grey to Rodd, 18 October, 1916.

⁴³⁶ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 355-358.

⁴³⁷ Official note of the Foreign Office, see: PRO FO, 2780/247394, 7 December, 1916.

⁴³⁸ *Ibid.*, 229908, Grey to Rodd, 14 November, 1916.

The Italian government agreed to the principle of drawing Athens out of neutrality, but it did not like the strategy adopted by its allies to reach this goal, as Greek expansion into Asia Minor would conflict with Rome's colonial interests there. Internal Greek politics made the situation even more complicated. The conflict between King Constantine and Venizelos brought the country to the verge of civil war, while foreign troops occupied Greek territory: the Allies had disembarked at Salonika and the Bulgarians had seized the cities of Seres and Kavala.⁴³⁹

On 1 September, Imperiali sent a note to Grey to express his government's disapproval of allied policy regarding Venizelos, whom the ambassador defined as an "astute and turbulent character."⁴⁴⁰ Italy tried hard to persuade Britain not to adopt Paris's line of unconditional support for a politician whose choices – above all the prolonged neutrality – did not appear to Rome to be either clear or favourable to the Entente. According to Sonnino, the only way to save the Greek monarchy and prevent Venizelos from carrying out a revolution was for King Constantine to declare war at least on Bulgaria, on the grounds that it had illegally occupied Seres and Kavala. But Constantine continued to resist such pressures.⁴⁴¹

The Greek problem pertained very strictly to the question of Asia Minor, for it was yet another cause of discord between Rome and Paris. The French counted on Venizelos because they believed he would both benefit the Entente more than his predecessor, and favour French interests in the ex-Turkish possessions. The Italian attempt to obstruct Venizelos was an obstacle to French plans for the region.⁴⁴²

In October 1916, Entente policy towards Venizelos revealed its limits. At an Anglo-French meeting at Boulogne, the two powers decided not to recognize Venizelos' provisional government but also not to oppose it.⁴⁴³ At the same time, they approved a joint declaration addressed to the Greek government which explained that, in the opinion of the Entente powers, Greece was already at war with Bulgaria,

⁴³⁹ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 359-360.

⁴⁴⁰ DDI, 5^a, VI, doc. 364, Imperiali to Sonnino, 1 September, 1916.

⁴⁴¹ G.B. Leon, *Greece and the Great Powers, 1914-1917* (Thessaloniki: Institute of Balkan Studies, 1977), 400-411; Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 361.

⁴⁴² DDI, 5^a, VI, doc. 659, Bosdari to Sonnino, 4 November, 1916.

⁴⁴³ *Ibid.*, doc. 607, Imperiali to Sonnino, 25 October, 1916.

given the latter's attacks on its cities.⁴⁴⁴ This was a way of forcing Athens to co-operate without risking a complete break. The attempt at conciliation failed completely when the troops of the allied contingent which landed at the Piraeus to push the royalist government to disarm its batteries around Athens, faced the Greek regular army. The Allies were forced to evacuate the next day.⁴⁴⁵

Britain's views of Greece had been expressed in a venomous dispatch from Hardinge to Rodd, in August 1916:

Those dirty Greeks appear to be playing their usual dirty game, and what is very interesting is that Elliot [British ambassador to Greece] is sending me correspondence that has been intercepted between Tino [King Constantine] and the German Military Attaché, which, I understand, proves conclusively that the King is involved in the plot against the Allies by which the Bulgarians and the Turks take over the whole of Greece.⁴⁴⁶

Italy found itself alone in its support for the king and London increasingly distanced itself from Rome. In addition, the agreements between France and Britain, which were at risk if Sonnino's line should prevail, had already had important military effects, including the increase to seven divisions of the British contingent at Salonika.⁴⁴⁷

In consequence, relations between the Allies cooled once again. Imperiali had several talks with Hardinge to try to prepare the ground for the conference that London had proposed. Instead, he discovered, not without surprise, that the Foreign Office appeared to be withdrawing. "Don't be hasty," was Hardinge's message. "It will be all right." Throughout that autumn, the ambassador came up against evasive or dilatory responses. When Imperiali tried to make Hardinge understand that it was a matter of proper behaviour towards an ally who had months before fulfilled the Entente's demands, Hardinge replied: "I think as you do." But he would not compromise: "Remember that we are not your only allies," he glossed, cryptically. "But who is causing these difficulties?" asked Imperiali, disheartened. He received no response.

⁴⁴⁴ For the records of the Conference at Boulogne, see: ADMAEF, Guerre 1914-1918, Dossier Général, vol. 989/134-138.

⁴⁴⁵ Leon, *Greece...*, 434.

⁴⁴⁶ Rodd papers, Hardinge to Rodd, 23 August 1916.

⁴⁴⁷ ADMAEF, Guerre 1914-1918, Dossier Général, vo. 989/134-138.

The ambassador concluded that the allies had no intention of co-operating. He commented in his diary: “Too much coming and going” on Asia Minor. “Too much confabulation for something so simple.”⁴⁴⁸ On 15 December Hardinge’s patience ran out: “Don’t drive me too hard,” he replied. Imperiali, evermore disconsolate, telegraphed to Sonnino: Italy, he feared, should not expect positive news. He suspected that the Anglo-French axis was too strong to be broken and that Russian opposition counted much more than Rome’s calls for fair treatment. Imperiali feared that the vague principle set out in the Treaty of London of an “equitable” Mediterranean equilibrium would remain simply words on a page.⁴⁴⁹

From Rodd’s private papers it appears clear, though, that London did not necessarily oppose an Italian presence in Asia Minor: it might well have weakened French competition. The French wanted to “put a finger in any Ottoman pie that might be baking,” and needed to be kept at bay.⁴⁵⁰ In a “confidential” dispatch to Rodd in April of the following year, Hardinge stressed that the best outcome for London was to have the French make concessions to Italians in *their* area of influence and he emphasised that Lloyd George, by then prime minister, who “knows nothing about Oriental politics or even geography,” should have been more determined to load the weight of the concessions to Rome solely on the French.⁴⁵¹

Yet relations between London and Paris were too intertwined. They ranged from the partition of Asia Minor to common policy in the Greek affair and to military co-operation in Salonika, not to mention co-operation against the German submarines in the Atlantic and the western front.⁴⁵² London was disposed to intercede on Italy’s behalf if it presented only a few claims in Asia Minor and was ready to step into line with Anglo-French policy in Greece, but it could not risk a diplomatic crisis with France by bowing to Italian claims which in any case it considered excessive.

Moreover, the openly anti-Italian current in the Foreign Office and the British Cabinet must not be ignored. Britain had good reasons for not consenting to some Italian requests. On Smyrna, for

⁴⁴⁸ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 298, 305, 309, 324.

⁴⁴⁹ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 344-345.

⁴⁵⁰ D. Lloyd George, *Memoirs*, II, 1084.

⁴⁵¹ Rodd papers, Hardinge to Rodd, 17 April, 1917.

⁴⁵² E. Greenhalgh, *Victory through Coalition. Britain and France during the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 122-162.

example, London had other plans. In Riccardi's opinion, the British had no direct interest in Smyrna, but wanted to keep it out of the Italian area of influence for two reasons: it could be used as "exchange goods" to obtain Greek intervention on the side of the Entente; and it was to be the only economically vital port for the new Turkish state after the war.⁴⁵³ This was the British official position, and Hardinge confirmed they were not mere pretexts.⁴⁵⁴ Yet Rodd's papers reveal that London had other concerns. Privately, Hardinge explained to Rodd that Britain's own interests were at stake. London's real aim was to exert its influence on Smyrna regardless of who would come to possess it after the war. This was a far more difficult goal if Italy, instead of Greece or Turkey, was to take it:

My own feeling is very strong on the subject of Smyrna, which, in my opinion, we ought under no circumstance whatsoever to cede to Italian exigencies. They have no interests at all there, while ours are of the greatest importance, and in the zone that has now been delimited for them all important foreign interests are purely British. These we should have to cede to them, but those connected with the railway will cause trouble over here.⁴⁵⁵

The lack of understanding about Italian claims emerges from many confidential Foreign Office documents addressed to Rodd.⁴⁵⁶ In particular, the Foreign Office insisted that Italians had no interest in Smyrna, and so could not understand their claim. This was the basic misunderstanding. A commercial tradition linking Smyrna to Italy did exist,⁴⁵⁷ but the fundamental issue was the British failure to appreciate that the Italians claimed Smyrna *precisely* because their interests were not yet well established and Rome wished to widen them. Italy was fighting in the First World War not least, and perhaps above all, to become a genuine great power, and its ambitions turned towards those places which offered the greatest commercial opportunities. From the Italian point of view, Mersin and Smyrna were of crucial economic interest: without them (or at least one of the two) any Italian ambition in Asia Minor was devoid of meaning; for the British (and even more so for the French) such demands were both absurd and dangerous.

⁴⁵³ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 362, 402.

⁴⁵⁴ Rodd papers, Hardinge to Rodd, 29 November, 1916.

⁴⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, Hardinge to Rodd, 7 March, 1917.

⁴⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, Hardinge to Rodd, 13 September 1916; 14 February 1917; 17 April, 1917; 18 May, 1917; May 22, 1917.

⁴⁵⁷ Glanville, *Italy's Relations...*, 51-65.

Another of Hardinge's dispatches is revealing here, a confidential message to Rodd in the autumn of 1916. Imperiali and Hardinge had just had a meeting, and the Italian ambassador had tried to test the water regarding a shifting of Italian claims from Mersin to the Red Sea, should the French refuse any compromise. Hardinge wrote:

Here and in India we always regard with suspicion Italian contentions in the Red Sea, [...] and we have no intentions of allowing them under any pretext to get over on to the Eastern coast. It was on account of the danger from Italian aspirations that we hoisted our flag, nearly a year ago, on some of the islands in the Red Sea off the coast of the Hedjaz, in order that we might be able to say that we had a claim to them in case anybody else – such as Italy – should endeavour to appropriate them. [...] It is clear that the Italians intend to open their mouths very wide.⁴⁵⁸

Britain was the ally most favourably disposed to Italian claims. However, it agreed with Russia and France on one principle: the main area of Italian influence was to be the Adriatic Sea, where, because of its recognised interests in Albania, Italy would be able to play its own role as a naval power and promote its own political and economic interests.⁴⁵⁹ Britain was ready to accept a minor Italian presence in Asia Minor, which might interfere with French interests, but London was not ready to make Italy a strong competitor in the eastern Mediterranean by giving up its own interests there – above all Smyrna. This explains why a part of the British government would have brought negotiations with Rome to an abrupt end, had Grey not held them back. Grey's constant attempt at mediation and continued personal effort are worth underlining. Just after Hardinge's letter of 13 September 1916, the foreign secretary wrote to Lord Cromer, in a letter copied to Rodd, that his wish stayed the same: to remain true to the pact with the Italians if the latter played their part and did not demand too much: "If Italy continues to fulfil her part in the war she must have whatever has been promised to her when she entered the war."⁴⁶⁰

So there was no "plot" against Italy, as Rome seemed to suspect,⁴⁶¹ but rather an understandable competition. Unfortunately, just at the time when diplomatic relations were becoming more strained and complicated, Imperiali lost his main contact at the Foreign Office, Grey. The cards of internal

⁴⁵⁸ Rodd papers, Hardinge to Rodd, 13 September, 1916.

⁴⁵⁹ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 404.

⁴⁶⁰ Rodd papers, Grey to Cromer, 5 October, 1916.

⁴⁶¹ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 349.

British politics were shuffled once more in a new political storm: the crisis in Asquith's government put the negotiations on ice until Britain had a new administration.

4.3 – *The Fall of Asquith.*

The collapse of Asquith's cabinet in December 1916 was not unexpected. Imperiali on 2 December wrote in his diary: "Ministerial crisis in the air. *The Times* thunders against Asquith and Grey." The ambassador was not enthusiastic about developments in British politics. The next day he wrote: "Crisis becomes more acute. Lloyd George, supported by Bonar Law, drew up what amounted to a real ultimatum. [A] Supreme Council of war [to be] made up of only four people. [...] Unlimited powers, independence from the Cabinet, seems absurd. We shall see." On the 5th, his thoughts were more bitter:

Lloyd George again threatening. He keeps insisting on primitive requirements concerning the constitution and the powers of the supreme war command, without the prime minister, who can be present but without a vote of resolution. Simply ridiculous. It would seem that Asquith has sent him... to take a walk. Asquith is still in the position of arbitrating the situation. Cambon however said that as tired and pained as he is he might take the opportunity to retire. And in this case Grey would follow his example. What a mess we'd be in!!

Imperiali feared serious repercussions on foreign policy. Moreover, he seemed to have little faith in Lloyd George, if for no other reason than for the way in which, having contributed to creating the cabinet, he undermined it.⁴⁶²

Asquith's attempts to keep the situation under control or to mediate with Lloyd George failed. He crossed to the opposition and remained leader of the Liberal party, while the conservatives formed a government under the leadership of Lloyd George – a liberal but backed by a minority of his liberal colleagues.⁴⁶³ "Lloyd George was thus a prime minister without a Party, while the Unionists were a party without their own prime minister," commented David French, sardonically.⁴⁶⁴

⁴⁶² Imperiali, *Diario...*, 342-343, 348.

⁴⁶³ Stevenson, *1914-1918...*, 148-149.

⁴⁶⁴ D. French, *The Strategy of the Lloyd George Coalition, 1916-1918* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 13.

French has suggested that the real reasons for the mutual misunderstandings which constrained British war policy lay in the contradiction between Britain's facade of "war for Justice and Liberty," and its real political and military objective: to defend British supremacy not only against the Central Powers, but also against its own Entente allies.⁴⁶⁵ Asquith and his ministers had calculated that the war would reach its crucial point in 1917. Britain should save its strength for this moment to win not only the war but also the peace:⁴⁶⁶ "the Asquith Coalition wagered that the Central Powers, under the weight of the Entente's military pressure, would sue for peace before Britain had gone bankrupt." But the calculations were wrong, and this policy "unrealistic." Military pressure on Germany had not been decisive and Britain was bleeding financially as well as physically. By the time Lloyd George came to power, Britain's dependence on American funds and supplies was already evident.⁴⁶⁷ The secret aim of the new government remained the same, to have Britain triumph as the dominant power in Europe. But to do so, it would be necessary to "change step."

Greater industrial, material and moral mobilisation, as well as real co-ordination among the allies, was necessary. Lloyd George and General Robertson, who detested each other,⁴⁶⁸ agreed that the war would not be over in 1917, as Asquith forecast and hoped, but in 1918 or later. If Britain did not rationalise resources, both material and human, it would not survive. It had both to invest in a massive propaganda campaign to sustain the population's morale and to expand its military horizons to embrace new solutions: concentrating forces in theatres considered "peripheral," Lloyd George thought, would favour co-operation among the allies and could lead to victories which would soothe public opinion.⁴⁶⁹ He later summarised the qualities he thought necessary to win the war:

There are certain indispensable qualities essential to the Chief Minister of the Crown in a great war. [...] Such a minister must have courage, composure, and judgment. All this Mr. Asquith possessed in a superlative degree. [...] But a war minister must also have vision, imagination and initiative – he must show untiring assiduity, must exercise constant oversight and supervision of every sphere of war activity, must possess driving force to energise this activity, must be in continuous consultation with

⁴⁶⁵ ID., *British Strategy and War Aims, 1914-1916* (London, 1896), XII-XII.

⁴⁶⁶ ID., "The Meaning of Attrition, 1914-1916", in *English Historical Review*, 103/407 (1988), pp. 385-405.

⁴⁶⁷ ID., *The Strategy...*, 5-6.

⁴⁶⁸ After the war, Lloyd George mocked Robertson taunting him with being "merely the echo of 'aig.": C. Cross (ed.), *Life with Lloyd George: The Diary of A. J. Sylvester, 1931-1945* (London, 1975), 80.

⁴⁶⁹ French, *The Strategy...*, 7, 16.

experts, official and unofficial, as to the best means of utilising the resources of the country in conjunction with the Allies for the achievement of victory. If to this can be added a flair for conducting a great fight, then you have an ideal War Minister.⁴⁷⁰

To make the War Cabinet more efficient, Lloyd George chose only four other members to work alongside him: three conservatives – Lord President of the Council and Leader of the House of Lords Curzon; Chancellor of the Exchequer and Leader of the House of Commons Bonar Law; and Minister without portfolio Lord Milner – plus Arthur Henderson, the sole Labour representative, and Lloyd George himself.⁴⁷¹ The new foreign secretary, Arthur Balfour, the secretary of state for war, Lord Derby, and Sir Edward Carson, first lord of the Admiralty, would also often take part in War Cabinet meetings. A secretariat, under Hankey, was appointed to streamline cabinet work. Hankey described the work of the new cabinet in an essentially positive light:

The system was quite flexible, and subjects were distributed to meet changing circumstances. [...] The War Cabinet therefore became in effect the Supreme Control in commission with the Prime Minister as the dominating and directing force. [...] For the first time in history, a Secretary attended the meetings to record its proceedings. [...] One great advantage of that method was that divided responsibility was avoided.⁴⁷²

In reality, according to French, “it is debatable whether the War Cabinet enhanced the efficiency of central government to any great extent.” Lloyd George hoped that such a streamlined structure would eliminate the delays and inefficiencies that he believed were caused by Asquith’s large government. However, those delays were caused more by personality clashes than by government structure. In this sense, the removal of men like Asquith, McKenna and Runciman was enough to give the cabinet a novel “air of dynamism.” But it was impossible to eliminate differences of opinion, just as it was to curb internal rivalries which would shake the War Cabinet. Rather, solving personal conflicts became at one point “the War Cabinet’s major function.” During 1917 it would become necessary to create several sub-committees to cope with the amount of work.

⁴⁷⁰ Lloyd George, *Memoirs...*, I, 602.

⁴⁷¹ It would be increased over the course of the next two years: French, *The Strategy...*, 17.

⁴⁷² Hankey, *Government Control...*, 41-42.

These contradictory developments lay in the future. In December 1916, when his government was formed, Lloyd George was highly satisfied with the result. Of course, Robertson did not agree. For the chief of the Imperial general staff, the new members of the cabinet were “quite as bad as the last lot.”⁴⁷³

How were these developments viewed in Italy? Rodd, diplomatically, did not comment on the “change of the guard,” or on Italian reaction. The Consulta and the Rome government saw the situation in Britain in contrasting terms, as can be gleaned from Imperiali’s diary and telegrams. On 16 December Imperiali explained to Sonnino that what he called “conspiring” against Asquith had been orchestrated by Lloyd George himself, Bonar Law and Carson, with the co-operation of Lord Derby and the Labour party, not to mention support from Lord Northcliffe’s newspapers, *The Times* and *The Morning Post*.⁴⁷⁴ Privately he commented rather coldly on the change of government:

Asquith resigned. [...] Lloyd George appointed. He’ll be satisfied at last. [...] Grey peaceful and calm above all the disgrace which has been poured on his honest, upright person by a crazy criminal press. I tell him how difficult it is for me to separate myself from him.

Imperiali’s preoccupation for Grey’s departure deepened when he heard that Balfour was to replace him. Imperiali dismissed the news succinctly: “Can’t understand it.” The ambassador feared that Hardinge, another character with whom he had never got on, would wield more and more influence. He remembered that their first meeting on 20 June of the previous year, “after years,” had given him only a slightly improved impression of the character of the man whom he remembered without any great pleasure: he found him just a little “less rigid and cold.”

In Rome, some feared that the government crisis would cause yet another delay in finding a solution to the question of Asia Minor, as it did. Others hoped that a new government would look more favourably on Italy, for it was immediately apparent that Lloyd George had a stronger interest in

⁴⁷³ French, *The Strategy...*, 17, 30.

⁴⁷⁴ Imperiali explained in detail the development of British domestic policy in a couple of telegrams to Sonnino: DDI, 5^a, VI, doc. 806, Imperiali to Sonnino, 7 December, 1916; *ibid.*, doc. 854, Imperiali to Sonnino, 16 December, 1916.

the Italian front than his predecessor. Yet a stronger government, if challenged, might show more resistance to Italian claims than a shaky government had done.⁴⁷⁵

Imperiali formed a slightly different opinion of Lloyd George when they met for the first time on 23 December: “He received me very cordially,” he wrote. Imperiali also reported on the British prime minister’s proposals to strengthen co-operation with Italy: an Anglo-French-Italian naval conference to better co-ordinate action in the Mediterranean, a direct meeting with Sonnino, and, finally, a common solution for the still unresolved Greek question. He did not talk of Asia Minor, which made Imperiali suspicious: perhaps, despite his cordial manner, he had not changed so much.⁴⁷⁶

A few days later, on 2 January, Imperiali wrung a few words from Lloyd George about Asia Minor. The prime minister repeated his wish for a direct exchange of opinion with Sonnino. Imperiali added: “What matters to me above all, I submit, is to see a close and constant contact established between Rome and London on the basis of common interests, to my mind the best, and perhaps the only, remedy to halt the intrusiveness of the French.” The reference to Asia Minor was clear, but Lloyd George let it drop diplomatically with a smile.⁴⁷⁷

Notwithstanding a far from promising beginning, there is no doubt that Lloyd George’s arrival in office marked a turn in allied relations. New prospects for co-operation would open up within the Entente: all that remained was to ascertain whether Italy would be made party to these initiatives and to what extent, and whether or not it would be able to seize the opportunities that would eventuate.

4.4 – *Allies, Not Friends.*

At the end of 1916, the British proposed that a conference be held in London at the beginning of 1917 in order to overcome the obstacles preventing the development of a common policy. Many issues needed to be addressed but the mutual tensions and recriminations did not encourage a conciliatory climate. Imperiali wrote to Sonnino on 18 December:

⁴⁷⁵ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 278, 343-344, 348-349.

⁴⁷⁶ DDI, 5^a, VI, docs. 892, 893, 894, Imperiali to Sonnino, 23 December, 1916.

⁴⁷⁷ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 355.

One has the impression that the three allies are preparing for the talks by sending each other the opinions of which we are completely in the dark. If this impression is correct, we shall find ourselves at the beginning of the discussion in the unenviable position of challenging alone decisions which may already have been agreed.⁴⁷⁸

Imperiali was brought face to face with the bitter reality that, however positive the bilateral relation between Italy and Britain, far more urgent motivations underlay British foreign policy, and Rome was “worth” less than the others in terms of political weight. This weakness was substantial, and the isolation in which Italy found itself was, therefore, almost inevitable. Yet, and Italian historians often forget this, Italy’s weakness did not arise solely from Rome’s poor political and military standing, but also from the contradictions in its international politics. Its reliability as an ally counted in London, and in that respect it provided fewer guarantees than France.

The fundamental problem of Italian international politics regarding the Entente was, in Riccardi’s words, its capacity to make “allies,” but not “friends.”⁴⁷⁹ This was the result of Italy’s inability to defend its own position effectively, not only through diplomatic relations but also by constructing a “narrative” of the war and Italian claims which might establish greater empathy between Italy and its allies. It was, again, a question of propaganda, and to understand Italy’s failure it is necessary to analyse the development of its propaganda abroad under Boselli.

The criticisms of Rome made by Italian journalists for its inaction over propaganda, the greater effectiveness of the British models and the isolation which Italy suffered within the Entente, found a more sensitive ear in Boselli than they had in Salandra.⁴⁸⁰ A report drawn up by a commission formed by De Martino and Ojetti submitted to Boselli two memoranda in July 1916: they both claimed that French and British propaganda had contributed almost as much as that of the Central Powers to eclipse Italy’s role in the war. They recommended the creation of a propaganda office which should coordinate the efforts of the Italian telegraph agency (Stefani Agency), several film companies, and associations like the “Dante Alighieri” and the “Touring Club Italiano.”⁴⁸¹

⁴⁷⁸ DDI, 5^a, VI, doc. 865, Imperiali to Sonnino, 18 December, 1916.

⁴⁷⁹ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 331-336.

⁴⁸⁰ ASSR, Senato del Regno, Legislatura XXIV, Discussioni, Tornata del 4 luglio 1916, 2590-2591; Tosi, *Propaganda*, 57 ff.

⁴⁸¹ ASMAE, Carte Italia, 1916-1918, b. 111, f. 1152; Tosi, *Propaganda...*, 16-18.

For Italy, it was a novel proposal, and proved that someone in Rome had understood the importance of a centralised propaganda body. There were, however, still two problems. The first was the lack of content. The second was the functions of De Martino's proposed body. In Britain – as in the other belligerent countries – Wellington House was entrusted not only with every decision concerning propaganda, but also with their implementation. De Martino's office was conceived as a co-ordinating body for initiatives between already existing organisations. The demands of the conflict required a speed of decision and execution which such an office could never have.

Another limit arose during the implementation of the project: centralisation, which was one of the main requirements identified by De Martino in his report, was ignored in practice. This was inevitable, given that none of the bodies interested in propaganda, from private associations to the press offices of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Interior Ministry, and also the general staff, was willing to give up its own prerogatives and freedom of action. The Comando Supremo wished to use propaganda abroad following Cadorna's directives without interference from civilian authorities; Sonnino would have preferred not to have any propaganda abroad at all; and private bodies wished to act on their own, but with government subsidies. The prime minister, effectively under Sonnino's thumb, could not assert himself.

As regards funding, the report raised the initial sum forecast by De Martino of Lit. 700,000 for six months to a million. This was still modest, compared to that spent by other belligerent countries, and did not seem excessive for Italian resources. But not even this was actually allocated. Towards the middle of October, Boselli decided to entrust propaganda strategy to the "Dante Alighieri," to make up at least for the lack of joint propaganda guide-lines. In theory, it was a good choice, as it brought centralisation to the fore, but it lost all practical effect because of bureaucratic restrictions put on the association's freedom of action. On 1 November 1916 the "Dante Alighieri" refused the assignment. Such an unexpected response gave rise to suspicions that the association had been chosen to handle propaganda not because of its reliability, but thanks to Boselli's personal contacts with the officers of the "Dante Alighieri," among them the director of the Bank of Italy, Stringher.⁴⁸²

All in all, then, the first experiment in co-ordinating propaganda was ill-fated. Paralysed by

⁴⁸² *Ibid.*, 60-61, 67.

inevitable and often insuperable contrasts between the various bodies involved and reduced merely to a co-ordinator of others' initiatives, the Office of Propaganda ended up scattering the meagre funds available haphazardly, without any particular criteria, other than, naturally, the nepotistic.⁴⁸³

The persistent lack of an effective strategy spurred Boselli, towards the end of 1916, to create a proper Ministry of Propaganda, and to entrust it to a minister without portfolio, Vittorio Scialoja. Scialoja was convinced that the weakness of Italian propaganda lay in its dedication to cultural initiatives rather than to modern techniques exploiting mass psychology. He also believed that it was essential to start with internal propaganda, "strengthening ideas to reinforce the hearts." It was the Italian nation which had to prove itself morally stronger in the eyes of both friends and enemies and, once this was done, the Italian cause would command greater respect abroad. Scialoja was chairman of the "Teachers' Union" and he leaned on it for his work. Given the growing popular unease as hostilities dragged on, internal propaganda was of no little importance. But the combination of the two propaganda targets, internal and external, was symptomatic of Rome's poor understanding of how completely different the two areas were, and how each required different policies.⁴⁸⁴ The job was too big for a single organisation, regardless of whether it was the "Dante" or the "Teacher's Union."

A more serious deficiency was, once again, the paucity of funds made available to the new ministry. Up to November 1916, despite the earlier provisions, only Lit. 150,000 had been allocated (Lit. 100.000 were destined for propaganda abroad, 50.000 for internal propaganda). Throughout the following year, investments in the ministry amounted to less than two million lire.⁴⁸⁵

A final, but formidable, hurdle for the new ministry was Sonnino's hostility. After having opposed to the very last a systematic propaganda campaign abroad, which in his view would waste money and hinder, not help, his diplomatic designs, Sonnino had had to accept that some form of propaganda should be put into place; but, as was his wont, he took the issue personally and withdrew behind a haughty reserve, making it known that he was not ready to co-operate. The persistent lack of joint action with the Consulta limited Scialoja's job: for propaganda to be effective, above all abroad, it had

⁴⁸³ H.D. Lasswell, *Propaganda technique in the World War* (London: Paul, Trench, Trubner & co. Ltd., 1927), 16-18, 192-193.

⁴⁸⁴ Tosi, *Propaganda...*, 69, 84.

⁴⁸⁵ Archivio Storico della Camera dei Deputati (ASCD), Relazione della Commissione d'Inchiesta sulle spese di Guerra, doc. XXI della Camera dei Deputati, XXVI Legislatura, v. I, 52, 85-87.

to be carried out in support of Italy's foreign policy, not be perceived as an obstacle. Instead, Scialoja, who failed to give his ministry clear structures and was not able to gather competent co-workers around him, could not prevent improvisation creeping into any initiative.⁴⁸⁶

The focus put on internal propaganda, furthermore, meant that propaganda at international level remained closely linked to the positions of irredentist and nationalist committees and their branches abroad. The principle of "our war" was still being promoted, notwithstanding the fact that in early 1917 it was anachronistic. The other Entente countries carefully avoided focusing on their own interests and war aims: Italian nationalists, on the contrary, deliberately emphasised Italian rights in the Adriatic and the colonies. As they had no idea of the contents of the London pact, their claims often went beyond the terms of the treaty itself.⁴⁸⁷ This did not do Italy any good in the difficult diplomatic match being played for Asia Minor, as it seemed to confirm the stereotype of the faithless, opportunist and greedy Italian; it increased anti-Italian animosity in allied and neutral public opinion, and amplified the hostility and resentment of the Yugoslavs.

Sympathy for the Italian cause and for Italy's political and military effort, as well as for its colonial claims, was still badly lacking abroad. Rome failed to dispel the suspicion of basic disloyalty even when it was unfounded. Its political isolation in the Asia Minor question was yet another consequence of its propaganda failure.

⁴⁸⁶ Malagodi, *Conversazioni...*, 383; ASMAE, Carte Italia, 1916-1918, b. 111, f. 1152, Sonnino to Boselli, 1 November, 1916; Tosi, *Propaganda...*, 84.

⁴⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 86.

5. The Mechanics of Co-operation.

5.1 – Towards a Renewed Mutual Understanding.

At the beginning of 1917 London realised that British effort was needed to reawaken in the Italian people trust in their allies and in the idea of a coalition war. Rodd tried to explain to London the reasons for Italian nervousness in the face of Slav propaganda: “The traditions in which a young nation has grown to maturity are slow to die. It was perhaps not sufficiently appreciated at home how closely the Croat neighbour had been identified in Italy with the two-headed eagle.” The favour which the Yugoslavs received in London risked compromising Britain’s image in Italy.

British propaganda activity in Italy, then, became increasingly important. Rodd described its early steps in his memoirs:

A small office of Propaganda was organized in Rome by Mr Algar Thorold, and the Embassy was thus relieved of much direct correspondence. Naval intelligence was in the hands of Lieut. W. Haslam of the Naval Reserve, who maintained constant contact with the Embassy. [...] Later a Military Intelligence Office, quite independent of the Intelligence section at the Italian Army head-quarters, was established in Rome under Sir Samuel Hoare [...]. This office, which worked cordially with the Embassy, took over the issue of passports and visas and the control of the Black List, a duty of no little responsibility in view of the number of enemy agents who were endeavouring to obtain access to Allied countries.

The British staff sent to handle propaganda in Italy was large and made up of experts in every field. As well as those “employed to more or less permanent establishments” there was a continuous toing and froing of officers, aides to the various technical and diplomatic staffs, agents and experts in “finance, munitions or blockade;” so much so, Rodd observed, not without irony, that “little by little Rome became almost as full of our countrymen as during a moderate tourist season.” By the end of 1916, the number of British staff dedicated to propaganda had become so high that Rodd had difficulty keeping count: “As time went on we were rather overwhelmed with mutually independent missions, and some coordination seemed desirable to avoid overlapping. I was then appointed High Commissioner of Italy, which gave me a sort of general controlling authority.”

Compared to the inadequate resources and effort dedicated by the Italians to propaganda, Rodd

observed that those made available by the British were almost too abundant, in the sense that it became extremely difficult to co-ordinate them. The results, however, made the effort worthwhile. The British managed also to establish good relations with some prominent members of Italian high society who proved willing to co-operate:

By that time our organisation to correct the propaganda of libel and misrepresentation instituted by our enemies was beginning to have its effect. Willing helpers did not fail us [as demonstrated by] the splendid work done at Milan for the allied cause by Donna Bettina di Casanova who, as the daughter of an Italian father and a British mother, had an almost dual nationality and [...] combined the best qualities of both. [...] All that was in the first instance attempted was to have available an adequate supply of simple documents showing stage by stage [...] the effort we had made to avert war. These, which were reproduced without comment, were supplemented by a collection of opinions of high authority from neutral sources, and by first-hand evidence regarding the methods applied in dragooning Belgium. Means were found, through friendly sympathizers, of introducing such literature into popular libraries throughout the kingdom, so that the simple man had opportunity to form his own judgement as to the rights and wrongs of the great issue. The relatively small sum required for translation and printing was the only expense which fell upon the Treasury during the earlier weeks of the war. Later Donna Bettina founded at Milan [...] a British-Italian Institute, which proved invaluable for maintaining contact between the subjects of the two countries by supplying information, correcting misapprehensions, and organizing lectures. It was copied in its general lines and purposes at Florence, Genoa, and Rome.

To this activity, which we could call “intelligence” rather than simple propaganda, was joined that of intellectuals from different fields. Rodd mentioned an acquaintance of his, Dick Bagot, and even a Belgian deputy: they travelled around Italy holding conferences and public meetings at which they expounded the ideals of the Entente and Britain’s role in close partnership with Italy. Pamphlets, postcards and posters were distributed at these events. The challenge was tough, for the Germans, who had moved early with clandestine distribution of leaflets and pamphlets, were far ahead. It was necessary to instil in that part of the Italian population which was still used to thinking of Germany as a strong and generous ex-ally, the idea that London was an even stronger, more reliable and generous ally. All these activities came under the supervision of the British ambassador and this threw an extra load onto Rodd’s shoulders:

I laboured not a little to find a remedy for a situation greatly to our disadvantage in Italy, where Germany had secured a sort of monopoly in the foreign book trade. [...] The learned and scientific

literature available for professors and students, the foreign periodicals obtainable which recorded historical, geographical and medical research were almost exclusively German. [...] English books, on the other hand, were costly, and being invariably bound or at any rate cased in boards, which for customs' purposes was regarded as equivalent, were subject to import duty. [...] And yet there was evidence of a demand for English books, subject to greater facilities for their acquisition, from the professorial world and a limited reading public. I suggested the institution of a central dépôt at Milan or Florence to act as the distributing medium. A small addition to the sale price would cover cost of superintendence and insurance against damage in transit. Paper covers such as are used for all continental publications might be substituted for the dutiable boards. [...] These proposals were referred to a Committee in London on which some of the most important publishing houses were represented. [...] But nothing was accomplished. With rare exceptions British publishers, who seem tenaciously conservative in their practice, were not disposed to meet conditions which would have offered some hope of competing with the German monopoly [...]. Their attitude towards the proposed use of paper covers seemed to be not that we should accommodate the supply to the demand, but that foreign customs regulations should be modified to suit the character of our production.

These difficulties were increased by the fact that many Italians, especially in the south, were illiterate. For a better result, Rodd sought greater co-ordination with the Italian Office – and then Ministry – of propaganda. Such co-ordination was handled by Mr. Thorold, who took over financial supervision of British propaganda activity in Italy, acting almost independently of Rodd, but keeping him informed through irregular confidential reports. On Thorold's initiative, a plan for a British Institute in Florence took form, which would compete with the corresponding German Institute. It would offer "facilities for higher education in English literature and culture." The director of the institute was A.F. Spender and it proved to be "a great success," given that "pupils from many provinces came to Florence to study there." The results were especially important during the alliance's most difficult moments:

When to us in Italy it seemed that our good name was at stake, the Institute was saved by the munificence of Sir Walter Becker, who had so liberally supported ambulances and hospitals during the war. A fund created by the late Mr. Arthur Serena to promote education in English in the country of his family's origin enabled the trustees to assign an assured revenue to the Institute, and the generosity of Miss S.R. Courtauld and Sir Daniel Stevenson has endowed it with £15,000. With these resources to supplement fees and subscriptions, the permanence of its activities seems guaranteed.

In mid-1917, London's attention to British propaganda in Italy increased further. As well as installing in Italian public opinion a greater sympathy towards Britain and a greater trust in the

alliance, it was increasingly important to strengthen the fighting spirit of the Italians – more and more disillusioned by the war and impressed by the socialist revolution in Russia.⁴⁸⁸ Consequently, London adopted for Italy the same propaganda measures as those reserved to enemy countries:

The results anticipated from a more intense and co-ordinated effort had been held to justify the creation of a Ministry of Information presided over by Lord Beaverbrook, but another distinct service of “Propaganda in enemy countries” was entrusted to the restlessly active Lord Northcliffe. For reasons which seemed convincing at home Italy was eventually also assigned to his province, and was thus for propaganda purposes assimilated to an enemy country.⁴⁸⁹

This decision marked a turn in British propaganda policy in Italy and will be dealt with in the second part of this work. Up to this point, British efforts in Italy, notwithstanding the inevitable limits, were greater and more effective than Italian efforts in Britain. In London, propaganda was considered an almost scientific fighting tool. A point of institutionalisation had in fact been reached: propaganda was officially becoming an instrument of power. In Italy, as Tosi noted, the only tools used in this way were censorship and military bulletins.

Slowly, however, the Italians were learning. The need to improve relations with the allies and re-establish a preferential partnership with Britain convinced Boselli that propaganda missions should be organised abroad. The first, led by Scialoja himself, was to Russia and coincided with the Petrograd conference – dealt with below. The second was entrusted to Giuseppe Antonio Borghese in France, and revealed the need for Italians to broaden the horizons of their foreign policy to include responses to the US-inspired “new diplomacy.” It was not by chance that the subsequent mission led by the prince of Udine, Ferdinando of Savoia-Udine, was to the United States. Another mission was led by another diplomat, Gaetano Paternò, and by Borghese again to Switzerland where pro-German fervour was simmering. Finally, a mission was organised to Britain and entrusted to the Hon. Romeo Gallenga Stuart.⁴⁹⁰ This last mission falls within the compass of this work.

It took place in the first half of August 1917 and was motivated by the warm reception London had given to the separate peace offer from Austria-Hungary in the spring. The Austro-Hungarian terms did

⁴⁸⁸ On 12 March a Provisional Government was formed.

⁴⁸⁹ Rodd, *Memories...*, III, 289-291, 307-311, 315.

⁴⁹⁰ Tosi, *Propaganda...*, 88 ff.

not meet Italy's expectations but the other allies hoped to induce Italy to accept them, in exchange for satisfaction of Rome's demands in Asia Minor. Some recurring comments in the House of Commons, such as "we never had any quarrel with Austria," were particularly unpleasant for the Italians. Similar remarks had infuriated Sonnino and aroused Bosellis's suspicion that Italy's allies might challenge the Treaty of London itself. Moreover, Slav propaganda in Britain was increasingly effective.⁴⁹¹

Gallenga Stuart worked on three levels. First, he exploited his personal relations with influential journalists and intellectuals such as Steed and Robert Seton Watson to explain the Italian war more effectively than hitherto; secondly, he set out to persuade British backers and industrialists to invest in Italy; finally, and he encouraged mediation on the Adriatic question with leading exiled Yugoslavs.⁴⁹²

He spoke with Frano Supilo and Nikola Pašić, as well as to Steed and various members of the Pro Serbian Society, and he convinced himself that, in order to beat Austria-Hungary, it was necessary not to burn bridges with the Slavs who were hostile to the Hapsburgs, as much as, if not more than, they were to the Savoia.⁴⁹³ In his report for Orlando, the Italian interior minister, Gallenga Stuart wrote that "the entire British Yugoslav movement, with *The Times* at the forefront, can be an effective ally against the tendency, which still exists in certain political spheres in this country, to oppose the dismemberment of the Austro-Hungarian Empire." So it was not necessary to react hysterically to anti-Italian provocation by the Yugoslavs: "I believe that, with tactful insistence, the Yugoslav movement will end up resigning itself also to Italian claims on Dalmatia. Then we shall not have failed [to deliver] even one of our objectives, and, moreover, we can count on massive forces on the other shore, friends and perhaps allies, against the common danger which is Austria."⁴⁹⁴

As regards direct relations with Britain, Gallenga Stuart was convinced that, despite recent misunderstandings, London trusted Italy. He believed that the British had lost all hope in Russia, and had a barely disguised hostility towards France, a dangerous ally-rival, who was, moreover, in the throes of financial and military crisis. As regards the United States, who had recently entered the war, London hoped that they would not have a major role in resolving the conflict. For Gallenga Stuart, all

⁴⁹¹ Albertini, *Venti anni...*, 2, II, 534-538, 546-552.

⁴⁹² Tosi, *Propaganda...*, 135-137.

⁴⁹³ D. Šepić, *Supilo diplomat* (Zagabria: Naprijed, 1961), 242-249.

⁴⁹⁴ ACS, Carte Orlando, b. 5, f. 236, Gallenga Stuart to Orlando, 13 August, 1917.

that was left for Britain was to concentrate on Anglo-Italian co-operation. For Italy too cultivating British support was crucial because “it is certain that our friendship with England will place us at the lead of the Europe of tomorrow.” He argued that the claims under the London pact should not be the primary aim of the Italian war: it was much more important to establish through the war those ties that would make Italy Britain’s partner of choice in the post-war leadership of Europe.⁴⁹⁵

In Tosi’s opinion, Gallenga Stuart for the first time linked the positions of some liberal Italian intellectuals and journalists, who had long criticised Rome’s inaction in propaganda affairs, to that political world which had remained deaf to their appeals. The bond did not, however, rest on the sorts of moderate and democratic views which were close to the “new diplomacy” of the United States, and which would later take hold. Rather it was a liberal-nationalist plan. The question was one of leadership on even more ambitious lines, going beyond Adriatic or Balkan supremacy to European. Gallenga Stuart’s argument was not too different from Sonnino’s ideal, because the politics of power remained at its heart. It was simply couched in a different manner, more dynamic and open, and less fixed within the limited horizons of the “sacred war”: Italy would gain its place as a great power, not only through “our war” but thanks to its friendship with Britain.⁴⁹⁶

Now, this idea of an Anglo-Italian leadership of Europe denotes a rather naïve enthusiasm on Gallenga Stuart’s part. It did not take account of the colonial issues, nor of the indissoluble – albeit problematic and at times irritating – tie London had with Paris. But it reflects the wish, which was ever-present, to foster strict, collaborative ties between Rome and London. Gallenga Stuart’s report was much appreciated by Orlando, who found it “of great accuracy and fairness.”⁴⁹⁷ From a practical point of view, however, there were no immediate results. The important point which Orlando gleaned was the knowledge that it was necessary to “melt” from a diplomatic point of view, if something more was to be obtained from Britain. In summer 1917, therefore, as Gallenga Stuart’s mission shows, conditions were ripening for a turn-around in Italian propaganda and in the relationship between Rome and its suspicious allies.

⁴⁹⁵ ACS, Carte Orlando, b. 5, f. 236, *cit.*

⁴⁹⁶ Tosi, *Propaganda...*, 136.

⁴⁹⁷ ACS, Carte Orlando, b. 5, f. 236, Orlando to Gallenga, 23 August, 1917.

5.2 – *The Rome Conference.*

A solution to the colonial question remained the Entente's diplomatic priority in early 1917. The Russian military crisis and allied financial and supply issues also needed to be dealt with. Two allied conferences were convened, in Rome and Petrograd, to draw up a common strategy for the new year. Parallel talks in London were set up to address more specifically the points raised by Italy regarding Asia Minor.

The Rome conference took place between 5 and 7 January 1917 and was the first allied proving ground for the real determination to overcome disagreements and better co-ordinate political and military efforts. It was a fairly full agenda: US president Wilson's peace proposals; the joint spring offensive; the situation in the Balkans and Greece; Asia Minor; and supplies.

The decision to call an inter-allied summit was taken during an Anglo-French meeting at Downing Street on 27-28 December 1916. Britain had proposed that the meeting should be held in Italy as this location would enable new members of the British cabinet to meet with their Italian counterparts. The British government knew that Sonnino was generally hostile to such meetings abroad because they involved long stays overseas and the political situation in Rome rarely made it possible to leave for many days at a time.⁴⁹⁸

Lloyd George welcomed the opportunity of making a visit to Rome for other reasons: it would be a chance to set up talks on issues pertaining more strictly to Anglo-Italian relations.⁴⁹⁹ The British leader nurtured the idea of greater military co-operation with Italy: he believed that, given the stalemate on the western front and the Russian crisis, an attempt should be made to unblock the situation on the Italian front where Austria-Hungary seemed weaker. The British prime minister was taking on himself the role which, until a few months earlier, had been Grey's: by making an approach to Rome, he hoped to prevent Italy leaving the alliance. It was a personal initiative and one which Asquith had never embraced. Lloyd George was probably aware that personal relations between Balfour and Imperiali were far cooler than those between Imperiali and Grey, and this quite possibly made him intervene in person in Anglo-Italian talks.

⁴⁹⁸ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 382-383.

⁴⁹⁹ DDI, 5^a, VI, doc. 919, Imperiali to Sonnino, 29 December, 1917.

The conference was presided over by Boselli. Lloyd George's proposal to transfer British troops from the western front to the Italian soon became the fulcrum of the discussions. The French and the Italian governments opposed the idea, but Cadorna favoured it. Consequently, the Italian delegation took a "passive" line.⁵⁰⁰ Sonnino did not wish to run up debts with the allies at such a delicate moment in their relations. He adopted dilatory tactics to have the British proposal gradually lose ground until it finally fizzled out.⁵⁰¹ The British prime minister was crushed between the clear opposition of the French, Italian coolness and the complaints of his own generals, above all Robertson and Haig.

Nevertheless, the Rome conference did make progress on allied policy in the Balkans, particularly concerning Greece. Positions at the start were, again, far apart. Rome still opposed Venizelos and Paris nourished no illusion that an agreement with Italy would be found.⁵⁰²

As Imperiali noted on 5 December, the British press was not lenient toward Italy, for having refused a compromise on Greece: "[I] pointed out to Rome [the] treacherous article in *Manchester Guardian* 'on our position in recent note to Greece,' position which the newspaper says is inspired by selfish motives, for Italy does not want Greece to enter the war, fearing its rivalry in the Adriatic and east Mediterranean questions. It is true, but it was not necessary to say so."⁵⁰³ The article quoted by Imperiali, however, was not anti-Italian; rather it reflected the urgent need to understand the real reasons behind Italy's position. The article concluded: "It is likely that Sonnino has an idea or two which is different from that pursued so far by the western Allies to notable failure. It is of vital importance that Italian views should be better appreciated and weighed in connection with the general policy resolutions which are now imperative."⁵⁰⁴ Two days later, Imperiali appreciated the comment in the *Observer* which defined Sonnino as "the most cool and most firm of the European statesmen," in whom British public opinion placed complete trust.⁵⁰⁵

British overtures were in part satisfied when, notwithstanding French scepticism, the allied meeting

⁵⁰⁰ V.E. Orlando, *Memorie*, R. Mosca ed. (Milan: Garzanti, 1960), 97-103.

⁵⁰¹ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 386.

⁵⁰² As emerges from an anonymous note found in the Quai d'Orsay's Archive: ADMAEF, Guerre 1914-1918, Dossier Général, vol. 991/31-34.

⁵⁰³ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 357.

⁵⁰⁴ DDI, 5^a, VII, doc. 48, Imperiali to Sonnino, 7 January 1917.

⁵⁰⁵ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 358.

in Rome produced a joint note for the Greek government. It stated that the Allies were determined to protect their armies against the menace created by the presence of the Greek forces in their rear. This could only be done if such forces were transported to the Peloponnese as soon as possible. It was also necessary that the Allies should have full liberty to control the movement. If the Greek government had not responded to the allied note within 48 hours of its receipt, the Allies would assume full liberty to safeguard their armies by other means.⁵⁰⁶

This ultimatum managed to put pressure on Athens without reaching a breaking point and without supporting Venizelos either. To Imperiali it seemed to be “a triumph of our own thesis.”⁵⁰⁷ It did not bring about a solution of the Greek question, but it did bring Italy and its allies back together. It was in any case the only result to come out of the conference: from both the military and the political points of view, no significant decision was taken. Franco-Italian rivalry shattered British proposals for compromise: France sought to further isolate Italy and at the same time to persuade British diplomats that the Entente hinged on Anglo-French collaboration, not Anglo-Italian.⁵⁰⁸ The cross-fire paralysed London’s efforts.

In his memoirs, Lloyd George nevertheless expressed his satisfaction with the results of the conference. In his words:

The Rome Conference [...] temporarily cleared up the Greek situation. Both at Athens and Salonika it saved us from precipitate action which would have damaged the Allied cause. It initiated transport arrangements for the use of Italian railways to carry troops and material from France to Brindisi. [...] Perhaps one of the most far-reaching decisions of all was that which resolved to summon an Inter-Allied Naval and Shipping Conference to consider the best methods of co-ordinating Allied resources at sea.⁵⁰⁹

On 10 January, back in London, the British prime minister informed Imperiali of the excellent impression Sonnino had made on him: “Tenacious, pertinacious, but you know at once where you are with him.” The ambassador commented: “Fine, but he seemed to me somewhat disappointed by the

⁵⁰⁶ Lloyd George, *Memoirs*, I, 857.

⁵⁰⁷ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 359.

⁵⁰⁸ ADMAEF, *Guerre 1914-1918, Italie*, vol. 574/123-125, Barrière to Briand, 29 January, 1917.

⁵⁰⁹ Lloyd George, *Memoirs*, I, 858.

difficulties set up by our ‘Mars’ [General Cadorna] to the implementation of Lloyd George’s favourite plan that is the offensive on our front!”⁵¹⁰ Imperiali had understood the snub whereas the British premier had not actually realised who was to blame for it. The aversion to Cadorna, who had given wholehearted assent to Lloyd George’s proposal at the start but had pulled back in the final phase of the negotiations, would remain strong in the British prime minister: “Cadorna’s lukewarmness was fatal,” he repeated.⁵¹¹ In reality, the individual mainly responsible for the failure of his plan was Sonnino, precisely the person who had made the best impression on him.⁵¹²

Lloyd George’s satisfaction with the outcome of the conference cannot hide his failure to change the traditional lines of Entente strategy. Despite all efforts, 1917 still looked set to be a year in which the differences on each side would grow.

5.3 – *The Petrograd Conference.*

Allied diplomatic circles now looked forward to the next meeting, arranged for the end of January in Petrograd. Its aim was to deal with the growing crisis in Tsarist Russia which was straining the Entente’s military co-operation. The conference was called, once again, on Britain’s initiative and was agreed at an allied meeting in Paris in November. The heads of the respective delegations making up the new mission were Scialoja for Italy, Milner for Britain and Gastone Doumergue, the French minister of colonies. They arrived in Petrograd on 29 January. Here the decision was taken, with the Russian foreign minister, to form sub-commissions to address each specific problem – political, economic and military.⁵¹³

Formal meetings started on 1 February and continued until the 20th. In the intervals between them the members of the allied mission travelled around and tried to get a first-hand impression of Russia’s

⁵¹⁰ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 359. Lloyd George’s disappointment at Cadorna’s position, which in the former’s view showed too little enthusiasm for the British proposal, is noted in Imperiali’s diary, but not in the telegram the ambassador sent to Sonnino, in which he highlighted the British prime minister’s satisfaction for the frankness of the talks: DDI, 5^a, VII, doc. 69, Imperiali to Sonnino, 10 January 1917.

⁵¹¹ Lloyd George, *Memoirs*, I, 858.

⁵¹² Sonnino rejected the so called “Cadorna Plan,” which the Italian chief of general staff had proposed: DDI, 5^a, VII, doc. 113, Cadorna to Sonnino, 17 January, 1917.

⁵¹³ Petracchi, G., *Diplomazia di guerra e rivoluzione. Italia e Russia dall’ottobre 1916 al maggio 1917* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1974), 57-88, 393.

conditions. They found the country in a deplorable state of disorganisation, muddle and disorder, “rent with faction, permeated with German propaganda and espionage, eaten up with corruption.”⁵¹⁴

At the inaugural session of the conference the western allies drew up a schedule of meetings for the issues that needed to be addressed: Russia, Greece, strategic co-ordination and transfer to Italy of prisoners of Serb nationality. “Too many issues,” commented Aldrovandi critically.⁵¹⁵ A political commission made up of delegation heads was charged with summarising and co-ordinating the work of the individual committees.⁵¹⁶

The conference proved uneven from the beginning. The British delegation had no intention of taking on onerous financial burdens, which was what the Russians most wanted. London was deeply suspicious of the uses the Russians would make of allied aid.⁵¹⁷ The Russians, perhaps fearing that, this conference also would come to an end without any decisive results, tried to make the political body a permanent one. They proposed to create a “permanent commission of delegates from Allied Governments to solve the Greek question directly and more rapidly.”⁵¹⁸ It was a first step towards a novel political integration: if the proposal were accepted for the Greek question, it could be adopted also for other business.

Doumergue found the Russian suggestion very interesting and proposed to create a permanent commission of delegates of each allied government, a sort of inter-allied co-ordinating body.⁵¹⁹ The Italians objected that such a commission would complicate matters, rather than simplify them. Everyone agreed that there was little understanding among the Allies but could not agree on how to remedy the situation. Paris proposed a rigid structure for political and diplomatic direction. London once more tried to conciliate the French and Italian positions.⁵²⁰ The British delegates, at Italy’s request, approved a watered-down version of the French proposal, less binding and rigid. The fifth

⁵¹⁴ Lloyd George, *Memoirs*, I, 932.

⁵¹⁵ Luigi Aldrovandi Marescotti was one of Sonnino’s aides. See: L. Aldrovandi Marescotti, *Guerra diplomatica: ricordi e frammenti di diario* (Milan: Mondadori 1938), 91-96.

⁵¹⁶ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 394 ff.

⁵¹⁷ DDI, 5^a, VII, doc. 198, *cit.*

⁵¹⁸ *Ibid.*, doc. 237, Carlotti&Scialoja to Sonnino, 6 February, 1917.

⁵¹⁹ *Ibid.* See also: Aldrovandi, *Guerra diplomatica...*, 99-100; Petracchi, *Italia e Russia...*, 65.

⁵²⁰ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 395.

point of the *Décisions d'ordre politique* stressed the need for a central body of the four powers which was to rally the respective heads of governments “regularly and frequently.”⁵²¹ On this point, Scialoja specified that words, such as “regularity of the meetings,” should not be understood as “for a set time.” Meetings “would be held at any time and period which appear convenient,” but without making them “too numerous to be effective.”⁵²²

Riccardi explained Rome’s attitude with the urge to void the content of the final resolution, in the face of overall allied appreciation of Doumergue’s proposal.⁵²³ No particular Italian hostility towards inter-allied co-ordination emerges from the notes of Italian diplomats: even Italian politicians had by then realised that greater integration in the Entente was necessary, but residual prejudices concerning Italian autonomy remained. Once more, no decisive agreement was reached. The Italians, on the one side, the French and the Russians on the other, confronted each other in a cross-fire of vetoes, used instrumentally most of the time, with the British hard pushed to mediate.⁵²⁴

The Petrograd conference was also disappointing on other fronts. From the military point of view, it went no further than to express the hope that joint offensives could be launched to put greater pressure on the Central Powers, in particular for Russian-Rumanian co-operation with allied forces at Salonika. On economic matters, it only partly met Russia’s request for aid.⁵²⁵ Thus the conference – the last one in which the Tsar’s government participated – produced little practical effect.

6.2 – *The London Conference.*

Whilst the allied mission was engaged in the Petrograd conference, another allied meeting was held in London with the objective of solving the issue of Asia Minor. The business here was to deal with Italian objections to the Sykes-Picot agreement.⁵²⁶

⁵²¹ ADMAEF, Guerre 1914-1918, Dossier Général, vol. 992/322-329, “Décisions de la Conference”.

⁵²² DDI, 5^a, VII, doc. 300, Carloti&Sciajola to Sonnino, 15 February, 1917; Petracchi, *Italia e Russia...*, 65, doc. 28.

⁵²³ Aldrovandi, *Guerra diplomatica...*, 102.

⁵²⁴ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 396.

⁵²⁵ ADMAEF, Guerre 1914-1918, Dossier Général, vol. 992/105, Paléologue to Briand, date unspecified; Petracchi, *Italia e Russia...*, 120-128.

⁵²⁶ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 398 ff.

The man who above all pushed London to search for a shared solution to the problem was Rodd. He persuaded the Foreign Office that stalling negotiations and isolating Italy might prove dangerous to the unity of the alliance itself.⁵²⁷ The British *chargé d'affaires*, G.D. Grahame, also believed that a solution had to be found before the end of January: another government crisis might bring about Sonnino's departure.⁵²⁸

January was marked by Italian attempts to garner consensus among the British. On 3 January, Imperiali reported a talk with Hardinge: the British diplomat denied that there was any agreement among the other powers of the Entente to reject Italy's requests. However, when the ambassador hinted at the reasonableness of the Italian claims, Hardinge replied that he could not "completely agree."⁵²⁹

However, the British cabinet's position did not exactly coincide with Hardinge's. Milner, head of the British delegation to the Petrograd conference, wanted London to place itself midway between Rome and Paris, to conciliate their positions. He opposed, as Grey had done before him, the most intransigent and hostile tendencies towards Italy within the British cabinet. Imperiali, however, had a precise mandate from the Consulta to adhere to an inflexible line.⁵³⁰ Hence negotiations from the very beginning looked set for head-on collision.

The first sessions served to restate the different positions.⁵³¹ Paul Cambon, the French representative, illustrated Paris's interest in Cilicia: he confirmed Adalia as an Italian possession under the London pact, maybe with Konia, but without Mersin. He concluded by expressing perplexity over Smyrna. Russia presented similar views. Balfour attempted to remain neutral: he did not want to deny Italy's rights to equitable compensations, but he did not wish to "breach understandings already in place with France." Imperiali undertook to demolish the arguments put forward by the Russian and French delegates and "with some energy" opposed their objections concerning Smyrna.⁵³² He confirmed Rome's readiness to recognise Russian interests in Constantinople and the Straits,

⁵²⁷ PRO FO, 371/2945/1146, Note of the Foreign Office, January 1, 1917.

⁵²⁸ *Ibid.*, Grahame to Balfour, 31 December, 1916.

⁵²⁹ *Ibid.*, doc. 19, Imperiali to Sonnino, 3 January, 1917.

⁵³⁰ DDI, 5^a, VII, doc. 118, Imperiali to Sonnino, 18 January, 1917.

⁵³¹ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 403-406.

⁵³² DDI, 5^a, VII, doc. 179, Imperiali to Sonnino, 30 January, 1917; Toscano, *Gli Accordi...*, 208-209.

notwithstanding the fact that Italy had been kept in the dark on these agreements too.⁵³³ Italian requests in French Cilicia, went on Imperiali, did not upset the overall balance of the Sykes-Picot agreement. The other allies found this last statement difficult to accept: Italian possession of Adana and Mersin would break French supremacy in the eastern Mediterranean, which had been established by the Sykes-Picot agreement in exchange for British possession of Palestine and Cyprus.⁵³⁴ The Russo-French project, accepted, if not openly supported, by the British, on the other hand, relegated Rome to a position of secondary importance.

The discussion hit a dead end. Balfour proposed a detailed report be prepared by Sir Louis Mallet, Britain's former ambassador to Constantinople, on the "real" value of the areas offered to Italy and France. Balfour hoped that such a report would convince Rome of the fairness of the allied proposal. The offer was received rather coldly by Imperiali who declared that he would not feel bound by any result that came out of it. The session ended with Balfour's promise to deliver to each delegate, within a week, the results of the British inquiry.⁵³⁵ The next morning, Imperiali noted in his diary: "Had an anxious night. [...] Who knows what terrible telegram Sonnino will hurl at me!"⁵³⁶

Imperiali tried to knit together some personal contacts to prepare the ground for the next session of the conference. He knew that Italy's only hope was to win Britain over to its side. London needed to be encouraged to put pressure on Paris, and not just act as a simple mediator. On 9 February, therefore, Imperiali met Lloyd George. The ambassador stated very clearly that he was not satisfied with the first round of negotiations and that he had received a negative impression of the plan proposed by Balfour. Imperiali hoped to by-pass Balfour, exploiting the prime minister's greater political weight. The latter, however, restated his government's position: the French had already made more than a few sacrifices during operations in the Dardanelles and Salonika, and deserved to be rewarded. Moreover, Lloyd George realised that discussions on the partitioning of Turkey could, in the end, "be academic, if, at a

⁵³³ In the Constantinople Agreement (18 March 1915) France and Great Britain promised to give Constantinople and the Dardanelles to the Russians in the event of victory. The city of Constantinople was intended to be a free port.

⁵³⁴ For an in-depth analysis of the Sykes-Picot agreement, see: N.M. Toraldo-Serra, *Diplomazia dell'imperialismo e questione orientale: la spartizione dell'impero ottomano e la nascita del problema palestinese, 1914-1922* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1988), I, 67-72.

⁵³⁵ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 404.

⁵³⁶ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 365.

certain point, the Allies should not become masters of the territories to be snatched from Turkish domination.”⁵³⁷ With typical British pragmatism, he understood that the priority should be allied co-operation in order to win the war. There would be time, once the Entente found itself ahead, to discuss the post-war order.

Sonnino had a very different opinion: his priority remained to conclude inter-allied agreements as soon as possible, so as to avoid nasty surprises at the peace conference:

That these discussions on the partitioning of Turkey could be [...] academic is one reason why the British government should remove more easily the French and Russian objections to our requests, perhaps academic, but which avoid dangerous mortgages for the future.⁵³⁸

Imperiali received clear orders not to give an inch.⁵³⁹ On 12 February, the Entente delegates met again. Balfour presented Mallet’s report: the main Italian claims, Smyrna and Mersin, were denied; the Italians would, however, get Konia and its hinterland, with links to the Adalia region.⁵⁴⁰ Here is how Imperiali reported the meeting:

Rather bitter session at the Foreign Office. Asia Minor. Balfour presents me with the famous Mallet report: Smyrna is not even mentioned. I declare that I refuse to enter the discussion and politely, but clearly, outline the wrong that has been done us by the allies by agreeing without our knowledge and giving us replies which are evasive (I should have said lies). Balfour and the other two insist: “If you do not want to discuss the matter, why the meeting?” I stick by my guns as my superior ordered. Balfour said: “I shall telegraph Rodd.” “Telegraph by all means,” I replied. *Je ne bronche pas*. I do not hide general ill humour. The fault is not mine, bound as I am hand and foot by Sonnino’s orders. Now it is up to him to speak.⁵⁴¹

As the Italian ambassador wrote these words, Hardinge was sending his report to Rodd:

The Conference of Ambassadors on the Asia Minor question is making no progress whatever. [...] Imperiali has only one argument, and that is that the Italian government were so badly treated in the agreement having been made behind their backs in 1915, that it is necessary for the Powers to give Italy material compensation for this apparent slight. On the other hand the demands of Italy are

⁵³⁷ DDI, 5^a, VII, doc. 263, Imperiali to Sonnino, 9 February, 1917.

⁵³⁸ *Ibid.*, doc. 273, Sonnino to Imperiali, 11 February, 1917.

⁵³⁹ Imperiali, *Diario*..., 369.

⁵⁴⁰ DDI, 5^a, VII, doc. 325, Drummond to Imperiali, 17 February, 1917.

⁵⁴¹ Imperiali, *Diario*..., 360-370.

perfectly fantastic. Italy has not fired a single shot against the Turks anywhere. [...] Why Italy should claim more than others is beyond my comprehension.⁵⁴²

The results, then, were disastrous. Balfour's decision to turn to Rodd, and to deal with the Consulta through him without any consideration for Imperiali's role, revealed the British growing mistrust towards the ambassador who was considered less and less co-operative.⁵⁴³ In truth, Imperiali was not assuming a personal position: he was simply following Sonnino's strict instructions, and that without any great enthusiasm.⁵⁴⁴ Imperiali's diary suggests that the ambassador would much rather have adopted a more flexible attitude. The telegram Imperiali sent to Sonnino on 13 February hinted at his wish to moderate Italian requests.⁵⁴⁵ At the same time, though, Imperiali was increasingly irritated by the aloofness of Balfour and Hardinge whose barely-concealed contempt for Italians emerged quite clearly in such situations. On 13 February Imperiali wrote in his diary: "Talk with Hardinge. Quite definitely his indecisive and snooty attitude tries my patience dearly." On the 14th, the atmosphere was almost unbearable. Imperiali wrote:

Did not go to the Foreign Office. Prefer to make myself scarce during these stormy moments. The more I reflect upon my work of the day before yesterday, the more I feel in all conscience that I could not have acted differently. It remains to be seen now what Sonnino has to say. I cannot definitely remonstrate with myself for having shown condescension, which in the present case would have been guilty weakness. We must however get out of this embarrassing situation.

The "embarrassing situation" did not improve in the days that followed, despite Imperiali's wish not to break off relations. Rome's silence did not bode well and in London the number of British diplomats drawing away from, instead of moving closer to, Italian position, grew.⁵⁴⁶ Imperiali realised it, but felt powerless. He commented on 19 February:

Talk with Balfour. Asia Minor. *Nous pataugeons*. He avoids me, he does not see or does not want to see. And he does not know Sonnino. All my efforts are useless. He stands firmly by his position. I do

⁵⁴² Rodd papers, Hardinge to Rodd, 14 February 1917.

⁵⁴³ Complaints on Imperiali: *ibid.*, Nicolson to Rodd, November 30, 1915; Nicolson to Rodd, February 16, 1916.

⁵⁴⁴ Toscano, *Gli Accordi...*, 218.

⁵⁴⁵ Sonnino, *Carteggio*, 160-164.

⁵⁴⁶ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 409.

not know what else to say. In this way we are reaching breaking-point. With what consequences? I dare not look ahead for they frighten me so. I feel totally dejected. How will it end?⁵⁴⁷

The next day, Imperiali received Sonnino's reply. As the ambassador had foreseen, Sonnino restated Italian claims to Adana, Smyrna and Mersin. The telegram revealed the implications for Italian internal politics: "Before parliament and my country my position had become extremely distressful and difficult due to the behaviour of the Allied governments who clearly did not realise how public opinion in Italy felt concerning all these issues."⁵⁴⁸ Imperiali commented: "[Sonnino] has spoken to Rodd, and... as he should. Now we shall see if they decide here to change direction. I greatly fear that all this will leave behind it bitterness and resentment."⁵⁴⁹

The same day the ambassador wrote to Sonnino proposing a new strategy: to maintain an uncompromising attitude on Smyrna, and accept greater flexibility on other claims.⁵⁵⁰ Imperiali concluded that:

Balfour's language leaves me with the double impression that he sincerely wishes to continue the discussion and reach a fair solution according to the treaty but that at the same time his sceptical and eminently parliamentary mentality are so different from that of Grey, that he is manoeuvring to prepare a possibly needed line of defence before Parliament accusing our claim to be intransigence and throwing all responsibility and consequent breaking off of negotiations onto us. Need, therefore, in my view, to adjust so as not to play his game.⁵⁵¹

Privately Imperiali commented: "I have sent a long telegram to Sonnino on the prickly, hateful question of Asia Minor. *Liberavi conscientiam meam*. Now it is up to him. If he wants a break, let us break, and then? Here they are incomprehensibly blind. They had such a wonderful chance to consolidate Italy's friendship and they stupidly let it go. I regret Grey's departure."⁵⁵²

Sonnino instructed Imperiali to make another attempt to talk with the British: he suggested trying

⁵⁴⁷ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 370-372.

⁵⁴⁸ DDI, 5^a, VII, doc. 337, Sonnino to Imperiali, 20 February, 1917.

⁵⁴⁹ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 372.

⁵⁵⁰ DDI, 5^a, VII, doc. 337, Imperiali to Sonnino, 20 February, 1917.

⁵⁵¹ *Ibid.*, doc. 354, Imperiali to Sonnino, 21 February, 1917.

⁵⁵² Imperiali, *Diario...*, 372-373.

Lloyd George as a possible ally⁵⁵³ but Sonnino ignored that Imperiali had already played that card on his own initiative. The ambassador was groping around blindly:

“[Sonnino] first gives me that hateful part to play and now wants me to make this up and in all this does not let me understand fully what his real thoughts are. It takes the patience of a saint to understand the blessed man. If I come off well out of this [...] hateful negotiation, it will truly be a divine boon. [...] I feel depressed and very disappointed. I sit between the devil and the deep blue sea. Sonnino is irritated by the proposal and Balfour is offended that we have refused even to discuss it.”⁵⁵⁴

Imperiali’s suggestions to Sonnino revealed, for the first time, a rank order in the Italian claims. The priority was Smyrna whose port made it an important commercial hub. The remaining claims, notwithstanding the fact that Sonnino had several times said they were “irremovable,” could be open to discussion.⁵⁵⁵

Whilst Imperiali made strenuous efforts to work out an alternative proposal, allied diplomacy, encouraged by Rodd, was also shifting perspective. The British ambassador went to see Sonnino once more, on 18 February, to advise the Italian minister not to break off the talks, however difficult they might be.⁵⁵⁶ On this occasion, Rodd relayed criticisms from London regarding Imperiali’s behaviour, but Sonnino defended his ambassador to the hilt. Only at this point did Rodd understand what in London Lloyd George and Balfour had failed to appreciate: that the intransigent man was – and always had been – Sonnino. The positive impression he had made on Lloyd George at their first meeting may have fooled the prime minister. What is surprising, however, is that Rodd, who knew both Imperiali and Sonnino, should have made the same mistake. The British ambassador realised that the Consulta intended to stick to its point of view.⁵⁵⁷

Nonetheless, and despite the fact that official positions remained the same, backstage there was a glimmer of hope. On 24 February, during yet another meeting between Imperiali and Balfour – in which the ambassador set out in greater detail why Italy felt that the area assigned to it was poorer

⁵⁵³ DDI, 5^a, VII, doc. 355, Sonnino to Imperiali, 23 February, 1917.

⁵⁵⁴ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 375.

⁵⁵⁵ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 410.

⁵⁵⁶ DDI, 5^a, VII, doc. 337, Sonnino to Imperiali, Salvago Raggi, Carlotti, 19 February, 1917.

⁵⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, doc. 341, Sonnino to Imperiali, 20 February, 1917.

than that promised to France – Balfour listened patiently and requested a complete report. “I feel my initiative was appreciated by him,” commented Imperiali. “It was necessary to break the ice otherwise he would never have opened his mouth and then where would we end up? Let’s hope that Sonnino will understand and will help me get out of this *impasse*.”⁵⁵⁸ On 27 February, the Italian ambassador delivered to the British minister his personal report containing notes on the reasons for Italy’s position.⁵⁵⁹ “I think he is treating them kindly,” he wrote in his diary that evening. “In any case, we are talking.”⁵⁶⁰

On 1 March came Rome’s official reply in the form of a counter-memorandum which, point by point, refuted Balfour’s offers to Italy. After a long dissertation on economic, mining and commercial opportunities, Sonnino appealed to Article 9 of the Treaty of London, which provided for “equality” between all allied areas in Asia Minor.⁵⁶¹ No substantial change, therefore, in Italian claims, but a more precise and structured presentation of the Consulta’s position: Sonnino hoped that such a clear report would convince London of Italy’s good faith.⁵⁶²

Petrograd and Paris reacted bitterly. The former opposed Italy’s claims on Smyrna, which would undermine its interests on the north-western coast of Turkey; for France, the question was Mersin and Cilicia.⁵⁶³ Unsurprisingly, the negotiations, which had re-opened so hopefully, once more ran aground. On 2 March, Imperiali complained about Balfour’s delay in replying to the Consulta’s memorandum. When at long last Balfour’s reply arrived unofficially to Imperiali on the 14th, he was disappointed. “*Sunt lacrimae rerum!!* He [Balfour] avoids me. Insists his proposal is fair. And he is completely wrong, and I tell him so. ‘But you are asking too much claiming Smyrna and Mersin.’ And you, I reply, have excluded both. How can we talk on this basis? Without Smyrna there is no point.”⁵⁶⁴ In his report to Sonnino, though, Imperiali underlined that “Balfour’s behaviour appears to me to clearly reveal the embarrassment in which he finds himself due to the continued French obstinacy regarding

⁵⁵⁸ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 374.

⁵⁵⁹ DDI, 5^a, VII, doc. 366, Imperiali to Balfour, 27 February, 1917.

⁵⁶⁰ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 375.

⁵⁶¹ DDI, 5^a, VII, doc. 395, Sonnino to Imperiali, 1 March, 1917.

⁵⁶² Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 414.

⁵⁶³ DDI, 5^a, VII, doc. 394, Sonnino to Imperiali, 1 March, 1917.

⁵⁶⁴ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 180.

any concession on Mersin, and the worry about parliamentary recrimination to which his government would be exposed if, giving in to the French, he should, out of over-riding political necessity, satisfy Italy by sacrificing in other terms British commercial interests.”⁵⁶⁵

In the days that followed, talks intensified but succeeded only in increasing mutual recriminations. Imperiali warned Lloyd George: “If Asia Minor is not settled, Sonnino will go.”⁵⁶⁶ The prime minister replied: “That would be fatal!” Imperiali rebutted: “It depends on you.”⁵⁶⁷ But Britain did not take up a position for one side or the other. The repeated failure of British attempts at mediation paralysed inter-allied relations. In the end, Imperiali agreed with Balfour that Sonnino’s memorandum of 1 March, to which the British had not yet officially replied, “could not imply a resumption of official four-way talks, which, if carried on on the basis of the British proposal, had no chance of leading to practical results.”⁵⁶⁸

Riccardi summarised their conclusion: better to take a break than risk breaking up.⁵⁶⁹ The curtain was brought down on the London conference, which marked the peak of inter-allied diplomatic clashes in 1917. The official reply by the British to the Italian memorandum, released only on 12 April, simply re-stated well-known positions.⁵⁷⁰ In the following days, the only progress was Italian approval for France’s inclusion in the Anglo-Italian agreement on the Senussi, signed on 31 July 1916, under which the French undertook to co-operate with Italy and Britain to quell the Islamist revolt.⁵⁷¹

In the meantime, the unexpected offer of a separate peace made by the new Hapsburg emperor Karl (Franz Joseph died on 21 November 1916) reshuffled the cards of inter-allied relations. The proposal found eager ears in Anglo-French circles but Italy’s approval was needed. Moreover, the fall of Briand, replaced on 19 March by the eighty-year-old Alexandre Ribot, foreshadowed possible changes in French policy. A new inter-allied conference was called to prepare a common line on Austria-

⁵⁶⁵ DDI, 5^a, VII, doc. 481, Imperiali to Sonnino, 14 March, 1917.

⁵⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, doc. 591, Imperiali to Sonnino, 27 March, 1917.

⁵⁶⁷ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 386.

⁵⁶⁸ DDI, 5^a, VII, doc. 481, Imperiali to Sonnino, 15 March, 1917.

⁵⁶⁹ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 417.

⁵⁷⁰ DDI, 5^a, VII, doc. 706, Imperiali to Sonnino, 12 April, 1917, Attachment I, Balfour to Imperiali, 12 April, 1917.

⁵⁷¹ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 386.

Hungary and finally solve the eastern question.

6.4 – *The Meeting of St. Jean de Maurienne.*

More than a conference, the new meeting was organised as a lightning summit which would allow face-to-face talks between the heads of the allied governments. Held in a railway carriage beside the station of the small town of St. Jean de Maurienne (Savoie), on 19 April 1917, it brought together Lloyd George, Ribot and Boselli. The British prime minister invited Sonnino to join them.⁵⁷² On the 16th the Italian minister accepted the invitation. According to Imperiali, Lloyd George was “pleased,” but the ambassador made no secret of his scepticism: after months of inconclusive negotiations, reaching an agreement at a lightning summit seemed impossible. Furthermore, Imperiali was convinced that it was first necessary to persuade Britain to move over to the Italian position. A four-way summit would not allow *tête-à-tête* meetings behind the scenes: “How will we manage to speak alone,” he wondered.⁵⁷³

If, however, the Italians imagined that the invitation signalled a step backwards by their allies they were mistaken. The idea of a summit had taken shape during a bilateral Anglo-French meeting at Folkestone on 11 April.⁵⁷⁴ Here Lloyd George and Ribot had agreed a new strategy in the light of Austria-Hungary’s peace offer. Vienna’s terms seemed reasonable: 1) A secret armistice with Russia in which the question of Constantinople would not be made an issue. 2) Alsace-Lorraine and Belgium to be restored. 3) The formation of a Southern Slav Monarchy, embracing Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Albania and Montenegro. The problem was that Italy was altogether ignored.⁵⁷⁵ London and Paris agreed to push Rome to accept a compromise: they would put Smyrna on the table in exchange

⁵⁷² Overall the participants were the three leaders of government, of Britain, France and Italy, plus Italy’s foreign affairs minister, and their respective aides: General Mac Donough and Hankey with Lloyd George, Barrère with Ribot, Salvago Raggi, De Martino and Aldrovandi with Boselli and Sonnino. Russia was excluded because of the outbreak of the revolution.

⁵⁷³ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 390-392.

⁵⁷⁴ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 460.

⁵⁷⁵ Italy’s claims were not pressed by France either: Lloyd George, *Memoirs...*, II, 1179-1182.

for withdrawal of Italian designs on Trieste.⁵⁷⁶ Lloyd George and Ribot agreed in their memoirs that the question of Asia Minor was the “ostensible” facade to the talks which were to concentrate on the Austrian peace proposals.⁵⁷⁷

On the Italian side, Imperiali renewed his advice to Sonnino that the solution to the problem of Asia Minor would come through the re-establishment of a privileged relationship with London. Behind this conviction, which translated into an urgency to act while France was in the throes of internal political unrest – before, that is, relations between the British and the new French government got onto a solid footing – was the awareness that the changes occurring on the international scene could further upset diplomatic relations in the Entente.⁵⁷⁸

On 4 April, the United States had finally declared war on Germany. At the same time, the Russian crisis hurled the country into revolution. Imperiali feared that, because of these new developments, the post-war balance of power would be very different from that agreed upon in the Treaty of London. The Consulta should take steps to ensure Italy would not be penalised. The Italian delegation arrived in the Savoie with two main objectives: first to restore good relations with the British; then, if possible, to find an agreement on Asia Minor which at least would settle the main Italian claim, Smyrna.⁵⁷⁹ In Sonnino’s mind, this would re-establish the “*complète harmonie*” between the Allies “*pendant et après la guerre.*”⁵⁸⁰

When the meeting opened on 19 April, the allied delegations split: the first part of the talks took place between the heads of government and the foreign ministers, with the aim of finding a general agreement; other members of the delegations joined in later, to deal with its formal details.⁵⁸¹

In the first round of talks, Sonnino accepted the Anglo-French plans for Greece, demanding Smyrna in exchange. He believed it was a fair *do ut des*: Smyrna to Italy, power in Greece to the pro-French Venizelos, to the inevitable abdication of King Constantine I. Giving in on the Greek question

⁵⁷⁶ The best sources on the Folkestone meeting are: Toscano, *Gli Accordi...*; Lloyd George, *Memoirs...*; A. Ribot, *Lettres à un ami* (Paris: Bosard, 1924); A. Ribot junior, *Journal de Alexandre Ribot et Correspondances inédites* (Paris: Plon, 1936).

⁵⁷⁷ Lloyd George, *Memoirs...*, II, 1175-1204; Ribot, *Lettres...*, 67-73.

⁵⁷⁸ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 463 ff.

⁵⁷⁹ DDI, 5^a, VII, doc. 730, Imperiali to Sonnino, 15 April, 1917.

⁵⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, doc. 778, Note by Sonnino, 19 April, 1917.

⁵⁸¹ Aldrovandi, *Guerra diplomatica...*, 158-159.

made it possible for Sonnino to move agilely in subsequent phases of the talks.⁵⁸²

At that point Lloyd George presented a new British plan for the general partitioning of Asia Minor: Smyrna passed to Italy; a part of the territory west of Mersin – which remained French – would also be allotted to Italy who, instead, was no longer guaranteed Konia.⁵⁸³ The latter was to be ceded to the new Turkish state.⁵⁸⁴

Sonnino observed that this proposal contradicted Balfour's project which, though it excluded Smyrna, had without difficulty included Konia and its territory in the Italian area. Lloyd George justified this change on ethnic grounds, but surprisingly gave in to Sonnino's objections: it was agreed that everything which had been offered to Italy under the Balfour proposal would be honoured, with the addition of Smyrna.⁵⁸⁵ Ribot raised a number of doubts, perhaps more facade than anything else, but in the end he accepted. The proposal was entered into the records.⁵⁸⁶

Sonnino seemed to have won right across the board, but the accommodating behaviour of the Anglo-French leaders was preparatory to introducing the other issue, which was dearer to them: separate peace with Austria-Hungary. No sooner had the allied delegations hinted at the proposal than Sonnino reacted, first with surprise and then with toughness.⁵⁸⁷ Lloyd George pointed out that the British Admiralty was convinced that the elimination of Austria would be a decisive advantage to the Allies. He also stressed that, in the event of a separate peace with Vienna, Italy could then employ its strength in the realisation of its *desiderata* in Turkey. But Sonnino knew that Italy would not secure much out of a compromise with Vienna at this stage: he replied to Lloyd George that any suggestions of separate peace only had the purpose of dividing the Allies and that a peace that did not include Trento, Trieste, Dalmatia and the Adriatic islands would result in a revolution in Italy. Sonnino's opposition forced the other allies to give no further consideration to the Austrian offer, as it appeared clear that Italy would make peace also with Germany in the event of a separate peace with Austria-

⁵⁸² Toscano, *Gli Accordi...*, 272-274.

⁵⁸³ DDI, 5^a, VII, doc. 784, Sonnino to Imperiali, Salvago Raggi, Carlotti, 20 April, 1917.

⁵⁸⁴ Toscano, *Gli Accordi...*, 273.

⁵⁸⁵ DDI, 5^a, VII, doc. 784, *cit.*

⁵⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, doc. 778, *cit.*; see also a note by De Martino in ADMAEF, Guerre 1914-1918, Dossier Général, vol. 884/28-30.

⁵⁸⁷ Toscano, *Gli Accordi...*, 275.

Hungary. A disheartened Lloyd George later commented: “Where you are working with allies, it is just as difficult to negotiate an honorable peace as to wage successful war.”⁵⁸⁸

At this point, the French and British tried to link the agreement on Asia Minor to a more active military role for Italy in the Balkans and against Turkey. Here too, Sonnino was adamant and declared that Italy could not “absolutely give anything more.”⁵⁸⁹ The discussion in this regard was long and “not all plain sailing,” and left the clear impression that the Anglo-French representatives were not satisfied.⁵⁹⁰ Sonnino ascribed the allies’ disappointment to his refusal to strengthen military co-operation, without managing to explain to himself how a matter never dealt with before should now become so urgent.⁵⁹¹ In reality, the other allies had concentrated on military co-operation because they could not show the true cause of their frustration: the failure to reach an agreement for a separate peace with Austria-Hungary. The British and French did not repeat their previous carelessness in recording the Asia Minor agreements prematurely, before the issue of Austria-Hungary had been discussed. They set on record their request for a greater Italian effort against Turkey: an official petition to which they could cling in a not too distant future.⁵⁹²

Notwithstanding allied recrimination at the end of the talks, the St. Jean de Maurienne meeting marked a concrete step towards bridging the gap between the Allies. A solution to the Greek question and an agreement on Asia Minor seemed a remarkable result. Yet this short meeting had not changed the structural differences within the alliance.⁵⁹³ In particular, two issues remained on the table which would immediately prove momentous. The first was the absence of Russia. Sonnino did not realise how this would prejudice the entire agreement, although it was likely to be quite clear to the British and French. Rodd commented, not without a trace of disappointment, at being excluded:

With the Conference of St. Jean de Maurienne [...] I had nothing to do. My French colleague went there. But the conversations were confined to the three plenipotentiaries – Lloyd George, Ribot, and Sonnino. The latter returned very satisfied with the result, as well he might be. It did not occur to him

⁵⁸⁸ Lloyd George, *Memoirs...*, II, 1175-1188.

⁵⁸⁹ DDI, 5^a, VII, doc. 784, *cit.*

⁵⁹⁰ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 472.

⁵⁹¹ Sonnino, *Diario*, III, pp. 116-121.

⁵⁹² Imperiali, *Diario...*, 394.

⁵⁹³ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 473.

that the absence of the consent of Russia would invalidate the settlement so far as the other Powers were concerned [...]. I imagine, however, that it was present to the minds of many, who conducted these and similar negotiations, that the extreme claims advanced would never be realised. It was of great importance for Sonnino to be able to assert that he had the assurance that claims commensurate with those advanced by the other Allies would be recognised. In the end all these arrangements which aroused so much misgiving at the time were destined to be in many respects overridden by circumstances and the introduction of new factors unanticipated when they were being discussed.⁵⁹⁴

The second matter which remained open was the allied request for greater support from Italy in the war against Turkey. This request was in fact considered by the allied governments as a final condition to be placed on Italy, even if Sonnino rejected it point-blank. What appeared to be a diplomatic triumph for Italy⁵⁹⁵ would soon prove a Pyrrhic victory.

5.5 – The Paris Conference.

After the St. Jean de Maurienne meeting it quickly became clear that the colonial question was anything but resolved. Already on 24 April, Lloyd George, back in London, met Imperiali and repeated to him the request for “greater effort and co-operation against Turkey,” intended to relieve the pressure on Russia. On the 27th, Cecil made the same appeal to Imperiali.⁵⁹⁶ The ambassador noted that “Sonnino did not want to hear anything about conditions imposed on the acceptance of our demands for Asia Minor. And he is right. But here they appear obstinate.”⁵⁹⁷

On 29 April, Sonnino said the same to Rodd. The latter, however, confirmed the War Cabinet’s position.⁵⁹⁸ Sonnino replied that he wanted “to completely rule out the final proposal of the War Cabinet [...] that the realisation of Italian ambitions in Asia Minor should in any case be conditional on new and greater Italian co-operation against Turkey.” Sonnino also emphasised that neither the

⁵⁹⁴ Rodd, *Memories...*, III, 311.

⁵⁹⁵ See also the enthusiastic telegram which Sonnino forwarded to his ambassadors on 29 April, containing his report on the proceedings and outcome of the meeting. Imperiali, in turn, considered the agreement that was shaping for Asia Minor “satisfying”: DDI, 5^a, VII, doc. 851, Sonnino to Imperiali, Salvago Raggi, Carlotti, 29 April 1917; Imperiali, *Diario...*, 394.

⁵⁹⁶ DDI, 5^a, VII, doc. 849, Imperiali to Sonnino, 27 April, 1917.

⁵⁹⁷ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 396.

⁵⁹⁸ DDI, 5^a, VII, doc. 851, Sonnino to Imperiali, Salvago Raggi, Carlotti, 29 April, 1917.

Sykes-Picot nor the St. Jean de Maurienne agreements included any military clauses.⁵⁹⁹

The government in London re-stressed the criticism they had been making of Italy for years: that it was engaged only on fronts where Italy's direct interests were at stake. In short, it reproached Rome for fighting *la nostra guerra*. Sonnino rebutted this, with almost "English" irony:

The practical consequence of the British War Cabinet proposals, if accepted, would be that Italy should at the earliest withdraw from Salonika its current contingent of 40,000 men, as it is not aspiring to any part of Bulgaria or Macedonia, and transport it to Asia Minor.⁶⁰⁰

Rodd pointed out in his reports that Rome considered the discussion on Asia Minor closed; renewing it would worsen again the climate for bilateral co-operation. The British ambassador also emphasised that the Italian government and the Comando Supremo – usually at loggerheads – agreed on the impossibility of further engagement abroad.⁶⁰¹

The distance between the two governments widened on 30 April. In a conversation with Cecil, Imperiali repeated that Sonnino was adamant, and added that "the acceptance by the British government of our requests simply represents their performance of duties under the Treaty and so the balance of power cannot be subordinate to other additional consideration." Cecil responded by defending the good faith of his government, asserting it had always shown understanding for Italian interests in Asia Minor, unlike the other allies in the coalition.⁶⁰² A primarily Franco-Italian colonial dispute seemed to be turning into an Anglo-Italian one. Why did it now appear to be Britain, Italy's favoured partner, who was opposing Rome's position?

The clash between the Consulta and the Foreign Office sprang from the different concepts the two had of the Entente's political and military co-ordination. In London by this point all diplomatic steps were meant to achieve global co-operation dictated by the need to manage ominous developments in Russia. As Lloyd George repeated, there was "nothing which the British Government have closer at heart than the concerting of arrangements for co-operation between the Allies as will enable them to

⁵⁹⁹ Toscano, *Gli Accordi...*, 301-302.

⁶⁰⁰ DDI, 5^a, VII, doc. 851, *cit.*

⁶⁰¹ PRO FO, 371/2946/90926, Rodd to Balfour, 28 April, 1917; Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 502 ff.

⁶⁰² DDI, 5^a, VII, doc. 861, Imperiali to Sonnino, 1 May, 1917.

counteract the tremendous advantages which the enemy has obtained from a centralised control.”⁶⁰³ Cecil was explicit in claiming that Italy should be ready to make all efforts, and go beyond national interests to favour better inter-allied collaboration.⁶⁰⁴

For Rome things stood differently. Its main goal remained the realisation of Italian “legitimate” ambitions, contrasting what General Cadorna saw as a “clearly unfair and deliberately malevolent attitude towards Italy.” Italy had already made heavy sacrifices and did not intend to risk all on the military level, weakening its own front to save Russia, which Italy saw as unreliable.⁶⁰⁵

Unable to move Sonnino, Cecil met Imperiali on 8 May and informed him in no uncertain terms that “Russian consent [was] indispensable” to the St. Jean de Maurienne agreements.⁶⁰⁶ The British diplomat outlined two scenarios: the first, that the Russian government should oppose any annexation by any power anywhere; the second, that it should raise special objections determined by particular interests against particular points of the Anglo-Franco-Italian agreement. In the first scenario there would be a serious issue of principle which would put everything back into question; in the second, it would be enough for Italy and Russia to talk to each other to clarify matters in order to reach a final agreement.⁶⁰⁷

On 14 May, Lloyd George even asked: “What if, for argument’s sake, you should have to choose between Dalmatia and Asia Minor?” Imperiali, incredulous, telegraphed Sonnino and noted in his diary: “I recommend we move with caution. Slippery ground. If they start talking about revision in Italy, I shan’t be accountable for what happens. Let’s be careful we don’t smash the whole Alliance.”⁶⁰⁸ The ambassador in any case talked firmly to Cecil, waving at him the threat of an Italian separate peace with Germany: “Stay with your friends and do not nurture utopian hopes.” On a personal note, Imperiali added: “Cecil remarks that my language is ‘truculent.’ I reply that it is simply truthful and mirrors the general feeling of Italians. I do not trust Cecil. He’s an Utopian!!” The ambassador believed that if Sonnino did not go to Britain himself as soon as possible, “the French

⁶⁰³ Lloyd George, *Memoirs...*, I, 839.

⁶⁰⁴ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 503.

⁶⁰⁵ DDI, 5^a, VII, doc. 899, Cadorna to Sonnino, 5 May, 1917.

⁶⁰⁶ “I had predicted it!” was the Imperiali’s comment: Imperiali, *Diario...*, 402.

⁶⁰⁷ DDI, 5^a, VII, doc. 884, Imperiali to Sonnino, 8 May, 1917.

⁶⁰⁸ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 405; DDI, 5^a, VIII, doc. 60, Imperiali to Sonnino, 23 May, 1917.

would increasingly gain the upper hand.”

Sonnino realised that his political strategy, which had brought about the St. Jean de Maurienne agreement, was beginning to crack. To the British request for greater military co-operation was added French procrastination over the Franco-Italian talks over the Mersin frontier.⁶⁰⁹ Sonnino therefore had to accept a new inter-allied conference in Paris on 25 July 1917.

Imperiali opposed the new meeting, above all until the position of the Russian provisional government was clear. “I continue to believe that this conference is a dangerous mistake, given the situation in Russia, whose government cannot, without setting itself in strident contrast with the declarations and will of the triumphant revolutionary classes, participate in talks with ambitions of imperialistic annexation.”⁶¹⁰ Sonnino rejected the ambassador’s reservations and accepted the conference in France. But already there were signs that Italy would be going against the flow, as Rodd reveals:

The telegram inviting Sonnino to attend only reached him on the day on which he must have started in order to arrive in time. His engagements made it impossible for him to leave at a few hours’ notice. There was only one train a day, and the journey took thirty-six hours. This was certainly unfortunate since, though Italy was not one of the guaranteeing Powers, no step in regard to Greece had been taken without consulting her, and as the Ambassadors in Paris were not present in the meeting, her voice was not heard at all.⁶¹¹

The Consulta secretary-general, De Martino, saw “a tendency on the part of some ally to isolate Italy from the day to day running of international politics.” For the upcoming conference, the secretary urged Sonnino to seek again “greater opportunities for contact and co-operation with Britain whilst at the moment Britain is alone facing the turbulent activities of France so that Britain is forced to undertake continual agreements and negotiations.”⁶¹² De Martino still hoped that the Anglo-French axis was not so tight, and that the Italian delegation could take advantage of the tensions between the two powers to show Britain the greater advantage of preferential co-operation with Italy.⁶¹³ It was

⁶⁰⁹ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 505.

⁶¹⁰ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 403, 406-412.

⁶¹¹ Rodd, *Memories...*, 336-7.

⁶¹² DDI, 5^a, VIII, doc. 711, Relazione del Segretario agli Esteri De Martino, 22 July, 1917.

⁶¹³ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 514.

merely an illusion: Rodd's private papers clearly reveal London's intention of shaking the Consulta with a "carrot and stick" policy, welcoming a meeting with Sonnino, but not backing down at all from London's own vision for Asia Minor.⁶¹⁴

The Paris meeting fell into two stages. The first took place in the French capital with a series of sessions, in which representatives of minor powers also took part; the second coincided with Sonnino's long-awaited journey to London, and took place in the British capital, at which only the powers who had underwritten the Treaty of London were present. On the agenda was the Russian situation, the Balkan question, the long-standing issue of Asia Minor, and general Entente strategy.⁶¹⁵

The sessions which took place in Paris saw the French and British confronting each other, at times bitterly, on the question of reinforcements to be sent to Salonika. Also discussed were matters related to Italian policy in Epirus which the allies saw as threatening Venizelos, despite promises made at St. Jean de Maurienne. Sonnino promised that Italian occupation of Epirus would be purely provisional.⁶¹⁶

Whilst these, relatively minor issues were being resolved, Sonnino intensified his personal meetings outside the conference and managed to reach an agreement with France on the frontier around Mersin.⁶¹⁷ He managed also to set up private conversations with Lloyd George, who repeated his proposal for a huge joint offensive by the Anglo-Italian armies on the Carso.⁶¹⁸ The first part of the conference seemed positive. The only one who did not share the general optimism was Imperiali. Perhaps somewhat upset by the fact that his role was becoming less and less important the ambassador allowed himself more melancholy thoughts regarding the outcome of the Paris talks:

Hardinge tells me of the conclusions of the famous Paris Balkan conference. It is a grand distortion. And the world lets itself be taken in: newspapers are pouring rivers of ink to say how wonderfully important the decisions are: the importance lies only in the secrecy with which what is *not* said is surrounded. And so we go on and the poor people die, whilst the petty politicians (no longer the diplomats this time) *more solito* scoff at the public.⁶¹⁹

⁶¹⁴ Rodd papers, Cecil to Rodd, 22 May, 1917.

⁶¹⁵ DDI, 5^a, VIII, doc. 725, Verbale della Conferenza Interalleata, 25-26 July, 1917; Sonnino, *Diario...*, 162-168.

⁶¹⁶ Burgwyn, "Italy's Balkan Policy...", 59-61.

⁶¹⁷ *Ibid.*; DDI, 5^a, VIII, doc. 737, Salvago Raggi to Sonnino, 27 July, 1917.

⁶¹⁸ *Ibid.*, doc. 735, Note by Sonnino, 27 July, 1917; Toscano, *Gli Accordi...*, 335.

⁶¹⁹ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 426.

On the 28th, Sonnino reached London. The aim of his journey, which effectively produced a conference within the conference, was to deepen the question of allied co-operation against Austria-Hungary, and to find a solution for Russia, as well as to formalise the agreements on Asia Minor.⁶²⁰ It would also make it possible for Italy to recover its privileged relationship with Britain.

The first issue discussed this time was Russia. All agreed that the provisional government's overtures to Germany for a separate peace were unacceptable and it was a priority to push the Russians to stay loyal to the alliance and continue the fight. The other Entente powers decided to send a fairly mild message which, however, demanded rapid restoration of discipline in the Russian army and the resumption of the offensive as quickly as possible.⁶²¹

The second matter was Lloyd George's renewed offer of British troops, in particular artillery for the Italian front. This was particularly important in view of the imminent reinforcement of the Austrian lines following the Russian rout. Sonnino had finally decided to support the British prime minister's plan, and even Ribot admitted that "it was mistaken to perforce consider the Anglo-French front as the main one," a view for which he blamed Joffre.⁶²² The problem was that the allies were willing to disengage some forces from the western front only if a decisive victory against Austria-Hungary was anticipated. Sonnino could not guarantee that the outcome would be decisive, in view of the insurmountable difficulties encountered on the Carso until that moment. At the same time he realised that offers from British and French politicians were one thing, approval from their generals quite different. Sonnino therefore proposed using allied reinforcements to strengthen the Italian army and continue the war of attrition from a stronger position. The French did not agree.⁶²³ There was also a discrepancy on the timing of the offensive, for Lloyd George wanted it to be launched by autumn, and Sonnino did not believe the Austrian front would be broken before the following spring. So, in the final document drawn up at the end of the talks, the need for artillery reinforcements for Italy was

⁶²⁰ DDI, 5^a, VIII, doc. 809, Verbale della Conferenza Interalleata, 7-8 August, 1917; Sonnino, *Diario...*, 169-178; ADMAEF, Guerre 1914-1918, Dossier Général, vol. 997/27-31.

⁶²¹ *Ibid.*, vol. 997/31, *cit.*; Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 519 ff.

⁶²² Imperiali, *Diario...*, 429.

⁶²³ Lloyd George also insisted: "The best policy is for the Allies to try really to crush Austria": DDI, 5^a, VIII, doc. 809. *cit.*

recognised but the statement remained vague.⁶²⁴

The next stage considered, yet again, Asia Minor. Sonnino, accompanied by Aldrovandi, had already had a rather troubled meeting with Imperiali on 29 July. They had spoken of the amendments requested by the other allies and Aldrovandi had rebuked Imperiali for being “too timid.” The ambassador retorted in a fit of pique, noting, with scathing irony, that Aldrovandi “with that mixture of foolishness, presumption and tactlessness” which was “typical” of him “gets irritated because here on Sundays they don’t do anything.” As regards Asia Minor, none of the allied diplomats any longer favoured those personal side-talks on which Sonnino and Imperiali counted to re-establish a privileged relationship with the British. “It’s not working like this,” remarked Imperiali. “Time is being wasted and Sonnino is losing his patience. If we go on like this, Sonnino’s trip, instead of a success, will be a disaster.”

Not until 8 August was a joint memorandum signed which finally established Italian rights in Asia Minor. Sonnino managed to defend the bulk of the St. Jean de Maurienne agreement, promising that Smyrna, although passing to Italy, would remain a free port. Ribot however opposed exclusion of Russian consent to the agreement, so that Sonnino’s real objective, releasing the agreement from Russian approval, was not reached. Imperiali begged Sonnino not to give in to the French, but “despite the force of my plea, Sonnino became irritated and did not insist.” Imperiali’s conclusion was in stark contrast to the foreign minister’s satisfaction: “He’ll regret it!”

Imperiali, although more and more overshadowed, was aware that the results of August 1917 were more nominal than real. He noted on 18 August: “We have at last exchanged with Balfour the famous notes for the no less famous and prickly question of Asia Minor. Now, though, let’s see what revolutionary Russia will say, and, considering its likely refusal, what France and Britain will do to place their respective agreements on as fair a footing as ours.”⁶²⁵ As he foresaw, the issue would flare up even more violently at the end of the war.

To conclude the analysis of Anglo-Italian diplomatic relations in 1917, we should consider the growing internal instability in the Italian government. The opening of the summer session of the

⁶²⁴ Sonnino, *Diario*..., 180-181; Riccardi, *Alleati*..., 520.

⁶²⁵ Imperiali, *Diario*..., 426, 429, 433.

Chamber of Deputies revealed the contrast between the two best known cabinet members, Sonnino and Leonida Bissolati. Notwithstanding a much-applauded speech by the foreign minister, the government had gradually split over the basic choices in foreign policy.⁶²⁶ On the one side, Bissolati, minister of military assistance and war pensions, was the soul of democratic interventionism, who breathed his Risorgimento-like message into the policy of nationalities, sponsored by Wilson.⁶²⁷ On the other, Sonnino was the representative of a policy of power, prepared in 1915 with strategic priorities that now, with the appearance on the scene of the “social revolution” and US “new diplomacy,” combined with the strengthening of national sentiment among the Balkan peoples, were likely to be doomed.⁶²⁸

In the middle were men like Imperiali and a few young deputies such as Francesco Saverio Nitti, who understood, from different viewpoints, the importance of integrating the two centrifugal forces within the government and, more generally, in Italian diplomacy.⁶²⁹ Imperiali actually remained an exponent of the aristocratic party, to which Sonnino also belonged, but his diplomatic intuition pushed him to suggestions (rarely heeded) which corrected the intransigent policy of the foreign minister. The younger deputies with the more modern ideas, such as Nitti, tended to support Bissolati, even though for the moment this support was not being rallied against the Boselli government. Such politicians had realised that the Entente was changing: and Italy needed to adapt.⁶³⁰

The two groups – those who sponsored the “policy of power” and those who supported the “new diplomacy” – gradually overlapped, and this unlikely “union” formed the heart of political relations between Italy and Britain in the final, decisive, year of the conflict.

⁶²⁶ For Sonnino’s speech see: Sonnino, *Discorsi Parlamentari* (Rome: Tipografia della Camera dei Deputati, 1925), 564-568.

⁶²⁷ Martini, *Diario...*, 931-933.

⁶²⁸ A government which lived in such a difficult situation could hardly operate incisively and this further raised perplexity in the allies. See, for example, Barrère’s opinion in: ADMAEF, *Guerre 1914-1918, Italie*, vol. 557/51, Barrère to Ribot, 13 June, 1917.

⁶²⁹ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 516 ff.

⁶³⁰ Nitti, for example, expressed his ideas to Sonnino for the most part privately by letter, inviting him to embrace Entente co-operation with greater conviction: DDI, 5^a, VIII, doc. 718, Nitti to Sonnino, 23 July, 1917.

5.6 – From the Adriatic to the Mediterranean.

1917 was the year in which the Allies tried to cement co-ordination in the Mediterranean. The submarine menace had grown in 1916 despite all the efforts of the Allies to counter it.⁶³¹ The British set out to reinforce their co-operation with the Italians (from both a military and commercial point of view) with three main objectives: to make the Mediterranean and its trading routes safe from attack, to progressively take away the naval command of the French, and to enforce the blockade on the Central Powers.

Success in the anti-submarine war in the Mediterranean, on which the protection of trading routes between Italy and Africa was reliant, was seen by the British commanders as being closely linked to the strategy adopted on the Strait of Otranto, through which German submarines continued to pass. Therefore, they devised a single strategical vision to address both the problems.⁶³²

At the end of October 1916, at the Taranto conference, the French proposed to shift the drifter line northwards, but the British and the Italians considered the position too vulnerable and rejected the proposal.⁶³³ Instead, the Italians proposed an extensive fixed barrage at Otranto.⁶³⁴ The British were unhappy with this proposal as well, as they had little faith in fixed obstacles and favoured a “mobile barrage” based on the drifters. Discussions regarding the best strategy continued for months and generated much frustration between the British naval commanders. Italian efficiency, particularly in regard to gunnery, also continued to cause concern.⁶³⁵

A ship’s lieutenant, Edward W. Parry, noted in his diary that the British mission in the Adriatic seemed to be lacking an aim:

I can’t make out exactly what our job is here. If we met the Austrians, our opposite numbers would be the “Radetzky” who are considerably more modern, faster, and better armed than us. If the French fleet is there as well as the Italian, there is no job for us at all. I’m afraid we are only left here [...] in

⁶³¹ Limpus MSS, Thursby to Limpus, 20 May, 1916.

⁶³² Halpern, *Royal Navy...*, 65 ff.

⁶³³ Jackson MSS, Kerr to Jackson, 4 November, 1916.

⁶³⁴ PRO ADM 137/1414, Kerr to Admiralty, 20 April, 1917.

⁶³⁵ The Italian policy of keeping their capital ships in the ports in order to reduce losses was also highly criticised by the British: “Their fleet, [...] can’t be really efficient after sitting a year in Taranto”: Lieutenant W. E. Parry, *Diary*, Parry MSS 71/19/1, 14 November, 1916. Quoted by Halpern, *Royal Navy...*, 186.

order to buck –up the Anglo-Italian Alliance. [...] But it is not much job to have in the biggest war there has ever been; and I'm afraid [...] that there is not much enthusiasm about anything.

The commander, Algernon Heneage, started to believe that the British force could be better used elsewhere, and he wrote a letter to the first sea lord, Admiral Jellicoe, suggesting the withdrawal of the British ships from Taranto.

Three results would accrue: 1) We should be able to afford much better protection to our communications for the army in Egypt. 2) We should gain a number of patrol craft for safeguarding our commerce in home waters. 3) We should free a large amount of shipping to be used for building up a reserve of food and for supplying our allies with coal and other necessaries.⁶³⁶

At the London Conference (23-24 January 1917) it was agreed to pay off the British battleships employed in the Mediterranean to provide crews for new ships. In order to meet Italian objections, the French promised that a squadron of French battleships would be constantly available at Corfu.⁶³⁷ The first result of the British withdrawal, therefore, was the strengthening of French naval influence. The sheer size of the French fleet in Corfu and the lack of ships available to the Italians to put in place for the blockade would lead to the French controlling operations:⁶³⁸ an outcome which would be as unpopular with the British as with the Italians. A compromise between London and Rome managed to prevent such an outcome, maintaining and also strengthening the British influence on operations at the mouth of the Adriatic regardless of the reduction in terms of vessels: a British commodore (Heneage) would be put in command of the Otranto patrol system under the general supervision of the Italian command, with the right to call on allied support when necessary. British control of the blockade, furthermore, should have enabled the application of a combined strategy.⁶³⁹

On 15 May 1917, however, the Austrians planned their largest raid in the Adriatic. Instead of bombarding Italian coastal towns, they moved south to attack the Otranto line. The three best Austro-Hungarian cruisers, *Novara*, *Helgoland*, *Saida*, attacked by night and sank 14 drifters out of a total of

⁶³⁶ PRO CAB 24/10, Memorandum by Jellicoe to the War Cabinet, 17 April, 1917.

⁶³⁷ PRO ADM, 137/1420, Report of Allied Naval Conference, London, 23-24 January 1917.

⁶³⁸ Halpern, *Royal Navy...*, 209 ff.

⁶³⁹ Churchill Archives Centre, Cambridge (CAC), De Robeck MSS, DRBK, 4/39, Heneage to De Robeck, 3 April, 1917.

47 in the line – 4 more were damaged. The allied reaction was slow and confused, and the Austrians managed to escape. The difficulties of commanding a multinational force were demonstrated once again.⁶⁴⁰ The British realised that, until they could provide destroyers to protect the drifters, the line was likely to be raided again. The destroyers were not available, so the Admiralty ordered the drifters to be withdrawn, thereby making the barrage even less effective.⁶⁴¹

Rome had other concerns as well. The limitation of Italian rail traffic increased the importance of coastal shipping which had to be protected.⁶⁴² The Italians repeated their request for faster British cruisers in the Adriatic with the argument that Italy was alone in the Mediterranean in being in close contact with a modern naval force, in the upper Adriatic. Furthermore, the entry of the USA into the war in April had resulted in the arrival at Queenstown of American destroyers, and Japanese destroyers had also reached the Mediterranean: the Italians felt that, given these reinforcements, the Royal Navy should have been able to provide more assistance.⁶⁴³ The British pointed out that the American destroyers had not reinforced the British fleet in the North Sea, but were engaged in defending British and allied trade in the Atlantic, while the Japanese destroyers were fully occupied escorting troopships in the Mediterranean. The Royal Navy could not, therefore, spare anything more for the Adriatic.⁶⁴⁴

After the reshuffle at the Admiralty in the summer of 1917 Rosslyn Wemyss became second sea lord – and would become first sea lord at the end of the year – and the Mediterranean command went to Vice-Admiral Sir Somerset Gough-Calthorpe.⁶⁴⁵ He proposed to the Admiralty a renewed anti-submarine offensive in the Adriatic, which would need a large increase in the numbers of British aircraft to attack the enemy bases, and to search for and attack submarines at sea. The development of hydrophone hunting flotillas in place of the netting drifters, which had proved a comparative failure, was also crucial: “Without wishing to detract from good work done by our air squadron in the Aegean

⁶⁴⁰ Halpern, *Naval History...*, 162.

⁶⁴¹ *Ibid.*; ADM 137/782, Kerr to Admiralty, 21 May, 1917.

⁶⁴² Halpern, *Royal Navy...*, 213 ff.

⁶⁴³ FO 371/2946, Memorandum from Imperiali, 26 June, 1917.

⁶⁴⁴ FO 371/2946, W Graham Greene to Foreign Office, 6 July, 1917; Halpern, *Royal Navy...*, 214.

⁶⁴⁵ National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, Fremantle MSS, FRE/301, Memorandum of Conference at the Admiralty, 14 August, 1917.

it appears to be vastly more important that the Adriatic should have every preference as regards disposal of personnel or material," he concluded. Calthorpe had particular difficulty in persuading the Italians to pool their resources which were already stretched to the limit.⁶⁴⁶

Calthorpe's plans would only be implemented very late in 1918. For the moment, the Otranto barrage was a failure. With the central Mediterranean now more open than ever to German submarines, inter-allied naval co-operation took on a new dimension. Anglo-Italian naval collaboration focused on the defence of the commercial routes from Egypt to Italy and from Libya to Italy.

The strategy for the defence of the central Mediterranean had been discussed at a conference in Paris in December 1915, when 18 patrol zones were delineated. They proved impractical, primarily because neither the French nor the Italians could effectively patrol all the areas allotted to them.⁶⁴⁷

The Malta conference, 2-9 March 1916, reduced the number of zones to 11, and adopted the principle of fixed patrolled routes for maritime traffic. The routes would be established by the French commander-in-chief, with each nation responsible for the patrol of its own zones.⁶⁴⁸ Limpus considered the conference a success because it confirmed each allied zone's freedom of interference from the French commander-in-chief.⁶⁴⁹ The British hoped this would make the French supreme command in the Mediterranean one in name only.⁶⁵⁰ The conference also recommended that the French fleet shift from overcrowded Malta to Argostoli, where it would be in a better position to intercept the Austrian fleet if it ever came out. Limpus, in particular, was worried that the Salonika base might be exposed to attack as he doubted that the Italian forces at Taranto would be able to catch Austrian raiding forces.⁶⁵¹

⁶⁴⁶ ADM 137/1413, Calthorpe to Admiralty, 28 October, 1917; Halpern, *Royal Navy...*, 215.

⁶⁴⁷ The Navy Records Society, *The Keyes Papers*, 3 vols. (London: Allen & Unwin, 1979), I, Halpern (ed.), doc. 135, Commodore Keyes to his wife, 30 December 1915, 299.

⁶⁴⁸ See: De Robeck MSS, DRBK 4/36, Limpus to De Robeck, 26 January, 1916; *ibid.*, 4/31, Jackson to De Robeck, 28 January, 1916; Jackson MSS, Limpus to Jackson, 2 February, 1916; De Robeck MSS, DRBK 4/36, Limpus to De Robeck, 9 February, 1916; *ibid.*, Limpus to De Robeck, 16 February, 1916; Limpus MSS, De Robeck to Limpus, 16 February, 1916; De Robeck MSS, DRBK 4/36, Limpus to De Robeck, 23 February, 1916.

⁶⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 7/70, De Robeck to Jackson, 8 March, 1916.

⁶⁵⁰ Halpern, *Royal Navy...*, 210.

⁶⁵¹ Jackson MSS, Thursby to Jackson, 10 March, 1916; Limpus MSS, Webb to Limpus, 14 March, 1916.

The fact that command in the Mediterranean, however nominal, remained in French hands was a disadvantage. Admirals Limpus and Wemyss, and Vice-Admiral Thursby were critical of French anti-submarine methods.⁶⁵² They repeatedly asked for more anti-submarine craft, which were never available.⁶⁵³ In December 1916 Wemyss proposed a system of convoys for at least slow vessels, but the French commander-in-chief did not agree.⁶⁵⁴

As Paul Halpern noted, this highlighted the main problem of the allied naval war in the Mediterranean: the lack of unity. Whether in anti-submarine warfare or co-ordination against Austrian raiding forces, it resulted in a substantial waste of resources.⁶⁵⁵

The crisis brought about by the introduction of unrestricted submarine warfare in 1917 caused major changes in the Entente naval strategy in the Mediterranean. The Admiralty decided to try a new formula to counter the submarine menace. On 11 January 1917 it ordered that the discredited system of fixed patrolled routes be abandoned for British ships. In the western basin, British shipping would keep as close to the shore as possible; west of Cape Bon, they would “spread as widely as possible,” keeping well clear of Malta if not actually bound there.⁶⁵⁶

The naval conference held in London on 23-24 January 1917, among its many decisions, approved the British proposal and extended it to all allied shipping in the western basin; in the eastern basin, however, there would be a trial of the two systems. The French scheme of fixed patrol routes, frequently changed, would be used for traffic in the Aegean, while “dispersion” would be used between Cape Bon and Port Said.⁶⁵⁷ In March it was clear that the experiment of dispersion had not worked any better than fixed routes, and their combination was even worse.⁶⁵⁸

The Allies met again for a conference at Corfu on 28 April-1 May, in the battleship *Provence* – flagship of French Commander-in-Chief Gauchet. They established a central authority in Malta, made

⁶⁵² Jackson MSS, Thursby to Jackson, 3 August, 1916; Miller MSS, Wemyss to Jackson, 23 August, 1916; Jellicoe MSS, ADD MSS 49035, Thursby to Jellicoe, 30 November 1916.

⁶⁵³ Jackson MSS, Limpus to Jackson, 2 August, 1916; Limpus MSS, Kerr to Limpus, 10 September, 1916; Jackson MSS, Kerr to Jackson, 27 October, 1916.

⁶⁵⁴ ADM 137/1230, Wemyss to Admiralty, 13 December, 1916.

⁶⁵⁵ Halpern, *Naval History...*, 162.

⁶⁵⁶ PRO, ADM, 137/1412, Minute by Admiralty War Staff (O.D.) 10 January, 1917; *ibid.*, Admiralty to Mediterranean Authorities, 11 January, 1917; *ibid.*, Admiralty to C-in-C East Indies, 17 January, 1917.

⁶⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 137/1420, Agenda and Conclusions, Allied Naval Conference, London, 23-24 January 1917.

⁶⁵⁸ Halpern, *Naval History...*, 390.

up of representatives of allied navies to arrange for transport routes and escorts. Thursby proposed that it would be convenient to have a British commander-in-chief under the overall French commander-in-chief, to co-ordinate the activities of the far-flung British commands in the Mediterranean.⁶⁵⁹ Gauchet accepted the proposal, as he believed it would be easier to deal with one British authority rather than many. Halpern underlined that, in practice, the institution of a British commander-in-chief combined with the establishment of the Malta central authority opened the way for Britain to assume the major role in the direction of the anti-submarine war.⁶⁶⁰

Calthorpe also strongly endorsed the convoy system.⁶⁶¹ Convoys followed new routes, and frequently changed them, in the way that proved successful in the Atlantic: Gibraltar-Genoa, to provide Italy with coal; Egypt-Malta-Naples; Libya-Taranto; France-North Africa. The new strategy was extended quite slowly throughout the Mediterranean. Many convoys continued to be escorted at least partially by trawlers rather than sloops or destroyers, and the scale of escort was often below the recommended minimum.⁶⁶² Halpern noted, quite rightly, that it would be too simplistic to conclude that Calthorpe and the Admiralty recognised the introduction of convoys as a turning-point which gave the Allies the upper hand in the submarine war.⁶⁶³ In reality, this view came only with hindsight; it was much less clear to contemporaries, and Calthorpe's telegrams to the Admiralty prove it.⁶⁶⁴ Nevertheless, convoys proved effective and shipping losses began to decline.

Even though the anti-submarine strategy became more successful, thus guaranteeing the growing domination of the Allies in the Mediterranean, the British hope of being able to strengthen the economic war against the Central Powers by including Italy in the blockade system was met by bitter disappointment.

Italy soon found itself in an extremely difficult economic situation. Its fragile economy until 1915 had been based overwhelmingly on commerce with Germany and now it had to be converted into an economy based on its links with Britain, while simultaneously adapting to a war economy. This dual

⁶⁵⁹ PRO, ADM, 137/1421, Minutes of the Corfu Conference, 28 April – 1 May, 1917.

⁶⁶⁰ Halpern, *Naval History...*, 391.

⁶⁶¹ ADM 137/1412, Ballard to Admiralty, 21 August 1917.

⁶⁶² ADM, 137/2178, Calthorpe to Admiralty, 28 November, 1917.

⁶⁶³ Halpern, *Royal Navy...*, 192.

⁶⁶⁴ ADM, 137/1413, Calthorpe to Admiralty, 27 November, 1917.

and brisk change extenuated Italy's difficulties. In the five years preceding the war, Italian exports covered less than two thirds of imports, the most important of which were foodstuffs, fuels, and virtually every mineral used in industry – most needed in the war effort – other than mercury and sulphur.⁶⁶⁵ This was not a problem in peacetime but it became a problem in wartime because the inflows that covered this deficit dried up; remittances, which covered about 40%, fell by three quarters in real terms from 1913 to 1918. Britain also suffered food shortage and had to import essential industrial raw materials. However, the British balance of payments included important inflows from large foreign assets accumulated over the previous century. At the war's outbreak Britain was the world's largest capital exporter precisely because its trade deficit was more than covered by invisibles and investment income. In contrast, Italy was a net capital importer before a single shot was fired, and the problem of financing Italy's wartime imports became crucial.⁶⁶⁶

Total imports declined between 1916 and 1917. A significant part was attributed to a drop of 33.9% in imports of fossil fuels at constant prices. Italian wartime needs, as calculated by the Rome government in 1916, amounted to 17,000 quintals per day of wheat, 300 quintals of pasta and rice, 1000 of cheese 1500 of potatoes, 7500 of meat, to mention only the main goods. In the same year war-related goods totalled 100,000 tonnes of cement, 60,000 metal poles and barbed wire, 30,000 cubic metres of timber – and that amount increased steadily in the following years. The closing of the Dardanelles prevented Italy from obtaining grain from Russia and Romania.⁶⁶⁷

In May 1917, the Italian mission to Washington argued that, without increases in coal deliveries from the allies, “Italy would soon be out of the war.”⁶⁶⁸ Although the interruption in German supplies appears to have stimulated some import substitution, the short-term difficulties were considerable.⁶⁶⁹

⁶⁶⁵ D.J. Forsyth, *The Crisis of Liberal Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 321.

⁶⁶⁶ P. Jannacone, *La bilancia del dare e dell' avere internazionale con particolare riguardo all'Italia. Prezzi e mercati* (Turin: Einaudi, 1951), 319; Galassi and Harrison, “Italy at War...,” 4, 18.

⁶⁶⁷ Einaudi, *Condotta economica...*, 59.

⁶⁶⁸ A. Monticone, *Nitti e la Grande Guerra* (Milan: Angeli, 1961). Lack of coal led to several steel furnaces being shut down during the last 12 months of the war: Caracciolo, “La crescita e la trasformazione della grande industria durante la prima guerra mondiale,” in G. Fuà (ed.), *Lo sviluppo economico in Italia* (Milan: Angeli, 1969), 203; Galassi and Harrison, “Italy at War...,” pp. *cit.*

⁶⁶⁹ V. Zamagni, *The economic history of Italy, 1860-1990* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 227-9.

Britain's main aim, that of replacing Germany as Italy's principal trading partner, was easily achieved as Italy had no alternative. Before the war the Central Powers as a whole provided almost a quarter of all goods imported into Italy. During the war Great Britain, India and Egypt provided from 25.9 to 28.3% (and the United States from 40.7 to 42.7%). This change was also noticeable in the switching of traffic from the Adriatic to the Tyrrhenian seas. Between 1914-15 and 1915-16 the cargo that reached Venice fell by 84.24%, Ancona by 84.77%, and Brindisi by 83.75%. The ports of the Tyrrhenian sea showed increases: 28% at Genova, 67.36% at Savona, 49.37% at Livorno, 33.72% at La Spezia, 47.43% at Civitavecchia, 43.36% at Naples, and 29.26% at Torre Annunziata.⁶⁷⁰

However, two huge problems remained. First, Italian dependence on maritime trade awakened worries in Rome. Italy was not able to sustain a huge merchant fleet. The substantial increase in the amount of tonnage devoted to meeting Italian supply needs tended to strengthen the Italian reluctance to pool their limited anti-submarine resources for convoys.⁶⁷¹ Secondly, the drop in imports was also accompanied by a collapse of exports. In 1914 exports covered 75.6% of imports, but the figure fell to 53.9% in 1915, 38.6% in 1916, 21.9% in 1917 and 20% in 1918. Italy was not selling anymore – all the nation's efforts were put into the production of the wherewithal required by both the civilians and the army. The consequent lack of income caused serious financial problems by 1917.⁶⁷² It was not easy to find a favourable market that was able to partially resolve this. Those of the allied countries were almost all already saturated. Therefore, the only other option was to turn to the neutral countries.⁶⁷³

For this reason Italy kept tight trading relations with Switzerland, Holland, Denmark and Sweden – countries which were either directly or indirectly under German influence. Through these countries Italian products still reached Germany, ruining months and months of effort by the other countries of the Entente to strengthen the blockade of the Central Powers.⁶⁷⁴

⁶⁷⁰ Einaudi, *Condotta economica...*, 64, 90.

⁶⁷¹ Halpern, *Naval History...*, 143.

⁶⁷² Einaudi, *Condotta economica...*, 85.

⁶⁷³ Crespi, *Alla difesa...*, 127.

⁶⁷⁴ For the development of British policy of blockade see: E.W. Osborne, *Britain's Economic Blockade of Germany 1914-1919* (London and New York: Frank Cass, 2004).

Italy, in theory, was bound by the conclusions of the Paris Economic Conference, signed by the Allies in June 1916. It provided uniform laws and regulations prohibiting trade with all persons, firms and companies in neutral countries “subject to enemy influence.” The names of such persons, firms and companies in neutral countries, like those of enemy subjects, were to be included in “a special list,” the so-called Black List.⁶⁷⁵ However, Italy sought various *escamotages* to maintain its commercial relations with neutral countries so as to secure its own economic survival.

British recriminations were related to particular goods like silk and cotton: Italy had agreed at least to limit cotton exports, but it did export silk to the countries of the Baltic sea basin which then exported it to Germany. The result, as Cecil explained to Rodd in mid-January 1917, was that the German textile industry managed to deal with the lack of cotton by replacing it with silk.⁶⁷⁶ The British were even more frustrated that Italian exports were sometimes being sent to neutrals regardless of the need for the same products in the countries of the Entente. The case of sulphur is symptomatic:

Both we and the French are in the need of sulphur, and when we ask for it from the Italians we are told that they have not enough to give us. Meanwhile they insist on continuing to export sulphur to Sweden, where it is vehemently suspected to be used for the manufacture of articles which are subsequently exported to Germany, or at least where it takes the place of other sulphur which is used for this purpose.

In some cases, Rome openly violated the Paris economic agreements. The fact that Italian exports considered to be luxury goods, such as wine, for example, were sold to neutrals was yet another reason for British complaints. The discovery that Italian wines still reached Germany infuriated Cecil:

We have reasons to suppose that Germany is very short of alcohol [...]. We have therefore after considerable trouble induced the French and the Spaniards to agree that the import of their wines into Denmark and Holland shall be subject to rationing and other guarantees. The Italians have just concluded an agreement with the Danes by which their wines are to go into Denmark free. It is very difficult for us here to understand the working of a belligerent mind that does these things.

Rodd retorted that the Italian government was acting in this way in order to survive, and that it was the trading restrictions themselves, that had been put in place by the British through financial and

⁶⁷⁵ Brown Scott, *Economic Conference...*, 847.

⁶⁷⁶ Rodd papers, Cecil to Rodd, 17 January 1917.

commercial treaties with Italy, that had pushed Rome to trade with the markets that gave better prices.⁶⁷⁷ Cecil replied that the behaviour of Rome deeply irritated London and that the Italians, “however excusable they may be,” were putting “the blockade in great difficulties.” In a telegram dated 12 February Cecil gave another emblematic example, that of oranges:

When I find that Italian oranges are being imported from Germany into Copenhagen at a lower price than they can import them from Spain, it makes it very difficult for me to resist the Spanish demand for an unrestricted import from that country. Or again with regard to sulphur. If the Italians refuse, as they have refused [...], to insist on the same guarantees being given about their sulphur, which we insist on for sulphur coming from America, our position becomes exceedingly difficult. The same consideration applies to wines and silk.⁶⁷⁸

The British complaints continued in the following months. The blockade by the Italians proved porous not only at sea but also on land. In April a huge controversy broke out over the dealings of the Italian representatives in Bern: according to the British, they did nothing to guarantee with the Swiss government that Italian exports were being used exclusively in Switzerland without being then exported into Germany.

Sonnino replied shortly to the criticism, stating that the accusation that Italy was not participating with the necessary determination was incorrect: the Italian chemical industry, which had just taken off thanks to wartime industrial mobilisation, desperately needed Swiss chemical components to keep going, as the British were not in a condition to provide them. Cecil noted to Rodd that Sonnino “was missing the point”:

We do not complain that the Italians refuse to be dragged by us into a “forward” blockade policy as regards Switzerland, nor that, when we are sometimes in favour of drastic actions, they are sometimes in favour of compromise. [...] What we do complain is [...] that, as regards the carrying out of the details of an agreed policy, their representatives at Berne have consistently shown not merely slackness and incapacity, but willful obstructiveness. [...] From the point of view of the effectiveness of the blockade it is obviously more important that the Italian representative at Berne [...] should be a man who is both a persona grata with the Swiss and able to work harmoniously with the British and

⁶⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, Rodd to Balfour, 29 January, 1917.

⁶⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, Cecil to Rodd, 12 February 1917.

French delegates; yet the Italian Government [...] have shown no inclination to remove this person as to whose incompetency there appears to be general agreement.⁶⁷⁹

The British became convinced that the only way to limit the damage to the blockade caused indirectly by Italy was to create a ministry in Rome which would specifically deal with the inter-allied co-ordination of this crucial aspect of the war:

Indeed a new organisation at Rome, which should control the customs and licensing authorities, and be more or less independent of the less reliable elements in the Italian administration, seems to me to hold out the only chance of striking at the root of the system of frauds on the Italian-Swiss frontier.⁶⁸⁰

Despite the British pressure such a ministry was never created. Under the Boselli and Orlando governments a Ministry for Rail and Maritime Transport (Ministero dei Trasporti Marittimi e Ferroviari)⁶⁸¹ was set up to better supervise exports and imports; the Italian Black List was eventually created, and progressively updated, but nothing else. This was the only field of inter-allied relations on which neither pressures from the British nor the progressive loss of financial and military autonomy of Italy had any real effect.

The British strategy of making the Mediterranean a key sector in which to exert the supremacy of the Entente thanks to the entrance into the field of Italy only partially succeeded. In military terms, the Allies managed – gradually – to win the war against the German submarines, therefore making the trading routes safe. Italy's trading policy, however, remained a threat to the effectiveness of the blockade. It did not compromise its success but it did slow down its effects.

⁶⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, Cecil to Rodd, April 15, 1918.

⁶⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, Heverton Hamis [?] to Rodd, 7 May 1918.

⁶⁸¹ Under Boselli: Minister Enrico Arlotto, then Ivanoe Bonomi, then Riccardo Bianchi. Under Orlando: Minister Riccardo Bianchi, then Giovanni Villa, then Giuseppe De Nada.

Part II

(Autumn 1917-Autumn 1918)

1. The Crisis.

1.1 – The End of Military Autonomy for Italy.

The battle of Caporetto (24 October-12 November 1917) was one of the most traumatic moments in Italian history and severely tested the very unity of the country. The defeat brought about a dramatic shift in Italy's position within the Entente, impacting particularly on the goals of the Anglo-Italian alliance. On the one hand, Caporetto signalled the end of Italy's military and political autonomy. On the other, Britain's objectives for the alliance shifted somewhat: previously the aim was to involve Italy in a wider war; now, Britain would have to concentrate on keeping Italy in the war.

To understand how first military and then political independence was lost, Caporetto must be set in the broader context of Entente strategy in the autumn of 1917. As the situation in Russia kept deteriorating, Britain and France pressed Italy to mount a new "relief" offensive before the onset of the winter.⁶⁸² Cadorna at first appeared to be in favour of such a measure, but then he changed his mind: the Russian crisis favoured the transfer of Austro-Hungarian forces to the Italian front, and a counter-attack seemed likely. Caution was advised,⁶⁸³ and Cadorna's decision to order the Italian army to take up defensive positions and to postpone any offensive to the following spring was notified to the British on 21 September to their "equal surprise and concern."⁶⁸⁴ Britain was even more annoyed because sixteen British heavy artillery batteries had just moved to Italy to support the Italian offensive.

The decision to move the guns had been taken the previous spring at the conference in Rome and it was confirmed at an Anglo-French conference in August after months of delay. Of the 300 heavy guns

⁶⁸² Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 538 ff.

⁶⁸³ Sonnino, *Carteggio...*, Cadorna to Giardino, 18 September 1917.

⁶⁸⁴ PRO FO 371/2947/184450, Balfour to Erskine, 21 September, 1917.

mentioned by Lloyd George in Rome, 100 were actually sent.⁶⁸⁵ They were the first foreign troops to arrive on the Italian front. This aspect of allied co-operation in Italy is often ignored: it actually began *before* Caporetto, not *after*.

Now that reinforcements had arrived, Cadorna's decision to postpone the offensive left the British with the feeling they had been misled. As Balfour wrote to William Erskine, *chargé d'affaires* in Rome, "it was solely to assist an early Italian offensive that the French and British governments consented to send a hundred heavy guns from the Western front where they are sorely needed."⁶⁸⁶ Erskine communicated in full to Sonnino,⁶⁸⁷ who, according to Erskine, denied all responsibility, claiming that it was a purely military matter.⁶⁸⁸ The Italian government, despite its frequent disagreements with Cadorna, stood by its chief of staff's decision.⁶⁸⁹ Cadorna informed the heads of the allied missions on 23 September that he confirmed his order of the 21st that the offensive be postponed. The tone of this communiqué was unusually harsh and critical of the allied chiefs: "As regards reinforcements [consisting of] one hundred heavy guns supplied by the allies, [...] I cannot have my general decisions conditioned by the presence of this artillery or otherwise on our front lines." Cadorna concluded that, with Austro-Hungarian reinforcements arriving in Italy from the Russian front, British artillery was required to defend the advances made in the earlier offensive (the 11th battle of the Isonzo).⁶⁹⁰

On 25 September, Lloyd George and the new head of the French government, Painlevé, who had been in power barely a week, met at Boulogne to consider the Italian position.⁶⁹¹ Both agreed that the guns had been granted to Italy for offensive purposes and any other use would entail their

⁶⁸⁵ ADMAEF, Guerre 1914-1918, Italie, vol. 578/109-110, Notes on an Anglo-French Conference, 4 September, 1917.

⁶⁸⁶ PRO FO 371/2947/184450, *cit.*

⁶⁸⁷ DDI, 5^a, vol. IX, doc. 101, Sonnino to Cadorna, 22 September, 1917.

⁶⁸⁸ PRO FO, 371/2947/184450, Erskine to Balfour, 22 September, 1917.

⁶⁸⁹ "[...] The recent, continuous build-up of enemy artillery and forces on our front obliges us to take up a defensive position and, at the same time, demands careful management of our not too plentiful reserves of ammunition." See: Melograni, *Storia politica...*, 351-355; Orlando, *Memorie...*, 56-57.

⁶⁹⁰ DDI, 5^a, vol. IX, doc. 121, Sonnino to Borghese, 26 September, 1917.

⁶⁹¹ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 540.

withdrawal.⁶⁹² The following day Robertson, in a terse message to Cadorna, demanded the immediate return of the guns. Cadorna's response was even stronger than his earlier one: "I alone am in a position to assess the situation on this Front as regards coalition interests."⁶⁹³ However, he could do no other than give in to the demand.

The military dispute fast became a political issue. To allay British fears, the Italian *chargé d'affaires* in London, Borghese, dispatched a memorandum to the British government stating that, although it was playing a passive role at that moment, the Italian army itself was strong enough to represent a serious threat to Austria-Hungary "not only by immobilising the greater part of their forces but also by continuously drawing others from the eastern front."⁶⁹⁴ On 28 September, Borghese informed Derby of his fears about the effects which the British decision could have "both on the safety of our front and also as a result of poorer co-operation in the common effort," with ensuing "consequences on overall morale."⁶⁹⁵ The British prime minister replied in more diplomatic tones than those used by Robertson, but Britain's position did not change.⁶⁹⁶ The new Italian ambassador in Paris, Salvago Raggi,⁶⁹⁷ obtained much the same result from the French. On 1 October, during talks with Painlevé, Salvago Raggi asked that the French government reconsider its stance.⁶⁹⁸ The French prime minister agreed to consult his ministers. Predictably, the matter was then handed over to the military to deal with.⁶⁹⁹

Notwithstanding the alarm raised by Italy, the Anglo-French chiefs of staff and their governments did not appreciate the danger. British records show that it was not until the week before the Austro-German attack that any trace of concern regarding the Italian front became apparent. And still it appears to have been little more than a vague awareness that the Italian people were weary and troop

⁶⁹² ADMAEF, Guerre 1914-1918, Italie, Dossier Général, vol. 997/5-6, Conclusions of an Anglo-French Conference held in the train at Boulogne, 25 September, 1917.

⁶⁹³ DDI, 5^a, vol. IX, doc. 121, *cit.*

⁶⁹⁴ PRO FO, 371/2947/188288, Secret Memorandum from the Italian Embassy, 27 September, 1917.

⁶⁹⁵ DDI, 5^a, vol. IX, doc. 132, Borghese to Sonnino, 29 September, 1917.

⁶⁹⁶ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 541.

⁶⁹⁷ Rome changed three ambassadors in Paris throughout the war: Tittoni was replaced by Salvago Raggi on 9 November 1916; Salvago Raggi was replaced by Lelio Bonin Longare on 24 October 1917.

⁶⁹⁸ DDI, 5^a, vol. IX, doc. 139, Salvago Raggi to Sonnino, 1 October, 1917.

⁶⁹⁹ Poincaré, *Au Service...*, IX, p. 307.

morale was falling. On 19 October, for example, Rodd wrote to Balfour that “the position of the government is critical owing to a general dissatisfaction with war.”⁷⁰⁰ Rodd felt that, as long as Sonnino remained Italian minister of foreign affairs, “there is no danger of ‘*combinazioni*’ designed to leave us in the lurch.” However, British diplomats still believed that “if Sonnino were to fall, one does not feel any security in this direction.”⁷⁰¹ Delmé-Radcliffe, the British military attaché reported that the Italian government “fears the growing discontent in the country,” fuelled by the coal and food shortages, heavy casualties, and German-financed propaganda.⁷⁰² The only mention made of the imminent offensive is a report which reached the Foreign Office on 17 October regarding a high number of German troops on their way to Italy: 100,000 were reported to be in Tyrol.⁷⁰³ But once again, the risk was underestimated, so much so that discussions between British and Italian diplomats actually concerned other issues: the Middle East and Russia.⁷⁰⁴

The final decision to keep a small, symbolic, presence of British guns in Italy, and to withdraw all the others, was a sadly unsatisfactory compromise.⁷⁰⁵ Prior to Caporetto, then, a great deal of national self-interest prevented the Allies from analysing the situation objectively. The governments then in power, above all the French and Italian, were too weak to compensate for the short-sightedness of their chiefs of staff. Painlevé, who had come to office at the height of the political confusion reigning in France and whose appointment was the result of a fragile compromise in parliament, lacked the necessary strength to impose a far-sighted policy. Boselli, caught in an ever-more critical parliamentary situation – which would bring about his downfall – now had little power over Cadorna. Lloyd George, whose government was stronger, still had to manage the hostility of his two chief generals, Haig and Robertson.⁷⁰⁶

Caporetto was not only an Italian military *débâcle* but also a political and diplomatic defeat for the

⁷⁰⁰ TNA FO 170/1005, n. 849: Rodd to Balfour, 19 October, 1917.

⁷⁰¹ FO 800/173/It/17/1: Grahame to Bertie, 6 January, 1917.

⁷⁰² CAB 24/27/GT2182: Delmé-Radcliffe to Robertson, 21 September, 1917.

⁷⁰³ FO 170/1014, Foreign Office, n. 1830.

⁷⁰⁴ Between 17 and 21 October the Italian minister of aviation and munitions, Alfredo Dallolio, General Delmé-Radcliffe, the British military attaché in Rome, and Hardinge, debated by telegram whether or not to send Italian war material to Russia. In the end it was agreed that 50 Le Rhone and 100 Fiat aircraft engines would be sent to support the Russian Air Force: FO 170/1809, Dallolio to Delmé-Radcliffe, 22 October 1917, n. 804.

⁷⁰⁵ Martini, *Diario...*, 996.

⁷⁰⁶ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 543.

whole Entente. The matter increased the enmity of the British and French commands towards Cadorna, who, as mentioned, was already regarded with some hostility by Lloyd George, convinced that there would never be any real military co-ordination on the Italian front whilst Cadorna was in command. The military disaster of Caporetto suddenly gave the British prime minister the opportunity to strike at the general's authority and at the independent control which Italy had always claimed for its front.

The first news of an Italian retreat reached the War Office on the evening of 26 October. Delmé-Radcliffe informed London that the Italian 2nd Army had been repulsed and Cadorna was organising a new line of defence. Two reports followed, one the same evening and another the following morning. Although they were not complete, they did give the impression that the Italian withdrawal was being carried out in an orderly manner. Delmé-Radcliffe stated that Cadorna was facing the situation "with resolution," and had no intention "of allowing himself to be overcome by it."⁷⁰⁷

So at first the situation was not considered to be serious. Prevailing opinion in London was that "naturally [the enemy] will at first take up some advanced positions, but then we shall be able to stop them."⁷⁰⁸ The day after the attack Lloyd George had a meeting with Imperiali. The British prime minister hoped that the Italian army would hold and mentioned once again his plan for a joint allied offensive on the Italian front the following spring: "We must defeat Austria but afterwards you must help us against Germany."⁷⁰⁹ Imperiali skirted the issue. He was more concerned about immediate political developments, for on that same day, 25 October, the Boselli government was defeated by 314 votes to 96 and fell from power. Contrary to what is often handed down by British historiography,⁷¹⁰ this turn of political events should not be seen as a consequence of Caporetto for little, if anything, was yet known about the recent developments. Rather, it was brought about by the internal divisions which had become apparent during the summer parliamentary session.⁷¹¹

⁷⁰⁷ CAB 24/30/21, Operations. Telegrams to and from the French and Italian Fronts, Delmé-Radcliffe to Robertson, 26 October 1917.

⁷⁰⁸ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 433.

⁷⁰⁹ Lloyd George was probably influenced by the poor performance given by the French during the Nivelle Offensive (16 April – 9 May 1917).

⁷¹⁰ Gooch, *Italian Army...*, 246.

⁷¹¹ Albertini, *Venti anni...*, II, 590-597.

Given the general feeling that Italian forces would be able to withstand the attack, it was inevitable that there would be some panic in London when the real import of the catastrophe actually became known. In a few days, the Italians lost over 300,000 men, including dead, wounded and prisoners, as well as 1,500 guns. At least a further 300,000 men deserted. As Thompson has commented, Cadorna, who used to say that he was in command of the largest Italian army since the time of the Caesars, had suffered the worst defeat on Italian soil since the battle of Cannae, over 2,000 years before.⁷¹² Not surprisingly, Cadorna's excuse for the rout rang hollow to his counterparts in the Entente: he accused the allies of having taken from him "with such sudden decision, the greater part of their guns [...] even though I, being fully aware of how the situation was developing, had begged them to leave them on this Front."⁷¹³ One of the paradoxes here is that Cadorna, who was so anxious to keep British artillery guns under his control, arguing that an enemy counter-offensive was imminent, did not show as much haste in organising his troops to oppose such a threat. His contradictory behaviour and mistakes are best left for another study.

The British, in any case, held Cadorna responsible for not having used the British guns.⁷¹⁴ Even Rodd, who held him in high regard,⁷¹⁵ complained he had not made full use of British artillery when he had had it: "I think, from all that I hear, the disaster is in great measure due to the most unfortunate abandonment by General Cadorna of his intended further offensive in the middle of October."⁷¹⁶

Cadorna's more recent conduct also came under fire. Robertson sent Delmé-Radcliffe a telegram around noon on the 27th, exhorting him to do all he could to steady the Comando Supremo:

Cadorna should have no difficulty in stopping the hostile advance, having regard to numbers and nature of terrain. The Roumanians did so a few months ago and surely the Italians could do the same

⁷¹² Thompson, *White War...*, 325.

⁷¹³ Quoted in: P. Pieri, *La prima guerra mondiale 1914-1918. Studi di storia militare*, G. Rochat ed. (Rome, Ufficio storico dello Stato Maggiore dell'esercito, 1986), 147-149.

⁷¹⁴ Rodd papers: Lloyd George to Rodd, 24 March, 1917.

⁷¹⁵ Rodd later commented: "I had regarded Cadorna, who was not always well served by his subordinates, as one of the great soldiers in a war in which few of the Allied commanders had found opportunity for exceptional distinction. [...] It is possible, if the proposals made by Mr. Lloyd George at the beginning of 1917 had been adopted, that Cadorna might have gone down in history as one of the most successful captains of the war": Rodd, *Memories...*, III, 256.

⁷¹⁶ PRO FO, 371/2948/213890, Rodd to Balfour, 3 November, 1917.

if the troops but fought moderately well. Apparently a panic prevails regarding which you should take a firm and stout line.⁷¹⁷

After reprimanding his allies, Cadorna tried to load responsibility onto his soldiers. His official bulletin of 28 October attributed defeat to the “cowardice” of some units belonging to the 2nd Army and to the anti-war propaganda of many socialist agents.⁷¹⁸ Such claims discredited both the Italian army and the whole country, and Cadorna managed to infuriate the few in Italy who had always backed him. He was reproved by Sonnino: “We run the risk of being treated like Russia.”⁷¹⁹

Imperiali fumed with rage when he read the bulletin the day after. He considered such a statement not only a lie, but a major diplomatic mistake as well.⁷²⁰ With a few lines, Cadorna had managed to nullify every effort Imperiali and Rodd had made to avert panic in the Foreign and War Offices.⁷²¹ On the same evening, Imperiali received a second war bulletin from Italian headquarters – a considerably modified and watered down one – and he did his best to prevent the first version from being published in the British press. This he managed to do but “Cadorna’s bulletin” had already been circulated in the War Office, and it was therefore impossible to keep it from reaching the British general staff and diplomats. It had a devastating impact. Haig commented privately on 26 October that “the Italians seem a wretched people, useless as fighting men but greedy for money. Moreover, I doubt whether they are really in earnest about this war. Many of them, too, are German spies.”⁷²²

Lloyd George soon realised that his plan for another allied offensive on the Italian front was no longer plausible. Rather, it would now be necessary to act immediately to prevent Italy leaving the

⁷¹⁷ Rodd papers, Robertson to Delmé-Radcliffe, 27 Oct. 1917.

⁷¹⁸ Isnenghi, Rochat, *Grande Guerra...*, 391.

⁷¹⁹ DDI, 5^a, IX, doc. 320, 30 October, 1917.

⁷²⁰ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 446.

⁷²¹ In those chaotic days, Rodd sent a series of telegrams and personal letters to his colleagues in London, to persuade the Foreign Office that the situation was difficult, but not irremediable. He stressed that “so far the [Italian] national spirit seems calm. No signs of panic.” Immediately afterwards, he sent two more telegrams, one announcing that the new Orlando Cabinet had been formed; the other restating that: “The first impression is that the spirit of the country generally is admirable and that the unfortunate experiences of the last few days have fortified public determination and drawn the nation together.” See: FO 170/1005: n. 879, Rodd to Balfour, 29 October 1917; n. 883-884, 31 October; n. 889, 1 November 1917; n. 897, 4 November 1917; and Rodd papers, Rodd to Balfour, 1 November 1917; 2 November 1917; Rodd to Hardinge, 7 November 1917.

⁷²² Cassar, *Forgotten Front...*, 321.

war. Imperiali and Drummond⁷²³ discussed the possibility that the British might intervene directly. The Italian ambassador noted in his diary: “I have spoken to Drummond. He says orders have been given to promptly ship British and French reinforcements. They will report at the line within 10 or 12 days. But they will be there on time.”⁷²⁴ They talked of two divisions initially, to be transferred from the French front. The British cabinet pointed out that the measure was a strategic as well as a political indication of support.⁷²⁵ Concerned that it might not be enough, Lloyd George contacted Painlevé to encourage the French to co-operate fully with Italy.⁷²⁶

To pave the way for a solution to the crisis, an inter-allied Supreme War Council (SWC) was formed to deal with the shortcomings in organisation and political-military co-ordination which had dogged the Entente.⁷²⁷ The Italian government had always been wary of a solution which might limit its own freedom of action: at the beginning of 1916 Sonnino and Salandra had voted against a similar proposal by Briand so as to have it dropped. Now, however, Rome was no longer in any position to oppose it. Inter-governmental meetings were immediately scheduled, with an inter-allied Command on their agenda. The first was held on 5 November in Rapallo, a symbolic gesture to reassure Italy that it was not alone.⁷²⁸

In his memoirs, the new Italian prime minister, Orlando, remembered the conference as a very difficult test for the new government. Sonnino was of the same opinion.⁷²⁹ The meeting opened with a report by Orlando on the military situation after the defeat, which had worsened the previous day with the Italian retreat from the Tagliamento to the Piave. His aim was to obtain substantial support without arousing too much concern among the Allies: “Allied help is necessary only for the time required for us to reorganise.”⁷³⁰

Lloyd George, for his part, replied that there was no question whether allied reinforcements would

⁷²³ Eric Drummond from 1912 to 1918 worked as the private secretary of respectively: Asquith, Grey, and Balfour.

⁷²⁴ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 446.

⁷²⁵ PRO FO, 371/2948, Balfour to Erskine, 27 October, 1917.

⁷²⁶ *Ibid.*, Balfour to Bertie, 28 and 29 October, 1917.

⁷²⁷ ASMAE, t. gab., 2792/495, Tittoni to Sonnino, 6 December 1915.

⁷²⁸ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 551.

⁷²⁹ Orlando, *Memorie...*, 294.

⁷³⁰ Aldrovandi, *Guerra diplomatica...*, 140.

be sent but it was important to understand how they would be used. If they were under poor command, it would spell disaster not only for Italy but also for its allies. The Italian command, continued the British prime minister, had shown it was not up to the task. The panic which followed the breakthrough at Caporetto was a reflection not of the Italian soldiers, who were inferior to no other troops in the world, but of the high command's poor organisation and staff work. Lloyd George concluded that he had no intention of entrusting British troops to the same command. Painlevé shared the same view. Orlando was probably the last person in the world to want to protect Cadorna. He resented Cadorna's overbearing manner and his stubborn refusal to submit to political supervision. Moreover, while serving as interior minister, Orlando had been severely criticised by Cadorna for failing to deal with the defeatism of many clerics and Socialists.⁷³¹ Nevertheless, he felt humiliated by the allied *diktat*. On 8 November he confessed to Colonel Angelo Gatti, Cadorna's chief of staff: "You cannot imagine how I felt humiliated today: I felt treated like a servant. They kept me waiting outside the door, and called me at their disposal. But what can we do? We may be starving in two months if we do not accept."⁷³² Gatti concluded that the allies were "already speaking as our masters."

The Italian government had no choice but to replace the "generalissimo." Orlando was then able to snatch the promise that allied reinforcements would be placed under Italian command. The new commander would have to be more of a diplomat, better able to maintain a rapport with Italian politicians and with the allies. The choice was for Armando Diaz, a little-known general, less of a dictator and far more malleable. Lloyd George now promised that the new command would have eight Anglo-French divisions and indicated his willingness to do more, if necessary, stating that "Italy's interests are our own."⁷³³

An outline constitution of the new SWC was drawn up. It would be formed by the head of government and the foreign minister of each of the three powers, who would also nominate a permanent military representative. To temper, somewhat, the decision to replace Cadorna, Hankey proposed that the Italian representative should be the very general who had been replaced, *promoveatur ut amoveatur*. Whether the idea was originally Hankey's, or had already come to the two

⁷³¹ Cassar, *Forgotten Front...*, 80.

⁷³² A. Gatti, *Caporetto. Diario di guerra*. (Bologna, Il Mulino: 1997), 254.

⁷³³ Aldrovandi, *Guerra diplomatica...*, 160.

Italian statesmen, is hard to tell.⁷³⁴ At the end of the conference, the climate was still strained. The allies did not seem to have much faith in the real possibility of Italy redeeming itself. From Lloyd George's point of view, however, the conference was a success, for he had reached his political goal: Cadorna had been replaced, Italian autonomy greatly weakened – for Orlando and Sonnino had backed him on practically everything – and it was now possible to establish inter-allied co-operation in Italy.⁷³⁵ For this to be most effective, however, the new Italian commander's freedom of decision needed to be purely nominal: it was essential to be able to condition his strategy.

Lloyd George aimed to achieve this at the following conference, held on 8 November at Peschiera,⁷³⁶ and designed to put into effect the allied co-operation agreed at Rapallo. King Victor Emmanuel III was present, for the first time, bringing all his authority to prove to the allies that Italy still had the strength necessary to pull together. He defended the Italian decision to stand firm on the Piave, whilst the other allies believed that the Mincio would be a more easily defensible line: the king argued that it was better to prevent the occupation of Venice and continue its use as a base in the Adriatic.⁷³⁷ According to reports at the time, his calmness impressed the British prime minister.⁷³⁸ At a political level, though, he too agreed with Lloyd George that only close co-ordination from then on would lead to victory, as the British prime minister had always argued.⁷³⁹

Talks moved on to more strictly strategic issues. Lloyd George complained about the deployment of the Anglo-French divisions to marginal positions:

Complete discretion should be given to Generals Wilson and Foch⁷⁴⁰ to move the six Allied divisions now in Italy to sectors of the Italian front where they thought the best use could be made of them.⁷⁴¹

⁷³⁴ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 553.

⁷³⁵ Lloyd George, *Memoirs...*, II, 1400.

⁷³⁶ Orlando, Sonnino, Bissolati, Lloyd George, Smuts, Painlevé and Franklin-Bouillon took part in the conference.

⁷³⁷ Orlando, *Memorie...*, 244-247.

⁷³⁸ Aldrovandi, *Guerra diplomatica...*, 177; Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 556.

⁷³⁹ Lloyd George, *Memoirs...*, II, 1401.

⁷⁴⁰ Sir Henry Wilson and General Ferdinand Foch were the British and French military representatives at the SWC.

⁷⁴¹ DDI, 5^a, IX, doc. 391, Processo Verbale della Conferenza tenuta al Quartier Generale italiano a Peaschiera, 9 November, 1917.

One of the allied promises, that allied troops would be under Italian command, was already being broken. Lloyd George raised the question of allied forces' independence so as to gain control of the Italian front indirectly. Allied divisions were far fewer in numbers than the Italian, which were reorganising and would continue to form the bulk of the forces in Italy. However, they were indispensable to Italian command strategy: by placing conditions on their use, Lloyd George would be able indirectly to condition Diaz. Lloyd George's attitude irritated both the king of Italy and Orlando who were, however, in no position to oppose. A compromise was reached: Wilson and Foch would move immediately with Bissolati to the new Italian headquarters in Padua to confer with Diaz and manage the deployment of the allied divisions to positions which were at greater risk.⁷⁴²

Italy had no real say in the matter. The independence of Generals Herbert Plumer, commander of the British force, and Foch, who kept direct command of the French contingent until 27 November when it was assumed by General Emile Fayolle, was confirmed by their behaviour after the Peschiera conference. Uncertain whether the Piave front would hold, Plumer and Foch decided not to commit their forces to the front line for fear of being caught up in another disaster for the Italian army.⁷⁴³

Orlando and Diaz insisted that allied troops remain on Mt Grappa and the Montello. Victor Emmanuel III himself was extremely annoyed and on 11 November rallied Orlando to "undertake diplomatic measures to support military action so as to push allied troops, the British in first place, into the front line."⁷⁴⁴ The same day, Diaz had a long meeting with Wilson and Foch to drive home his case.⁷⁴⁵ His arguments fell on deaf ears and he realised that both strategic and political problems would ensue. From these events we can conclude that: on the one hand, allied mistrust of Italy's ability to hold on, contrary to what Italian historians have claimed, was still strong, despite the king's intervention; on the other, allied troops in Italy enjoyed unusual independence of Italian command, while at the same time being able to affect its decisions significantly.

At the same time as they were attempting to take indirect control of Italian land forces, the British

⁷⁴² Aldrovandi, *Guerra diplomatica...*, 80.

⁷⁴³ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 558.

⁷⁴⁴ Sonnino, *Diario...*, 385, Victor Emmanuel III to Orlando, 11 November, 1917.

⁷⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, Diaz to Orlando, 11 November, 1917.

were trying to do the same with the Italian fleet. When the Caporetto crisis was at its peak, the Admiralty ordered Calthorpe to prepare for the possible fall of Venice, and even for a separate Italian peace. Calthorpe's plans for the redeployment of British forces in the Mediterranean and the protection of trade show that he hoped to acquire at least a portion of the Italian fleet, mainly destroyers.

Calthorpe feared that, should Italy make a separate peace, the allied base at Corfu would be untenable. The priorities of the British, he wrote on 13 November, should then be to: 1) occupy Valona and prevent Albania from falling to the Central Powers; 2) make every effort to reinforce and hold the Otranto barrage; 3) acquire at least those Italian ships in the Adriatic which were "of the utmost importance," without giving "the enemy the chance of laying his hands on what is left." The British were to keep "as many of these latter as we can hope to man, and all the rest should be sent to the west coast of Italy before Italian neutrality becomes an accomplished fact." The method of acquisition would be "purchase or agreement, backed perhaps by a show of *force majeure*." Finally, the admiral proposed that British shipping *en route* to Italy should be withdrawn or diverted to pre-arranged ports – e.g. ships bound from Gibraltar to Genoa be diverted to Marseilles, and those bound from Port Said to Italy to Malta.⁷⁴⁶

The Admiralty replied briefly on 4 December, approving the draft of the plan in general and promising Calthorpe that he would receive further comments.⁷⁴⁷ Calthorpe then forwarded his plans to commodore W.H. Kelly and stressed that it was "of the utmost importance that the Italians shall be unaware that the question is under consideration by us, and every precaution is to be taken by you to avoid the fact coming to their knowledge."⁷⁴⁸ The comparison with the situation in 1940, when the British attempts to acquire or neutralise the French fleet led to the tragedy of Mers-el-Kébir, is patent, although the situation was not identical for, in 1917, the British objective was only a portion of the Italian fleet.⁷⁴⁹

The Italians were themselves concerned about the naval situation. An emergency allied conference

⁷⁴⁶ PRO ADM, 137/2180, Calthorpe to Admiralty, 13 November, 1917.

⁷⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, Admiralty to Calthorpe, 4 December 1917.

⁷⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, Calthorpe to Kelly, 14 November, 1917.

⁷⁴⁹ Halpern, *Royal Navy...*, 216.

was called in Rome on 21 November to consider an Italian request for over twenty destroyers to counter a potential naval offensive by the Austrians directed at the rear and seaward flank of the Italian army on the Piave. Such an offensive might include a landing on the eastern coast of Italy, or attacks by light cruisers, destroyers and submarines on coastline communications or the railway.⁷⁵⁰ Fortunately, the contingency never arose. The Piave line held and the Central Powers postponed the final offensive against Italy to the following spring. Admiral Wemyss, who travelled to Rome for the meeting, believed the Italians had overreacted at first and had recovered their confidence by the time of the conference, as would be proven by their acceptance of the British refusal to send any naval reinforcements.⁷⁵¹ However, there is little evidence that anyone else expected the Italians to resist. The emergency plans to take control of the Italian destroyers were not set aside by Calthorpe, and the Admiralty kept a close eye on the situation throughout December: the final version of the plans is dated 8 January 1918.

Calthorpe was particularly anxious to divert British or neutral ships serving the Italian government, with Italian shipping outside the Mediterranean to be kept as hostage for the release of British, allied and neutral shipping in Italian ports.⁷⁵² Admiral Gauchet, French and allied commander-in-chief, was eventually brought into the picture. He was warned of the implications of any Italian defection for the Balkans, particularly Greece, where King Constantine might return backed by German forces. Corfu might then become untenable as a base for the French fleet, which would then be forced to fall back on Agostoli. Surprisingly, Gauchet displayed no overt interest in acquiring any of the Italian warships,⁷⁵³ according to Halpern because he lacked the manpower to use them. Calthorpe, in contrast, thought he might be able to man 20-30 Italian destroyers and flotilla leaders by drawing on the crews of ships on station or in port.⁷⁵⁴

Although none of this happened, the British still did not believe that Italy would hold out and the documents suggest, once again, that Victor Emmanuel III's role at Peschiera needs to be put into its

⁷⁵⁰ PRO ADM, 137/1420, Minutes of Naval Conference at Rome, 21 November, 1917.

⁷⁵¹ *Ibid.*, Memorandum by Wemyss, 26 November, 1917.

⁷⁵² 293,000 tons of Italian ships were outside the Mediterranean at that moment, whereas only 115,000 tons of non-Italian ships were in Italian ports, another 192,000 in non-Italian Mediterranean ports: PRO ADM 137/2180, Admiralty to Calthorpe, 8 January, 1918.

⁷⁵³ *Ibid.*, Calthorpe to Admiralty, 22 January, 1918.

⁷⁵⁴ Halpern, *Royal Navy...*, 100.

correct perspective. Notwithstanding the reassurance of the king, the British still tried to gain some control, direct or indirect, of the Italian land and sea forces. In part they succeeded. For the rest they gave up the attempt in view of a slow but gradual improvement in the general situation. In any event, the Caporetto crisis effectively marked the end of Italian military and strategic autonomy.

1.2 – *The Diplomatic Struggle.*

The danger for Italy was that reduced military autonomy would bring about a reduction in its political clout within the Entente: a temporary military emergency might produce lasting political weakness. To prevent such an outcome, Italian politicians and diplomats worked energetically but to little avail.

The first problem, once again, was the lack of a clear political line from Rome. The government collapsed at the same time as the enemy offensive pressed forward and this, combined with the lack of precise information regarding military developments, prevented Italian diplomacy from playing any real part in the early days of the crisis when the allies were trying to come to grips with the situation.

Sonnino's line was to avoid raising any alarm among the allies regarding the real state of the Italian army. But such an attempt was nullified by Cadorna's bulletin. His words tore Italian diplomacy asunder and it was several days before a new defence strategy could be put together, the effectiveness of which, in any case, was continually reduced as more terrible news arrived from the front. On 29 October, the Italian king called Imperiali to ask him to do everything in his power to save Italy's honour, even in the absence of an official line from the Foreign Ministry.

Imperiali met Balfour, Churchill and Derby on the 31st, and assured them that the Italian army and the whole country would do their duty, and more. Then he sent a telegram to Sonnino, with a summary of the conversation: "I told them that it is likely that in the plains of Veneto the fate of the whole war will be decided."⁷⁵⁵ However, the British were quite cold. Italy's reputation lay in tatters. "Here I hear every sort of rumour," Imperiali wrote. "They say that the disbandment of the 4th Corps came about through treason, involving the generals themselves. That is the result of Cadorna's bulletin!"⁷⁵⁶

⁷⁵⁵ DDI, 5^a, IX, doc. n. 337, Imperiali to Sonnino, 31 October. 1917.

⁷⁵⁶ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 450.

The ambassador gave Sonnino an overview of the different interpretations the British press were giving of the Italian defeat.⁷⁵⁷ Part of the press, supporting Lloyd George, were attributing it to the overwhelming strength of the enemy, while the rest of it, closer to Robertson and led by the *Morning Post*, ascribed the rout to the feeble resistance of the Italian army. Members of the Italian diplomatic staff demanded a reply in the form of an official communiqué. Imperiali, however, disagreed: “If we reply now, we shall produce a counter-reply which, given the present undeniable facts – ah, that wretched bulletin of Cadorna’s! – would be pathetic.” Instead, he told Sonnino, it was vital that a communiqué should be issued by the Italian government in order to clarify the military circumstances behind the rout: “Now it is time for the government to speak!”

In Imperiali’s opinion, entering into a hostile debate with the British press was useless, if not outright dangerous. He had the feeling that the Italian defeat was becoming just another *casus belli*, fuel for British domestic haggling: behind the conflicting interpretations of the battle in the British press there lingered the never-ending conflict between Robertson and Lloyd George: “It is regrettable that our disgrace is but something functional to the two rivals’ purposes,” Imperiali commented. It was therefore in Italy’s interest to stay out of that arena, and to limit Italian diplomatic action to restating the “real” reasons for the defeat, with particular reference to the overwhelming strength of the enemy and their superior equipment.⁷⁵⁸ It was necessary to stress the fact that Italy, in concert with its allies, was ready to stand against the Austro-Hungarian forces, but was not prepared to face the German divisions arriving from the Russian front: the British had been negligent in refusing to satisfy Cadorna’s requests between early September and late October, and this was to be considered another of the causes for the defeat.⁷⁵⁹

However, Rodd’s reports from Rome encouraged a very different British interpretation. Rodd did not blame the Italian soldiers but he was becoming persuaded that the activities of Anarchists and Socialists had undermined troop morale. He wrote a series of private letters to Hardinge, pointing out

⁷⁵⁷ DDI, 5^a, IX, doc. 425, Imperiali to Sonnino, 12 November, 1917.

⁷⁵⁸ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 450, 455.

⁷⁵⁹ DDI, 5^a, IX, doc. 369, Imperiali to Sonnino, 4 November, 1917.

that such propaganda had spread disaffection in the Italian army well before the offensive.⁷⁶⁰ The Vatican itself had to take some of the blame: “There appears to have been some riots in the Second Army due no doubt to socialist pacific propaganda, while the Pope’s pronouncement on the duty of making peace has probably also had its effect.”⁷⁶¹

Years later, when the British ambassador published his *Memories*, he was still convinced that Caporetto was a psychological, rather than military, defeat. He did not neglect military errors – such as the presence of only two weak corps without any adequate support to hold a vulnerable section of the line, and highly questionable artillery deployment – but he was sure that the main burden of responsibility for what took place rested on those who had deliberately created the moral atmosphere which made defeat possible, and probably inevitable:

Here for many months a persistent anti-military propaganda had undermined the morale of peasant soldiers [...] whose restricted outlook had never conceived those ideals of the war, which, in our country, had brought millions of volunteers to the flag. In Italy the corporate spirit is never strong, and it depends largely on the quality of the officers to inspire it in a regiment. The old professional officers had been to a great extent killed or disabled in the earlier phases of the campaign. The new officers were not in touch with their men, and had little hold upon them. Into this army had been drafted the men, strongly impregnated with the doctrines disseminated by the extreme Socialists, who had been compromised in the serious riots at Turin and elsewhere, and who were sent as a punitive measure to the colours. [...] They became centres of infection preaching pacifism and even sabotage. [...] The letters [the soldiers] received from their families were depressing to their spirits, and on the rare occasions when they went on leave they would encounter echoes of the same teaching in the villages. The constant effort to discredit the Allies and to attribute, especially to ourselves, selfish motives for prolonging the struggle [...] had no doubt its effect also at the Front.⁷⁶²

The myth of anti-war propaganda contaminating entire divisions became so widespread that even an obscure officer of the Canadian forces, Major M.S. Bohem, “was quoted by some of the New York papers as stating, in the course of an address at ‘Heroland’ that half of the Italian army were pro-German, that it was little wonder that the Italians surrendered, and that their army was full of traitors,”

⁷⁶⁰ Rodd papers: Rodd to Hardinge, 15 November 1917; Rodd to Hardinge, 26 November 1917; Rodd to Balfour, 16 December 1917; Harridge to Rodd, 22 January 1917.

⁷⁶¹ FO 170/1005: Rodd to Balfour, 1 November, n. 889.

⁷⁶² Rodd, *Memories...*, III, 278.

as Cecil Spring-Rice, British ambassador to the United States, reported to Balfour nearly two months after the battle.⁷⁶³

Italian diplomacy found it difficult to reply to such criticisms. In the first place, similar ideas were shared by a large part of the Italian conservative political establishment, Imperiali among them. The two aristocratic ambassadors, Rodd and Imperiali, shared the same opinion regarding Socialists and anti-war activists. Similar cases of mutiny had occurred in France, not to mention Russia: it seemed reasonable that anti-war propaganda and sabotage had played a major role in the Italian defeat.

The Italian political line, therefore, remained weak and was limited to a rather vague appeal to the military convention of 1915 which specified the number of divisions which the Russians had agreed to range against Austria-Hungary: it was hardly Italy's fault if, when Russia failed to honour its obligations, Austrian and German reinforcements had managed to exert overwhelming local numerical superiority against Italy. Further details regarding such an "overwhelming force" were not issued. In consequence, when the Italian army did manage to halt the Austro-German offensive in what is known as the "Battaglia d'arresto" on the River Piave (13-26 November), the British press gave hardly any credit to the Italian performance:

Our troops are resisting. The honour is saved. But the epic of our war is no more. Here newspapers begin to talk about the "moral" support and the encouragement given to our soldiers by Allied troops – who have not yet fought though. It may be true. But I dislike reading it. Ah! General Cadorna! May God forgive you. You were proud at first, later improvident, and then you lost your mind with that damned bulletin!⁷⁶⁴

The military emergency had passed but Italy's political role was compromised, as Sonnino soon realised. At Peschiera, Lloyd George remarked that the foreign minister was "more depressed than I have ever seen him."⁷⁶⁵ On 16 November, the British prime minister confided to Imperiali: "Sonnino's power is not the same in the new cabinet. The king does not like him. [...] I saw it when we were at Peschiera. The king sent for Orlando and not for Sonnino. And how about Giolitti? I want to meet

⁷⁶³ FO 170/1080, 29/18: Spring-Rice to Balfour, 21 December, 1917.

⁷⁶⁴ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 460, 462.

⁷⁶⁵ PRO FO, 371/2948/213315, Lloyd George to the War Cabinet, 7 November, 1917.

Nitti, he seems to be the strong man.”⁷⁶⁶ The ambassador, however, wanted to reassure Lloyd George that, whoever was in power in Italy, “we are men of honour, fervent patriots who will do our duty by our country and our allies. There can be no doubt about this. I am out of politics. As an ambassador and an Italian I advise you not to crystallise Italian politics into one or two of its representatives.” Notwithstanding the ambassador’s proud reply, Anglo-Italian public relations had by this stage changed irreversibly.

Signals of such a change could already be glimpsed at Peschiera, but became evident in the inter-allied conference in Paris, which was to mark new shifts in inter-allied balance of power. The conference took place between 29 November and 3 December. For Britain, the purpose was to set out the Entente’s global strategy, and seventeen allied delegates were present including the Russian (without the representatives of the Soviets) and, for the first time, an American representative. The Italian aim was to obtain more supplies for the army and greater US involvement, with an American declaration of war on Austria-Hungary and Bulgaria.⁷⁶⁷

The conference began by establishing five Councils (Armaments, Maritime Transport and Imports, Finances, Supplies and Blockade). Lloyd George, supported by Georges Clemenceau, the new French prime minister, outlined the policy which the Entente should follow: resistance on the Italian and western fronts until the arrival of the Americans and rejection of the new separate Austrian peace offered in secret to France and Great Britain. On this point, Italy agreed, for a separate peace at this stage would find Italy at its weakest in relation to Austria-Hungary.⁷⁶⁸

Any other hopes which Italy may have nurtured were mostly dashed. The United States would declare war on Austria-Hungary on 7 December but this was the only result Italian diplomats managed to obtain in Paris. Allied promises of supplies for the Italian army fell shorter than expected, as Silvio Crespi, Commissioner of Provisioning, complained.⁷⁶⁹ Such a result was largely due to intransigence on the part of Clemenceau, who insisted on keeping a significant part of the materials and supplies

⁷⁶⁶ Sonnino was more limited by the energetic attitude of Orlando, his old rival, who, unlike Salandra and Boselli, carried out his role in a more authoritarian manner as head of government, and was not willing to give up unlimited autonomy to his foreign minister: Imperiali, *Diario...*, 456.

⁷⁶⁷ Sonnino, *Diario...*, 217-218.

⁷⁶⁸ Poincaré, *Au Service...*, IX, 394-395.

⁷⁶⁹ Crespi, *Alla difesa...*, 16.

destined for Italy on the French front, regardless of his reassurance to the new Italian ambassador to France, Lelio Bonin Longare.⁷⁷⁰ Clemenceau took the same position concerning US reinforcements: the two divisions under General John Pershing, on their way to Europe, would concentrate on the western front and a single regiment would be sent to Italy.⁷⁷¹

Sonnino and Orlando found that Clemenceau's appearance on the scene had changed the balance within the Entente: Lloyd George was no longer dealing with the meek and mild Ribot, but with a far more determined leader. The difficulties encountered by the British prime minister aggravated Italian ones: the presence of two strong leaders such as Lloyd George and Clemenceau, further crushed the Italian statesmen. The result was that Italy leant even more on Great Britain. But at this point it was no longer a "special partnership." Italy's political, military and provisioning dependence on Britain was more evident than ever. From that moment on, as Orlando realised, it would be almost impossible to oppose London.⁷⁷²

⁷⁷⁰ Sonnino, *Carteggio...*, Bonin-Longare to Sonnino, 23 November, 1917, 340-343.

⁷⁷¹ Poincaré, *Au Service...*, IX, 401; J.J. Pershing, *My Experiences in the World War* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1931), 227.

⁷⁷² Italian disappointment was clear to Rodd when the diplomats returned to Rome. The British ambassador noted that: "A sense of humiliation was perceptible in their faces and in their words." The only positive thing that Rodd noted was their determination to redeem themselves: "No voice was heard putting forward any plea for peace": Rodd, *Memories...*, III, 411.

2. Keeping Italy Alive.

Keeping Italy in the war was both a military and economic challenge for the allies. Militarily, it was crucial to ensure that the Italian army would hold together, and then to reorganise it to full efficiency. Economically, a further effort was required to give Italy the necessary financial support for its recovery and its supply demands. The first of these challenges was met and won in the space of a few months, whereas the second remained pressing for the whole of the last year of the war and would mark the end of what (little) economic and financial independence Italy still enjoyed.

According to estimates made by General Dallolio after the retreat from Caporetto, the Italian Army had lost 3,000 cannon, 600,000 shells and a huge range of other equipment at a total cost of over 7 billion lire.⁷⁷³ The most pressing issue, that the troops would hold together, was solved almost immediately. The Italians fought with renewed energy, proof that the accusations of cowardice and poor morale were unfounded. In the so-called “Battaglia d’Arresto,” the Italians managed, for the first time, to hold back the German troops, whose supplies were running out, and force them to cease the operation.⁷⁷⁴ On 24 December, the permanent military representatives sent a joint note to the SWC urging it to study the current situation on the Italian front from the “offensive and defensive points of view.” The Council found that the military situation had been restored⁷⁷⁵ and that the Italian troops had shown “in the past six weeks that they were capable of stolid resistance” which would make it possible for them, “with the support of allied forces,” to hold the new Piave line. However, “it is not for the present possible nor is it advantageous to take the offensive in Italy.” It was better to strengthen the Piave-Grappa line as much as possible and get ready to defend every inch of terrain.⁷⁷⁶

A new joint note from the representatives, number 12 of 21 January, more clearly set out allied strategy for 1918 in 19 points: the general plan provided for an overall defensive stand for the Entente

⁷⁷³ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 507.

⁷⁷⁴ Isnenghi, Rochat, *Grande Guerra...*, 444.

⁷⁷⁵ A. Gionfrida, *L’Italia e il coordinamento militare “interalleato” nella prima guerra mondiale* (Roma: Stato Maggiore dell’Esercito, 2008), 102.

⁷⁷⁶ Archivio dell’Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore dell’Esercito (AUSSME), E8, b. 10, f. 2, Nota Collettiva n. 6, Deliberazione presa dai rappresentanti militari permanenti nella seduta del circa la situazione italiana, 24 December, 1917.

for the year, until the arrival of new tanks and the Americans. Point number 3 concerned the safety of Great Britain, considered a priority, while point 5 related to Italy: 1 May was set as the deadline for the reorganisation of the Italian army.⁷⁷⁷ The representatives' plan was in contrast with the hopes of General Foch, who wished to relaunch the offensive, at least on the French front. His proposal was appended by General Weygand to note 12.⁷⁷⁸ Allied strategy, then, would be defensive in the "early months" of 1918, until the American divisions joined the line; then an attempt would be made to regain the offensive as quickly as possible, which was "the only thing which could lead to victory." The commanders of the French, British and Italian forces were to draw up plans for a possible combined counter-offensive consisting of a joint Anglo-French attack in the west and an Italian multi-phase counter-attack in Italy.⁷⁷⁹ This compromise wanted by Foch, however, contrasted with the views of Pétain, Haig and Diaz, whose position was much more in line with the opinion expressed by the SWC's Permanent Military Representatives.⁷⁸⁰

In the following weeks, allied reinforcements in Italy rose to number 130,000 French and 110,000 British at the end of December.⁷⁸¹ The contribution of allied officers to the reorganisation of the Italian army was important: for the first time there was real, close and regular discussion among allied commanders, with a frank exchange of opinions and advice, and shared solutions to the various problems.⁷⁸² The entire military doctrine of the Italian army was much improved by these processes.

Plumer, who had been one of Haig's most reliable army commanders, gave his views on the situation in Italy in a long letter to Robertson:

When we arrived here the Italian Commanders and troops were only beginning to recover from the shock of their enforced retreat. [...] Our policy should be, I think, while we are here to do our best to set an example of organisation, training, etc., which we hope the Italians will imitate. To get them to

⁷⁷⁷ Ministero della Difesa, Stato Maggiore Esercito, Ufficio Storico (SME), *L'Esercito italiano nella Grande Guerra (1915-1918)* 5 vols. (Roma, 1980), V, tome 1 bis, docs. 44, 145-151.

⁷⁷⁸ Ministère de la Guerre, Etat Major de l'Armée, Service Historique (EMA), *Les Armées Françaises dans la grande guerre*, 10 tomes (Paris, 1936), VI, vol.1, 50-51.

⁷⁷⁹ SME, *L'Esercito italiano...*, V, 1, 161-162.

⁷⁸⁰ EMA, *Les Armées Françaises...* VI, 1, 52-61; Gionfrida, *L'Italia e il coordinamento...*, 103.

⁷⁸¹ To be downsized to 45,000 and 80,000 by April 1918: Isnenghi, Rochat, *Grande Guerra...*, 446.

⁷⁸² This was also a result of the hundreds of substitutions made by Cadorna: although some were quite unfair, they had brought fresh, young blood into the Italian officer corps: Italian generals had an average age of 50 – Diaz himself was 55 – and the colonels around 45. The result was a group of far less rigid officers who were more open-minded and flexible, and more inclined to accept new ideas: *ibid.*, 452.

do this we must show that we are ready and anxious to take our full share of any fighting that comes along.⁷⁸³

Plumer's relations with the Italian commanders were friendly. His diplomatic skills mirrored those of Diaz, who was in regular contact with both Plumer and Fayolle.⁷⁸⁴ The former understood that the Italians were a proud people and that the recent defeat had shattered their pride. Consequently, he treated Generals Diaz, Gaetano Giardino and Pietro Badoglio with the utmost courtesy.⁷⁸⁵ Diaz reciprocated Plumer's goodwill and did everything he could to accommodate the British. As Cassar has commented, seldom have two allies worked so well together.⁷⁸⁶

Diaz's relations with the French were less collaborative. Some of Fayolle's aides did not bother to disguise their contempt for the Italians and acted as if only their intervention had saved Italy. This made Diaz much more inclined to co-operate with the British – little did he know that Plumer's staff and senior officers had a similarly low regard for Italian efforts, and that the main difference with the French was that the British masked their feelings better.⁷⁸⁷

At Diaz's invitation, Plumer often inspected Italian troops. He viewed the poor attention devoted to training as a major obstacle to reorganising the army: although many stragglers had returned to the ranks, most units were far below strength. To build them up, the Italian government had called up boys as young as seventeen and sent them to the front after barely a month of camp drill.⁷⁸⁸ Plumer pointed out clearly to the Italian authorities that serious training was crucial: he encouraged Italians to attend training schools which the British established behind the front line. The schools taught a wide range of skills, including marksmanship, gunnery, signalling, camouflage, tactics – with particular regard for the concept of deep defence, which the Italians knew little about – and anti-gas defence.⁷⁸⁹ Despite

⁷⁸³ Plumer to Robertson, 4 December 1917, quoted by Cassar: *Forgotten Front...*, 103.

⁷⁸⁴ Diaz was in frequent contact also with the king and Orlando (around 3-4 times a month). He accepted the creation of a War Council of seven ministers on which the heads of the military and naval staffs had only one vote; he also visited quite often the Finance Minister Nitti to explain in person what the army needed.

⁷⁸⁵ Committee of Imperial Defence, Historical Section, *History of the Great War*, 36 tomes (London, 1922-2010), vol. *Military Operations: Italy, 1915-1919*, J. E. Edmonds, H. R. Davies eds., (London, 1949), 107.

⁷⁸⁶ Cassar, *Forgotten Front...*, 113.

⁷⁸⁷ Hardinge papers, Cambridge University Library (CUL), vol. 38, Rodd to Hardinge, 2 July 1918.

⁷⁸⁸ Cassar, *Forgotten Front...*, 115.

⁷⁸⁹ CAB 24/39, Plumer to Robertson, 13 January, 1918.

some persistent weaknesses – such as the deeply ingrained habit of Italian officers to assume that orders, once issued, would be carried out, without any check being made that this was so⁷⁹⁰ – the Italian army was improving quite quickly. Infantry regiments were reduced in numbers (from 3,500 to 2,600 men) and equipped with a flame-thrower section. Machine-guns now numbered 36 per regiment, instead of 30.⁷⁹¹ The artillery was reorganised and commanders were ordered to concentrate more carefully on the positioning of their guns and on co-ordinating their action with the infantry.⁷⁹² The Italian army was now being managed in new, more flexible ways. Divisions would no longer be broken up – a process which had fragmented the army and weakened morale; and there would be improved co-operation with light artillery in the front line.⁷⁹³ Infantry tactics were improved as well and a new élite assault corps of shock troops, the *Arditi*, was formed.⁷⁹⁴

Not many British soldiers or officers were much impressed by these developments, most probably because they could not appreciate them until the final offensive at Vittorio Veneto. For many Tommies the Italian campaign was a relief from the western front, and some of them openly referred to it as a picnic.⁷⁹⁵ This is comprehensible. After all, the allied troops had arrived in November, they had joined the frontline when it had been already stabilised, and thereafter were not involved in major engagements until the battle of the Piave (15-22 June), where, again, they had a minor role. What followed was another long pause until the final offensive in late October. For many allied soldiers the Italian front was too good to be true. None of them had experienced the cauldron of the Carso or the harshness of winter warfare on the Trentino peaks. From their letters and reports the widespread idea emerges that victory on the Italian front would have been easily achieved, had the Italians been better fighters. These opinions were of course influenced by the fact that after Caporetto the military reputation of the Italians, which probably had never been very high, was in tatters. In consequence, the British became dismissive of Italian military abilities, regarding the Italians as second-rate allies

⁷⁹⁰ CAB 24/40, Plumer to Robertson, 20 January 1918.

⁷⁹¹ Gooch, *Italian Army...*, 273. The Arditi had been created already in the summer of 1917, but became a crucial component of the Italian army throughout 1918.

⁷⁹² AUSSME, E2, b. 132, n. 8094, Schieramento d'artiglieria per la difesa ad oltranza, 1 February 1918.

⁷⁹³ Isnenghi, Rochat, *Grande Guerra...*, 460.

⁷⁹⁴ AUSSME, E2, cit., n. 6977, Deployment of forces in depth, 26 December 1917.

⁷⁹⁵ J. Dillon, *"Allies are a Tiresome Lot." The British Army in Italy in the First World War* (Solihul: Helion&Co., 2015), 55-56, 64, 105-112.

worthy of little more than sympathy or contempt. This would be the basis for the subsequent British prejudice, which was reflected in post-war literature, and which generally discounted Italian influence on events.

Plumer, for his part, formed a mixed, and more balanced opinion of the quality of Italian soldiers: many officers were brave and maintained their calm under fire, but their knowledge of staff work was “too theoretical,” and few showed compassion for their men.⁷⁹⁶ The rank and file, Plumer felt, lacked confidence in their officers. Still they were excellent material and their morale was good, notwithstanding the ordeal many had gone through. His conclusion on 20 January was as follows:

All I think that can be expected at the end of three months is a force of fairly good, if somewhat uneven, infantry, capable of making a brilliant attack or a stubborn defence for a time, but incapable of anything but the simplest manoeuvres and uncertain if called upon for any sustained or prolonged effort [...]; the infantry will have for its support artillery which will almost certainly be inferior in tactics and fire effect to what is opposed to it, and the conduct of operations will be by commanders and staff with too little practical experience and training to be able to make up for any deficiencies or shortcomings on the part of the troops.⁷⁹⁷

Nevertheless, Plumer believed the Italian army could not hold without British aid, and opposed London’s plan to withdraw some divisions in view of the progress being made by the Italians. Hardinge was irritated:

I read today a report by Plumer on the Italian Armies in the field. It was not at all satisfactory, and what surprises me so much is that the training of the troops appears to be so deficient. I had always heard the case to be exactly the reverse, but Plumer apparently considers all branches inefficient with the exception of the Engineers. If that is the case, it looks as though we shall never be able to withdraw our troops which are so badly needed in France.

Hardinge and Robertson felt that Plumer would try to win laurels in Italy and would want to keep his command united, or even ask for reinforcements to expand it.⁷⁹⁸

⁷⁹⁶ Domenico Quirico, in his analysis of the battle of Adowa, concluded provocatively that many Italian officers knew “how to die [well], not how to win”: D. Quirico, *Adua. La battaglia che cambiò la storia d’Italia* (Milan: Mondadori, 2004), 103.

⁷⁹⁷ CAB 24/57, Plumer to Robertson, *cit.* Plumer’s ideas for the most part were confirmed by General Fayolle, whose report on the Italian army was dated 27 December 1917: WO 106/805, General Fayolle, “Summary of a Report on the Situation of the Italian Army,” 26 December, 1917.

⁷⁹⁸ Rodd papers, Hardinge to Rodd, 28 January 1918.

Plumer has seldom been given enough credit for what he accomplished in Italy notwithstanding the fact that he was not involved in any major fighting. He worked hard with Diaz to impart the benefit of his command experience and training, often bridging over differences between the Italians and the French.⁷⁹⁹ The Italians were unhappy over London's decision to transfer him in early March, requesting through Rodd that he be allowed to remain in Italy:

From quite a number of sources, I hear that his [Plumer's] influence has been of the greatest possible value. Italian C-in-C appears to rely very greatly on his counsel and many reforms have been carried out as a result [...] and there seems to be no doubt that Diaz leans upon him, and that there is such an excellent understanding.⁸⁰⁰

The War Cabinet replied that, in view of the very serious events expected on the western front, it could not refuse Haig's request for the general's return. On 10 March Plumer handed over command of the British troops in Italy to the Earl of Cavan.⁸⁰¹

Cavan confirmed that the military emergency in Italy had passed, but remained worried that a new Austro-German offensive could lead to another Caporetto. It was therefore necessary to establish a plan to send more reinforcements to Italy in the case of yet another emergency.⁸⁰²

A solution was attempted through the Allied Transport Council, set up following recommendations by the permanent military representatives, but which did not start work immediately.⁸⁰³ It was not until the SWC's 4th session (14-15 March) that the proposal of British General P.A.M. Nash⁸⁰⁴ was approved, and the scope and responsibilities of the Council defined:⁸⁰⁵ the Transport Council was to

⁷⁹⁹ Cassar, *Forgotten Front...*, 129-136.

⁸⁰⁰ FO 800/202, Rodd to Balfour, 3 March 1918.

⁸⁰¹ Cassar, *Forgotten Front...*, 136.

⁸⁰² CAB 2375, Minutes of the War Cabinet, 5 March, 1918.

⁸⁰³ AUSSME, E8, b. 10, f.2, Nota collettiva n.8, 8 January, 1918.

⁸⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, E8, b.9, f.7, Resolutions passed at the fourth session of the session Supreme War Council, March 1918.

⁸⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, E9, b.18, f.114, Relazione sulla situazione generale dei trasporti dal fronte occidentale del Generale Sir P.A.M. Nash, 15 March, 1918.

draw up a report for general improvements to land and sea communications, outline plans for mass troop movements and study enemy transport routes to improve air-strikes against them.⁸⁰⁶

A particular focus of attention was transport to Italy via France.⁸⁰⁷ On 27 March 1918 a joint note from the Council set out the logistics for new aid to Italy on the Modane-Ventimiglia line.⁸⁰⁸ The line was to be strengthened.⁸⁰⁹ During the Caporetto crisis, there were up to 42 trains a day. In spring 1918, however, it was hard to reach 18-20 as they vied with convoys of coal supplies for Italian industry and of provisions and supplies for the Anglo-French divisions on the Altipiani and for the allied base at Taranto, a crucial port in implementing the Otranto barrage and supplying the Armée d'Orient. The Italian delegation proposed using ordinary railway lines (Aosta, Pinerolo, San Dalmazzo, Savona) as an alternative to Modane-Ventimiglia. It also suggested that the transport of coal and other supplies should be suspended in the event of a military crisis. Diaz, in the case of another successful enemy offensive, would require the aid of an allied force of four army corps for a total number of eight divisions.⁸¹⁰ The target was that, when required, it should be possible to run at least 42 trains a day.⁸¹¹

The Transport Council's reply to the Italian proposal arrived on 10 April.⁸¹² It began with a detailed analysis of the three ways in which troop movement from France to Italy could be carried out: entirely by train; by train and normal road across the Alps; by train to Marseilles or other southern French ports, then by sea to Italian ports in the northern Tyrrhenian Sea. In the first case, the Council calculated that the maximum daily rate could not exceed 45 (21 for the Modane line, 24 for the Ventimiglia), and all goods trains would be suspended. Because supplies for Italian industry and provisions for the allies in Italy were crucial, the interruption should not extend beyond 4-5 days, following prior adequate stock-piling, particularly of coal. In the second case, French railway would

⁸⁰⁶ The Council worked intensely to the end of the war, with 37 meetings up to 11 November 1918, and 19 afterwards. The Italian Section of the Council was chaired by Colonel (and later, General) Giulio Levi. See: *ibid.*, E9, b.17, f.112.

⁸⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, E9, b.17, f.111, Lettera della sezione francese del Consiglio interalleato dei trasporti, 20 April, 1918.

⁸⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, E2, b.81, f. "Consiglio interalleato supremo di guerra", Nota collettiva n. 19, 27 March 1918.

⁸⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, Lettera collettiva dei rappresentanti militari permanenti al comitato interalleato dei trasporti, 27 March, 1918.

⁸¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Promemoria del rappresentante militare italiano, "esposizione dei motivi," 27 March, 1918.

⁸¹¹ Gionfrida, *L'Italia e il coordinamento...*, 144.

⁸¹² E2, b.81, f. "Consiglio interalleato supremo di guerra," Risposta del Consiglio interalleato dei trasporti, 10 April, 1918.

be used to the Italian frontier, then normal road transportation on tracks – some of which, however, were impassable in winter – would be used to Italian railway stations; then supplies would be once more loaded onto rail to the front line. In this way, however, it was not possible to run more than 12 to 16 trains per day, and it would still be necessary to halt all other transportation. The third option made it possible to run no more than 12 trains per day because of the low number of convoys the Italian railway could provide from the ports of Savona, Genoa and La Spezia.

Another possibility was to free up the Franco-Italian railway lines by diverting part of the France-Italy traffic through Switzerland. For military transport, this presented a not insignificant political problem. It would, however, appear feasible for provisions. The Council therefore found that it was possible to transport coal, recommending an overall daily tonnage: by sea (5000 tonnes); by rail and by sea from the ports to the mouth of the river Rodano (6000 tonnes); by rail only (9000 tonnes). In view of the difficulties being encountered at that time by the allied merchant fleet, the Council recommended transport entirely by rail.⁸¹³

The Italian delegation agreed to the plans for military transport,⁸¹⁴ but advised setting aside the idea of rerouting merchant transport via Switzerland in favour of a stock-piling of coal reserves for Italy of 150,000 tonnes.⁸¹⁵ On 18 April 1918 the permanent military representatives on the SWC approved the council's report.⁸¹⁶

The question of allied support to Italy in the military sphere was resolved, but other issues remained: Italy desperately needed more supplies and money to prosecute the fight – for instance, coal imports in 1917 although amounting to 5,038,000 tons, were only 52% of requirements.⁸¹⁷

On 11 November 1917, Crespi, Italian provisioning commissioner, for the first time drew up an overall estimate of Italian requirements for food supplies: 400,000 tonnes of wheat and 30,000 of frozen meat per month. Wheat imports had dropped to 70,000 tonnes per month and the minimum

⁸¹³ Gionfrida, *L'Italia e il coordinamento...*, 145.

⁸¹⁴ E2, b.81, f. "Consiglio interalleato supremo di guerra," Memoria esplicativa annessa alla relazione del Consiglio interalleato dei trasporti, 15 April, 1918.

⁸¹⁵ Crespi, *Alla difesa...*, 28, 47, 51, 54.

⁸¹⁶ AUSSME, E2, b.21, f. "Consiglio interalleato supremo di guerra," Nota collettiva n. 22, 18 April, 1918.

⁸¹⁷ Gooch, *Italian Army...*, 266.

requirement was 250,000 tonnes per month. The situation was serious and Crespi did not mince words: “Italy does not have enough to eat.”

On 4 December in Paris, Crespi had talks with Clemenceau and Weygand, but after long discussion, the French refused all aid: Weygand argued that their army did not have enough flour even for themselves. Fortunately, General Wilson was also in Paris as the British permanent military representative. Crespi spoke to him and he “immediately put himself in our shoes:” “All right, I will send you a thousand tons of wheat from my stocks.” Crespi replied: “No wheat, general, we need flour.” And the British general agreed.

In three meetings in London on 13, 14 and 15 December, called by Cecil, who was working on the blockade, the representatives of the allied and associate governments estimated the losses which could be inflicted by the Germans on allied and neutral shipping in the following four months at two million tonnes. The Allies would balance the losses only on 1 March as “by that date, the Americans will launch 350,000 tonnes and the British 150,000.” Italy, in particular, was in difficulty. According to Crespi, the Central Powers were concentrating their Mediterranean operations on Italy “to reduce it to starvation and to provoke a revolution.” Italian merchant fleet losses rose by 60%, the highest figure among the belligerents.⁸¹⁸ In all, losses amounted to 336 ships, 556,205 tonnes. Losses caused by the enemy rose from 36,405 tonnes in 1915 to 190,385 in 1916, to 312,242 in 1917, falling in 1918 to 138,175 tonnes. To the loss of shipping must be added the 420,382 tonnes of cargo – 151,642 of coal, 133,069 of cereals, 37,266 metals, 52,505 of miscellaneous goods and 45,900 of minerals.

Crespi negotiated with the US government for 135,000 tonnes of shipping for Italy. Efforts were made to encourage combined rail and river transport to compensate for the difficulties of sea transport. Navigation on the River Sile was improved and work carried out to make it possible to navigate the Bacchiglione between Padua (the new headquarters of the Comando Supremo) and Vicenza. At Piacenza, Cremona, Mantua and Pontelagoscuro, railway stations were connected to river wharfs. The quantity of goods transported by river grew from 38,526 tonnes in 1915 to 483,226 in 1917, and 784,339 after the retreat to the Piave.⁸¹⁹

⁸¹⁸ Crespi, *Alla difesa...*, 16, 21, 176.

⁸¹⁹ Einaudi, *Condotta economica...*, 95, 98.

Thanks to these measures, the number of tonnes of wheat reaching Italy in November and December 1917 rose from 136,000 to 140,000 tonnes: “A significant increase on previous months” summed up Crespi, who could inform Parliament on 22 December: “Now I can guarantee that the country will live for another thirty days.” At the same session, Orlando rebuffed the Socialists’ complaints declaring: “Before Italy will talk of peace, we shall withdraw all the way down to Sicily!”⁸²⁰

The new supplies guaranteed by Britain were nonetheless lower than requirements estimated at 250,000 tonnes per month. Crespi therefore tried to garner new supplies from the Wheat Executive. Britain began to suspect that Italy was exaggerating its difficulties, as Hardinge wrote to Rodd:

The rumours [...] of food riots at Naples and elsewhere in Italy were unpleasant reading, but I do not understand why the shortage should be so acute unless, as I expect, it is due to bad organisation. I made immediate enquiries on receiving your letter and find that, owing to arrivals of flour in Italy during December having exceeded the estimates, the position of Italy is actually better than that of this country where arrivals last month fell short of estimates. [...] It is estimated that the deficiency in supplies of wheat on the 1st February next in the UK, France and Italy will be 24%, 23.5, and 22.9% respectively, showing Italy in the best position of the three, and ourselves in the worst. [...] It seems to me iniquitous that we should continue to be blamed for starving Italy, when in reality we are making greater sacrifices than we can afford.⁸²¹

Imperiali intervened in support of Crespi’s requests and on 21 January warned Milner: “Be careful for you will lose Italy.”⁸²² The risk was too great and on 26 January Crespi and Beale met to draw up a new Anglo-Italian agreement on supplies. The British could not guarantee more than 34 million hundredweight of wheat for all 1918. The Italians, however, obtained significant advance supplies for the first months “so as to restore supplies before the new harvest.”⁸²³ Thanks to Britain’s commitment, spring saw four million hundredweight of wheat shipped to Italy and, excluding losses to torpedoing, 3,770,000 were actually landed.⁸²⁴

⁸²⁰ Crespi, *Alla difesa...*, 27.

⁸²¹ Rodd papers, Hardinge to Rodd, 18 January, 1918.

⁸²² Imperiali, *Diario...*, 484.

⁸²³ Crespi, *Alla difesa...*, 40.

⁸²⁴ On 25 April, Crespi wrote in his diary with some relief: “The organisation of marine transport has successfully seen us through the critical moment and is continuing with growing efficiency,” *ibid.*, 88.

Wheat shipments were received as shown below:

September 1917	88.000 tonnes
October	140.000
November	140.000
December	140.000
January 1918	223.000
February	230.000
March	218.000
April	323.000
May	377.000

The food emergency might have been solved, but finding a solution to the coal question was more difficult. Imports to Italian ports had fallen from 4,681,900 tonnes in 1913-14 to 3,780,100 in 1915-16, to 1,033,200 in 1917-18.⁸²⁵ Only 473,000 of coal had been received in previous months, far from meeting the monthly requirement calculated at 690,000 tonnes, and forecasts at the end of January estimated only 350,000 would be landed the following month. “It would be catastrophic,” concluded Crespi. On 17 January, he went to London accompanied by Bianchi and Salvatore Orlando, commissar-general of the Merchant Fleet, to negotiate a coal agreement with the French and the British.

Lord Milner⁸²⁶ proposed that Italy, at such a critical moment for its army, should receive its extraordinary supplies from France. Such an agreement would ensure the shipping to Italy of a substantial amount of coal by rail, thereby freeing up some of the tonnage which could be dedicated to the transport of wheat and other goods which the country desperately needed. 15,000 extra tonnes of coal a day would arrive via France, totalling 450,000 a month; ordinary supplies for 250,000 tonnes would continue. The French, though, refused to supply “even a kilogram” which was not returned to

⁸²⁵ Einaudi, *Condotta economica...*, 91.

⁸²⁶ In early 1918 Milner was still at the War Cabinet. He was appointed secretary of state for war on 19 April 1918.

them by the British, “so that the latter would bear the full burden.”⁸²⁷ Crespi and the other Italian delegate, Bianchi, moreover, were unhappy because “in this way we burn the bad French coal and the French burn the good British coal.”⁸²⁸ After a first round of talks, the agreement for coal had reached stalemate.

The British blamed the Italian delegation:

We British certainly did our best for the Italians, but they are rather a hopeless set of people. But for our almost indecent insistence they never would have sent Bianchi, and the people they did send are incredibly incompetent. Crespi, indeed, is not so bad, though he is not a match for any of the French, but Salvatore Orlando and Berrini were really pitiable. [...] Against these men the French had sent three or four really competent people. [...] If, therefore, the solution of the question is unsatisfactory I must honestly say that I think the Italians are chiefly to blame, and I can only hope that they are not so incompetent in other matters as they appear to be in these.⁸²⁹

At a second meeting on 9 February, the British clashed instead with the French, who continued to oppose any extraordinary supply to Italy with the pretext of their own “infinite needs.” Cecil threatened the French that he would override their objections and manage British coal according to his own good sense. “A serious break is in the offing,” commented Crespi. Healing the breach proved difficult and was achieved in the following days, thanks above all to the efforts of the French Commerce Minister Etienne Clémentel. On 18 February, the agreement was at last signed. Italian requirements were set at the figure presented by Crespi and Bianchi: 690,000 tonnes – 240,000 of French coal by rail and 450,000 tonnes of British, delivered in part by rail across France and in part by ship.⁸³⁰ The British, once again, had taken on the greatest share of the burden in supporting Italy.

In the following months, the Italian government once more put forward its plan, in agreement with its allies, for a national reserve of coal which could be used in the event of another military emergency.⁸³¹ In May, however, Orlando realised that, notwithstanding all his efforts, it was

⁸²⁷ Crespi, *Alla difesa...*, 28, 47.

⁸²⁸ French coal “is apparently from 10 to 20% lower in calorific value than English coal”: Rodd papers, Cecil to Rodd, 18 March, 1918.

⁸²⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸³⁰ Crespi, *Alla difesa...*, 48, 54.

⁸³¹ AUSSME, E2, b. 81, f. “Consiglio interalleato supremo di guerra,” n. 1092, 16 May, 1918; Gionfrida, *L'Italia e il coordinamento...*, 148.

impossible for Italy to engage on its own. The only possibility was to turn once more to Britain to obtain an extraordinary supply.⁸³² On 31 May, Di Robilant entrusted his aide Angelo Levi with the negotiation.⁸³³ Levi left for London where he met Aldo Mola, head of the Italian military mission, and began the negotiations which would last until 13 June. That day, Levi signed a convention with Milner by which His Majesty's government would "make available to Italy 150,000 tonnes of good quality coal taken from the railway reserve stocks [in Britain] for a period of six weeks from the 20th of the current month."⁸³⁴ The coal, carried by British merchant vessels which were assigned to the movement of wheat, would be transported entirely by sea to the Italian ports of Genoa, La Spezia, Savona and Livorno. The Italian government undertook to use this coal reserve only in the event of a critical military situation which made the transfer of allied troops from France necessary, interrupting the coal supply.⁸³⁵

The signing of the convention⁸³⁶ was quite definitely a success for Levi, but it was above all proof that allied logistic co-ordination was beginning to produce results. On 7 August, however, Di Robilant sent a confidential letter to Diaz in which he expressed his concern regarding British difficulties in guaranteeing coal supplies.⁸³⁷ The British government, although managing to grant the extra 150,000 tonnes, could not keep up the ordinary shipments of coal agreed in previous negotiations. The Italian minister of transport, Giovanni Villa, had declared, therefore, his intention to dig into the reserve. Di Robilant asked Diaz to take responsibility for the guarantee given to the British that coal reserves would not be touched: even in the face of an ever-more serious coal crisis, agreements needed to be abided by for mutual credibility and trust.⁸³⁸

⁸³² *Ibid.*, n. 754, Orlando to Di Robilant, 22 May, 1918.

⁸³³ *Ibid.*, n. 1450, Di Robilant to Levi, 31 May, 1918.

⁸³⁴ *Ibid.*, E2, b.81, f. "Riserva strategica di carbone," n. 2039, "Accordi per la provvista di una riserva strategica di 150.000 tonnellate di carbone in Italia," 17 June, 1918.

⁸³⁵ Gionfrida, *L'Italia e il coordinamento...*, 149.

⁸³⁶ AUSSME, E2, b.81, f. "Riserva strategica di carbone," Diaz to Levi, 26 June, 1918.

⁸³⁷ *Ibid.*, n. 11759, Di Robilant to Diaz, 7 August, 1918.

⁸³⁸ Gionfrida, *L'Italia e il coordinamento...*, 150.

Diaz agreed⁸³⁹ and charged the general superintendent of the army with supervising the situation.⁸⁴⁰ On 9 September Diaz wrote to Orlando, begging him to issue to the ministries of Arms and Munitions and of Transport the necessary provisions to ensure that the coal reserve supply provided by the British would remain untouched. He asked, moreover, that any exceptional use would not be made without prior consultation with the Comando Supremo and with the allies.⁸⁴¹ Orlando replied on the 14th, confirming he had taken the necessary measures to comply.⁸⁴² The general superintendent of the army, General Vittorio Zaccone, guaranteed an inspection every fifteen days.⁸⁴³

The setting up of inter-allied economic, financial and logistic co-ordination was completed only in the last months of the war and, in the summer of 1918, Crespi, appointed head of the new Provisions Ministry, enthused: “The allied nations have become a huge common body which combines every resource, of blood, energy and raw material and distributes them according to need.”⁸⁴⁴

Italy, however, needed to solve another, even more serious problem: financing such a wealth of acquisitions. Emilio Morandi, director-general of provisions, and Vincenzo Giuffrida, director-general of supplies, drew up a finance plan for 1918 which set out a total turnover (adding income and outgoings together) of 15 billion Lire.⁸⁴⁵

After Caporetto, the Bank of Italy in ten days issued, *una tantum*, money equal to 11% of existing circulation to forestall a run on the banking system. In the following months, though, the policy of relying on debt finance, rather than taxation or the printing press, was restored. The debt returned to its more customary values of around three quarters of public expenditure. The Fifth National Loan issued

⁸³⁹ AUSSME, E2, b.81, f. “Riserva strategica di carbone,” Diaz to Di Robilant, 7 August, 1918.

⁸⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, n. 13279, Diaz to Zaccone, 8 September, 1918.

⁸⁴¹ *Ibid.*, n. 13279, Diaz to Orlando, 9 September, 1918.

⁸⁴² *Ibid.*, n. 2780, Orlando to Diaz, 14 September, 1918.

⁸⁴³ *Ibid.*, n. 35656, Zaccone to Diaz, 12 September, 1918.

⁸⁴⁴ Crespi described the workings of his ministry: “Divided into three general offices, supported by a legal office and legislative office, it includes [various] sections. [...] Just as for each of the general offices, also each of the sections and each office is presided over by a manager who by now is definitely experienced. No foodstuff escapes this minister of war who has dictatorial powers and even his own militia”: Crespi, *Alla difesa...*, 117.

⁸⁴⁵ On internal affairs, Crespi’s recipe to face the increase in prices on the Italian market, approved by Orlando, was: “I have no trust in caps and half measures of any kind. The increase in price is an economic phenomenon which is stronger than any sanction. The causes themselves of this phenomenon must be removed, that is, modify the ratio of supply to demand. When too many goods are offered, only their distribution can halt the fall; if there is a shortage, only a reduction in consumption, therefore of demand, can hamper the increase. It is necessary, then, to stabilise and curtail imports to reduce consumption.” *ibid.* 20, 79.

in January-February 1918 reached its target subscription. Nitti mounted a massive propaganda campaign to achieve this result, which was crucial, both to establish the credibility of the new cabinet after Caporetto and to reassert the national will to continue fighting to the end.

National loans, however, were not enough. At the beginning of 1918 the Italian government and the Bank of Italy became involved in the difficult negotiations over inter-allied war debts that were to cast such a long shadow over the following decade. Now the Bank's main worry was not how to find domestic finance for the war effort, but how to manage a weakening external position. Early debt issues had reassured Stringher of the domestic market's ability to absorb large loans without unsettling the financial system. As public consumption climbed from around 10% of GDP in 1913 to more than 40% in 1917, and as Italy's weak endowment of raw materials bit deeper into its balance of payments, the Bank focused increasingly on the problem of the exchange rate.⁸⁴⁶

Already in spring 1916 Stringher was being advised that future borrowing would inevitably have to be raised on the US market. But it was not until late summer 1917 that the Bank secured an agreement with the US Federal Reserve.⁸⁴⁷ Among the currencies of the allied powers the lira was falling fastest and farthest. Foreign debt was little more than one sixth of total indebtedness at the time, so there was not much concern for the real burden of the debt. Rather the problem with depreciation was its inflationary impact, which caused high rates increases for producer goods: from 1914 to 1917, retail prices rose 89% but wholesale prices went up by 186%.⁸⁴⁸ Stringher realised that this was piling up problems for the future as financial intermediaries would have trouble adjusting to a return to normality at the end of the war. Thus, while inflation would eventually reduce the real value of domestically-held public debt, in the short run it would render further borrowing necessary.⁸⁴⁹

As Galassi and Harrison stressed, Nitti had a political view of the exchange rate problem: he believed it could be solved by energetic public action. He saw a lack of confidence in Italy's final victory underlying the depreciation, and blamed the defeatism of Italian bankers and financiers who

⁸⁴⁶ Galassi, Harrison, "Italy at War...", 17-18.

⁸⁴⁷ G. Toniolo ed., *La Banca d'Italia e l'economia di guerra* (Bari: Laterza, 1989), 50.

⁸⁴⁸ V. Zamagni, "Italy: How to Lose the War and Win the Peace," in Harrison M. (ed.) *The Economics of World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 213; Galassi, Harrison, "Italy at War...", 18-19.

⁸⁴⁹ Toniolo, *La Banca d'Italia...*, 46-7.

were avoiding repatriation of foreign revenues. Therefore he decided to set up a clearing office, the INC (*Istituto Nazionale Cambio*), with a monopoly on foreign currency trading. The main bankers, including Stringher, bowed to pressure. The INC, however, lacked the resources to sway the markets because Italy's foreign reserves were already small to start with. Seeing that the solution lay in further foreign loans, Nitti aimed straight at the American market.⁸⁵⁰

With some 35% of allied early-war purchases in America being financed on the New York exchanges, some \$2.4 billion in total, by 1917 all Entente powers had mortgaged themselves heavily to the USA, whose investment in allied victory had to be sustained. Britain was no exception: after America entered the war, Britain's almost exhausted credit line was extended further, with almost 69% of Allied purchases being financed on credit thereafter.⁸⁵¹

In the spring of 1918, Nitti negotiated a loan from the US Treasury (talks took place in London in the presence of Crosby, the American delegate) and outlawed the export of currency or credit instruments from Italy. A joint INC-Fed committee would examine Italian credit needs in the US market and provide support on the spot market for the lira, while the US Treasury would finance dollar-denominated Italian import bills. In return, all Italian-owned dollar balances would be earmarked for settlement of Italy's debts with the US Treasury.⁸⁵² Similar agreements with Britain and France followed. The announcement of this agreement (22 July 1918) entailed a lowering of the dollar and of sterling, falling from 38.47 (the record reached in February) to 37.15 lire – the dollar rate was 11,15 in April 1918.⁸⁵³ The sums involved were astronomical. The new agreements would give Italy 6 billion lire, to be spent primarily on the South America markets where prices were more favourable.⁸⁵⁴

On the other hand, this brought all Italian purchases abroad under the control of allied authorities and ended Italy's independence in the allocation of foreign balances. Since the dollar was becoming

⁸⁵⁰ Galassi, Harrison, "Italy at War...", 19.

⁸⁵¹ Phillpot, *Attrition...*, 77.

⁸⁵² Galassi, Harrison, "Italy at War...", 20.

⁸⁵³ A hundred lire were worth 67 francs.

⁸⁵⁴ Crespi, *Alla difesa...*, 29, 127.

the main means of international settlement, and the pound and the French franc took up any slack, the agreement with the US Treasury also terminated Italy's ability to run its own monetary policy.⁸⁵⁵

Besides, access to the American market did not end Italy's problems. The financing, so expensively acquired, proved inadequate. Britain insisted on being paid in dollars for purchases that involved American raw materials and components. In September 1918, Italian dollar-denominated purchases in third countries caused resistance in London once the original line of credit granted by the US treasury came to an end.⁸⁵⁶ British shipping firms were abruptly ordered to halt operations, pending renegotiation of the financial agreements with Italy. Douglas Forsyth described Italy's position at the time as that of "a beggar," whose financial weakness gave British and American diplomats room to obtain important trade concessions.⁸⁵⁷

In conclusion, Italy managed to survive the crisis, reorganise its army, increase its industrial production and find the funds to keep up the enormous effort of the final, decisive act of the war. But this occurred at the price of its autonomy which, in economic terms, was even greater and longer-lasting than in military. As Galassi and Harrison put it, "fighting a war with one hand while holding out a hat with the other is a difficult act to carry through." Italy's weak position, economic and financial as well as military, cast it as a junior partner at Versailles.⁸⁵⁸

⁸⁵⁵ Galassi, Harrison, "Italy at War...", 20.

⁸⁵⁶ The official purchasing agent of the British government in the USA was the American banker J.P. Morgan.

⁸⁵⁷ D.J. Forsyth: *The Crisis of Liberal Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 149-92.

⁸⁵⁸ Galassi, Harrison, "Italy at War...", 20.

3. A New Co-operation.

The new Supreme War Council compensated for the lack of co-ordination within the Entente in previous years. The concept of the united front from Newport to Venice strengthened the alliance. This collaboration accelerated the allied capacity to react and pushed their governments to better co-ordinate their own forces. It did not however enable them to iron out the real differences at the heart of the Entente.

For example, the permanent military representatives only played the role of technical advisors in co-ordinating the demands of the main powers. The real decisions were made at periodical conferences between the various heads of state who met throughout 1918. The requests of the council were taken into consideration but largely based on the more general needs of the alliance.

Britain and Italy had good reason to oppose the SWC, or at least to make its decisions less binding. Italy had always been against this kind of inter-allied organisation. It sent figures of secondary importance to the council. The first was Cadorna, who after Caporetto had been deprived of any real military authority; the second was General Giardino, war minister under Boselli who was looked down upon due to the predicament of the Italian army; the third was General Mario Nicolis Di Robilant who was a capable man but almost unknown abroad. This was a huge contrast to Wilson and Foch, the representatives chosen by the British and the French. It reveals the different importance that the allied powers gave to the new co-ordinating body.⁸⁵⁹

British dissatisfaction with the SWC would seem surprising given the fact that Lloyd George was one of its main promoters and an advocate of the 'united front.' However, Russian defection and the growing influence of President Wilson had resulted in a reshuffling of the cards, especially in regards to the power and role of Britain as the leader of an Entente, which now seemed to be in crisis. In addition, the British generals were concerned that their troops could be exploited by the French purely for their own benefit.

⁸⁵⁹ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 578.

In theory, Italy and Britain should have been able to co-operate with each other, acting to obstruct the SWC and to keep the power of the French at bay. Maintaining this preferential partnership would have allowed them to push the other allies to make compromises. This never happened because other conflicting interests began to irreparably damage Anglo-Italian relations.

Despite the fact that Italy's weakness made it more reliant on the help of the other allies and in particular of the British, Rome tried as far as it could to maintain its own strategic independence on both land and sea – sometimes at the cost of bitter disputes with their “favoured” ally, Britain. The British knew that the Americans and the French had very similar ideas on how to end the war – to wait until an overwhelming superiority had been achieved on the French front and then beat Germany there.⁸⁶⁰ In light of this the British could not support the Italian demands for autonomy without jeopardising their relations with the Americans.

Behind this growing mutual mistrust there was an even bigger issue: the dispute over war aims, which was heating up. The Italians had reason to believe that the British, contrary to Rome's hopes, would not respect the terms of the London treaty. The British, after the military emergency in Italy had been resolved, were now being hard-pressed by the French and the Americans to concentrate again on the French front.⁸⁶¹

These contrasts emerged at the first allied meeting in Versailles, between 30 January and 2 February 1918,⁸⁶² when conflicting Italian and British interests hindered common action. Here, the Allies decided on the creation of an inter-allied reserve which would come under the authority of an “Executive War Board.” Its members were the same as the permanent military representatives in the case of Britain and Italy, Wilson and (still) Cadorna. Bliss was included also, even though the USA had declined to send a political delegate to sit on the Council itself, because the manpower reserves were in the American Expeditionary Force. The presidency of the War Board was given to Foch.⁸⁶³

⁸⁶⁰ Pershing, *My Experiences...*, 318-319.

⁸⁶¹ Gionfrida, *L'Italia e il coordinamento...*, 111-119.

⁸⁶² DDI, 5^a, X, docs. 166, 168, 170-173, Consiglio Supremo di Guerra, Prima seduta, 30 January – 2 February 1918.

⁸⁶³ 30 January – 2 February: E8, b9, f2, Resolutions Passed at the Third Session of the Supreme War Council, January to February 1918.

In theory, the Executive War Board had the authority to determine the strength and composition of the general reserve, specifying the number of men in each allied army. It could decide the reserve's location and take the necessary measures to transport and concentrate it. The leadership of the reserve was in the hands of the individual commanders on the battlefield. However, in the event of insuperable disagreement they could call on the SWC.⁸⁶⁴

Sonnino and Orlando were strongly opposed to these proposals. They objected – not groundlessly – that this executive body could interfere with the SWC's authority. Their real concern, however, was Italy's secondary role. Italian resistance was overcome when the other governments accepted that an Italian contingent⁸⁶⁵ would be transferred to the French front. The corps of General Alberico Albricci (two divisions) would be transferred to France together with a further 60,000 militarised workers.⁸⁶⁶ Politically this was a significant result for the Italians, who would have been able to lay claim to a role on the main front of the war.⁸⁶⁷

On 3 February, at the first meeting of the Executive War Board, the details of the organisation of the reserve were decided.⁸⁶⁸ No less than 30 divisions would be involved: 9-10 British (6-7 taken from the French front and 3 from the Italian one), 13-14 French (4 taken from the Italian front), the rest Italian.⁸⁶⁹ A large part of the allied troops then stationed in Italy were thus considered part of the reserve, and they could be moved at very short notice, even though the final resolution stated that the divisions of the reserve of each country would initially be stationed in the country where they were fighting.⁸⁷⁰

Both the French commander-in-chief, Pétain, and the commander of the British Expeditionary Force in France, Haig, were deeply dissatisfied.⁸⁷¹ They feared that a general reserve consisting of

⁸⁶⁴ EMA, *Les Armées Françaises...*, VI, 1, 65-66.

⁸⁶⁵ DDI, 5^a, X, doc. 172, Conclusions: "The Supreme War Council remit to the Executive Committee for the General Reserve the study of the question of the employing Italian troops on the Western front."

⁸⁶⁶ The Italian 2nd Corps was transferred to France on 18 April 1918: A. Caselli Lapeschi, G. Militello, *1918. Gli italiani sul Fronte Occidentale* (Udine: Gaspari, 2007), 43.

⁸⁶⁷ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 588.

⁸⁶⁸ Gionfrida, *L'Italia e il coordinamento...*, 111.

⁸⁶⁹ AUSSME, E8, b9, f3, Verbale della prima seduta del Comitato esecutivo del Consiglio Supremo di Guerra, 3 February, 1918.

⁸⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, Verbale della terza seduta del Comitato esecutivo del Consiglio Supremo di Guerra, 6 February, 1918.

⁸⁷¹ EMA, *Les Armées Françaises...*, VI, 1, 71-75.

their troops but under an authority different to their own would badly limit their powers of command. Pétain wrote to Foch that 14 divisions would be enough for the general reserve, and that he believed the inclusion of 10 French divisions to be excessive.⁸⁷² On 15 February Foch replied that he intended to respect the decisions made by the SWC, adding that the reserve should stay under the control of the Executive Board.⁸⁷³

Haig and Robertson opposed any restriction on their freedom and were unhappy to move British troops in the reserve.⁸⁷⁴ Diaz, on the other hand, was willing to participate with 6 divisions; he saw in the general reserve the possibility of receiving more help for Italy in the event of another emergency. He asked, however, that four of the Anglo-French divisions in Italy assigned to the reserve be united in two corps, one British and the other French, and that they remain at the disposal of the Comando Supremo.⁸⁷⁵

Diaz's position isolated Haig and Robertson, to Foch's benefit and much to British irritation. On 17 February Rodd asked the Italian government to agree that two British divisions be moved from the Italian front to the French.⁸⁷⁶ Sonnino reacted badly because he feared another Austro-Hungarian attack in Italy.⁸⁷⁷ Orlando even suspected that "the creation of the reserve" was an excuse the allies were ready to exploit to withdraw all their troops from Italy.⁸⁷⁸ Clemenceau used the Anglo-Italian debate to impose himself and jump at any opportunity to patch up France's relations with Britain at the expense of the Italians, complaining that Rome's resistance to the transfer of troops from the Italian front to the French was weakening the Entente.⁸⁷⁹ Rome claimed that had the Italian front been weakened, they would not be able to send Italian divisions to France as agreed in the Treaty of Versailles.⁸⁸⁰ On 28 February, despite Italian objections, Clemenceau ordered the withdrawal of a

⁸⁷² *Ibid.*, Annexe 355, 777-779.

⁸⁷³ *Ibid.*, 800-802.

⁸⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, Annexe 420, 953-954.

⁸⁷⁵ SME, *L'Esercito italiano...*, VII, n.2, 4-5.

⁸⁷⁶ DDI, 5^a, X, doc. 248, Sonnino to Orlando and Giardino, 17 February, 1918. This decision was taken also due to Foch's pressure. See: PRO FO, 371/3230/30509, Balfour to Rodd, 16 February, 1918.

⁸⁷⁷ DDI, 5^a, X, doc. 248, *cit.*

⁸⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, doc. 264, Orlando to Imperiali, 20 February, 1918.

⁸⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, doc. 274, Bonin to Orlando, 21 February, 1918.

⁸⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, doc. 275, Orlando to Imperiali, 22 February, 1918.

further three French divisions from Italy. Orlando wrote to Imperiali that the strategy agreed at Versailles was “slowly losing every validity for the purpose for which it was aimed.”⁸⁸¹ Imperiali’s plea to the British, predictably, fell on deaf ears, and without London’s support, the Italians were deprived of any room for diplomatic manoeuvres.

Behind this Anglo-Italian misunderstanding lay a fundamental difference in the positions of the Italians and the British. In the case of the British, the military leaders were openly opposed to the constitution of the reserve, whilst Lloyd George considered it to be indispensable. Privately he hoped he could thus rein in the power of his generals; publicly he said the general reserve was essential to match Germany’s numerical superiority on the French front.⁸⁸² What mattered to him most of all was the need to end the war victoriously, albeit at the cost of military compromises. In the face of the British prime minister’s position, Robertson handed in his resignation: personal tensions between the two had reached breaking point.⁸⁸³ The Italian position was the reverse: the government did not look kindly upon the creation of the reserve for political reasons, whereas the military leaders were in favour of it, at least in general. Diaz’s problem was to avoid that the inter-allied reserve be used solely on the French front. From this point of view, the replacement of Robertson with Wilson as the British chief of the Imperial general staff did not ease Italy’s difficulties. Wilson explained to Diaz that, if he had had the power, he would have willingly accepted the transfer of the four Italian divisions to France, leaving five Anglo-French divisions in Italy; but his hands were tied by politicians.⁸⁸⁴

Anglo-Italian confrontation worsened at the meeting of the Executive War Board on 2 March, which saw for the first time the participation of Henry Rawlinson, the new British permanent military representative in place of Wilson, and Giardino, who had been Cadorna’s replacement from 18 February.⁸⁸⁵ The meeting saw Foch pounce on both the Italians and the British. Initially he criticised the latter, as Haig had not yet replied to the note regarding the constitution of the reserve, thus paralysing the work of the committee. Straight after Foch argued with Giardino about the role of the

⁸⁸¹ *Ibid.*, doc. 315, Orlando to Imperiali, 28 February, 1918.

⁸⁸² Gionfrida, *L’Italia e il coordinamento...*, 114.

⁸⁸³ P.E. Wright, *At the Supreme War Council* (London: Eveleigh Nash Company, 1928), 38-43.

⁸⁸⁴ DDI, 5^a, X, doc. 324, Wilson to Diaz, 1 March, 1918.

⁸⁸⁵ Gionfrida, *L’Italia e il coordinamento...*, 116.

35th Italian division in Macedonia. Giardino explained Italy's logistical difficulties in supplying the division: the steamers loaded with supplies were not able to pass the Corinth canal and they had to make the long journey round the Peloponnese before reaching Salonika, resulting in huge coal consumption and excessive wear on the light escorts. Shipping, fuel and tonnage were in his opinion areas of common interest for the Allies who should provide Italy with adequate support. Giardino concluded by proposing the immediate transfer of the 35th division to Valona. Foch disagreed: he saw in this suggestion a huge interference in the field of command of General Guillaumat, Serrail's successor as head of the *Armée d'Orient*. Giardino sought Rawlinson's support, but the latter let Giardino's suggestion drop, much to Italian irritation.⁸⁸⁶

On 4 March Haig's response finally reached Foch. The British general opposed the principle of the creation of the reserve, and declared he was not in a position to provide troops for it, anyway. General Tasker Bliss, the US permanent military representative, suggested bypassing the problem by leaving the number of reserve divisions on the various fronts undefined. Such a decision would however have hammered the very idea of an inter-allied reserve: Foch strongly opposed it. But faced by Haig the Executive War Board recognised that it "had been unable to form a general reserve." It reported this state of affairs to the SWC and awaited instructions.⁸⁸⁷

At the meeting of the SWC in London, 14-16 March, in which Orlando and Bissolati took part along with the other heads of the allied states, the Italian premier reopened discussion on the agreement reached at Versailles, and in particular on the role that the SWC should have in running the reserve.⁸⁸⁸ The British and the French made a common declaration in which they asked the Executive War Board to give attention to the Italian front.⁸⁸⁹ Shortly after they confirmed their intention to withdraw their divisions from Italy. Clemenceau insisted that Italian reinforcements should be sent to France in view of an imminent German offensive. Orlando bitterly stated that each of these points was "a total contradiction" of the other.⁸⁹⁰ The conference represented a step backwards compared to that

⁸⁸⁶ AUSSME, E8, b.9, f.3, Verbale della 4^a seduta del Comitato Esecutivo del Consiglio Supremo di Guerra, 2 March, 1918.

⁸⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, Verbale della 6^a seduta del Comitato Esecutivo del Consiglio Supremo di Guerra, 8 March, 1918.

⁸⁸⁸ For the whole records see: DDI, 5^a, X, docs. 398, 399, 408, Consiglio Supremo di Guerra, Quarta Sessione.

⁸⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, doc. 411, Orlando to Sonnino, 16 March, 1918.

⁸⁹⁰ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 591.

of Paris (30 January–2 February) as the Executive War Board had been reduced to a merely consultative body.

On 20 March Diaz chaired a meeting in Turin to determine the size of the Italian force in the reserve.⁸⁹¹ General Paul Maistre was the French representative present, whereas the Italian, British and American representatives were unchanged from the SWC: Giardino, Bliss and Rawlinson. The two Italian generals, informed of the increasing number of Austro-Hungarian troops on the Piave, foresaw an offensive and opposed the withdrawal of the allied troops.⁸⁹² The final resolution was divided into two points: 1) four Italian divisions, plus two French and one British previously on the Italian front, were to be part of the general reserve; 2) five divisions, two Italian, two French and one British, would be transferred to France. The Italian divisions would be the first to transfer as they needed to get used to the new theatre of operations and to French military doctrine. The objections of Giardino and Diaz, who were in favour of transferring only two Italian divisions, were put into the document but in the end ignored.⁸⁹³

The following day the discussions were resumed in the War Board. Giardino told Foch that the withdrawal of the British and French troops was premature and should only be done in case of extreme necessity. But the other allies voted against him, and ratified the agreements made in Turin. On that very afternoon Giardino received a telegram from Orlando in which the prime minister advised him on how to act at the meeting of the executive committee which had just finished. Orlando urged him to oppose the Turin agreement in such a way as to “accept the Commission’s proposal as regards the immediate departure of two Italian divisions, asking that the departure of the other troops [...] will be subordinated to the military situation.”⁸⁹⁴

The next day, Giardino reported that he and Diaz had opposed the decisions taken in Turin, but their objections had not been taken into consideration. Giardino suggested leaning on the SWC, stressing the resolution at Turin which stated that the initial heart of the general reserve would be

⁸⁹¹ SME, *L'Esercito italiano*... VII, n.2, 7.

⁸⁹² Gionfrida, *L'Italia e il coordinamento*..., 125 ff.

⁸⁹³ AUSSME, E8, b.9, f.8, Avis exprimé par la mission de généraux, réunie à Turin, le 20 mars en exécution de l'ordre n. C.E. du Comité exécutif du 17 mars 1918.

⁸⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, b.10, f.9, n. 289G, Orlando to Giardino, 21 March, 1918.

formed of seven divisions, of which four would be Italian, compared to the resolution made at the London conference of 14 March which spoke of ten British and French divisions and “some” Italian.⁸⁹⁵

On 23 March, with the German “Michael” offensive underway, the War Board met again and the British and French representatives demanded that two French divisions and a large part of the British artillery were to be immediately removed from Italy, in addition to a further two Italian divisions. Giardino, in light of the events on the French front, did not raise any objections.⁸⁹⁶ Lloyd George himself wrote to Orlando saying that he could not wait even a day to withdraw both the French and British contingents because “the enemy is making desperate efforts to break through the British front in France.”⁸⁹⁷ The Italian prime minister authorised their withdrawal.⁸⁹⁸ Orlando highlighted the fact that his decision was taken in the name of “perfect solidarity” and that Italy was putting its allies’ needs before its own. He also pointed out, in a slightly argumentative tone, that the agreements of Rapallo, Versailles and London would have imposed a very different procedure. The prime minister stressed that in the event of an Austro-Hungarian offensive in Italy both the two French divisions and the British one should come back.⁸⁹⁹ Finally, in agreement with Diaz, he insisted that the other seven British and French divisions left in Italy (three and four respectively) would then be put under the complete control of the Italian command. Two of the French divisions had already been deployed on the Altopiani, two British divisions were about to join the frontline, and those remaining were in reserve on the Pianura Padana. According to Diaz, any changes to this deployment would have caused serious problems.⁹⁰⁰

Between 25 and 26 March four groups of British artillery (12 batteries) left Italy. Between 27 and 30 March the XXI French corps and between 31 March and 3 April the 7th British division followed

⁸⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, n. 492, Giardino to Orlando, 22 March, 1918.

⁸⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, n. 514, Giardino to Orlando and Diaz, 23 March, 1918.

⁸⁹⁷ “I am confident you will readily agree to the orders we have issued:” PRO FO, 371/3230/30509, Lloyd George to Orlando, 23 March, 1918.

⁸⁹⁸ DDI, 5^a, X, doc. 483, Orlando to Imperiali, 30 March, 1918.

⁸⁹⁹ AUSSME, E8, b.10, f.9, n. 318G, Orlando to Giardino, 24 March, 1918.

⁹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, n. 9360, Diaz to Giardino, 25 March, 1918; Gionfrida, *L'Italia e il coordinamento...*, 129.

suit. On 15 April, after the withdrawal of the 46th and 47th French divisions, only three British and two French divisions remained in Italy. On 18 April the Italian II corps also left.⁹⁰¹

Orlando was upset: in a telegram to Giardino sent on 1 April, he complained that the transfer of the British and French troops from Italy was very one sided and had happened without respect for the agreements previously made, which foresaw a gradual withdrawal of the allied troops *after* the transfer of the Italian.⁹⁰² Giardino supported his prime minister in complaining about the lack of compliance with these earlier resolutions. On 5 April he argued with Foch, who refused any responsibility, saying that the order to withdraw the French came directly from Clemenceau. Giardino told Orlando that he was ready to resign in protest.⁹⁰³ Orlando advised him not to take hasty decisions and to take into account the situation on the French front. At this point, Lloyd George proposed a meeting to the Italians and suggested that Giardino, instead of resigning, should draw up a plan for allied help to Italy in the event of a military emergency.⁹⁰⁴ Giardino replied coldly that it would suffice to study the plan for quick movement of reinforcements that had already been drawn up by the allied Transport Council.⁹⁰⁵ A few days later, Giardino confirmed his intention to resign as Italian military representative at Versailles. On 15 April he was recalled to take command of the IV army and replaced by General Di Robilant.⁹⁰⁶

Two conclusions can be drawn from this meeting. First, it was easy to speak abstractly of a united front but the political contrasts at the heart of the Entente remained. Secondly, these contrasts saw France vying with poorly co-ordinated and therefore ineffective British and Italian resistance, which enabled the French to impose their own ideas. The failure of the Executive War Board to create a general reserve – the allied units potentially allocated to a reserve remained under national control – is symptomatic of its weakness. At the end of March 1918 its functions were entirely overtaken by events, specifically the appointment of Foch as allied “generalissimo.”⁹⁰⁷ This choice imposed a new

⁹⁰¹ SME, *L'Esercito italiano...* VII, n.2, 8.

⁹⁰² AUSSME, E8, b.10, f.9, n. 392, Orlando to Giardino, 1 April, 1918.

⁹⁰³ *Ibid.*, n. 610, Giardino to Orlando and Diaz, 5 April, 1918.

⁹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, Orlando to Giardino, 7 April, 1918.

⁹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, n. 626, Giardino to Orlando, 8 April, 1918.

⁹⁰⁶ Gionfrida, *L'Italia e il coordinamento...*, 131.

⁹⁰⁷ Greenhalgh, *Victory through Coalition...*, 182.

discipline on the national commanders: they remained responsible for tactics on their own fronts, but not for the strategy.⁹⁰⁸

The decision was taken by the British and French following the overwhelming initial success of the German offensive “Michael” on 21 March between Arras and St Quentin-La Fère: the Germans managed to advance 65km, capture 65,000 prisoners and 975 allied guns. On 26 March, at Doullens, Poincaré, Clemenceau, the French Armaments Minister Louis Loucheur, Foch, Pétain and Weygand met Milner, Haig and Wilson, and they confirmed the role of Foch as co-ordinator of all allied forces.⁹⁰⁹ On 3 April at Beauvais Clemenceau, Foch, Pétain, Lloyd George, Haig, Wilson and (this time) the American representatives Pershing and Bliss met to establish that Foch was to be in charge of allied strategy,⁹¹⁰ and that he therefore became ‘head general of the allied armies in France.’⁹¹¹

On 31 March the Italian permanent military representative at Versailles sent a telegram to both Orlando and Diaz reporting the creation of a unique command on the Belgian-French front and communicated Clemenceau’s wish that it be extended to the Italian.⁹¹² In light of the serious crisis in progress Giardino believed it would not be appropriate to refuse such co-ordination as it would have excluded Italy from any help in the future. He also suggested that Italy start sending help immediately.⁹¹³ In a later telegram to Orlando on 4 April he expressed his worries regarding the lack of Italian involvement in the “unique command,” not least because of its potential political consequences at the conclusion of the war.⁹¹⁴

Diaz differed. On 1 April 1918, after receiving Giardino’s telegram, he wrote to the prime minister and to the war minister of his satisfaction with the single command on the Belgian-French front. However, he expressed doubts about its applicability to the Italian front whose peculiarities had not been taken sufficiently into account by the allies. Furthermore, the fact that it was held by 54 Italian

⁹⁰⁸ J.J.H. Mordaq, *Le Comandement unique: comment il fut réalisé* (Paris: Tallandier, 1929), 57-91.

⁹⁰⁹ Gionfrida, *L’Italia e il coordinamento...*, 165 ff.

⁹¹⁰ F. Foch, *Memorie* (Mondadori: Verona, 1931), 361-363.

⁹¹¹ EMA, *Les Armées Françaises...*, VI, 1, 401-404.

⁹¹² AUSSME, E8, b.10, f.9, n. 579, Giardino to Orlando and Diaz, 31 March, 1918.

⁹¹³ G. Giardino, *Rievocaizoni e riflessioni di guerra, II, L’armata del Grappa – la battaglia difensiva del giugno 1918* (Milan: Mondadori, 1929), 422-424.

⁹¹⁴ AUSSME, E8, b.10, f.9, n. 606, Giardino to Orlando, 4 April, 1918.

divisions and just 7 allied made the extension of the single front under French command inappropriate. Therefore, in the present situation “acceptance of the single command would [...] only logically result in the surrender of the activity of the national command.” As an alternative he put forward the proposal for a common plan “with quick and prompt strategic movement” of reinforcements to the Italians or French “after a well contemplated examination of the needs on each of the fronts.”⁹¹⁵

Therefore, when Clemenceau formally asked Orlando to approve the agreements made at Beauvais,⁹¹⁶ the Italian prime minister replied in extremely vague terms: he did not deny his consent but reiterated Diaz’s point of view that the geographical structure of the Italian front, its distance from France and the dominant number of Italian divisions should convert the tactical independence *de jure* of Diaz into strategical independence.⁹¹⁷ Imperiali referred Orlando’s objections to London, claiming that it was clear and appropriate to leave the command of the Italian front “to the head commander of the country in which he is fighting.”⁹¹⁸

Orlando’s position should not be interpreted as a boycott of unified command. He had two reasons to avoid complete opposition to the French requests: first, the military emergency, second the impossibility of being able to stand up against a decision that London had already approved. The Italian prime minister aimed at getting the most he could, in other words a political compromise. Italy would accept the Beauvais agreement in exchange for a general re-examination of the distribution of the allied forces on the various fronts.⁹¹⁹ Clemenceau accepted.⁹²⁰

At the allied conference held at Abbeville on 1-2 May Orlando accepted the role of Foch as co-ordinator of the allied force on all fronts, including the Italian, “but nothing more” as Milner observed.⁹²¹ Co-ordination, not command, left Diaz a greater independence than that enjoyed by the

⁹¹⁵ SME, *L’Esercito italiano...*, V, 2, doc. 11, Diaz to Orlando and Zuppelli, 1 April, 1918.

⁹¹⁶ DDI, 5^a, X, doc. 490, Orlando to Imperiali, 2 April, 1918.

⁹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, doc. 512: Orlando to Sonnino, 6 April, 1918; *ibid.*, d. 516, Sonnino to Orlando, 6 April, 1918.

⁹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, doc. 518, Imperiali to Orlando, 6 April, 1918.

⁹¹⁹ ADMAEF, Guerre 1914-18, Dossier Général, vol. 986/226, Clemenceau to Barrère, 18 April, 1918;

⁹²⁰ *Ibid.*, vol. 986/241, Barrère to Pichon, 27 April, 1918.

⁹²¹ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 595. For the whole record: DDI, 5^a, X, docs. 621, 628, 629, Consiglio Supremo di Guerra, verbale.

other commanders on the French front.⁹²² In the event of further allied reinforcement being needed in Italy, the Italian government would accept that the commander in charge was Foch.⁹²³ In short, the Italians were ready to accept Foch's command in exchange for reinforcement of their own front.

For Orlando the results of the conference were fairly positive: he had been able to defend the relative independence of the Italian command without isolating Italy from the other allies.⁹²⁴ He wrote to Imperiali:

At the Abbeville Conference the unity of fronts [has] been recognised from the North Sea to the Adriatic, and military implications of the recent allied agreement [have been] extended over to Italy, taking account, naturally, of the special conditions of the Italian front.⁹²⁵

As Riccardi pointed out, "the Italian president in his vague expressions managed to remove his front from under Foch's authority."⁹²⁶ Foch nevertheless was satisfied as in this way the allied command could monitor the Italian front, using it for his own benefit.⁹²⁷

The British decision to adhere to the single command naturally did not mean that London took kindly to the extension of Foch's power. Imperiali noted that the British press "had a bitter taste" at the announcement of Foch's promotion to generalissimo, so much so that Lloyd George himself was privately gloomy, remarking that "Clemenceau has won the point."⁹²⁸ In a telegram to Sonnino the ambassador noted that the "the medicine is hard to swallow for the British," but on the whole "now in this tragedy [...] the government is able to put in place any measure they see necessary to achieve the supreme aim." Furthermore, President Wilson was also in favour of the proposal and as a consequence it would have been almost impossible to oppose it. Imperiali concluded, as regards Foch's

⁹²² Italian troops in France, though, were under Foch's command.

⁹²³ AUSSME, E8, b.10, f.9, Orlando to Bonin, 6 April, 1918.

⁹²⁴ SME, *L'Esercito italiano...*, VII, 2, 35-36.

⁹²⁵ DDI, 5^a, X, doc. 662, Orlando to Imperiali, 9 May, 1918.

⁹²⁶ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 593.

⁹²⁷ Foch, *Memorie*, 383.

⁹²⁸ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 514. Imperiali concluded bitterly: "In the end, poor us! It will be they [the French] to have done everything."

appointment, that everything would depend on the result of the battles: in the event of victory Foch would have a huge amount of power at his disposal.⁹²⁹

The British were also aware of this risk. Instead of openly opposing Foch's authority they tried to counterbalance it by exploiting the roles of the permanent military members in the SWC. They were the advisors in military policies, as set out in the 7th resolution of the Council. Their task was to study the general situation on the various fronts from a strategic point of view, consulting the commanders of each army. The results of their studies had then to be presented to the SWC for approval. Their suggestions could be requested by the Council or by the generalissimo who could, at the same time, prepare his own plans to compare with those of the representatives.⁹³⁰

Di Robilant, still the permanent Italian representative at that moment, mentioned this resolution in a letter to Diaz dated 18 July. He stated that the British were trying to use the SWC to counter-balance the role of Foch and French supremacy. The views of the French and British concerning the role of the permanent military representatives were "completely different." The French goal was to prevent the council becoming "a body of control of military conduct which would slow down the freedom of power of the generalissimo to give readiness and unity of actions." The British, however, saw Foch merely as "the commander of the allied front in France and the co-ordinator – strategically speaking – of the conduct on the Adriatic channel," but they did not accept that he had any competence in the other theatres of war, in particular in Africa and Asia. Resolution 7 reinstated the council's complete and free "execution" of power. It indicated, therefore, a British victory: the permanent military representatives were intended as a technical and consulting organ, taking advantage of the advice of the chiefs of the allied armies on the various fronts (the generalissimo in France was just one of them), and it was their organ that had to put forward proposals for the strategic and logistic co-ordination of all allied forces on all fronts.⁹³¹

There was a final reason why the British accepted the power of Foch: they hoped that Foch's authority on land would be counterbalanced by the naval power of a British admiralissimo. After managing to avoid Italian defection, the question of naval co-operation returned to the forefront.

⁹²⁹ DDI, 5^a IX, doc. 485, Imperiali to Sonnino, 30 March, 1918.

⁹³⁰ Gionfrida, *L'Italia e il coordinamento...*, 175 ff.

⁹³¹ SME, *L'Esercito italiano...*, V, n. 2, doc. 10, Di Robilanto to Diaz, 18 July, 1918.

At the end of November 1917 a Naval Council⁹³² was set up and its first meeting was chaired by Sir Eric Geddes, the British first lord of the Admiralty, in January in London. The two main issues were the situation in the Adriatic and the submarine war. The latter could be resolved with the adoption of convoys with battle-hardened escort ships. A commission was set the task of studying future operations in the Adriatic, among them an aero-naval attack on Cattaro. The commission met in Italy on 8-9 February but, in the face of Italian opposition, ended up dealing primarily with the Otranto barrage. It put in place a fixed blockade and confirmed the pre-existing mobile blockade under the overall control of the British command in the Mediterranean.

Between 12 and 14 March a second meeting of the Naval Council took place, once again in London. The main aim should have been possible plans in the eventuality of a German seizure of the Russian navy. However it was the problem in the Adriatic that dominated discussions. The American representatives suggested a large landing in Dalmatia, but all the other representatives claimed that it would be too risky.⁹³³

The third meeting took place in two sessions in Paris, the first in April and the second in May. The decision was taken to attack the Dardanelles Strait in the event of the defection of the Russian army and to withdraw a large part of the forces from the Aegean sea, leaving a minimal naval force in the Adriatic. The final issue was anti-submarine co-ordination in the central Mediterranean and the new discipline of the “convoy system.”⁹³⁴

Appointing a British admiralissimo, in the figure of Jellicoe, responded both to the political desire to counterbalance Foch and the need to better co-ordinate allied naval forces in the Mediterranean. Milner first spoke of this to Imperiali on 10 May. Officially, the proposal was initiated to hinder the French claim to the Adriatic. Admiral Gauchet, the allied commander-in-chief in the Mediterranean, hoped to exercise his authority in the Adriatic by virtue of the superiority of the French fleet.

Having a British admiralissimo seemed the logical solution to the Italians, and Imperiali communicated to Milner on 13 May that Orlando was willing to support the proposal. The British

⁹³² The Italian representative was Mario Grassi, former naval attaché in Paris.

⁹³³ Halpern, *Royal Navy...*, 352.

⁹³⁴ C. Manfrioni, V. Giglio, *Marina e aviazione italiana nella guerra mondiale* (Milan: Vallardi, 1937), 217-219, 228-238.

minister was happy and commented to the ambassador, in confidence, that the French were too grasping. It was the British fault, “for you always gave into them,” Imperiali replied, while “I would advise to proceed in a more intimate agreement with us [Italians], more moderated and rational. It is the only way to hold off a Gallic intrusion.”⁹³⁵

Despite the apparent security of the Anglo-Italian agreement, the allied conference at Versailles (the 6th session of the SWC on 1-3 June) developed against expectation.⁹³⁶ The Italians inverted the positions they had adopted on the allied reserve – when the military had been in favour and the politicians against: Orlando was now in favour of a British admiralissimo, whose appointment would have weakened the French political influence; Thaon di Revel was firmly against it.⁹³⁷

The Italian government therefore tried the same manoeuvre that had worked at Abbeville: accepting in theory a single command – guaranteeing the British complete authority over the Italian naval force in the central Mediterranean and control of the convoys to and from Libya – but keeping on a practical level “the little naval war of the Adriatic” out of Jellicoe’s hands.⁹³⁸ This attempt infuriated Lloyd George, who abruptly interrupted the discussion:⁹³⁹ no concrete decision was made.

“As usual they ended up playing the game of the French, who were not happy to have a British admiral in command,” Imperiali remarked. “Now it’s down to me [...] to pick up the pieces.” On 8 June the ambassador saw Balfour at the Foreign Office and pointed out that “the impulsiveness and briskness of Lloyd George were unjustified and had more offended than distressed Orlando.”⁹⁴⁰ Balfour regretted this, promising to make the most of the Imperiali’s personal intervention. Rodd also tried to recommence the discussion, convinced that the root of the argument was just an unpleasant misunderstanding. The military and political positions of Rome were too weak for the Italians to be

⁹³⁵ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 530.

⁹³⁶ For the whole record see: DDI, 5^a, XI, dd. 1, 4, 7 and: AUSSME, E8, b.9, f.10, Verbale della 1^a seduta della 6^a sessione del Consiglio Supremo di Guerra, 1 June, 1918.

⁹³⁷ Halpern, *Royal Navy...*, 184-188, doc. 209, Heaton-Ellis to Admiralty, 22 May, 1918; doc. 211, Admiralty to Heaton-Ellis, 24 May, 1918; doc. 213, Clemenceau to Lloyd George, Most secret, 23 May, 1918; doc. 214, Geddes to Lloyd George, 24 May, 1918.

⁹³⁸ DDI, 5^a, XI, doc. 12, Orlando to Imperiali, 14 May, 1918.

⁹³⁹ PRO FO, 371/3231/85586, Rodd to Balfour, 14 May, 1918. See also: AUSSME, E8, b.9, f.2, Resolutions Passed at the Sixth Session of the Supreme War Council, June 1918.

⁹⁴⁰ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 539-41.

able to refuse the British proposal. Rodd knew this and he was more optimistic regarding the possibility of a new agreement.⁹⁴¹

The following week the Austrians attacked on the Piave. The result of that battle would determine the development of the relations between Italy and Britain in the final months of the war.

⁹⁴¹ Halpern, *Royal Navy...*, 504, doc. 226, Rodd to Geddes, 27 June, 1918.

4. Propaganda as a Strategy.

On the eve of the Austro-Hungarian offensive on the Piave, which was to mark the turning-point in the war in Italy, the problem for the British – in the face of the German threat in France – was how to strengthen the Italian front and defeat the Austro-Hungarian army without sending more reinforcements to the Italians. Their strategy was to concentrate on a more sophisticated use of propaganda, which in the final months of the war would become a strategic weapon in the hands of the Allies. Orlando finally realised the importance of propaganda and took steps to improve it, both to rebuild Italy's reputation abroad and to boost the morale of the country and the army at home. The British contributed by halting the spread of anti-war feeling in Italy, and by undermining the unity of Austria-Hungary's multi-ethnic army. To appreciate the transformation of Anglo-Italian propaganda in the last year of the war it is worth looking at how it evolved in the two countries up to the summer of 1918, when the decisive phase of co-operation began.

In Britain, Lloyd George asked John Buchan on 9 February 1917 to overhaul Britain's propaganda machine. Buchan proposed a new department with three sections, the first to be housed in the Foreign Office, the second somewhere between the Foreign Office and Fleet Street, and the third at Wellington House. The headquarters would be in the Foreign Office, with eleven national sections which had previously operated out of Wellington House and the Enemy Propaganda Department, including the intelligence branch, also originally at Wellington House. The second section was to be responsible for new propaganda media – cable and wireless transmissions, film and press articles. The third was to continue with the methods that had been widely used in the first two and a half years of war – writing, translating and distributing books, pamphlets and other documents.⁹⁴²

The War Cabinet approved the proposals on 20 February 1917: a single head of propaganda was appointed, reporting directly to the prime minister.⁹⁴³ In a letter to Edward Carson, a member of the British Cabinet, Buchan described the problems regarding standardising propaganda methods. The

⁹⁴² PRO, INF. 4/1B, Memorandum to the cabinet, 3 February 1917.

⁹⁴³ *Ibid.*, CAB. 23/WC75, War Cabinet minute.

main aims of propaganda, he believed, were to impart accurate information and to explain British policy. It could not work miracles and be expected to stem anti-war propaganda in foreign countries when those countries could manage it themselves.

Carson's resignation from the Cabinet on 23 January 1918 paved the way for a new propaganda agency. On 10 February, Lloyd George invited Lord Beaverbrook to become minister of Information (and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster). The new ministry came into being on 4 March 1918, the culmination of a long process of propaganda management in Britain.

The ministry was organised into three main divisions. The first was to manage foreign propaganda; the second propaganda in military zones; and the third propaganda at home. Foreign propaganda was controlled by what was in effect the old Department of Information under Buchan. The work was handled by four offices. The first, administration, was directed by Hubert Montgomery; the second, under Charles Masterman, controlled the production of all propaganda other than press and cable work; the third dealt with cable and wireless, cinema, and propaganda through the press; the fourth was the intelligence department. Propaganda in enemy countries was transferred to the organisation headed by Lord Northcliffe, reporting directly to the War Cabinet – and not to the minister of information.⁹⁴⁴

The very nature of British propaganda also changed, for until then propaganda and information had been kept apart. As Steed would say, the mixed success of propaganda until that moment could be set down to the fact that it had no fixed political scope. Flooding the world with leaflets and booklets extolling how “noble our nation is” and how “great our contribution to the war effort” was no longer enough. Most of the foreign masses “couldn't have cared less.”⁹⁴⁵ It was necessary, therefore, to devote greater attention to political ends and hence to a strategic use of propaganda.

Printed material, such as pamphlets, books, government papers, ministerial speeches, and all the old tools adopted by Wellington House from the very beginning of its activity, were still circulated, but on a larger scale and through different channels, including steamship companies and their agents. Voluntary organisations in Britain helped circulate pamphlets using their own private mailing lists,

⁹⁴⁴ Sanders, “Wellington House” ..., 127-129.

⁹⁴⁵ Steed, *Trent'anni...*, 492.

which fitted well with the wishes of the government to avoid as much as possible any public association with propaganda, so that neutral countries would not feel that their citizens were being dictated to in some way. Beaverbrook, however, found that the most direct, effective forms of publicity were film, cable and wireless, and the press. Where Wellington House had largely aimed at an intellectual élite, the Ministry of Information sought a mass response.

It was not all plain sailing though. The creation of a separate organisation to manage British propaganda in allied and neutral countries had from the very beginning of the war caused inter-departmental conflict. The Foreign Office, the War Office and the Admiralty were all involved in propaganda, each according to its own interests, and they were very jealous of their prerogatives. The creation of a new ministry exacerbated boundary issues and administrative disputes would continue to the end of the war.⁹⁴⁶

The British propaganda machine, then, did have its problems, not unlike those which dogged the Italian propaganda effort. That the former was more efficient was a result of two things: it had more funding and in 1918 it enjoyed a single organisation under the supervision of Lloyd George himself, which meant clearer political aims.

Orlando attempted to follow the same path. He designated an under-secretary for foreign propaganda and the press, Gallenga Stuart,⁹⁴⁷ who replaced the minister without portfolio, Scialoja. Stuart was close to the Liberals who, together with Salvemini and Bissolati, supported a moderate policy towards the Slavs. His appointment shows that Orlando had understood that keeping promoting concepts such as “our war” after Caporetto was absurd: it was inevitable that there should be a move towards Gallenga Stuart’s view, after his mission to Britain. Gallenga Stuart’s idea was to pursue the “policy of nationalities” in moderation. By adopting this line, Italy might succeed in presenting its war as part of the Entente’s war, inspired by the same ideals of liberty and democracy. Others, like Luigi Albertini, even believed that concessions to the Slavs were needed if the Italians were to make their own liberal attitude credible.

⁹⁴⁶ Sanders, “Wellington House”..., 128.

⁹⁴⁷ The under-secretary also dealt with domestic censorship: ACS, Carte Presidenza. Commissariato generale dell’assistenza civile e propaganda interna. Censura stampa 1915-1918, vols. II, III, IV.

However, Orlando never considered going as far as Gallenga Stuart and Albertini proposed. The prime minister remained faithful to the London treaty: his new propaganda strategy was to be only a means to restore Italy's reputation at a delicate moment, earning the favour of the Slavs (and the other allies), thereby avoiding conflict around the peace table.⁹⁴⁸

Gallenga Stuart set to work with a clear priority: to counterbalance the enemy methods of “disloyalty, espionage, twisting and falsifying the truth” by presenting a “clear explanation and honest, detailed accounts of the facts, events and Italian efforts both during the war and in civil life, to offset the partial, underhand versions presented by the enemy.” At the same time, domestically it was crucial “to make ourselves aware and convinced of our true value.”⁹⁴⁹ Such ideas were rather vague and hardly original. Gallenga Stuart, however, could count on more experienced workers than himself to improve the effectiveness of the new propaganda machine. Among these were his friend Giuseppe Antonio Borgese, several journalists, writers and officers with smart, new ideas, as well as Lombardo Radice, an educationalist, and Salvemini,⁹⁵⁰ one of the promoters of “Servizio P.”⁹⁵¹

This organisation, set up under the aegis of the armed forces, was entrusted to journalists and intellectuals (as well as suitably trained officers) who organised a new type of propaganda for the Italian troops, not in the abstract rhetoric of lectures delivered by rather unlikely “professors,” but in the language of everyday conversation in the routine of trench-life which would talk to soldiers about the Italian war and about the allies. Trench newspapers appeared and soldiers themselves contributed by writing, drawing, and creating cartoons.⁹⁵² The main message was “we shall make it.”⁹⁵³ The papers were full of the talk of a “National Risorgimento.”⁹⁵⁴

⁹⁴⁸ Tosi, *Propaganda...*, 153 ff.

⁹⁴⁹ R. Gallenga Stuart, *La propaganda all'estero. Novembre 1917-giugno 1918. Relazione a S.E. il Presidente del Consiglio*, in ACS, *Carte Gallenga Stuart*, b. 1, f. 7.

⁹⁵⁰ A nationalist like Volpe was also involved: he held that it was right to highlight the justice of Italy's war, but it should not be forgotten that countries were fighting also to guarantee better living conditions and opportunities for development and so he would not ignore the politics of power: Volpe, *Fra storia e politica* (Rome: De Alberti, 1924).

⁹⁵¹ Civil aid and internal propaganda were not set aside but entrusted to the Ministry for Military Assistance and Pensions.

⁹⁵² G. Lombardo Radice, “Dopo Caporetto”, in ID., *Nuovi saggi di propaganda pedagogica* (Turin: Paravia, 1922), 28-29.

⁹⁵³ P. Jahier, “Perché vinceremo,” in *L'Astico*, n. 13, 9 May 1918.

⁹⁵⁴ *Volontà*, n. 5-6, 2 November, 1918.

Gallenga Stuart, however, had to deal with the usual problem of funding. In February 1918, the government agreed to increase its investment in propaganda to almost 9 million Lire⁹⁵⁵ – a record for Italy, but nevertheless a very small amount when compared to equivalent sums spent by the British, who allocated that figure in a month.⁹⁵⁶

Notwithstanding such limitations, Gallenga Stuart reorganised the under-secretary's office, creating central offices in Rome and branch offices in allied and neutral capitals. An efficient information service was also set up to track international public opinion so that Italian propaganda could be more efficiently organised. The office was entrusted to Borgese (later to Gaetano Paternò and Alberto Tarchiani). Among its duties, it monitored what was written about Italy abroad so that misunderstandings and inaccurate reporting could be contrasted. A press office was created to circulate both the collected information and the corrections. Gallenga Stuart also reorganised the photography and film offices into a new department, which availed itself of the co-operation of the Comando Supremo.⁹⁵⁷

Between November 1917 and December 1918 millions of postcards and 700,000 booklets were produced illustrating the events of the Italian war. These publications kept to the minimum illustrations of “the battlefield,” which risked being repetitive, and instead highlighted aspects of life on the “internal” front, in particular the growing efficiency of Italian war industry. The under-secretary also managed other types of propaganda which kept Italy's reputation flying high, including the visits of foreign missions to Italy and the front. He organised inter-allied patriotic demonstrations, concerts, displays and photographic exhibitions, while abroad he built up propaganda offices at the embassies and legations.

British public opinion was closely monitored. The foreign action bureau was set up in Britain under Lieutenant-Colonel Filippo de Filippi. This office joined the Italian information bureau, which had been recently created by the correspondents of leading Italian newspapers, among whom were Emanuel and Francesco Prati. The two new offices took over the duties previously performed by the

⁹⁵⁵ ASCD, Carte inchiesta sulle spese di guerra, b. 11.

⁹⁵⁶ Of the total sum of 9 million, in actual fact only four were spent on propaganda, the rest went on minor activities and, above all, on telegraph messages. Complete details of the expenses in: Tosi, *Propaganda...*, 226.

⁹⁵⁷ Film distribution followed strict market rules and so came up against competition from British and French films which were distributed at cut prices or even free: *ibid.*, 160.

different committees under embassy supervision. The offices in Britain – compared to those opened in other countries⁹⁵⁸ – were the most active, with more ideas, some of which, such as the publication of the *Anglo-Italian Review*, enjoyed significant success.⁹⁵⁹ Those in charge of propaganda in Britain were all supporters of the politics of nationalities and believed it was necessary, if Britain and the United States were to accept the dismantling of the Habsburg empire, that all the peoples of the empire should want it. For this to occur, “agreement between Italy and Yugoslavia” over their borders was needed.⁹⁶⁰ Borgese believed a revision of the London pact was inevitable and Italy should not submit passively to it but should take the initiative, call for a conference of nations ruled by the Habsburgs – Italians, Bohemians, Yugoslavs, Roumanians, Ruthenian Poles – to reach an agreement quickly and impose it on the US and Britain: “America shall not withstand the will of nations.”⁹⁶¹

From the pages of the *Corriere della Sera* Albertini claimed that, at this stage, not even the alliance with Britain would be enough to safeguard Italian interests: “Western governments can do little without the help of public opinion, and western public opinion in Europe and the US holds fervently to a particular duality [Trento and Trieste] but that is where they stop, somewhat bewildered.”⁹⁶² Albertini was not alone. For Salvemini, the Pugliese historian, a great deal of work needed to be done to ensure that democratic ideas would triumph: “And as for us, Italian democrats, let us finally decide to break off the equivocal and ruinous alliance which ties us to the nationalists, unless the nationalists recognise they have made a mistake; [...] they should let us handle propaganda from now on in Italy and abroad.”⁹⁶³ Wilson’s new policy, which directly targeted the peoples, found a sturdy supporter in Albertini: “We must begin to convince the democratic masses if we want to draw the governments. As a start let us hastily remove that group of fanatics so favoured by the Consulta and ‘Dante Alighieri.’”⁹⁶⁴

⁹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 159, 164.

⁹⁵⁹ The Italian Information Bureau spent in 1918 £1242 on propaganda, the Foreign Action Bureau £14,497.169: ASMAE, Carte Ambasciata d’Italia a Londra, 1918-1919, b. 462, f. 1-2; b. 463, f. 1.

⁹⁶⁰ Tosi, *Propaganda...*, 168-169.

⁹⁶¹ G.A. Borgese, Memoriale, 10 January 1918, in Albertini, *Epistolario...*, 849-851.

⁹⁶² ID., “L’Italia e l’assetto orientale,” 29 January 1918.

⁹⁶³ “Il Problema dell’Austria,” *L’Unità*, 24 January, 1918.

⁹⁶⁴ “L’Italia e i popoli dell’Austria,” *L’Unità*.

The *Corriere* men concentrated their efforts on Britain, where sympathies for Austria-Hungary were stronger. With the military attaché to Britain, General Armando Mola, Emanuel set out to influence local public opinion through articles in several British newspapers, applying pressure in an attempt to counterbalance anti-Italian campaigns in the press.⁹⁶⁵ He was supported by Steed, who from the pages of *The Times* praised Italy's recovery.⁹⁶⁶

Emanuel, Steed and Yugoslav representatives in London held talks between 14 and 18 December 1917 which led to the Mola-Trumbić agreement. Italy and Yugoslavia agreed they would both benefit from the dismembering of Austria-Hungary and from the application of the principle of nationality. Furthermore, it was decided that the differences which had arisen out of the London treaty would be overcome through reciprocal concessions.⁹⁶⁷ Colonel De Filippi, representing the under-secretary for propaganda, was present alongside Emanuel, thereby lending particular weight to the agreement notwithstanding Sonnino's absence, and marking a turning-point in Italian propaganda abroad.

The new strategy was approved a month later by Orlando, who was in Britain at the end of January to canvass for greater British support for Italy and to inform Lloyd George of his concern about the persistence of Austrian sympathies in the British public. Emanuel at first was not sure whether the prime minister would sincerely embrace the policy of nationalities. However, perhaps blinded by his own hopes, he convinced himself that, although Orlando might well have some doubts, he would in the end come round. The Italian premier, on the other hand, discovered at this time that even Lloyd George had accepted the idea of breaking up Austria-Hungary. Orlando came to the conclusion that, as things stood, at the right moment it would be possible to withdraw the offers made to the Yugoslavs.⁹⁶⁸

Emanuel's, Mola's and De Filippi's jobs were made more difficult by the publication of the London treaty on 17 January, which re-ignited anti-Italian feeling in that part of the British press which sympathised with the Yugoslavs. Mola reacted by sending a memorandum to Steed in which he went so far as to suggest that newspapers which might damage Anglo-Italian relations should be shut

⁹⁶⁵ Albertini, *Epistolario...*, 794-797, Emanuel to Albertini, 11 November 1917.

⁹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 852-853, Emanuel to Albertini, 10 January, 1918.

⁹⁶⁷ Italy would give up claims on the Dalmatian coast, Zara would be a free city and Yugoslav would drop claims on Carso and Istria. See the records of the meeting by Emanuel in Albertini, *Epistolario...*, 105-106.

⁹⁶⁸ Tosi, *Propaganda...*, 171.

down and that at the same time a vast press campaign supporting the dismantling of Austria-Hungary should be launched.⁹⁶⁹ The British reporter let the suggestion regarding the closure of hostile newspapers drop, but did promise to continue mediation with the Yugoslavs.⁹⁷⁰

Encouraged by this Anglo-Italian co-operation, Gallenga Stuart imagined that greater co-ordination of inter-allied propaganda would be possible. An allied propaganda conference was organised in Paris on 6 March 1918, following talks with Stephen Pichon, the French foreign minister. Gallenga Stuart headed the Italian delegation and Buchan, head of the Department of Information's press and propaganda section, led the British. The US and French delegations were led by Henry Crosby and Franklin Bouillon, respectively.⁹⁷¹

The delegates agreed they needed to co-ordinate their respective information services in Switzerland and speed up the detachment of Turkey from the Central Powers by supporting Cemal Bey over Enver Pasha. The delegations formed two sub-committees: one to handle booklets and the press and the other to manage photography and the cinema. Both committees presented their reports at the end of the meeting. The first recommended that propaganda publications be exchanged and closer attention paid to neutral countries where the Germans controlled many press agencies.⁹⁷²

Next on the agenda was propaganda aimed at the enemy. French delegates declared that Orlando's speech to the Italian parliament on 4 March, with its clear overtures to the Yugoslavs, had paved the way for a new propaganda strategy, and the British confirmed they would join in an anti-Austrian campaign. At the end of the conference, therefore, the delegates accepted Beaverbrook's invitation to a new meeting in London convened to organise it.⁹⁷³

Gallenga Stuart was satisfied with the outcome of the conference, but also much impressed by the gap which still existed between Italian and allied propaganda: he was the first Italian politician since

⁹⁶⁹ ACS, Carte Gallenga Stuart, b. 1, f. 1.

⁹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, Mola all'Ufficio Staccato, Relazione, 15 Febraury, 1918.

⁹⁷¹ Tosi, *Propaganda...*, 177.

⁹⁷² ACS, Carte Gallenga Stuart, b. 1, f. 6.

⁹⁷³ Steed, *Trent'anni...*, 491-495.

the beginning of the war to witness it first-hand, and concluded that there was still much work to be done.⁹⁷⁴

At the London meeting (12-15 March) were: Gallenga Stuart for Italy, Bouillon for France and Edward Robinette for the United States.⁹⁷⁵ A sort of “chiefs of staff” of inter-allied propaganda was formed by Steed, Borgese and Henri Moysset, *chef de cabinet* for the French Navy Ministry and an expert in German propaganda techniques. Moysset emphasised that the enemy must be beaten ideologically, not only militarily: it would be necessary to “change the mentality of an entire generation of Germans” if respect for international law was to prevail in Europe, and that could only be achieved by offering an alternative model of the state from the Prussian one. Results must also be obtained swiftly and so the main objective remained Austria-Hungary.⁹⁷⁶

The Rome congress of 8 April 1918 marked an important step forward: the delegates of the nations oppressed by Austria-Hungary once again asserted the right of nations to their freedom. Italians and Yugoslavs, in particular, undertook to resolve their territorial issues on a friendly basis according to the principles of nationality and national self-determination.⁹⁷⁷ Similar statements were echoed abroad and certainly contributed to undermining the solidity of the Habsburg empire. The only shadow hanging over the congress was the resounding absence of Sonnino, who, although he assured Steed that he sympathised with the ideas expressed by the delegates, did not have the slightest intention of following them up politically.⁹⁷⁸ Orlando shared Sonnino’s ideas. The Rome Congress, then, was spoilt by a major misunderstanding within the Italian ruling class: people like Borgese and Emanuel had acted in good faith, but in Orlando’s view the congress was just a huge strategic propaganda operation aimed at improving Italy’s international position. Sonnino’s coldness, however, did not escape the allies’ attention, and prevented a significant change in their general scepticism regarding

⁹⁷⁴ ACS, Carte Presidenza, b. 19-11-11, Gallenga Stuart to Orlando, 8 March, 1918.

⁹⁷⁵ North European American Propaganda head.

⁹⁷⁶ Steed, *Trent’anni...*, 496.

⁹⁷⁷ The full text of the agreement was published in G. Amendola, “Il Patto di Roma e la polemica,” in *Il Patto di Roma*, Quaderni della “Voce”, 15 Settembre 1919, n. 38, 20-21.

⁹⁷⁸ Sonnino, *Diario...*, III, 265-266.

Italy's proposals. Tosi concluded, quite rightly, that the congress was a success only as far as propaganda against the enemy was concerned.⁹⁷⁹

Anglo-Italian co-operation was making great progress on this front. The British effort pursued two main aims: on the one hand, to support the Entente's cause (and thereby counter anti-war and defeatist ideas) among the Italian population; on the other, to support the Italian propaganda campaign against Austria-Hungary. The first aim was pursued mainly by Rodd and British intelligence's Samuel Hoare. Rodd was to "forward in code any telegrams which the representative of the Committee might have occasion to send home."⁹⁸⁰

Hoare, an MP and MI5's man in Rome, headed a staff of 100 British intelligence officers, and financed an anti-pacifist campaign led by Mussolini's newspaper, *Il Popolo d'Italia*. Mussolini was paid £100 a week – the equivalent of about £6,000 today – from autumn 1917 for at least a year. The British subsidised *Il Popolo* but also, unofficially, funnelled money directly to Mussolini for the purpose of organising militant opposition to anti-war groups. British money was used to pay thugs – as Mussolini himself explained to his British benefactors – to "break the heads of any pacifists who try to hold anti-war meetings in the streets."⁹⁸¹ The last thing Britain wanted were pro-peace strikes which would bring the factories in Turin and Milan to a halt. Hoare mentioned Mussolini's recruitment in his memoirs dated 1954, and details of the payments can be found in Hoare's private papers.⁹⁸²

However, Britain's main effort was directed at persuading Italy to adopt a firmer, more convinced stance on the question of nationality politics, so that greater results might be obtained in undermining the Austro-Hungarian army. Steed went to Italy to supervise the creation of an inter-allied commission for propaganda in enemy countries, based in Padua and which included a French officer, Commander Gruss, a British colonel, Granville Baker, an American, Lieutenant Wanger and Ojetti as general supervisor (with Stevan Hristić and Ante Trumbić representing the oppressed nationalities).⁹⁸³

⁹⁷⁹ Tosi, *Propaganda...*, 187.

⁹⁸⁰ "This [...] gave my already fully-occupied staff additional and, I could not but think, rather unnecessary work": Rodd, *Memories...*, III, 397.

⁹⁸¹ CUL, Templewood papers, Part III, Italy and the Vatican, 1917-1918, f. 1-5.

⁹⁸² Hoare, Viscount Templewood, Sir Samuel, *Complacent Dictator* (New York: Knopf, 1947); see also: https://archive.org/stream/memoirsofsamuelh00hoarrich/memoirsofsamuelh00hoarrich_djvu.txt

⁹⁸³ Rodd, *Memories...*, III, 398-401.

After the war, legend, springing mainly from the memoirs of Sir Campbell Stuart⁹⁸⁴ and Steed, had it that: “President Wilson and Northcliffe’s team were the destroyers of the Danube empire.”⁹⁸⁵ Both Stuart and Steed made much of the role of Crewe House in this, but the real mover of propaganda in Italy was the Padua commission, not Crewe House. And the Padua commission was firmly in the hands of Ojetti.

Gallenga Stuart himself wanted to keep control of the overall strategy of the propaganda offensive,⁹⁸⁶ and he succeeded despite Steed’s opposition.⁹⁸⁷ The British acted primarily as mediators between the Italians and the Yugoslavs, so much so that Baker complained to London that Ojetti was insisting on a purely Italian organisation of anti-Austrian propaganda.⁹⁸⁸ On 18 June he warned Crewe House that: “Everything is being done to deprive this commission of its inter-allied character.” The French and American representatives, for their part, complained that they were merely “witnesses” to Anglo-Italian initiatives.⁹⁸⁹

Despite such differences, the propaganda offensive launched against the Austro-Hungarian army from 8 April was one of the greatest allied propaganda successes of the war. From May to November, the printing works at Reggio Emilia produced almost sixty million copies of 643 brightly coloured manifestos, as well as almost two million copies of 80 news-sheets. The material was dropped by aircraft on the enemy rear lines – the Italian air force was gaining control of the air – but also on the front line during risky missions carried out by select patrols.

The use of Czech volunteer prisoners was particularly effective.⁹⁹⁰ Mixed Czech and Italian patrols were formed to approach Austro-Hungarian positions where it was known Czech units were deployed and, making use of whatever cover they found, would launch leaflets by hand or fire them from sling-

⁹⁸⁴ A Canadian newspaper magnate who ran propaganda operations for the British during both World Wars.

⁹⁸⁵ It gained some support from the Austrians, as confirmed by Edmund von Glaise-Horstenau, a former staff officer AOK: M. Cornwall, *The Undermining of Austria-Hungary. The Battle for Hearts and Minds* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 174.

⁹⁸⁶ Albertini, *Epistolario...*, 924-925, Ojetti to Albertini, 31 March, 1918.

⁹⁸⁷ Steed, *Trent’anni...*, 498-509.

⁹⁸⁸ Bodleian Library, Oxford, Milner MSS, Box 108, Delmé-Radcliffe to DMI, t. 10474, 18 June, 1918.

⁹⁸⁹ R. Mock, C. Larson, *Words that won war. The story of the committee on Public Information 1917-1919* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1939), 256-257.

⁹⁹⁰ They were not affected by the same political problems as the Yugoslavs; furthermore, those in the Austrian ranks proved more receptive to enticement: Cornwall, *The Undermining...*, 235 ff.

shots, and start up conversations with their co-nationals and sometimes even join them.⁹⁹¹ Four-page news-sheets in Serbo-Croat, Czech, Polish and Roumanian were fired at enemy trenches. They continued alongside news of the military defeats of the Central Powers, reports of increasing anti-German insurgency, and of famine, strikes and revolts within the Habsburg empire.⁹⁹²

Although trench propaganda was very much a military affair, it was nonetheless linked with the work carried out by the Padua commission. Baker was amazed at the quantity of military intelligence collected by the Italian army, in particular by Major Aldo Finzi's bureau (6th Army). The intelligence network and Padua liaised closely, with the former supplying material for manifestos while the latter sent some of its manifestos for direct distribution by the front-line patrols.⁹⁹³

By employing national delegates, the Padua commission avoided spreading simple nationalist stereotypes. These were not totally missing, but alongside short, crude and colourful material there were messages appealing more deeply to an historic "national patriotism." Thus Italy's propaganda not only exploited anti-war or social discontent but also, in Finzi's words, "spread dissension and mistrust among the various races." Striking in this way at "Austria's real weakness," the propaganda campaign used arguments which threatened the very existence of the Habsburg empire, and often through sources within the Dual Monarchy itself.⁹⁹⁴

To circulate fast and accurate news, an Italian press agency was created in May in Berne answering to the under-secretary and directed by Borgese. In view of its strategic position, it very soon became the Italian propaganda machine's main information centre and the information gathered was shared with French and British allies.

The results of this new strategy soon became clear. In early May, General Conrad himself was alarmed. He called it "an extremely dangerous form of propaganda which (if true) might have a demoralising effect on the men of Slav minority."⁹⁹⁵ Desertion from the ranks of the Austro-Hungarian army increased exponentially both before and during the battle of the Piave: 9433 from 13 to 20 June;

⁹⁹¹ E. Egoli, *I legionari cecoslovacchi in Italia, 1915-1918* (Rome: Tipografia Segraf, 1968), 44.

⁹⁹² These events were exaggerated by the *Corriere*, who gave voice to propaganda aimed at the enemy and to the campaign for nationality politics as if they were one and the same thing.

⁹⁹³ Cornwall, *The Undermining...*, 240.

⁹⁹⁴ Quoted by ID., 443.

⁹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 300.

6761 from 20 to 30 June; 5648 from 1 to 15 July. After the battle of the Piave all Habsburg army prisoners stated they had read or seen material circulated by the Italians and many had copies on them, notwithstanding the severe measures taken by Austrian Command to prevent this.⁹⁹⁶ In addition to these concrete results, there were the extraordinary feats of Italian pilots, such as the flight of 87th Squadron over Ljubljana and Zagreb, and D'Annunzio's over Vienna.

Results seemed so encouraging that Baker fooled himself into believing that the Austro-Hungarian army would, in a little while, simply melt away, without any need to attack it. This illusion spread rapidly among the British representatives in Padua who wished to push on with the campaign and attributed the not-yet decisive results to Italy's ambiguous position regarding the Slavs. If the Italians had taken on nationality politics with greater conviction, the work of the Padua commission would have been far more effective. The British were furthermore frustrated by what they held to be routine Italian inefficiency and by the delay which this caused to the work of the commission.⁹⁹⁷ In this case, at least, it was not just poor organisation but also deliberate inefficiency. Unknown to the other allies, the commission had enemies within the Comando Supremo: officers who shared Sonnino's ideas and who did not like the new strategy promoted by Gallenga Stuart and Steed with Diaz's approval.⁹⁹⁸ Among these was colonel Domenico Siciliani, whom Sonnino had managed to have appointed president of the commission (Ojetti having an executive but not independent role), and who hampered its activity in every possible way with delays and useless discussions.⁹⁹⁹ Thaon Di Revel, for his part, advanced spurious technical excuses to deny navy seaplanes for the dropping of leaflets in Serbo-Croat on the Dalmatian coast to encourage local people to support the insurgency which was already breaking out against Austria-Hungary.¹⁰⁰⁰

Furthermore, Sonnino, whilst he hindered enemy propaganda through his agents in the Padua commission, attempted to block propaganda abroad with the support of nationalists and irredentists belonging to pro-Italian associations. After Caporetto, the irredentist movement abroad had taken a

⁹⁹⁶ ACS, Carte Presidenza, b. 19-4-6, f. 150, Servizio Informazioni to Orlando, 27 June and 25 July, 1918.

⁹⁹⁷ Cornwall, *The Undermining...*, 222.

⁹⁹⁸ Tosi, *Propaganda...*, 189.

⁹⁹⁹ ACS, Carte Orlando, b. 8, Ojetti to Albertini, 6 July and 18 September, 1918.

¹⁰⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, Carte Presidenza, b. 19-11-10, Diaz to Orlando, 29 April, 1918.

hard knock and soon split, some members forming the “Democrazia Sociale Irredenta,” (DSI) an association which was closer to Wilsonian principles. The irredentists, however, founded the “Associazione Politica degli Italiani Irredenti” (APII), sponsored by Giorgio Picatto and Giovanni Lorenzoni, who promised Sonnino that “government propaganda will find [...] in our propaganda not negligible moral support.”¹⁰⁰¹ At the same time, the “Trento and Trieste” had offered its services to Sonnino, to prepare the ground for a future peace conference by promoting Italian territorial claims abroad.¹⁰⁰² Among the proposals put forward by the APII was that they should get a foot into the under-secretary’s office, with Orlando’s help. Gallenga Stuart attempted to oppose it but in the end had to allow an under-secretariat representative to be taken onto the irredentist liaison committee.¹⁰⁰³

Thus commenced a battle between Italian associations abroad in which APII, the “Trento and Trieste” and the “Dante” tried to undermine the newly-created DSI. These quarrels were particularly fierce in France,¹⁰⁰⁴ but a little less so in Britain, where Imperiali and Mola acted to prevent them and managed to have the more active advocates of irredentist propaganda, such as lieutenant Vittorio Fresco and Luigi Caprara, removed from the London scene.¹⁰⁰⁵ Imperiali advised Sonnino to do everything possible to avoid such ambiguity in the future. In his reply, the minister set out guidelines for the action of the under-secretary’s office: it was free to handle all activities aimed at exalting the Italian war and patriotic propaganda, but any other activity which touched on the political domain “must [...] depend on the Foreign Office and local agencies.”¹⁰⁰⁶ Sonnino also defended the work of the irredentists in London: “Approaches to the Yugoslavs, which culminated in the recent Rome congress, should not mean giving up the Adriatic claims based upon which Italy entered the war,” therefore “such propaganda as intended to back up the legitimacy of these assertions” might continue,

¹⁰⁰¹ G. Pitacco, *La passione adriatica* (Bologna: Cappelli, 1928), 288.

¹⁰⁰² G. Giurati, *L’opera della “Trento e Trieste” nell’ultimo periodo della guerra*, Relazione al XII Congresso nazionale, Trieste, 1-3 June, Roma, 1919, 10-11.

¹⁰⁰³ ACS, Carte Presidenza, b. 19-11-10, APII to Orlando, 27 June, 1918.

¹⁰⁰⁴ Tosi, *Propaganda...*, 195.

¹⁰⁰⁵ ACS Carte Gallenga Stuart, b.1, f.18; ASMAE, Carte Italia, 1916-1918, b. 111, f. 1152; Giurati, *L’opera...*, 12.

¹⁰⁰⁶ ASMAE, Carte Italia 1916-1918, b. 111, f.1152, Sonnino to Orlando.

as long as “all acrimonious polemic in the pursuit of this action shall be avoided, in a courteous and measured manner.”¹⁰⁰⁷

Sonnino’s support, however, was not enough for the nationalist irredentists who, after the leaders of their London group had been axed, protested vociferously, criticising the conduct of the government. Their delegation was received by Orlando on 15 July and the prime minister clearly expressed his opinion:

From no declaration or act of mine preceding or subsequent to the beginning of this ‘policy of the oppressed peoples of Austria’ can it be claimed that I have shown a tendency to give up, even partially, what Italy guaranteed under its treaty with the Allies; and, I repeat, it is my firm intention to adhere to the policy followed to date.¹⁰⁰⁸

This was further proof that Orlando’s open attitude towards nationality policies was no more than a huge red herring, a propaganda and “mass diversion” strategy, aimed at enemy, neutrals and allies to gain immediate results in military terms without compromising Italy’s political position with regard to the London treaty.

British frustration with Italian foreign policy and its indecisive impact on the propaganda campaign came to a head in the second inter-allied propaganda conference. It was convened on Britain’s initiative and attended by around fifty delegates. Among them were: Northcliffe, Steed, Seton Watson, Nicholson and Beaverbrook, for the British; minister Antony Klobukovsky in the French group; and Walter Lippman in the American party. The only leading figure from Italy was Borgese, appointed by Gallenga Stuart, who joined De Filippi, Emanuel, captain Pallavicini, military adjunct attaché, and lieutenant Cajrati, secretary to the Italian delegation.¹⁰⁰⁹

The conference, convened in London, was opened on 14 August by Northcliffe who gave an overview of the work so far carried out by Crewe House and an outline idea of what was still to be done, including a further effort to encourage the independence movements of the various nationalities of the Austro-Hungarian empire. A great deal of the discussion centred on this issue and Italian policy bore the brunt of accusations of ambivalence. Notwithstanding his praise for the propaganda work

¹⁰⁰⁷ ACS, Carte Orlando, b. 46, Sonnino to Imperiali, 17 June, 1918.

¹⁰⁰⁸ Pitacco, *Passione adriatica...*, 128-137.

¹⁰⁰⁹ Tosi, *Propaganda...*, 203.

carried out by Italy at the front, Steed demanded an explicit Italian declaration in favour of Yugoslav independence and insisted that it was essential to have a clear plan or policy so that propaganda could be “directed into the best channels to attain the goals desired.”¹⁰¹⁰

As Emanuel observed, it was “an outright frontal attack on Italian foreign policy: and of a threatening and almost brutal nature.”¹⁰¹¹ Borgese, in his reply, “made in this respect an eloquent and convincing contribution to the knowledge of the Committee,”¹⁰¹² specifying that the Italians were in favour of concessions to the Yugoslavs but were not yet ready to give up the London treaty unilaterally, “for on the other side there is no authority competent to negotiate and to commit Yugoslavia to sacrifices in our favour and to discuss [...] the limits of our claims.” Moreover, Italian unilateral surrender of its own territorial claims would have been seen as an admission of weakness: it would have sparked nationalist recrimination in Italy and re-ignited hope in Austria-Hungary which was not yet defeated. Borgese thus managed to have the delegates approve a rather different final resolution from that proposed by Steed:

The political committee of the inter-allied conference on propaganda hereby resolves to advise the Italian government that it should take the initiative to promote a common and simultaneous public declaration by which all the allies shall consider the setting up of a free Yugoslav state including Serbs, Croats and Slovenes as one of the conditions for a fair and lasting peace and supremacy of the rule of law in Europe.¹⁰¹³

Borgese managed to save his government’s ambiguous policy, notwithstanding the fact that he did not share it, but on 16 August he received bad news from Orlando. The prime minister was worried about reports from Ljubljana, where the congress of Slav minorities held on the 15th had manifested marked hostility towards Italy,¹⁰¹⁴ and he telegraphed Borgese to recommend caution with the allies. In particular, he underlined that no further concessions should be made to the Yugoslavs but, rather,

¹⁰¹⁰ Cornwall, *The Undermining...*, 209.

¹⁰¹¹ Albertini, *Epistolario...*, Emanuel to Albertini, 17 August, 1918, 960-970.

¹⁰¹² ACS, Carte Orlando, b. 49, Atti della Conferenza; Carte Gallenga Stuart, b.1, f.8, Erskine to Gallenga Stuart, 20 August 1918.

¹⁰¹³ ACS, Carte Gallenga Stuart, b.1, f.8, Relazione sommaria sulla conferenza interalleata di Londra 14-17 agosto 1918.

¹⁰¹⁴ Tosi, *Propaganda...*, 211.

“it would be wise not to trust them.”¹⁰¹⁵ Conference resolutions however had already been passed and Borgese could only share Italian concerns regarding the Yugoslavs with Northcliffe. To Orlando he pointed out that it would be unwise not to abide by the resolution approved at the conference.¹⁰¹⁶

When Sonnino received the minutes of the conference via the French embassy,¹⁰¹⁷ he was furious. On 4 September he wrote to Orlando, criticising the delegates who had signed a resolution on their own initiative regarding matters which were “strictly related to Italian foreign policy and to vital Italian interests connected to our war aims.” It was unacceptable that the government should be left with only the choice to accept or to reject a resolution approved by delegates. He concluded that it was no longer possible to keep propaganda and diplomatic action separate, and that it was necessary to pool all the foreign propaganda services “under the direct and immediate responsibility of the minister for Foreign Affairs.”¹⁰¹⁸

For the first time, Sonnino determined to take direct control of Italian propaganda. Orlando, who was not yet ready to doff his mask before the allies, attempted to compromise. He replied to the minister: “I do not need to explain the effect which the coincidence of that provision would have on the fiery discussions of recent days, just when such discussions and arguments are to be put before the Council of Ministers. It all depends, then, on whether or not such arguments should be quashed or made more forceful.”¹⁰¹⁹ Firing Gallenga Stuart was out of question at the moment, in view of the repercussions this would have on public opinion and in the press – even the *Corriere*, unusually, was critical of the government’s foreign policy and was carrying on a campaign against Sonnino. Gallenga Stuart, for his part, once he had come to know about Sonnino’s letter to Orlando, feared he would soon be dismissed; so he warned Orlando that if propaganda were to be transferred to the Consulta, it would be a good idea to look for another foreign minister, making it clear that he supported Bissolati, Sonnino’s main opponent at the ministry, as a candidate.¹⁰²⁰

¹⁰¹⁵ Albertini, *Epistolario*..., Emanuel to Albertini, *cit.*

¹⁰¹⁶ ACS, Carte Gallenga Stuart, b. 1, f. 8, Borgese to Orlando, 17 August, 1918.

¹⁰¹⁷ Sonnino, *Diario*..., III, 291-292.

¹⁰¹⁸ ASMAE, Carte Italia 1916-1918, b. 111, f. 1152.

¹⁰¹⁹ Sonnino, *Carteggio*..., Orlando to Sonnino, 6 September, 1918, 479-480.

¹⁰²⁰ Tosi, *Propaganda*..., 213.

These tensions resurfaced at the Council of Ministers of the Italian government on 7-8 September, and the meeting closed with a favourable, albeit vague, declaration for a united Yugoslavia.¹⁰²¹ This appeared to be a victory for Gallenga Stuart and the supporters of nationality politics. In reality the winner was Orlando, who once again had gained enough time to continue with his deliberately ambiguous policy. By this stage, however, tensions between the supporters of the two opposing lines, both within and without the institutions, had reached breaking-point. Orlando would soon have to reveal his true intentions.

Italian foreign propaganda, then, had succeeded in convincing the allies that the dissolution of Austria-Hungary was necessary and inevitable, and for this to happen support should come from the empire's ethnic minorities. From the point of view of domestic propaganda, the efforts of "Servizio P" and the activity of British intelligence had managed to raise the spirit of the nation and of the army. Propaganda at the front, finally, was where the two propaganda campaigns merged. From being an isolated activity, associated with intelligence work, by the end of the war front propaganda had secured itself a place in the overall strategy of the Italian army, becoming an important strategic tool. It was, from all points of view, "the most sophisticated example of front propaganda in the war,"¹⁰²² sharpened by British advisers, but always with a solid Italian base and outlook.

Victory in the field, though, was one thing. Political victory at international level was something different, and the ever-ambiguous attitude of the Italian government would eventually prove to be counter-productive. It was to Orlando's credit that he understood the need for a change in foreign propaganda, but his limitation was that he considered the politics of nationalities purely as a propaganda tool. Orlando lacked, as did Sonnino, a clear vision of the diplomatic and cultural changes which were taking place.

¹⁰²¹ Sonnino, *Diario...*, III, 294-298.

¹⁰²² Cornwall, *The Undermining...*, 440.

5. The Forked Road To Victory.

5.1 – *Vittorio Veneto.*

Anglo-Italian relations after the battle of the Piave were marked by two main aspects: the debate over military action on the Italian front and the dispute over war aims. Both issues had been in the air for some time and had already generated mutual suspicions in the previous months. But in the summer-autumn 1918 the discussions on these issues became red-hot and confirmed a no-return estrangement between the positions of the two countries, which culminated in the polemics at the peace conference.

The Italian victory on the Piave (15-22 June) was greeted with relief and jubilation by the allies of the Entente, which praised the Italian army for its “great contribution to the future success of the cause of the Allies.”¹⁰²³ The battle proved that Italy had recovered militarily and dispelled the last fears of its collapse. It gave the Italians the awareness that victory was possible. This new Italian confidence was probably more widespread among soldiers and ordinary citizens than among generals and politicians. Orlando and Sonnino, in any case, tried to make the most of the stir of the battle to demand greater respect from other allies for the position of Italy.

Therefore, the first indirect consequence of that victory was the abandonment of the British plan for an admiralissimo in the Mediterranean. When the British attempted a new mediation about that, during a SWC meeting in July, Sonnino declined the invitation to reopen the discussion.¹⁰²⁴ Italy seemed less disposed to accept unpleasant compromises.

It was necessary for the United States to intervene, in order to reopen the debate on the war in the Adriatic. The American proposal, made in July, was to strengthen the Otranto barrage through a boom made of mines, to prevent the Austro-German submarines from leaving the Adriatic. However, the British, maintained a haughty isolation and caused the discussion to be postponed until the meeting in

¹⁰²³ 7th session on the SWC at Versailles, 2-4 July, 1918: AUSSME, E8, b.9, f.2, Procés verbaux des trois séances de la septième session du Conseil supérieur de guerre, tenue à Versailles, les 2-4 juillet 1918.

¹⁰²⁴ Halpern, *Royal Navy...*, doc. 218, Geddb to Rodd, 13 June, 1918.

Malta in August, when the proposal of a fixed boom in the strait of Otranto, made of nets and mines, was asserted definitively. In late August, during the fourth session of the Naval Council in London, Italy agreed on the withdrawal of British naval forces in the Adriatic. The boom of the Otranto canal, established on the Capo Cavallo-Saseno line and proposed by Italy, was actually realised almost at the end of hostilities.¹⁰²⁵ The proposal for a British admiralissimo remained in the air during the final month of the war, but it was never put into practice.

With regard to land fronts, the matter of co-ordination was more complex. Despite the clear Italian victory, Diaz was worried. In his view, the enemy offensive had proved that the Austro-Hungarian war machine was still powerful. Among the Italian general staff – and therefore within the government – the fear that a new Austrian offensive, perhaps with German support, could lead to yet another crisis began to spread. Diaz's concern also stemmed from his awareness that Italy was running out of men. The call-up of the 1900 contingent would guarantee about 200,000 new recruits, to which 50,000 replacements already available could be added, while it had been calculated that Austria-Hungary could count on 40,000 replacements immediately, besides 350,000 men between the 1900 contingent and prisoners returning from Russia.¹⁰²⁶

Therefore, Italy tried to get immediate help from its allies, arguing that the victory on the Piave had paved the way for an inter-allied counter-offensive.¹⁰²⁷ Paris and London, however, drew a different conclusion: after the Piave, Italy was in the best condition to fight back, without the need for allied reinforcements.¹⁰²⁸ The resources of France and Britain too were drying up: Imperiali was embarrassed at having to make new requests for Italy and acted particularly cautiously, asking only for a modest American contingent “to form our own indispensable reserve.”¹⁰²⁹

¹⁰²⁵ Manfroni, *Nostrì alleati...*, 253-258.

¹⁰²⁶ Gooch, *Italian Army...*, 284.

¹⁰²⁷ DDI, 5^a, XI, doc. 210, Orlando to Imperiali, 12 July, 1918.

¹⁰²⁸ “Cavan told Wilson that we can beat them as we want. [...] I object that faced with the numerical superiority of men and artilleries, sheer value is not enough”: Imperiali, *Diario...*, 461.

¹⁰²⁹ DDI, 5^a, XI, d. 266, Imperiali to Sonnino, 26 July, 1918.

The other allies did not believe in a new Austro-Hungarian offensive. The British command kept trying to resort to ploys to reduce its contingent in Italy.¹⁰³⁰ The prevailing opinion was that expressed by Delmé-Radcliffe to Wilson on 10 August:

He [Badoglio] says if the Central Council decides that the Italian front is to be held defensively and the campaign is to be prosecuted in France by all means let that be so. There are too many troops in Italy in this case for a purely defensive campaign and 5 or 6 divisions at least should be sent to France to increase the weight of the armies operating there.¹⁰³¹

Cavan, understandably, stood out against the reduction of the contingent under his command and hoped that the Entente would eventually attack in Italy, so that his troops could have an important role. He therefore expressed himself in favour of an allied offensive to Lloyd George, perhaps hoping that the prime minister would take the opportunity to realise his old project.¹⁰³² This proposal was discussed in a meeting between Cavan, Wilson and Badoglio, during which Cavan formally asked Wilson to send to Italy 25 tanks and 6 divisions for an offensive before the autumn. Badoglio who, as Cavan noticed, had “twice the push” of Diaz, and was “not so tied by political considerations,” said he agreed on the whole, making it clear though that the final decision depended on Diaz.¹⁰³³

The latter, however, was immovable. He had the explicit support of one of the most influential members of the government, Nitti, Treasury minister, who was against a premature Italian offensive, as he had already said to Lloyd George on 24 July.¹⁰³⁴ Nitti was very influential also in military circles. He knew General Capello, the Duke of Aosta, and Diaz himself (Nitti’s wife and the Italian commander-in-chief’s were friends), and believed that the goal of the Italian government was to win the war in such a way as not to compromise Italy’s future, which meant avoiding wearing down Italian manpower until a decisive battle (or battles) could be fought.¹⁰³⁵ Therefore, he wrote Diaz numerous letters from late spring, insisting that he planned the Italian army’s stance – either offensive or

¹⁰³⁰ PRO FO, 371/3232/162567, Milner to Delmé-Radcliffe, 8 September, 1918.

¹⁰³¹ Rodd papers, Private and personal telegram n. 10679, Delmé-Radcliffe to Wilson, 10 August 1918.

¹⁰³² Cassar, *Forgotten Front...*, 171.

¹⁰³³ HHW 2/28B/1, Cavan to Wilson, 30 July, 1918.

¹⁰³⁴ CAB 28/4, Notes of a Conference held at 10 Downing Street on Wednesday, 24 July at 6 pm.

¹⁰³⁵ Gooch, *Italian Army...*, 271.

defensive – exclusively according to his own military judgment.¹⁰³⁶ The army had been reconstituted with enough guns and ammunition for defence “and perhaps to attack”; there was now enough grain to last until the harvest, and enough coal; and the Socialists were divided and mostly benevolent, if not favourable, towards the war. But this was not the time to dare, or to bow in front of allied pressure: otherwise, Italy would have risked finishing up like Serbia, Romania or Russia. Diaz must have “a firm will and nerves of steel.”¹⁰³⁷ As Gooch noted, Nitti was prepared to be faithful to the alliance – but not to be sacrificed to it.¹⁰³⁸ Italy was playing its last card and had to play it wisely.¹⁰³⁹

Italy, therefore, continued to insist on getting reinforcements, making them a necessary precondition for any offensive.¹⁰⁴⁰ If French or British troops were not available, American troops should be sent. Orlando maintained that the arrival of the Americans had guaranteed a numerical superiority on the French front: only the Italian front still appeared neglected.¹⁰⁴¹ In the light of the military improvement in France over the summer, on 8 August Orlando sent Macchi di Cellere to press the US government to send reinforcements direct to Italy.¹⁰⁴² Washington showed itself amenable.¹⁰⁴³

But Pershing had a different view: victory was to be won over the main enemy, Germany, on the main front. On 28 July, he wrote to Foch that his position was “very firm” and identical to that of the French generalissimo, who replied on the 30th confirming that “it can not enter into my mind the thought of diverting to another region any part of the American forces.”¹⁰⁴⁴ Italy was not going to get substantial American reinforcements.¹⁰⁴⁵

¹⁰³⁶ Nitti to Diaz, 18 May, 1918, quoted in Monticone, *Nitti...*, 277.

¹⁰³⁷ Nitti to Diaz, 20 May, 1918, *ibid.*, 278.

¹⁰³⁸ Gooch, *Italian Army...*, 272.

¹⁰³⁹ Nitti to Diaz, 2 June, 1918, quoted in Monticone, *Nitti...*, 280.

¹⁰⁴⁰ The heavy losses suffered, the lack of means for an independent offensive, the constant requests to the allies, show that, although Italy’s position had greatly improved, it still had not regained authentic military autonomy.

¹⁰⁴¹ DDI, 5^a, XI, doc. 210, Orlando to Imperiali, *cit.*

¹⁰⁴² *Ibid.*, doc. 370, Attachment, Orlando to Macchi di Cellere, 8 August, 1918.

¹⁰⁴³ *Ibid.*, doc. 409, Sonnino to Imperiali, Bonin and Macchi di Cellere, 19 August, 1918.

¹⁰⁴⁴ Quoted by Caracciolo: *L’Italia e i suoi...*, 306; EMA, *Les Armées Françaises...* VII, 364, 380; see also: Greenhalgh, *Foch in Command. The forging of a First World War general* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 417.

¹⁰⁴⁵ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 560.

Another channel used by Italy to ask for reinforcements was the inter-allied tank committee.¹⁰⁴⁶ Established, like the others, in the meeting of 8 January, it had to assess the individual countries' needs for tanks, the creation of an inter-allied reserve and its use, and the measures to be taken against possible enemy armoured formations.¹⁰⁴⁷

On 19 May, Di Robilant asked the Comando Supremo for clarifications on the Italian progress on tank doctrine.¹⁰⁴⁸ The new Italian military representative stated that he had forwarded to the allies the request for 50 tanks for the Italian front, even though he was aware that it was unlikely to be approved.¹⁰⁴⁹ Major Benicelli was in charge of negotiating with the French for the assignment of some Renault tanks to Italy.¹⁰⁵⁰ On 1 June, he suggested Di Robilant contact the Renault company directly, in case the allies rejected his request.¹⁰⁵¹ Despite Di Robilant's personal commitment, only four of the 50 tanks arrived in Italy and they were later used for training.¹⁰⁵²

The last Italian hopes to get allied reinforcements vanished at the meeting of 10 September in which, at the request of the SWC, the military representatives prepared their proposals for the 1918-19 allied strategy.¹⁰⁵³ On 3 September, Di Robilant had presented to his colleagues a plan that anticipated the possibility of beating the Central Powers by first defeating Austria-Hungary, through an allied

¹⁰⁴⁶ It was also the preferred channel through which the first tank and anti-tank defence doctrines spread in Italy: SME, *L'Esercito italiano...*, VI, n.2 (Rome: Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito, Ufficio Storico, 1980), 419-127; AUSSME, E8, b.12, f.3.

¹⁰⁴⁷ Gionfrida, *L'Italia e il coordinamento...*, 151 ff.

¹⁰⁴⁸ AUSSME, E2, b.81, f. "Consiglio interalleato supremo di guerra," n. 1158, Di Robilant to Diaz, 19 May, 1918.

¹⁰⁴⁹ L. Ceva, A. Curami, *La meccanizzazione dell'Esercito italiano dalle origini al 1943*, 2 vols., I, (Roma: Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito, Ufficio Storico, 1994), 67-69.

¹⁰⁵⁰ If allied tanks were not available, Italy asked at least the patent for Renault tanks to manufacture them in Italy: SME, *L'Esercito italiano* V, n. 2, 104-105.

¹⁰⁵¹ AUSSME, E8, b.12, f.3, Promemoria del Generale Benicelli, 1 June, 1918.

¹⁰⁵² Ceva, Curami, *La meccanizzazione...*, 68. In the last meeting of the tanks committee, on 10 October, Gargiulo explained the efforts that Italian industry had been making to get to the spring of 1919 right on time with the production of tanks. A pool formed by Ansaldo, Amstrong, Breda, Fiat and Vickers Terni was to manufacture 1400 light tanks with 840 37mm guns and 560 model Schwarzlose or S.I.A. machine guns. After the end of the war this industrial plan was interrupted and resumed in other forms in 1921. See also: M. Montanari, *Politica e strategia in cento anni di guerre italiane* (Roma: Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito, Ufficio Storico, 1996) II, n. 2, 802.

¹⁰⁵³ AUSSME, E8, b.10, f.2, Nota collettiva n. 37 dei Rappresentanti militari permanenti al Consiglio supremo di guerra, 10 September, 1918; see also: M. McCrae, *"Ambushed by Victory: Allied strategy on how to win the First World War"*, PhD thesis (Oxford: 2014).

offensive in Italy launched with 25 allied divisions.¹⁰⁵⁴ The final note approved by the representatives was very different. It was divided into two parts, one for the western front from the English Channel to the Adriatic Sea, the other for the “outer theatres:” it confirmed the priority of the French front.¹⁰⁵⁵ The Italians were considered to have the upper hand on their front and should exploit it without any reinforcements. An allied offensive in France under Foch’s command was scheduled for the autumn, but only if the situation was favourable; otherwise a general offensive was to be launched in France and Italy the following spring.¹⁰⁵⁶ On the 14th Di Robilant wrote to Diaz and Orlando that the plan approved was nothing more than the result of the western powers’ political hegemony.¹⁰⁵⁷

In Rome the irritation grew. Not only was Italy’s request for reinforcements not met, but Italy was also expected to attack. The Italian ambassador in Paris, Bonin Longare, noticed an “indifference for our front as if, by remaining passive, it offered less and less interest for the overall economy of the war.”¹⁰⁵⁸ Nitti was furious. On 15 September, he sent Rodd a memorandum in which he summarised the position of Italy and scolded the allies for not respecting its rights. Here are the main points of the memorandum:¹⁰⁵⁹

[...] 4. When Italy entered the war to support the Alliance whose situation was at the time very unfavourable [...] it had only to contain a portion of the Austrian army. Now it is alone against Austria-Hungary [...].

5. On its front Italy really fights with its own forces only [...] and Allied divisions (including soldiers and auxiliary workers) there are inferior in numbers to the units Italy has sent to France. In justification of this situation [the Allies reply] that Austria is in the process of disintegration. This is not a logical or adequate answer. [...] Austria-Hungary has the superiority over Italy in three respects: in the number of troops, in its artillery of medium and heavy calibre, and in geographical position. [...] The recent Italian resistance on the Piave had in it an element of the miraculous [...] but miracles cannot repeat themselves [...] According to all calculations, owing to the deficiency of roads, it takes double the time to come from France to Italy [...] than it does from Germany. Italy ought therefore to have reserves to be able to hold the enemy [...] If it was beaten, the Allies could not arrive in time to save it. [...]

¹⁰⁵⁴ SME, *L’Esercito italiano...*, V, 2, *Documenti*, n. 63, Di Robilant to Diaz, 3 September, 1918.

¹⁰⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, n. 50, Nota collettiva n. 37, 229-237.

¹⁰⁵⁶ AUSSME, E2, b.81, f. “Consiglio interalleato di guerra di Versailles,” n. 3788, Di Robilant to Diaz, 14 August, 1918.

¹⁰⁵⁷ Gionfrida, *L’Italia e il coordinamento...*, 188.

¹⁰⁵⁸ DDI, 5^a, XI, doc. 517, Bonin to Sonnino, 15 September, 1918.

¹⁰⁵⁹ Rodd papers, Nitti to Rodd, 15 September, 1918.

16. The Italian front has an essential value which it is a grave error to disregard. If Italy were to lose the war [...] it is probable that the Entente would lose the war too. [...] On the other hand the winning of the day on the Italian front could precipitate events. The fall of Austria-Hungary would carry with it that of Bulgaria and Turkey. [...]

Nitti concluded that there was “no country in which the intervention of the American troops would give a greater impetus to the military spirit than it would in Italy. There are 4 million Italians in America. The arrival of American troops would have a decisive effect.”

Imperiali began to mature a different opinion about the stance that Italy should adopt. The overall situation was taking a turn favourable to the Entente and in France the Allies were meeting with one success after another. “Things may come to a head, and we should not find ourselves to be idle, and with the enemy still in the house, while the other allies will have driven it out of their territories. It would be an incalculable moral disaster.” But “Nitti is not in a hurry.”¹⁰⁶⁰

Orlando too began to fear that military inaction was more detrimental to Italy than the risk of a battle without allied reinforcements. In the second half of September he went to Paris. He found, once again, a total indifference to Italy’s request for reinforcements until the Italians attacked. “All means inevitably flow to where there is a fight. We are in this vicious circle: we are not fighting because we do not have the means, and we are denied the means because we are not fighting.”¹⁰⁶¹ This situation could hide serious political consequences: getting to the end of the conflict without a decisive victory to celebrate would be dangerous for Italy. There was also the danger that a separate peace between Austria-Hungary and the Allies would weaken Italy’s claims, given that a significant portion of Italy was under Austrian control.¹⁰⁶²

In late September, Imperiali visited the Italian front, and shortly after he met Sonnino. The ambassador reported to the minister the talks he had had with Italian generals, and recorded the meeting in his diary:

The various personalities with whom I talked maintain that we cannot do anything: we have no reserves, [we are] inferior in numbers, artillery and position. [...] This inaction is very harmful to us,

¹⁰⁶⁰ Imperiali, *Diario*..., 575.

¹⁰⁶¹ DDI, 5^a, XI, doc. 539, Orlando to Sonnino, 18 September, 1918.

¹⁰⁶² *Ibid.*, doc. 519, Sonnino to Orlando, 16 September, 1918.

and can prove very dangerous for us. Such was the opinion of Sonnino, convinced more than ever that honour, prestige and vital interests of the country induce us to start a new offensive. 'Even if it fails, it will always be better for us, not to have remained idle in this moment when everybody is fighting.' I find he is absolutely right.

In a further interview with the foreign minister on 2 October, Imperiali realised that the government had started to exert strong pressures on Diaz, and that, sooner or later, he was supposed to attack anyway.¹⁰⁶³ That very day Orlando communicated to Foch, who for weeks had resumed bombarding Diaz with exhortations to attack, that preparations for the offensive were beginning.¹⁰⁶⁴ The only one against that decision seemed to be Nitti who, until the very last, opposed an offensive at all costs. On 20 October, with the battle four days away, he advised Orlando: "A failure would be a disaster. [...] We would face revolt, if not a fully justified revolution."¹⁰⁶⁵ He also reminded Diaz that victory would change little, but defeat would mean ruin, and went as far as threatening Orlando with his own resignation.¹⁰⁶⁶

The numbers seemed to justify Nitti's pessimism. At the start of October Diaz's army numbered about 2,160,000 men: for the final offensive 60 divisions were available (including 3 British, 2 French and 1 Czechoslovakian), supported by 7700 guns and 663 aeroplanes. Far from enjoying the three-to-one superiority held to be necessary for a successful attack, Diaz was one division weaker than his opponent, General Boroevic.¹⁰⁶⁷

British and Italians strongly disagreed about the role of the battle of Vittorio Veneto and its role in the final crisis of the Central Powers. In the days immediately preceding the offensive of 24 October, the British press already emphasised that Britain held the key to the Entente's success. Furthermore, even before the battle was concluded, the British newspapers saluted it as an allied victory. The

¹⁰⁶³ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 577-8.

¹⁰⁶⁴ DDI, 5^a, XI, doc. 605, Orlando to Bonin, 2 October, 1918.

¹⁰⁶⁵ Nitti to Orlando, 20 October, 1918, quoted in Monticone, *Nitti...*, 293.

¹⁰⁶⁶ Marescotti, *Guerra diplomatica...*, 188.

¹⁰⁶⁷ Gooch, *Italian Army...*, 293.

Austrian rout was not considered an Italian military achievement but a consequence of Yugoslav and Czechoslovakian agitation.¹⁰⁶⁸

For the Italians, Vittorio Veneto was an Italian victory, and it was decisive, because within a few days the surrender of Austria-Hungary determined that of Germany. Therefore, Imperiali strongly protested about the interpretation of the facts provided by British newspapers: the allied contingent at Italy's side was too small "to mark as an 'allied' success the efforts of three quarters of the Italian army." He went on to list the numbers: "5,000 guns and 500,000 prisoners. No army can boast such a success."¹⁰⁶⁹ On 31 October, Imperiali noted with satisfaction that "this morning newspaper articles portray Italy's success with greater accuracy." In the following days he reported to Sonnino that "the newspapers, with the exception of *Daily News* and *Manchester Guardian*, published satisfactory comments."¹⁰⁷⁰

However, the debate on the final battle did not fade away and revived angrily at the peace conference, with each of the two parties eager to credit itself with the victory. As often happens, this division was reflected in the respective historiographical stances. Italian scholars have supported the thesis of the decisive victory that put an end to the war,¹⁰⁷¹ emphasising the light casualties suffered by the allies (1,800 British and 500 French)¹⁰⁷² and even shouting, with regard to Vittorio Veneto, about a "conspiracy of silence" hatched by the other allies.¹⁰⁷³ A more recent study by Stefano Rovighi focused on the peculiarity of Vittorio Veneto, whose course was different from that of the 'classic' First World War battle – not an initial success that fades over time due to the enemy's hardening resistance and the arrival of reserves, but a difficult initial advance due to the valiant Austrian resistance followed by an overall breakthrough after the enemy's reserves were exhausted. The conclusion, however, does not differ from Caracciolo's nationalist one: "The victory brought about an

¹⁰⁶⁸ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 584. Imperiali deemed an article of *The Observer* particularly important and sent a summary of it to Sonnino. It emphasised the "legitimate and vital" British claims within the maritime and colonial theatres: DDI, 5^a, XI, doc. 711, Imperiali to Sonnino, 20 October 1918.

¹⁰⁶⁹ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 591-2.

¹⁰⁷⁰ DDI, Sesta Serie (6^a), I (Roma 1955), doc. 17, Imperiali to Sonnino, 31 October, 1918.

¹⁰⁷¹ See: P.P. Cervone, *Vittorio Veneto, l'ultima battaglia* (Milan: Mursia, 2007).

¹⁰⁷² E. Rosati, A.M. Carassiti, *Dizionario delle battaglie di terra, di mare e di cielo, assedi, rivoluzioni, colpi di stato, guerre civili. I conflitti che sconvolsero la storia dell'Umanità* (Genoa: Gulliver Libri, 1996), 328.

¹⁰⁷³ Caracciolo, *L'Italia e i suoi...*, 310.

end to hostilities both on our front and – at a short time distance – on the western one, saving Italy and all the countries of the Entente another ‘winter in the trenches.’ [...] Without Italy’s victory, the Central Powers might have been able to hold out much longer.’¹⁰⁷⁴

For the British, Cassar has particularly emphasised the role of the British contingent in the breakthrough of the Austrian front.¹⁰⁷⁵ Thompson described the battle almost as a fight whose outcome was taken for granted, in which the Austrians were already defeated from the start due to their political and moral crisis.¹⁰⁷⁶ Only recently did Gooch concede that Vittorio Veneto was not a *passaggiata* (promenade).¹⁰⁷⁷

The allied role at Vittorio Veneto was certainly useful, but it is hard to believe that the outcome would have been different without the success of the British in their sector, as Cassar claims, given that the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian army was determined, in the final analysis, by constant pressure, across the entire line, by the whole Italian army. This largely Italian success deserves more attention on the part of French and British scholars, particularly as no comparably clear victory was achieved in autumn 1918 by the other allies against the exhausted German army on the western front. This is not to denigrate the action of the Anglo-French contingents at Vittorio Veneto, which Diaz had entrusted with a key part of his plan. Their role was probably less crucial than British historians claim, but the allied contribution to the final victory had been fundamental in other ways: above all, they helped in bringing the Italian army back to its full efficiency, and this also is worth more mention than it has received until now from Italian historians: a more balanced and complete understanding of the battle is therefore needed. It was only through close inter-allied collaboration throughout 1918 that victory was possible. The front-line co-operation, both at Bligny¹⁰⁷⁸ and in Veneto, worked better than the political co-operation in Versailles. The words of the Duke of Aosta to Cavan – “Without the

¹⁰⁷⁴ S. Rovighi, *Una “battaglia fortunata:” Vittorio Veneto*, in “L’istituzione militare in Italia. Politica e società,” Nicola Labanca, ed. (Milan: Unicopoli, 2002), 101-106.

¹⁰⁷⁵ Cassar, *Forgotten Front...*, 215.

¹⁰⁷⁶ Thompson, *White War...*, 343.

¹⁰⁷⁷ Gooch, *Italian Army...*, 297.

¹⁰⁷⁸ The town where the Italians fought against the Germans, earning the respect of the French and British colleagues.

presence of you and your troops there would have been no Vittorio Veneto”¹⁰⁷⁹ – might have been a flattering farewell to a British colleague, but, essentially, they indicate just that.

5.2 – *The Conflict Over War Aims.*

Although Vittorio Veneto was an indisputable military victory, it did not bring Italy the political success it sought. During the final months of the war, the diplomatic situation had become heated. The debate especially concerned war aims and the post-war European political configuration, and therefore it challenged the very sense of victory provided by Vittorio Veneto. In this dispute, Italy and Britain clashed. The controversy had begun months earlier, remaining in the background of Anglo-Italian relations throughout 1918 and exploding in all its harshness in the two final months of the war.

The speech that Lloyd George addressed, on 5 January 1918, to a group of trade union representatives inflamed the polemic at a time when Italy was still in a military crisis.¹⁰⁸⁰ The British prime minister put special emphasis on the principle of nationality with regard to Austria-Hungary, and he did not exclude the survival of the Ottoman empire, which would have nullified the St. Jean de Maurienne agreement. “What a way to observe treaties,” said Imperiali, annoyed by the different treatment reserved by Lloyd George for Italy’s and France’s claims: “We will support until death the French democracy’s claims for a reconsideration of Alsace-Lorraine. We consider Italy’s legitimate claims as vital.” Furthermore, Imperiali noticed that the Trades Union Congress had approved Italy’s “national” claims but not the “so-called imperialistic” ones. Perplexed, he wondered: “Which ones? If it is about Dalmatia, so be it, and it would seem to me to be our interest to come to an agreement with the Yugoslavs, since we are not going to take it this time, anyway. However the Italian Trento, Trieste and Istria must become so politically too. Otherwise, there will be trouble.”¹⁰⁸¹

Imperiali telegraphed Sonnino,¹⁰⁸² noticing Lloyd George’s marked ideological change. He now seemed to be speaking like President Wilson.¹⁰⁸³ On 7 January the Italian ambassador spoke to

¹⁰⁷⁹ CAB 45/84, Sandilands to Edmonds, 24 August, 1945.

¹⁰⁸⁰ DDI, 5^a, X, doc. 37, Imperiali to Sonnino, 6 January, 1918.

¹⁰⁸¹ Imperiali, *Diario* ..., 474-479.

¹⁰⁸² “I could sense the treacherous wind blow within these foul ultra-radical environments, dipped in Bolshevism”: *ibid.*

Hardinge¹⁰⁸⁴ “harshly and privately,” going so far as to threaten the allies in a veiled manner: “The British government had better remember that Italy, despite its temporary and already almost redressed setback, has an army four million strong, that is the allies’ primary interest to keep in the Alliance.”¹⁰⁸⁵ Sonnino, at the same time, made himself heard by Rodd:¹⁰⁸⁶

Yesterday I confidentially told Rodd that I personally was not very happy with Lloyd George’s address. Without any previous concert with us nor any warning, he threw all our war aims [...] out of the window, with the sole exception of the purely Italian territories. [...] On the defence of the Adriatic and guarantees for our security there was not one word.¹⁰⁸⁷

Cecil rejected Imperiali’s complaints¹⁰⁸⁸ and the latter replied that Italian public opinion would not accept territorial revisions.¹⁰⁸⁹ On 11 January, the ambassador expressed to Sonnino his concern at what he called the “inconsistent, sporadic and contradictory” British policy: on the one hand, Britain aimed “at the dual illusory purpose of fomenting revolution in Germany or pushing Austria toward a separate peace,” while on the other hand it made not “one real step towards the overall peace,” running the risk, on the contrary, “of crumbling alliances, or at least significantly weakening the indispensable cordiality between the allied peoples.”¹⁰⁹⁰ Imperiali suggested that Sonnino should bluntly declare to the other allies that Italian public opinion was no longer willing to send Italian soldiers to die in order to defend only British and French interests and that it was prepared to make sacrifices only if the others did the same.¹⁰⁹¹

The Anglo-Italian dispute preceded by a few days Wilson’s address to the US Congress, on 8 January, with the formulation of the famous Fourteen Points.¹⁰⁹² They provoked even more discontent

¹⁰⁸³ DDI, 5^a, X, doc. 37, Imperiali to Sonnino, *cit.*

¹⁰⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, doc. 42, Imperiali to Sonnino, 7 January, 1918.

¹⁰⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, doc. 42, Imperiali to Sonnino, 8 January, 1918.

¹⁰⁸⁶ PRO FO 371/3229/8430, Rodd to Balfour, 10 January, 1918.

¹⁰⁸⁷ DDI, 5^a, X, doc. 61, Sonnino to Imperiali, 9 January, 1918.

¹⁰⁸⁸ “I protested strongly against this view”: PRO FO, 371/3229/8430, Cecil to Rodd, 8 January, 1918.

¹⁰⁸⁹ DDI, 5^a, X, doc. 75, Imperiali to Sonnino, 11 January, 1918.

¹⁰⁹⁰ ASSR, Fondo Imperiali, b. I, f. 6, Corrispondenza, gab. 18, Imperiali to Sonnino, 11 January 1918.

¹⁰⁹¹ DDI, 5^a, X, doc. 75, Imperiali to Sonnino, 11 January, 1918.

¹⁰⁹² L. Salvatorelli, *Un cinquantennio di rivolgimenti mondiali (1914-1976)* 2 vols. (Florence: Le Monner, 1976), I, 238-246.

in Rome. Sonnino decided to adopt an inflexible line on any proposal for the revision of “the compensations agreed upon with us.”¹⁰⁹³ Sonnino’s problem was that the USA was not bound by the London pact, which was one of those “secret covenants” denounced in the fourteen points speech.

Initially the Americans, in the persons of the Secretary of State Lansing and later of Wilson himself,¹⁰⁹⁴ tried to reassure the Italians: the new borders of Italy were going to be set based both on the ethnic¹⁰⁹⁵ and geographical principle, by taking into account the “natural” borders, without any desire to compromise the strategic security of Italy: “Italy was entitled to the irredenta and also entitled to establish proper strategic boundaries.” Orlando believed that meant American support for its claims to the whole of South Tyrol, Trieste, Istria and the Albanian coast.¹⁰⁹⁶

However, in an interview with Macchi Di Cellere, Wilson made it clear that it was through the League of Nations that the strategic security of each country was to be guaranteed.¹⁰⁹⁷ Nothing was further from Sonnino’s position. He thought the League of Nations would be useful only when “every country has found in the geographical demarcation of its political borders that minimum of defensive conditions sufficient to give it the time [in case of attack] to usefully resort to the protection” of the new international organisation proposed by Wilson.¹⁰⁹⁸ Relations between Italy and France were not better, as confirmed by the words of the French minister of armaments, Loucheur. According to him, with regard to the Adriatic issues, it was necessary to find “a conciliatory ground with the other nationalities.”¹⁰⁹⁹

In this context, a visit by Orlando to London was urgent. The Italian prime minister arrived there on 23 January, and on the 24th he met Lloyd George. Imperiali, who was present as an interpreter, noted in his diary that Orlando, on the whole, had “spoken well” but had ignored Imperiali’s suggestion that he demand precise guarantees on Asia Minor. “It seems to me he turns a deaf ear. The

¹⁰⁹³ PRO FO 371/3229/8430, Attachment, Rodd to Balfour, 10 January, 1918.

¹⁰⁹⁴ DDI, 5^a, X, doc. 87, Macchi di Cellere to Sonnino, 17 January, 1918.

¹⁰⁹⁵ On this basis, Italy would have little claim to Istria, Less to Dalmatia, and none to the Alto Adige or the Isonzo valley above Gorizia, let alone the Greek islands or Asia Minor.

¹⁰⁹⁶ Thompson, *White War...*, 336.

¹⁰⁹⁷ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 604.

¹⁰⁹⁸ DDI, 5^a, X, doc. 129, Imperiali to Bonin, 23 January, 1918.

¹⁰⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, doc. 104, Imperiali to Sonnino, 18 January, 1918.

Adriatic is everything to him.” In the end, “everything remained as vague as it was before.”¹¹⁰⁰ Nevertheless, the two governments reaffirmed the Treaty of London.

British liberal opinion was not convinced. The editor of *The Nation* queried the discrepancy between that “cynical” secret treaty and the increasingly anti-imperialistic flavour of allied war aims. The treaty could only be implemented by challenging the emergent aim of autonomy for the Habsburg nations. By forcing injustice onto non-Italians, this would have bad repercussions inside Italy: “By the acquisition of German, Slovene, Serbo-Croat, Albanian, Greek, Turkish and possibly Abyssinian subjects, Italy would become an Empire doomed to racial unrest and firm government.”¹¹⁰¹

The Foreign Office too, in spite of the assurances always made to Imperiali, had been maturing the intention to change the agreements. The starting point of the British arguments was that Russia’s defection had changed the fate of Constantinople.¹¹⁰² This reshuffled the cards of all the agreements made about Asia Minor. According to Lloyd George, it was necessary to try and take the Ottoman empire away from the alliance with Germany, even at the cost of reducing allied colonial claims.¹¹⁰³ Clemenceau agreed with him, so much so that there were rumours that he was ready to give up Syria.¹¹⁰⁴

Nicolson was even more explicit. He addressed a memorandum to the Foreign Office in which he stated that the time had come “when we should consider the means by which some modifications of our existing treaties with Italy” could be re-examined. The document analysed the “morality” of the treaties of London and St. Jean de Maurienne. The first, albeit anachronistic, still had elements of validity, that made an agreed modification desirable; the second – “even worse” – should be considered completely lapsed. Beside the sentences mentioning the St. Jean de Maurienne agreement, Hardinge noted down: “It is dead as far as Italy is concerned.”¹¹⁰⁵

Some British parliamentarians (such as Snowden and Trevelyan) condemned “the secret Italian treaty” not only privately but publicly. Imperiali was increasingly concerned by such attacks – “It is

¹¹⁰⁰ Imperiali, *Diario*..., 488.

¹¹⁰¹ Thompson, *White War*..., 337.

¹¹⁰² DDI, 5^a, X, doc. 75, Imperiali to Sonnino, 11 January, 1918.

¹¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, doc. 141, Orlando to Sonnino, 25 January, 1918.

¹¹⁰⁴ Riccardi, *Alleati*..., 606 ff.

¹¹⁰⁵ PRO FO 371/3250/42599, Possible Revision of Our Treaty with Italy, 2 March, 1918.

ridiculous to think of a non-secret treaty to determine the entry into the war of a power until then neutral” – which he believed hid “intrigues and plots against us.”¹¹⁰⁶ The ambassador was well aware that “the time to review all the agreements on Asia Minor” was approaching.¹¹⁰⁷

The following months were characterised by a growing state of tension. The greatest danger was, once again, that the British and French would come to an agreement behind Italy’s back.¹¹⁰⁸ In order to prevent it, Imperiali suggested that Sonnino propose a new reading of the inter-allied agreements on Asia Minor. This way, he hoped it would be possible to play on the disagreements between the British and French, since “with regard to the eastern Mediterranean and Italy’s interests, British and French policies are [...] in antagonism.”¹¹⁰⁹

Instead, De Martino proposed to bypass the Entente allies and turn to Wilson: the White House would have never accepted a division of Anatolia at the expense of the future Turkish state. Therefore, it was necessary to “advocate the thesis of the areas of economic exploitation, included in the thesis of the eastern Mediterranean stability, as a necessary condition for a lasting peace.”¹¹¹⁰ Unfair treatment of Italy by the British and French appeared to be a manifestation of the very imperialism that Wilson had resolved to fight. Equity of treatment – and therefore of expansion in the eastern Mediterranean – between the three Entente powers, would have been, instead, the guarantee of a “democratic peace.”¹¹¹¹ Sonnino accepted De Martino’s suggestion and telegraphed to Washington on 27 June:

Our plan, inspired [...] by the idea of proportionality and balance of forces, is much closer to Wilson’s concepts than the plan of Great Britain and France, which has the absolute aim [...] of direct acquisition of certain Turkish territories.¹¹¹²

¹¹⁰⁶ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 491. On 7 February, Imperiali had a tough conversation with Hardinge who “was in one of his days of *mood patronizing*. Just think that he had the courage to admit with me, the Italian Ambassador, that hearty sympathies for Austria continued in British society. And I gave him tit for tat [saying] that, if it is so they must not bother us with the Germanophilism of the Italian aristocracy!”

¹¹⁰⁷ DDI, 5^a XI, doc. 55, Imperiali to Sonnino, 13 June, 1918.

¹¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, doc. 100, De Martino to Sonnino, 21 June, 1918; see also: Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 601.

¹¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, doc. 55, Imperiali to Sonnino, 13 June, 1918.

¹¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, doc. 100, De Martino to Sonnino, *cit.*

¹¹¹¹ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 610.

¹¹¹² DDI, 5^a XI, doc. 134, Sonnino to Macchi di Cellere, 27 June, 1918.

The same day, however, Picot's visit to Sykes in London increased Sonnino and Imperiali's fears about a secret Anglo-French agreement on Asia Minor.¹¹¹³ Sonnino stated that, had London and Paris "once more"¹¹¹⁴ come to an agreement without consulting Rome, considerable political damage to the coalition would have resulted. The Foreign Office denied this insinuation, but, in Imperiali's opinion, London was getting ready to make a *tabula rasa* of all past agreements.¹¹¹⁵ "We shall have serious disturbances," he predicted.¹¹¹⁶

It was with this fear that Livio Borghese went to meet Balfour on 14 October. The imminent Turkish armistice raised the question of how to manage the occupation zones to be assigned to the Entente. There was the danger that Smyrna could end up under Greek trusteeship, which could pose a threat to Italy's claims on that province. But Balfour replied that the British government, while willing to remain faithful to the Treaty of London, no longer saw the St. Jean de Maurienne agreement, which had established the areas of occupation, as valid because of the lack of Russia's consent.¹¹¹⁷ Borghese appealed to the "political substance" of the agreement, if the legal one was no longer applicable. Balfour was aware that a British refusal was going to cause strong disagreements with Italy. However, he refused to discuss the subject further.¹¹¹⁸

Sonnino's reply was equally determined: "The defection of Russia cannot in any way release Great Britain and France from the formal commitments contracted with Italy."¹¹¹⁹ A competition had begun that was to place Italy at odds with the other powers throughout the subsequent months, including the peace conference. Although the issue of Asia Minor was not the priority of the Italian government – it would take second place at the peace conference – the rejection of the St. Jean de Maurienne agreement meant that the entire political foundation for Italy's entry to the Entente was crumbling.

While the differences between Italy and Britain on the agreements for Asia Minor had been growing, the frail harmony attained on the Yugoslav question had also been shattering. Throughout the

¹¹¹³ *Ibid.*, doc. 141, Imperiali to Sonnino, 27 June, 1918.

¹¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, doc. 153, Sonnino to Imperiali e Bonin, 29 June 1918.

¹¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, doc. 204, Imperiali to Sonnino, 10 June, 1918.

¹¹¹⁶ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 558.

¹¹¹⁷ Riccardi, *Alleati...*, 613.

¹¹¹⁸ DDI, 5^a, XI, doc. 670, Borghese to Sonnino, 14 October, 1918.

¹¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, doc. 694, Sonnino to Imperiali and Bonin, 18 October, 1918.

summer, the British pressures for a more explicit commitment by Italy to the policy of nationalities fell on deaf ears. This attitude continued to cause turmoil among the Yugoslavs and frustration for the British.¹¹²⁰

In Hardinge's opinion, Sonnino was "extremely tiresome" over the Yugoslav question.¹¹²¹ Colonel Edward M. House, advisor of President Wilson, was even more resigned: "It is perfectly hopeless to get Sonnino into anything progressive or constructive." Sonnino's real view was expressed in September to the American ambassador: that Austria would emerge from the war as a power once again, albeit a minor one, still able to dominate and even absorb the Yugoslavs.¹¹²²

After Vittorio Veneto, Imperiali appealed to Balfour to get Britain to show "tangibly its friendship for Italy" by accepting the occupations – Durrës, Zadar, Pula, Šibenik – that the Italians were carrying out in the wake of their victorious offensive.¹¹²³ But His Majesty's government had received the same request from the Yugoslav committees. The Slavs tried to have as many Dalmatian urban areas as possible assigned to them, as Rodd explained to Cecil on 3 November: "The Italians are today in Trent and Trieste and the Yugo-Slavs are in many places where they [are] hardly expected unless the peace conference placed them there."¹¹²⁴

Northcliffe made a final attempt to convince the Italians to come to an agreement with the Yugoslavs. He wrote a long telegram to Chiesa, the Commissioner of Aeronautics, emphasising that he was speaking in a private capacity, but, "so far as I know and believe," interpreting "the opinion of the British people, an opinion by which the British Government is guided and to which it is definitely obliged to adhere:"

Gradually in the United States and to some extent among the British public the impression has been received that Italian official policy is not in complete accord with the principles established by British statesmen and by President Wilson. [...] I cannot sufficiently strongly insist on the necessity of Italy's official policy being without any delay raised to that loyalty level to which President Wilson has brought the whole Allied cause with the enthusiastic support of the great mass of the British public. If

¹¹²⁰ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 555.

¹¹²¹ Rodd papers, Hardinge to Rodd, June 17, 1918.

¹¹²² Thompson, *White War...*, 336, 341.

¹¹²³ Imperiali, *Diario...*, 582, 593.

¹¹²⁴ Rodd papers, Rodd to Cecil, 3 November, 1918.

this is carried out *immediately, publicly* and *spontaneously*, it may be of great advantage to Italy. But as a private citizen who has some acquaintance with the trend of public opinion, I am convinced that it will not be tolerated that any obstacle should be placed in the way of an equitable peace settlement through any kind of secret treaty or by any of the contrivances of an antiquated diplomacy.¹¹²⁵

The Italian government did not let these arguments change its position. Orlando asked Rodd to meet him, “not officially but as a friend,” and told him he was disappointed by Northcliffe’s words – or, rather, by Steed’s, as “the letter was written in Italian, so that he [Orlando] had no doubt that though signed by Northcliffe, it was composed by Mr. Wickham Steed:”

[Orlando] found that old friends and allies and their interests seemed to count for much less than a newly-discovered Jugo-Slavs [...]. The so-called National Council at Zagabria had so defined its boundaries, that Italy was limited to the line of the Isonzo, less even than what was included in the “something” (*parecchio*) of Signor Giolitti [...]. Italy had been struggling and often fighting for the best part of a century to accomplish its destiny and obtain a livable frontier, and had always had the sympathy of Great Britain and France in these efforts, and now suddenly a state which had hardly been heard of before the war, some of the components of which have been among the hardest fighters against the Allies, seemed to have a monopoly of sympathies and suffrages. [...] Whereas Italy, which for a young and poor country had made very great sacrifices [...], seemed to be quite elbowed out by the new friends. He was at a loss of account for this attitude.¹¹²⁶

Rodd’s conclusions were that Orlando was “quite in earnest.” As “a Sicilian” he did not “in the least conceal his emotions;” but between his outburst and Sonnino’s calmer observations “there was close analogy.” Rodd was also under the impression that Orlando feared that the British press was going to be utilised to create “a certain wave of public opinion” unfair to Italy “after her struggles and misfortunes and recovery.” If a full press battle was to be waged against Italy, “an impossible situation will be produced by our having an official propaganda agency here working under them.”

By now, Orlando was ready to throw off his mask about his own ambiguous policy of nationalities. This ambiguity vanished soon after Vittorio Veneto: by that time the military victory, for which the political and propaganda strategy of the “nationalities” had been undertaken, had been attained and the premier could therefore realign himself with Sonnino’s positions, as he had always intended to do.

¹¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, Northcliffe to Chiesa, 3 November, 1918.

¹¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, Rodd to Balfour, 11 November, 1918.

Orlando justified the change in his attitude as a reaction to the Yugoslavs' uncompromising spirit and unwillingness to seek reconciliation.¹¹²⁷ Just before the final offensive, those responsible for the Italian army's intelligence had been charged with sending all possible reports (even exaggerating them) of anti-Italian statements and actions made by the Yugoslavs. Diaz himself had received the specific order to "collect evidence of all excesses and abuses of which Yugoslav individuals are guilty against us."¹¹²⁸

The propaganda under-secretary too was involved in this new campaign. In late October, for example, Northcliffe sent Gallenga Stuart, through De Filippi, a British memorandum about the allies' war aims, which mentioned a "readjustment of the frontiers of Italy as nearly as possible along the lines of nationality."¹¹²⁹ The reply came from Rome on 7 November and it had an unexpected tone. Gallenga Stuart rejected the memorandum for reasons that he had never used before. He affirmed that the rights of Italy did not seem sufficiently protected: in particular, its strategic needs in the Adriatic were not being met.¹¹³⁰

At the same time Gallenga Stuart wrote to the other managers of the Italian propaganda offices abroad. He ordered those in Washington to fire Felice Ferrero because he was pro-Slav, while to those in Berne, including Borgese, he said he considered "any attitude [...] geared to acknowledge territorial renunciations which the Italian government has never agreed upon [...] absolutely against the interests of the country; instead propaganda's task is in this hour to affirm the legitimacy of Italy's aspirations."¹¹³¹

Borgese was the most surprised by the under-secretary's words. He objected to Gallenga Stuart that a propaganda of nationalities would enable Italy to reclaim Italian territories not covered by the London treaty, such as Fiume, while international public opinion would respond very badly to an annexationist programme in Dalmatia.¹¹³² Borgese concluded that he was ready to resign, if Orlando's

¹¹²⁷ Tosi, *Propaganda...*, 215.

¹¹²⁸ ACS, Carte presidenza, b.19-28-1, Orlando to Diaz, 18 November, 1918.

¹¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, Carte Orlando, b. 49, De Filippi to Gallenga Stuart, 29 October, 1918.

¹¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, Carte Gallenga Stuart, b. 1, f. 18. See also: ASMAE, Carte Ambasciata d'Italia a Londra, 1918-1919, b. 463, f. 1, Gallenga Stuart to De Filippi, 9 November, 1918.

¹¹³¹ Albertini, *Epistolario...*, Gallenga Stuart to Borgese, 9 November, 1918, 1180.

¹¹³² *Ibid.*, Borgese to Gallenga Stuart, 15 November, 1918, 1186.

government persevered in its old-fashion policy.¹¹³³ Gallenga Stuart' problem was that Orlando's radical move to Sonnino's position had left him isolated. He probably feared being dismissed, had he not followed the prime minister's line: so he rejected Borgese's suggestions.

The entire Italian propaganda apparatus (the Navy office, the Comando Supremo office and under-secretary office) was newly oriented in an anti-Yugoslav direction.¹¹³⁴ In the propaganda missions abroad, where often in the last year representatives of the irredentist associations had been replaced or pushed aside, members of the DSI were now expelled and replaced with irredentists and nationalists. Among these, Giorgio Pitacco, Felice Bennati, Roberto Ghiglianovic and Riccardo Zanella were sent to London with the task of starting the campaign for an Italian Fiume. By then, however, it was the eve of the peace conference. British diplomats did not understand why Italy put such emphasis on matters that were to be debated by the governments in Versailles. Balfour, while confirming his loyalty to the commitments made in the London pact, strongly suggested Italian irredentists avoid anti-Yugoslav propaganda. The same opinion was expressed by George Barnes, Milner and Northcliffe.¹¹³⁵ Unsurprisingly, the British press also reacted harshly.¹¹³⁶

When the war ended, international public opinion was largely against Italy. Italian propaganda, whose management was entrusted by Orlando to the Consulta from the end of December 1918¹¹³⁷ through the months of the peace conference,¹¹³⁸ had to reckon with a foreign press that discredited the success of the Italian army and the legitimacy of Italy's claims.¹¹³⁹ Hardinge clearly explained to Rodd that if Italy did not "at least show some moderation" they would be completely isolated at the peace table:

¹¹³³ Tosi, *Propaganda...*, 217.

¹¹³⁴ ACS, Carte Presidenza, b.19-28-1, Badoglio to Sonnino, 15 December, 1918.

¹¹³⁵ Tosi, *Propaganda...*, 219.

¹¹³⁶ See, in particular: *Daily Telegraph*, *Morning Post*, *Manchester Guardian*, *Globe*.

¹¹³⁷ ACS, Carte Presidenza, 19-28-2, Orlando to Sonnino, 28 December, 1918, and Sonnino to Orlando, 31 December, 1918.

¹¹³⁸ The arguments were now explicitly annexationist: "The Adriatic is too small to allow armed people of different races to live in peace. A single power should have control over it and Italy has given sufficient evidence so that it can and must be considered that the Italian control is synonymous with freedom and justice." See: "I confini d'Italia," in *Bollettino del soldato*, n. 1, 1919, 3.

¹¹³⁹ ACS, Carte Presidenza, 19-28-1, Bevione to Gallenga Stuart, 12 November, 1918.

[Italy] appear to have an insatiable appetite, for by the Pact of London they have certainly got more than they can possibly digest, and their tentacles seem to stretch out everywhere. I am all for giving them all that has been promised, but they really should follow the motto "Live and let live." [...] An exit to the Adriatic is desirable for others besides Italy. Yesterday we received a pamphlet from Imperiali with a huge map showing Italy's aspirations in Africa. In addition to rectification of the frontiers of Tripoli, which between ourselves appears to me somewhat ridiculous, since their influence only extends to the range of their guns from the sea, they claim the whole of Abyssinia, French and British Somaliland and Jubaland. They put forward a curious argument to the effect that Italy, in proportion to its population, should have colonies on the same proportional basis of population as France and Great Britain. I am afraid their views are quite unrealisable, and I am confident that France would under no circumstances surrender Jibuti to Italy.¹¹⁴⁰

At the end of the week following this telegram, the respective delegations made their way to Paris. The confrontation that took place at the peace conference confirmed the worst presentiments of those who had feared a radicalisation of the clash between Italy and Britain.¹¹⁴¹ The relations between the two countries came out of it deeply worsened, not so much in the geopolitical balance, as in the sense of injustice and betrayal that was instilled in large sections of the Italian people, inflated by the nationalist propaganda of the "mutilated victory." Balfour's prediction that all that would have had "far reaching consequences" could not have been more true.¹¹⁴²

¹¹⁴⁰ Rodd papers, Hardinge to Rodd, 6 December 1918.

¹¹⁴¹ Imperiali, *Diario*..., 558.

¹¹⁴² DDI, 5^a, XI, d. 670, Borghese to Sonnino, *cit.* See also: Riccardi, *Alleati*..., 614.

Conclusions.

Anglo-Italian relations played a major role in shaping Italian participation in the First World War. Italy sought Great Britain as the guarantor of the Treaty of London, as well as its main naval and financial partner within the Entente. Britain, for its part, used its special partnership with Italy to reach three main objectives.

The first, and most important, was to have Rome increasingly involved in the Entente's global war. Britain aimed in particular to complete the blockade of the Central Powers by securing the Mediterranean. This result was achieved slowly and not without contradictions, such as Italy's persistently self-reliant trade policy. The Italian role in the allied economic blockade and Italy's part in the Entente's naval strategy are badly neglected aspects of the Great War, and they still need to be studied in depth.

The second British goal was to keep Italy in the war when the Caporetto crisis hit. The Italian front, initially peripheral, became one of the decisive theatres of the conflict: Britain managed to control Italian strategy indirectly, by subordinating British reinforcements and supplies to the replacement of Cadorna with a more accommodating commander-in-chief of the Italian army, and later influencing Diaz's strategy by setting conditions for the use of British troops in the field.

Finally, in a wider geo-political sense, Britain took advantage of its good relations with Italy to balance French influence in the Mediterranean and the Middle East. The British acted as mediators in the controversies between Italy, Russia and France, taking upon themselves the task of keeping the alliance together. At the same time, they used their role to reduce as much as possible French expansion, but without making Italy a dangerous rival. The way Italian colonial claims in the Ottoman empire were played out through ambiguous relations between Italy, Britain and France also deserves further attention.

Anglo-Italian relations worsened in the last year of the conflict. Britain's role as the leading power of the Entente declined as it was gradually replaced by USA, and Italy began to doubt whether Britain

would actually fulfil its promises. The debate over the war's aims proved that London had no intention of risking a clash with Washington to defend non-British interests.

The distancing between Italy and Britain which started in the last year of the conflict ran wider at Versailles. Rome still looked at London as the guarantor of the London treaty but, because of the contradictions of its foreign policy and its poor propaganda strategy, Italy arrived at the peace conference confronted by an almost impossible task.

Orlando and Sonnino knew the other powers would try to reduce concessions to Italy. Nine days before Vittorio Veneto, the Italian ambassador in Paris warned Rome that it would not displease France "if Italy were to end the war with a victory like that of the Piave, purely defensive and now somewhat old," as that would make it easier to liquidate the agreement of April 1915.¹¹⁴³ When victory came at Vittorio Veneto, Italy's entire war effort was pushed hard in support of its peace aims. Sonnino went to Paris determined to press claims that rested on three separate rights: those pre-dating the war, those arising during it, and those that were a "necessary consequence" of the post-war situation.¹¹⁴⁴

Italian final claims included the territories promised to Italy in the Treaty of London, with the addition of Fiume, according to the principle of nationality. In addition to the colonial claims agreed upon at the Paris conference of 25 July 1917, an extensive list of African territories was also included. Such requests were founded partly on Italian claims to have brought the war to a victorious end "against the entire Austro-Hungarian army" and on the grounds that Italy had contributed to the allies' victory in Africa by fighting its "parallel war" in Libya against the Senussi.¹¹⁴⁵

The colonies minister, Giacomo Colosimo, aimed primarily to "valorise Italy's old colonial possessions." His ambitions stretched from the Arabian Peninsula, to which Italy should have economic access, via Kassala in the Sudan to the Jarabub oasis on the Egyptian-Libyan border. The possession of the British port of Kisimaio (on the basis of a claim going back to 1888) and the French

¹¹⁴³ R. Mosca, "Autunno 1918: Sonnino, la Francia e la vittoria da spartire," in *Storia e Politica*, vol. 15, n. 1, 1976, 51.

¹¹⁴⁴ Gooch, *Italian Army...*, 305.

¹¹⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 306.

port of Jibuti was also indispensable to secure the “organic unity” of Italian colonies in the Horn of Africa.¹¹⁴⁶

Sonnino had never been much interested in the African programme: his main concern was that it must not compromise Italy’s demands in the eastern Mediterranean.¹¹⁴⁷ Orlando, for his part, was much more worried about the domestic unrest that was spreading in Italy. The Nationalists had claimed Fiume, and D’Annunzio was ready to march on the city with a legion of volunteers. To satisfy Nationalist demands on Fiume, Orlando was ready to reduce Italian claims in Dalmatia, requesting Fiume as a replacement. Sonnino, instead, was ready to give up many colonial compensations, but insisted that both Dalmatia and Fiume must be Italian. Their conflicting lines weakened Italian diplomatic action. Wilson did not seem ready to compromise in any way.

What Italian historiography has long failed to appreciate is how Italy’s weak position at Versailles reflected not only its military and political weakness, but also, and perhaps above all, its astronomical financial debt. By the end of the war, Italy had a public debt equal to 119% of its GDP, of which almost three quarters was domestically held. This might seem to put Italy in a better position than Britain which had public debt equal to 140% of GDP; but for Britain foreign debt reduced the domestic pressures for inflation; for Italy foreign debt, even if proportionally smaller, increased the trade gap. At the average exchange rates prevailing in May 1919, Italian foreign debt was equal to five times the value of Italy’s annual export trade;¹¹⁴⁸ 56% of Italian external debt was owed to the UK, 40% to the US, and the rest to France.¹¹⁴⁹

Other governments also became heavily indebted during the war, but in the Italian case the high debt was superimposed on a divided country where the taxation required to balance the books eventually fuelled long standing grievances.¹¹⁵⁰ The industrial mobilisation of the war years did not allow Italy to build up an external surplus afterwards. Given that richer economies had trouble

¹¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*; G. Bucciante, *L’egemonia sull’Etiopia (1918-1923): Lo scontro diplomatico tra Italia, Francia e Inghilterra* (Milan: Giuffrè, 1977), 26.

¹¹⁴⁷ Gooch, *Italian Army...*, 307.

¹¹⁴⁸ Toniolo, *La banca d’Italia...*, 14.

¹¹⁴⁹ Kindleberger, *A Financial History...*, 307.

¹¹⁵⁰ The fiscal manoeuvres of the post-war years increased the polarisation and violence that helped Mussolini come to power as the defender of law and order.

disentangling themselves from post-war indebtedness, “Italy was bound to struggle all the more.”¹¹⁵¹ Furthermore, the end of the war brought with it a dramatic drop of allied supplies to Italy – from 12 million tonnes of coal and grain to 6, thus worsening the Italian economic situation.¹¹⁵²

In the end, at Versailles Italy was granted Tyrol up to the Brenner Pass, including predominantly German-speaking South Tyrol and the present-day Trentino province, as well as the Austrian littoral (Gorizia and Gradisca, and the March of Istria) and four Dalmatian islands. Given Italy’s diplomatic isolation and its weak negotiating power, they were not insignificant acquisitions.

Nevertheless, the myth of the “mutilated victory” quickly spread across Italy, creating an environment in which for many Italians Fascism appeared to be the solution to the country’s ills. The failure of the negotiations for Italian colonial claims is another key aspect in understanding Rome’s foreign policy in the following years: it played a major part in the colonial expansion pursued by Mussolini between 1922 and 1936.

The fascist regime, with its emphasis on nationalism and militarism, wanted to expand the Italian empire in Africa. London remained Mussolini’s main interlocutor when he rose to power, and in the 1920s it still seemed that the response to fascist colonial ambitions would be largely played out through Anglo-Italian relations. In a series of conferences stretching from Paris in 1919 to Locarno in 1925 Britain attempted to address the problem of the post-war balance of power, in which the Mediterranean – and more specifically Italy – had an important part.¹¹⁵³

Sir William Tyrrell, assistant under-secretary at the Foreign Office between 1925 and 1928, saw the lack of a reliable post-war balance of power as an issue that had remained unresolved since the end of the war.¹¹⁵⁴ James Headlam-Morley, a British government advisor at the time of the peace settlement, observed that, “it is to be regretted that public opinion appears to countenance the view that the doctrine of the Balance of Power can be neglected. It is, and will remain, a fundamental point just

¹¹⁵¹ Galassi, Harrison, “Italy at War...,” 22.

¹¹⁵² I. Montanelli: *L’Italia di Giolitti 1900-1920* (Milan: Bur Rissoli, 2011), 327.

¹¹⁵³ M. Dockrill, B. McKercher (eds.), *Diplomacy and World Power. Studies in British Foreign Policy, 1890-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 135.

¹¹⁵⁴ FO 371/11066/W6497/9/98, Minute by Tyrrell, 18 March 1925.

as much after the establishment of a League of Nations as it has been before.”¹¹⁵⁵ Austen Chamberlain, secretary of state for foreign affairs between 1924 and 1929, was also much concerned with the issue of Mediterranean balance of power. He warned the Committee of Imperial Defence (CID) in December 1924 that the dominant sentiment in Europe was that another war was inevitable unless Britain could give Europe a sense of security.¹¹⁵⁶

Britain’s policy towards Italy was therefore guided by basic security precautions. If North Africa and the Middle East were properly in equilibrium any threat to Britain would be much reduced.¹¹⁵⁷ The result was a long and difficult negotiation with Italy over the fate of the Dodecanese islands and the Libyan-Egyptian border. Italy managed to be granted the possession of the islands in 1923, and was given the oasis of Jarabub in 1925. But London was adamant in denying Rome Sollum and any territory belonging to the British Somaliland. It also refused to make concessions over Abyssinia, the most ambitious objective of Italian colonialists.

The paucity of Italian gains caused long-lasting resentment towards Britain.¹¹⁵⁸ Mussolini’s unilateral invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 virtually marked the end of the Anglo-Italian friendship: the apparently unshakable pillar of Italian foreign policy – that of not going to war with Britain on any account – was close to collapse.

¹¹⁵⁵ FO 371/4353/f23/PC55, minute by Headlam Morley, date unspecified, quoted by H. Nicolson, *Peacemaking* (London: Constable, 1933), 210.

¹¹⁵⁶ CAB 2/4/CID 192, meeting of 16 December 1924.

¹¹⁵⁷ Dockrill, McKercher, *Diplomacy...*, 124.

¹¹⁵⁸ See: A. Giannini, *L’ultima fase della questione orientale* (Roma: Istituto per l’Oriente, 1933), 334-359; C. Rossetti, “Come l’Inghilterra ci portò via Sollum,” *Nuova Antologia*, October 1940, 238-246.

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