

Misfortunes of the Moment: Italy and the Supreme War Council in World War I

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## **Abstract**

The history of Italy during World War I has often been characterized by the eleven bloody and inconsequential battles on the Isonzo River from 1915 to 1917. The twelfth battle, Caporetto, was one of the most lopsided defeats of the war. The subsequent development of an inter-Allied Supreme War Council has often been portrayed as a British and French creation with little Italian input. However, the defeat at Caporetto actually signified the rapid escalation of Italy's influence among her Allies. Combined with American tentativeness and Russian collapse, the winter of 1917-1918 offered key Italian leaders the opportunity to manipulate debates on Allied strategy. Ultimately, the Italians could not keep true to the promises they made during a succession of inter-Allied conferences. This failure led to indecision by Italian leaders during the critical campaigns of 1918 and disillusionment in Italy itself during the post-war era.

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I firmly believe that all soldiers should endeavor to be scholars in the field of military history. No other subject and profession are so closely intertwined. To that end, I want to sincerely thank the entire History Department at KSU for enabling soldiers and civilians to work so closely together in a rigorous academic environment.

## **Dedication**

For Kitty and Luca.

## Chapter 1 – Introduction

Over one hundred years ago, on the morning of 24 October 1917, a German-Austro-Hungarian army struck at Italian positions across the Isonzo River. The resulting defeat near the village of Caporetto marked one of the most lopsided engagements of World War I, a conflict noteworthy for its indecisive battles of attrition. The Italians lost over 600,000 men and withdrew nearly sixty miles to the southwest.<sup>1</sup> The Italian retreat to the Piave River provided plenty of fodder for western historians eager to uphold the myth of Italian military incompetence: the commander who ignominiously fled from his headquarters before being overrun by the Germans,<sup>2</sup> the wholesale surrender of entire divisions which refused to fight, and the arrival of Anglo-French troops in the nick of time to help their weakened ally. The defeat marked the *twelfth* consecutive engagement along the Isonzo River line in only two and a half years since Italy's delayed entry into the war. The rapid success of the Central Powers' offensive, and Erwin Rommel's own marginal role in the battle, helped contribute to the post-war perception that the Germans had unlocked the key to restoring a war of maneuver in western Europe. But Caporetto's most important legacy did not lie in the near-defeat of Italy nor in the supremacy of new German tactics; rather, the battle forced a reappraisal of Allied<sup>3</sup> coalition-making that placed Italy, often regarded

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<sup>1</sup> Luigi Cadorna, *La Guerra alla Fronte Italiana*, vol. 2 (Milan, Italy: Fratelli Treves, Editori, 1921), 200, World Cat. Manfred Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Hapsburg Monarchy*, trans. Alex J. Kay and Anna Guttel-Bellert (Vienna, Austria: Bohlau Verlag, 2014), 790.

<sup>2</sup> The Germans organized the offensive at Caporetto and a German commander led the main thrust which included a mix of German and Austro-Hungarian units. I will sometimes use the word "German," instead of "Central Powers" or "German-Austro-Hungarian" to avoid prolonging my sentences.

<sup>3</sup> The coalition of Britain, France, Russia, the United States, Italy – and a host of minor powers like Belgium and Serbia – has often been described with several different names, but most commonly it is known as either the "Entente" or the "Allies." Adding to this confusion is the fact that sometimes the coalition's correspondence referred to Germany and Austria-Hungary as the "Allies." For this thesis, I prefer to keep symmetry with World War II and refer to the British and French side as the Allies.

as one of the weakest great powers, squarely at the center of military strategy.<sup>4</sup> The defeat signaled the culmination of two years of steadily-increasing Italian involvement in coalition warfare, and solidified Italy's importance to her Allies. Italy thus played a central role in the creation of the new Supreme War Council that coordinated Allied strategy until the end of the war.

A combination of British, French, and American soldiers won World War I in 1918 by defeating the German army in France. Although Italy was on the winning side by the end of the conflict, her military value to her partners has often been deemed as less significant to the ultimate outcome. However, much of the history of the subsequent Allied conferences after Caporetto has placed too much importance on the decisions of British and French actors. As a result, far too little credit has been given to Italian statesmen and generals in determining the outlook of these meetings. Because the British and French dominated the alliance and the post-war settlement at Versailles with superior resources and influence, they also controlled much of the narrative about the utility of Italian involvement. But the Italians, who were readily dismissed in their calls for military assistance before October 1917, could not be so easily cast off when Caporetto threatened their exit from the war. The Allied attempts at joint military action earlier in the war had all failed spectacularly, but Caporetto provided a new incentive for cooperation. Italy's role in this evolution of coalition doctrine demonstrates how a weaker partner influences its stronger associates during a war.

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<sup>4</sup> Perhaps Richard Bosworth best labelled Italy's strategic outlook in the title of his book, *Italy, the Least of the Great Powers: Italian Foreign Policy before the First World War* (London, England: Cambridge University Press, 1979). Whether Italy was less of a Great Power than Austria-Hungary or the Ottoman Empire is certainly debatable, but what is not arguable is that Italy was, from the perspective of military strength, certainly weaker than France, Britain, Russia, and Germany.



## Historiography

The Allied conferences after Caporetto are often portrayed as the triumph of David Lloyd George. The fiery Welshman had come to power as Britain's Prime Minister in the bitter waning days of 1916 as the nation reeled from both the bloody disaster on the Somme and the surety that the "War to End All Wars" would not end anytime soon.<sup>5</sup> Lloyd George came into immediate conflict with the so-called "westerners," or the men who believed the war had to be fought and won against the main German field armies in Belgium and France. Lloyd George could not directly contravene these men because they included the Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS), General Sir William Robertson, and the Commander of the British Expeditionary Force in Europe, General Sir Douglas Haig. These conservative stalwarts enjoyed popular support both in the press and from King George V. The "easterners," or advocates for campaigns in secondary theaters against Germany's weaker allies, had been much discredited by the disastrous expedition to Gallipoli in 1915 and the surrender of a British force at Kut el Amara, Mesopotamia, in 1916. Although Lloyd George encouraged campaigns in early 1917 in secondary theaters like Italy, Romania, and the Middle East, he lacked the military experience and political clout early in his term to publicly contravene Robertson and Haig.<sup>6</sup> By imposing his strategy on the military he could return proper direction of the war effort to the civilian government, but his attempts to do this failed. The result? A botched joint Allied effort in the Nivelle Offensive (April 1917) and a failed attack at Passchendaele (July-November 1917) that remained mired in the Flemish mud for

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<sup>5</sup> David French, *The Strategy of the Lloyd George Coalition: 1916-1918* (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1995), 6.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 122-123.

half the year.<sup>7</sup> Under these circumstances, Lloyd George had lost confidence in the ability of his most experienced commanders to bring the war to a successful conclusion. The rift between military and civilian leadership in Britain, which took place amidst the better-known battles of the Western Front, has influenced much of the literature on Allied coalition warfare during World War I.

Lloyd George used the defeat at Caporetto to blame CIGS for failing to adequately reinforce the Italian Front and identify the threat of a fall offensive there. American historian David R. Woodward shows that this civil-military split lasted well into the post-war era in *Lloyd George and the Generals* (1983). Long after the war had ended, Robertson and Haig, along with their supporters, quarreled with Lloyd George over who had truly led the Allies to victory. Woodward argues that Lloyd George was strongly influenced by the overbearing role that Field Marshal Herbert Kitchener then played in strategy, and by the massive casualties suffered by Kitchener's New Armies after 1914.<sup>8</sup> Although not discounting Lloyd George's political acumen, Woodward portrays him as a gifted military strategist who appreciated both the threat of Germany and the inability of Britain to win a war on its own. Fearing another futile offensive in 1918 if he could not gain greater control of the war effort, Lloyd George travelled to Rapallo, Italy upon hearing of the news of Caporetto. Together with his advisors, the Prime Minister planned to use the conference to undermine the authority of CIGS in favor of his own plan for an Allied war council.<sup>9</sup> Ideally, the council's military advisors would be completely separated from each nation's chain of command, thereby providing politicians the expertise and leeway to implement their own strategy.

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<sup>7</sup> David Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, vol. 4 (London, England: Ivor Nicholson and Watson, 1934), 2238-2239. Lloyd George somewhat derisively labeled the Passchendaele chapters with the sub-heading: "The Campaign of the Mud."

<sup>8</sup> David R. Woodward, *Lloyd George and the Generals* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 1983), 24.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

Thus, Lloyd George could order Robertson to send additional British divisions to assist the “shell-shocked Italians,” implying that the British helped stabilize the front by the Piave River.<sup>10</sup> Woodward sympathizes with Lloyd George’s irritation over the fact that the Germans conquered so much territory in a few weeks while his own generals spent months – and thousands of casualties – capturing only a few hundred meters of trenches. The creation of the Supreme War Council is thus shown as a British invention because the Italians were supposedly too busy rebuilding their shattered armies.

From this background, Caporetto came like a godsend to revive Lloyd George’s aspirations for greater civilian control of military strategy. In *The Strategy of the Lloyd George Coalition: 1916-1918* (1995), British historian David French argues that the Italian defeat gave Lloyd George’s schemes “unstoppable momentum” in slowly replacing the influence of the “westerners” with the weight of his own men in the War Cabinet.<sup>11</sup> Lloyd George remained more interested in dominating the post-war world than in exhausting the British Army through any special efforts to win the war single-handedly. Unlike France and Italy, Britain had no need to recover lost national territory, did not fear an invasion of the home islands, and could afford to play the role of coalition leader while her Allies did the heavy lifting. Lloyd George insisted that British troops be sent to Italy’s aid and argued for the creation of a united Allied council led by civilian ministers. By these measures, he wanted to publicly salvage the Italian situation to showcase Britain’s primacy in dictating policy for the rest of the war – and, by extension, in the post-war world. David French also shows that though they welcomed American involvement in the war, the Allies all feared the loss of independence in any unified military arrangement. The entry of the United States did not immediately displace Italy’s role in the coalition. David French at least acknowledges that the

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>11</sup> French, *Strategy of the Lloyd George Coalition*, 160.

Italians had reformed their own lines along the Piave River long before any British or French reinforcements had arrived by late November 1917.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, the decision to send support and to relieve the Italian commander, General Luigi Cadorna, is portrayed as a distinctly British decision made by Lloyd George over not only the heads of his Allies but even over those of his own generals. The Italians steadied their own defenses, remained committed to the war effort, and transferred Cadorna to the new Supreme War Council. But their role in creating and shaping the direction of the SWC is not mentioned by either Woodward or David French. This omission makes sense for these authors because they place British actors as the central figures in the pivotal days after Caporetto.

American historian Robert Doughty has argued the French viewed the war as a multi-front effort from the beginning, relying on a strong coalition with joint planning efforts, learning through trial and error, and persisting in fighting despite increasing manpower deficiencies. In *Pyrrhic Victory* (2005), rather than seeing French generals as slavishly devoted to the offensive, Doughty shows them as having a more nuanced appreciation for the importance of working with their coalition partners. According to Doughty, the French played the critical role in keeping the Allies together near the end of 1917. As the Italians retreated from Caporetto, General Ferdinand Foch, Chief of the French General Staff, went with Robertson, his British counterpart, to visit Cadorna and to coordinate the movement of Allied reinforcements to support the new Piave River line.<sup>13</sup> In these conversations, Foch and Robertson browbeat a despondent Cadorna into not relying too much on Allied support and into concentrating instead on fighting his own campaign with the forces at hand. Thus, Doughty believes not only that Allied troops were critical in saving the Italian

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>13</sup> Robert A. Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory: French Strategy and Operations in the Great War* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 397.

position, but that Allied generals inspired their Italian counterparts to respond more directly to the German attack – as if for the past week Cadorna had not been supervising the withdrawal of nearly one million combatants and stragglers in the wake of the surprise offensive.<sup>14</sup> Doughty also makes clear the importance of chains of command for British and French troops operating in Italy. These soldiers would not operate under the Italian *Comando Supremo* (Supreme Command, the Italian Army headquarters) but rather through their respective war departments.<sup>15</sup> Anglo-French fears of how their soldiers were treated if directly under Italian control bore remarkable similarities to later American concerns over placing units directly under Anglo-French command. This nuance – that the Italians could demand to control Allied units on their own front – is lost in Doughty’s work. The British and French had arrived to rescue the Italian campaign, and so they should dictate where their own reinforcements went. Though the British and French did not trust the Italians to adequately supply and competently command their detachments, neither Robertson nor Foch had any qualms over their own abilities to integrate American units on the Western Front in 1918. The British and French can hardly be blamed for wanting to control their own forces in Italy and seeking American reinforcements of their own depleted units. However, prejudices about the Italian recovery after Caporetto, evident in most of the historiography of World War I, suggests that they were not capable of integrating or leading Allied troops. Doughty also explains that the French agreed to support Lloyd George’s plan for an inter-Allied council in exchange for several conditions. French Premier Paul Painlevé wanted a generalissimo – a French one, since that was the primary theater of operations – and a general staff to coordinate military operations.<sup>16</sup> However, it took another military crisis during the Spring Offensive in 1918 for the Allies to agree to these

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 397.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 398.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 399.

supposedly extreme measures. Doughty thus paints a picture where the French, as one of the two strongest Allies, did not blindly follow along with Lloyd George's proposal, whereas the Italians had no choice in the matter.

Elizabeth Greenhalgh, a British historian specializing in the French Army during World War I, has tried to rebalance the idea of the Allied coalition as being dominated by the British. In *Victory Through Coalition* (2005), she looks specifically at how perennial enemies Britain and France ironed out an effective partnership in the war. Greenhalgh agrees that the defeat at Caporetto "gave Lloyd George ammunition." But from the perspective of joint operations, if the Germans and Austro-Hungarians could plan an effective campaign together, why not the two strongest Allied powers?<sup>17</sup> Greenhalgh disapproves of David Woodward's contention that the French meekly followed along with Lloyd George's suggestions for the new council.<sup>18</sup> Instead, she claims, much as Doughty does, that the French had always wanted better coordination for joint campaigns and so the Rapallo agreement was one entered into by two equal powers. Lloyd George and Painlevé had generally agreed on the concept for an Allied council before coming to Rapallo. While the French play a more equal role in this narrative, Greenhalgh still depicts the Italians as being "in shock after Caporetto" and therefore as having "no suggestions" for the conference.<sup>19</sup> However, by 5 November 1917, the Italians had come to terms with the scope of their initial defeat because they had made efforts to stem the tide of the German offensive. They actually offered plenty of suggestions at Rapallo that shaped the direction of both the Supreme War Council and Allied strategy.

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<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth Greenhalgh, *Victory through Coalition: Britain and France during the First World War* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 169.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

Pulitzer Prize-winning historian David Trask published *The United States in the Supreme War Council* in 1961 and *The AEF and Coalition Warmaking* in 1993. Trask embodies the generally-held American view that the Allies had blundered through the war until the end of 1917 without a unified command structure. Generally, historical studies of American involvement before the major campaigns of 1918 had focused on General John Pershing's repeated attempts to keep the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) an independent army instead of allowing it to be divided among the more experienced Allies.<sup>20</sup> However, in his works, Trask warns that the decision to send American soldiers to France was not as simple as it seemed after the war was won. For example, major setbacks in Romania, Russia, and now Italy offered different theaters into which forces might be sent. When the War College submitted its final recommendations to send the AEF to France, Pershing understood he had to fight the Germans and to preserve his army to ensure that American power influenced any post-war negotiations on how peacekeeping would be conducted.<sup>21</sup> Trask's analysis of President Woodrow Wilson resembles David French's perspective on David Lloyd George: leaders of isolated nations could afford to take a more patient approach to winning the war because, unlike France and Italy, they did not have to immediately recover lost territory. Trask admits that Caporetto provided the "final blow" in the creation of a new Allied council to manage the war.<sup>22</sup> Trask also claims that the Italians went along with British and French demands at the Rapallo Conference because the council's first priority was to organize defenses along the Piave River.<sup>23</sup> The Italians, again in a notably weaker position, passively accepted help to get much needed reinforcements. Because the Supreme War Council included the

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<sup>20</sup> David F. Trask, *The United States in the Supreme War Council: American War Aims and Inter-Allied Strategy* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 9-11. David F. Trask, *The AEF and Coalition Warmaking, 1917-1918* (Lawrence, Kansas: The University Press of Kansas, 1993), 32-33.

<sup>21</sup> Trask, *The United States in the Supreme War Council*, 14, 18-19.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

prime ministers of the major European powers, Trask praises the Americans for refusing to appoint a political representative to the SWC in order to keep the focus on purely military matters. However, he does not admit that this exclusion ceded some of America's decision-making ability to Britain, France, and Italy, all of whose heads of government were present. American reinforcements did provide a valuable bargaining chip. Nevertheless, American high-handedness and designs for the post-war era prevented them from influencing the new SWC as much as the Italians initially could.

In *The White War: Life and Death on the Italian Front* (2008), Mark Thompson compares the harsh conditions of the Italian Front and the better-known war of attrition in France and Belgium. Thompson believes that the war helped finish the Italian *Risorgimento* (reunification) begun in the mid-19th century, but that the incompetence of the Italian government in prosecuting the war fatally undermined the post-war state. Like so much of the history of Italy in World War I, all roads must ultimately lead to Benito Mussolini and fascism. Thompson scathingly criticizes Cadorna's mishandling of both the battle of Caporetto and the subsequent retreat.<sup>24</sup> He repeats many of the themes of the Rapallo Conference, namely that the Allies only offered military support in exchange for Cadorna's immediate removal. Thompson hints that this decision gave "cover to [Italian Prime Minister Vittorio] Orlando's government" which wanted to remove Cadorna but did not have sufficient clout yet.<sup>25</sup> Though he writes that the arrival of Allied division near the Piave River proved absolutely critical in defeating the subsequent German attacks, Thompson also admits that the Italians played some role in removing Cadorna and in incorporating Allied reinforcements.

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<sup>24</sup> Mark Thompson, *The White War: Life and Death on the Italian Front 1915-1919* (London, England: Faber and Faber Limited, 2008), 319-320.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 321.



The decision to remove an unpopular commander after a major defeat is certainly a logical choice. However, histories of the war have too often melded singular events (Cadorna's removal) with Italian incompetence (defeat at Caporetto) to build a narrative of Italy's irrelevance in the strategic decisions of the Supreme War Council. In this context, who made the decision to remove Cadorna matters just as much as the Italian government's approval of the council's creation. Neither of these decisions was made lightly nor simply upon the urging of British and French leaders at Rapallo; indeed, some of these leaders were firmly opposed to any unity of effort. The recently-published series *Armies of the Great War*, written during the centennial anniversary of the war, provides prominent historians a chance to reanalyze the role of individual armies and societies during World War I. In *The Italian Army and the First World War* (2014), John Gooch, a British historian with expertise in Italian military history, shows how Cadorna brought the Italian army to the edge of collapse at Caporetto. However, Gooch also demonstrates the ways in which a stunning Italian revival, aided partially by the Allies, staved off ultimate disaster. Gooch points out that Cadorna had little chance of remaining in his position after suffering such a defeat but that Orlando may have "wanted to exonerate him."<sup>26</sup> The author also admits that Orlando, the new Minister of War, and the King of Italy had all agreed to Cadorna's replacement by 4 November before the Rapallo Conference even began.<sup>27</sup> Although he uses the common narrative that the Allied commanders bullied the Italians into maintaining their defensive line on the Piave, Gooch also acknowledges the Italians as decision makers in their own right.

The different histories of individual nations and of coalition warfare during this period largely ignore the Italian role in the Supreme War Council. But weak powers nevertheless play an

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<sup>26</sup> John Gooch, *The Italian Army and the First World War* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 248.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 248.

important part in shaping war-time alliances. There are many different ways to measure the effectiveness of their contributions. Geography often determines how weak powers affect events. For example, the Italian peninsula's lengthy coastline has often been described as a topographical feature that made her ports vulnerable to stronger navies. Yet, Italy's ability to project power into the central and eastern Mediterranean also made her supremely valuable, especially as the war expanded to the Balkans and the Middle East. In addition, a shared border with France and Austria-Hungary threatened to add another land front to either the Allies or the Central Powers. Of course, a nation's real power must be strong enough to take advantage of these geographical features, especially because military realities shape decision-making. Still, even a weak power can manipulate coalition policy. By determining what strategies its allies debate and implement, such a state can wield influence far outpacing its military capacity. Thus, even though Italy suffered a significant defeat in late 1917, her geography, military power, and ability to affect coalition policy all give her significant clout in political debates.

This thesis examines the context of Italy's function as an ally before, during, and after the Battle of Caporetto. Chapter 2 explains the progress of Italy's part in World War I from 1915 to just before the battle of Caporetto in October 1917. This timeline includes the first eleven of the Isonzo battles, but also covers how Italian influence among the Allies enlarged as member nations fell out of the coalition. Wartime conferences at Chantilly, Paris, London, and Rome marked an increase in responsibility assigned to the Italian Army and government. The Rome Conference in 1917 has often been portrayed as Lloyd George's first attempt to rein in military control of the war effort. However, just by its location and timing, the conference gave the Italians much greater legitimacy at a time when their role in the alliance was becoming increasingly important. Chapter 3 covers the major events of the Battle of Caporetto and the subsequent Rapallo Conference.

Memoirs and the notes of various government officials from the meeting, especially when analyzed from an Italian perspective, shows how the Italians played a much larger role in firing Cadorna and determining the outlook of the new council. Chapter 4 discusses how Italian representatives on the council influenced the critical winter meetings of 1917-1918. By that time, some generals feared that the pending German offensive might actually strike Italy again rather than the Western Front. Finally, Chapter 5 looks at the immediate reaction by the SWC to the Spring Offensive and the role the Italians played in the appointment of Foch as the supreme commander. The decision by the Italians to remain on the defensive for most of 1918 must be understood not just in light of Italian military weaknesses after Caporetto. Instead, fears of Allied encroachment on the independence of the Italian Front encouraged Italian leaders to reject many of the promises they had made in earlier meetings. The failure of Italy to live up to these assurances hurt its post-war standing among the Allies and its ability to demand territory at the Versailles Conference.

## Chapter 2 – The War Before Caporetto

Italy's entry into the war did not come until 22 May 1915. Unlike British and French forces fighting together in France or campaigning to open the Dardanelles for Russia, Allied involvement in Italian operations did not begin in earnest until 1917. The British and French had agreed to support Italian demands as laid out in the Treaty of London, but this deal did not translate immediately into military support. This initial seclusion from joint strategic planning occurred because of Italy's lengthy membership in the Triple Alliance with Germany and Austria-Hungary.<sup>28</sup> Italy did not have a history of military cooperation with her new-found partners, whereas Britain, France, and Russia had experience with each other in grand strategy thanks to their various agreements: the alliance between Russia and France (1891) designed to limit the power of the German Empire, the Entente Cordiale between Britain and France (1904) created to prevent all-out war over minor colonial disputes, and the Anglo-Russian Convention (1907) to calm similar colonial tensions in Central Asia.<sup>29</sup> These treaties at least afforded some familiarity among the future Allies that the Italians could not easily duplicate at the onset of the war. Therefore, the initial Italian assaults on the Isonzo River line in 1915 and 1916 occurred without much regard for, or input from, her newfound partners.

Nevertheless, despite these initial difficulties, Italy's strategic importance to the Allies increased as her steadily-larger armies – combined with Allied defeats – gave her an increased role in the decision-making processes of the coalition. This chapter will briefly summarize Italy's difficult involvement in joint warfare during her first two years in the conflict. Eleven consecutive

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<sup>28</sup> Antonio Salandra, *Italy and the Great War: From Neutrality to Intervention*, trans. Zoe Kendrick Pyne (London, England: Edward Arnold & Co., 1932), 23-24. Margaret Macmillan, *The Road to 1914: The War that Ended Peace* (New York, NY: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2013) 81-82.

<sup>29</sup> Macmillan, *The Road to 1914*, 158-159, 169, 210.

battles along the Isonzo River demonstrated a battle of attrition comparable to the trench-warfare of the Western Front. This immobility stood in stark contrast to the initial war of movement in Belgium and France in 1914 and the continuing war of movement on the Eastern Front throughout the war. Although Italy's initial commitment concentrated on one limited theater of operations, it nevertheless came at a desperate time for the Allies, who by May 1915 had suffered significant setbacks in Poland and Turkey. Prime Minister Salandra himself noted that Italy "had joined the Entente at a time when the fortunes of war were going against it."<sup>30</sup> Austria-Hungary had to divert more of her limited resources to defend her southwestern border in response to Italy's entry into the war. Italy's ability to project power across the Adriatic Sea and into the Balkans provided a series of opportunities for better inter-Allied coordination on a secondary front.

That coordination proved necessary became apparent as the political situation of the Allies worsened by the end of 1916. The governments of Britain, France, and Italy all were replaced that year under the strain of inconclusive battles on the Somme River, at Verdun, and on the Isonzo River. The new Allied regimes redoubled their war efforts and resolved to work together more closely. The resulting conference in Rome in January 1917 marked a turning point in Italy's role as an ally. The newly-elected British Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, sought to make the Italian Front the main theater of operations for that year through a combined Allied effort. General Luigi Cadorna, although grateful for the vote of confidence, resisted any reciprocal deals with the Allies that forced him to accelerate his own plans. British and French attempts to dictate military policy often met with resistance from Italian leaders loath to appear too reliant on their partners. As the government in Rome saw it, the war had to be seen as an *Italian* victory over Austria-Hungary in order to justify Italy's irredentist claims in any post-war peace treaty. Thus, the Allies

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<sup>30</sup> Salandra, *Italy and the Great War*, 366.

continued to bicker over the method of conducting combined operations in the Balkans and now in Italy as well.

Even with the Rome Conference and the improved synchronization of strategy, the Allies failed to contain Germany in 1917. Mutinies in France and defeats in Serbia, Romania, and Russia made Italy progressively more essential as a partner. As a result, by September 1917 only the British and the Italians still had large-scale offensive operations underway. Although his repeated attacks along the Isonzo River lacked creativity, Cadorna finally seized significant bridgeheads that allowed him to threaten the critical port of Trieste. This faithfulness to Allied grand strategy left the Italians in a dangerous position because, while they gained a more prominent role in the coalition, they threatened the ability of Austria-Hungary to remain in the war. The Germans, fresh from their victories in the east, could not afford the surrender of the Hapsburgs. The two empires planned for an offensive in October 1917 to surround and destroy Italy's forward-most armies on the Isonzo. The resulting Battle of Caporetto proved to be one of the most lopsided defeats of the war, as well as the most critical event in solidifying Italy's status as a full and equal partner in the Allies.

### **The Early War: 1915-1916**

The first Italian offensive (23 June-7 July 1915) on the Isonzo River proved to be a harbinger of the war to come. Poorly coordinated and poorly supported attacks failed to achieve any significant territorial gains in an area dominated by difficult terrain.<sup>31</sup> Fighting from strong defensive positions, the Austro-Hungarian Fifth Army spent most of the year – indeed, most of the

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<sup>31</sup> Luigi Cadorna, *La Guerra alla Fronte Italiana*, vol. 1 (Milan, Italy: Fratelli Treves, Editori, 1921) 136-138, Hathi Trust. James E. Edmonds, *Military Operations Italy 1915-1919*, British Official History of the Great War (London, England: The Imperial War Museum, 1949), 13. Gooch, *The Italian Army*, 109.

war – holding numerically superior attacks at bay. Nevertheless, the determined entry of a major European power, no matter how weak, on the Allied side forced a strategic reappraisal among both coalitions. For their part, the Central Powers could not easily sustain simultaneous operations in Poland, Hungary, Belgium, France, Serbia, and now Italy as well. Therefore, the Austro-Hungarians had to remain on the defensive on a very narrow front.

The Allies, having to integrate nearly 875,000 men from the Italian Army into their plans, arranged a conference at French Army headquarters at Chantilly on 7 July 1915.<sup>32</sup> Although the representatives agreed to organize “combined offensive operations as soon as possible,” a shortage of ammunition and the British Shell Crisis delayed the Artois and Loos offensives on the Western Front until late September.<sup>33</sup> The Italian Second and Third Armies dutifully launched a second attack on the Isonzo one week later (18 July-3 August 1915) and gained nothing but a larger number of casualties than in their previous offensive. But these repeated attacks at least showcased one of the key roles a weaker power can play in any coalition. A weaker ally could tie down enemy forces in the lull between major offensive operations of the stronger allies. As the British, French, and Russians recovered from organizational crises and defeats in Poland, respectively, the Italians could harass one weak link in the great middle position of the Central Powers.<sup>34</sup> This aggravation of the Austro-Hungarian western flank might also keep the Central Powers from detaching enough troops to conquer Serbia.

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<sup>32</sup> Luigi Cadorna, *La Guerra alla Fronte Italiana*, vol. 1, 13-14. Edmonds, *Military Operations Italy*, 9.

<sup>33</sup> CAB 28/1, IC 5(a), “Allied Military Conference at French Headquarters, 6 - 8 December 1915,” 2, The British National Archives. The British Shell Crisis in May 1915 led to Lloyd George’s ascension to the head of the Ministry of Munitions and increased government oversight of war production. It is one of the most significant events in transforming World War I into a more mechanized and total conflict. See also the article that helped start the crisis: “Need for Shells,” *The Times*, 14 May 1915, 8, The Times Digital Archive. All references to *The Times* in this work refer to the London newspaper. See also David Lloyd George, *War Memoirs of David Lloyd George*, vol. 1 (London, England: Ivor Nicholson & Watson, 1933), 162-166.

<sup>34</sup> Cadorna, *La Guerra*, vol. 1, 121.

Italy's entry into the war also had major repercussions for the Balkan theater of operations. Historians have given great prominence to the Balkans as the "powder keg of Europe" during the summer of 1914 and the onset of World War I. Yet, they have also consistently downplayed the importance of the Balkans as a secondary theater of operations. But at the time, southeastern Europe loomed large in the calculations of both sides out of all proportion to its actual military potential. Austria-Hungary remained particularly desperate to humiliate tiny Serbia despite the much more critical task of containing the Russians. What use would victory in the east be if the Serbians continued to undermine Vienna's authority over its polyglot kingdom?<sup>35</sup> Not only had the Serbs played a controversial role in the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, but they had also repulsed the first Austro-Hungarian invasion of their country in the autumn of 1914. The neutrality of Serbia's neighbors also played an important role in the political machinations of the competing European alliances. Bulgaria, Greece, and Romania all had ample military forces, and even smaller nations like Albania and Montenegro could help link or sever lines of communications for either side. Therefore, the Italian declaration of war threatened to bring another major power into an already unstable and divided region of questionable loyalties.

It was not to be. The attempts to organize a series of Allied offensives at the Chantilly Conference in July could not hold back the momentum of the Central Powers. By the end of 1915, Bulgaria had joined Germany's side, which not only allowed for the almost complete subjugation of Serbia but also created a direct supply route to the Ottoman Empire. Even the establishment of a French and British "Army of the Orient" at Salonika (in Macedonia) could not forestall the loss of Serbia. Finally, the end of the Gallipoli expedition in December also ensured that Allied supplies

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<sup>35</sup> For a further discussion of how Serbia, along with the already annexed territories of Bosnia and Herzegovina, would be incorporated into a "third kingdom" of Austria-Hungary (also known as trialism), see Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 2012), 82-85.



to Russia had to move through the Barents Sea, a difficult enough task made even more onerous by the onset of the 1915-1916 winter.<sup>36</sup> The loss of Poland during the Great Retreat of 1915 and the increasing difficulty of keeping Russia armed and fed meant that, despite her vast manpower reserves, she could play only a limited part in the upcoming inter-Allied conferences. Indeed, Lieutenant General William Robertson, chief of staff of the British Expeditionary Force (who by the end of December 1915 was slated to become the new CIGS), lamented that any multi-national meeting was “handicapped by the absence of a suitable representative from Russia,” since her liaisons in the west could do little more than relay Allied requests back to St. Petersburg.<sup>37</sup> These events signified that Italy could perhaps play a larger role in the coalition to counter the setbacks in the Balkans and to fill part of the gap left by an increasingly distant Russian ally.

The Chantilly Conference from 6 to 8 December 1915 provided the Italians with just such a chance. The British and French were already at loggerheads about their respective commitments to the Salonika operation. Britain’s Secretary of State for War, Field Marshal Herbert Kitchener, summarized his country’s view when he argued that the defeat of Serbia made the Allied presence in Macedonia “neither practical nor advantageous to the war” and risked “the whole [Allied] position in the East” by wasting resources.<sup>38</sup> French foreign minister Aristide Briand countered that the moral implications of a complete Allied withdrawal might allow the remaining Balkan neutrals, Romania and Greece, to fall under German influence.<sup>39</sup> Then Briand played his trump card: Russian and Italian reinforcements could stonewall any further advances by the Central Powers in that region. According to their official summary of the December 1916 conferences, the

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<sup>36</sup> Edmonds, *Military Operations Italy*, 14.

<sup>37</sup> William B. Robertson, *From Private to Field Marshal* (London, England: Constable and Company, Ltd., 1921), 234.

<sup>38</sup> Herbert Kitchener, CAB 28/1. IC 4(a), “Summary of the Conference Held at Calais on December 5, 1915 between British and French governments,” 1. Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, vol. 1, 393-395.

<sup>39</sup> Aristide Briand, CAB 28/1, IC 4(a), 1. Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, vol. 1, 408-409.

British ultimately agreed with Briand's request that Italy could, and should, take on more responsibility in the war. Robertson acknowledged that both the British and French armies needed the coming winter to rest and reorganize, but he also noted that the Italians remained relatively fresh by comparison. He criticized the Italians for their attacks being "methodically carried out" but praised them for their "more active phase" in the middle of October 1915 in conjunction with Allied attacks in France.<sup>40</sup> Robertson asked for Italian representatives to study "the conditions under which Italy is prepared to act in the Balkans."<sup>41</sup> While the "westerners" such as Robertson and Kitchener might have despised wasting men in Salonika, they clearly had no hesitation in spending Italian lives for the exact same effort. Italy's expanded role thus initially came at the behest of her more powerful coalition partners.

Italy's delayed entry into the war and her abandonment of the Triple Alliance have often been criticized as openly selfish moves made solely in the hopes of territorial enlargement. While this accusation is true, it would be naïve to consider that the other great powers entered the war without hopes of territorial aggrandizement or other material advantage. From this vantage point, the Treaty of London (signed 26 April 1915) can be seen as one of the most honest documents of the entire war, especially considering how much difficulty the other powers had in determining their own war aims. In the treaty, Guglielmo Imperiali, Italy's ambassador to England, demanded Italian acquisition of the Trentino, Tyrol, Trieste, Dalmatia, and Valona.<sup>42</sup> Consequently, the Italian campaign in Albania must be seen as not only supporting Allied efforts in the Balkans but as part of a desire to grab as much land as possible ahead of any post-war settlement. This dual

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<sup>40</sup> William Robertson, CAB 28/1, IC 5(a), "Committee of Imperial Defense: Memorandum for the Meeting of Representatives of the Allied Armies," 3.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-7.

<sup>42</sup> Salandra, *Italy and the Great War*, 263, 269-270. Vittorio Emanuele Orlando, *Memorie: 1915-1919*, ed. Rodolfo Mosca (Milan, Italy: Rizzoli, 1960), 340, 343-344.

role as both faithful ally and self-interested expansionist, common in most war-time alliances, nevertheless frustrated efforts to incorporate Italy into Allied planning. Continuing to chart an independent course, Foreign Minister Sidney Sonnino wanted to seize the port city of Valona, Albania, and establish a permanent naval base to protect Italian maritime interests in the Adriatic in any post-war settlement.<sup>43</sup> The Italians, while still a neutral power in December 1914, had seized the island of Salona and then Valona itself to ward off any potential Austro-Hungarian move into the southern Balkans.<sup>44</sup> However, by 1915, the Italian position had become much more dangerous, especially with the entry of Bulgaria among the Central Powers and their renewed offensive into Serbia. Sonnino and Minister of War General Vittoria Zupelli both believed that any expeditionary corps should move north into Albania to expand the Italian presence in the country.<sup>45</sup> Cadorna, in his own memoirs on the Balkan theater, claimed to have been opposed to any such maneuver and instead “remained favorable to an expedition towards Salonika” to link up with the Anglo-French Army of the Orient. While Cadorna might have been portraying himself as more inclined to work with the Allies than he had been at the time, he surely realized that a stronger Central Powers’ presence in Albania could only hurt Italy’s strategy across the Adriatic. These comments and the eventual establishment of an inter-allied base at Monastir (between Salonika and Valona) provided two important examples for later in the war. First, the Allies could coordinate more than one national force under one commander, although this tended to happen in the wake of a military crisis like the imminent loss of Serbia. Secondly, the Italians demonstrated a strong understanding of the possibilities offered by operations in secondary theaters. Although Cadorna and Sonnino have often been painted as inept leaders who hurled their nation into a fixed war of attrition on the

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<sup>43</sup> Luigi Cadorna, *Altre Pagine Sulla Grande Guerra* (Milan, Italy: Casa Editrice A. Mondadori, 1925), 108-109.

<sup>44</sup> Thompson, *The White War*, 26-27. Gooch, *The Italian Army*, 119.

<sup>45</sup> Cadorna, *Altre Pagine*, 111-112, 114.

same small front on the Isonzo, they actually had a much more sophisticated appreciation of the views of both “westerners” and “easterners.” Weaker powers with smaller empires to defend have to pay more attention to secondary theaters like Albania and Macedonia because of the more immediate threat those regions can pose when under enemy control.

With a year of experience behind it, the Italian Army sought to expand its position on the Isonzo River in 1916. But the massive German assault at Verdun, which began in late February, significantly changed the plans of all the Allied powers. With the French desperately on the defensive, a series of Allied conferences took place in March. Prime Minister Antonio Salandra, Sonnino, Cadorna, and General Dall’ Olio, Under-Secretary of State on Munitions, represented Italy in meetings at Chantilly (12 March) and Paris (26-28 March).<sup>46</sup> Italy had already moved up its fifth offensive on the Isonzo (11-15 March) to relieve some of the pressure on the French. Yet again, the conference members found time to squabble over the Salonika operation. The Russians, Italians, and French all came out in support of maintaining the Allied army there. Joffre in particular worried that any withdrawal “would appear as if he had failed at Verdun,” and he acknowledged the utility of keeping an open front in Macedonia to prevent the entire Balkans from falling to the Central Powers.<sup>47</sup> Cadorna’s support for extending his expeditionary corps towards Salonika rested mainly on what he called “theoretical military grounds,” a deflection which meant he really had no intention of risking his position in Albania to march overland to Macedonia.<sup>48</sup> Throughout 1916, as the Italian position in Albania steadily shrank, Cadorna did little but provide vague promises to support offensives in this area. His hesitation to over-commit himself in the Balkans ultimately proved prescient because the Austro-Hungarians undertook their first major

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<sup>46</sup> CAB 28/1, IC 7, “Allied General Staff Conference Chantilly 12 March 1916,” 1.

<sup>47</sup> Joffre, CAB 28/1, IC 7(b), “Resumé of a Discussion at the Foreign Office, Paris, on March 27, 1916,” 1.

<sup>48</sup> Cadorna, CAB 28/1, IC 7(b), 3.

offensive in the Italian theater shortly thereafter. Their Eleventh and Third Armies attacked (15 May-29 July 1916) south from the Trentino area in an effort to cut off the northeastern Italian salient that jutted into Austria-Hungary.<sup>49</sup> Cadorna ultimately regained about half the ground lost in this sector with a strong counterattack. A temporary respite for the suddenly hard-pressed Italians came from the east when the Russians agreed to move up the Brusilov Offensive (4 June-20 September 1916) to ease pressure on Cadorna. The Russians inflicted enormous casualties on the Austro-Hungarian forces who had to divert resources from the easily-defendable Italian theater to the vast expanses of Galicia.<sup>50</sup> With the British attack on the Somme, the French holding onto Verdun, and the Russians back in the war, the Italians recovered from their setbacks in Albania and the Trentino. As inter-Allied cooperation slowly increased, Cadorna used his freedom of maneuver to continue his attack on the Isonzo line with greater vigor in the second half of 1916.

Part of the difficulty of initial inter-Allied conferences proved to be the vagueness of commitments and promises that could not be enforced readily by any one commander or governmental body. Therefore, events like the Interallied Finance Conference in London (14-15 July 1916) proved crucial for the sustenance of the war effort as all the major combatants moved closer to a total war economy.<sup>51</sup> The Italians, with one fewer year of the war under their belts and an underdeveloped economy to boot, faced some complex financial challenges to fielding nearly a million men year-round. The meeting provided an arena for Britain, France, Russia, and Italy to place orders with neutral countries and to float loans on foreign markets, much of which had to be financed by the British. Paolo Carcano, the Italian Minister of the Treasury, and Reginald

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<sup>49</sup> Edmonds, *Military Operations Italy*, 18-19. Rauchensteiner, *End of the Hapsburg Monarchy*, 287.

<sup>50</sup> David R. Stone, *The Russian Army in the Great War: The Eastern Front, 1914-1917* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2015), 242-250.

<sup>51</sup> CAB 28\_1. IC Paper 9A "Interallied Finance Conference on 15 July 1916," 1.

McKenna, the British Chancellor of the Exchequer, ultimately signed the “2<sup>nd</sup> Supplementary Financial Agreement between British and Italian Governments” on 15 July 1916.<sup>52</sup> The agreement essentially allowed the Italian treasury to discount their own treasury bills, sell them at a profit, and use the money acquired both to finance their own war effort and to make interest payments to the British. When these new resources were combined with the nearly 50 million pounds loaned directly to the Italian government in 1915 and 1916, the fortunes of the Italian Army improved dramatically with the corresponding financial injection.<sup>53</sup> But not all was rosy. The pressure of mounting casualties without much territorial gain forced the collapse of the government of Antonio Salandra on 10 June 1916 in favor of Paolo Boselli. So when the Sixth Battle of the Isonzo (6-17 August 1916) achieved some success by seizing Gorizia and a bridgehead across the Isonzo, the victory came under the cloud of dramatic shifts in Italy’s government. Perhaps the army could finally achieve some real gains to bolster the new regime. However, slowly and at great cost, the next three offensives from September through November only partially enlarged some of the bridgehead. These rather inconclusive victories seemed to point to an even larger part for the Italians in 1917. Although Salandra had left office, Sonnino and Cadorna remained as entrenched as ever. The possibility of an expanded role for Italy, so often debated in 1916, suddenly became a reality when Rome became the location of the next great Allied conference.

### **Rome Conference**

Simply choosing to have a conference in Rome signaled an important change of policy among the Allied powers. Prior conferences had been held primarily in France, which made sense

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<sup>52</sup> CAB 28/1, IC 9(c), “2nd Supplementary Financial Agreement between British and Italian Governments,” 1.

<sup>53</sup> Edmonds, *Military Operations Italy*, 23.

considering the cooperation between Britain and France immediately before and upon the outbreak of the war. Indeed, as the Germans swung through Belgium and northern France in August 1914, Italy remained a member, albeit a neutral one, of the Triple Alliance with Germany and Austria-Hungary. Mistrust, always a crucial element of any alliance system, remained rife between Italy and the original Entente states. This wariness became most apparent when the Italians waited until August 1916, after their victory at Gorizia, to declare war on Germany.<sup>54</sup> Although the declaration was mostly a formality, it indicated Italy's willingness to go to war with all the Central Powers and Italy's assumption of larger obligations in its coalition. Italy's expansive territorial ambitions stood in stark contrast with its limited offensive potential. Perhaps Italy's greatest contribution to the Allies through the end of 1916 had been in remaining neutral during the critical opening salvos of the war as France fought desperately to defend Paris. French Premier Paul Painlevé voiced that exact notion after Caporetto when he thanked the Italians for "remaining absolutely neutral" in 1914.<sup>55</sup> But now Italy would come to play a much larger role than that of merely distracting Austria-Hungary. Repeated attacks on the Isonzo River suddenly seemed much more important as the third year of the war ended with a series of internal rifts in Allied domestic politics. Prime Minister Aristide Briand of France had to reshuffle his government and oust Joseph Joffre from his role as effective commander-in-chief of the French armies.<sup>56</sup> Meanwhile, Herbert Asquith's government in Britain collapsed in favor of his former War Secretary David Lloyd George.<sup>57</sup> The

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<sup>54</sup> Sidney Sonnino, "Discussion with the House of Deputies and the Senate on 01 December 1915," *Discorsi per la Guerra*, ed. Amedeo Giannini (Foligno, Italy: F. Campitelli, 1922), 3, Hathi Trust. Thompson, *The White War*, 35. Gooch, *The Italian Army*, 146.

<sup>55</sup> Paul Painlevé, CAB 28/3, IC 30(b) "Procès Verbal of a Conference of the British, French, and Italian Governments" at the New Casino Hotel, Rapallo, Tuesday November 6 at 6:50 p.m. Third Session."

<sup>56</sup> Thomas B. Mott, quoted in Ferdinand Foch, *The Memoirs of Marshal Foch*, trans. Thomas B. Mott (New York, NY: Doubleday, Doran, and Company, Inc., 1931), 220-221. Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory*, 320-321.

<sup>57</sup> Douglas Haig, *The Private Papers of Douglas Haig: 1914-1919*, ed. Robert Blake (London, England: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1952), 183. French, *Strategy of the Lloyd George Coalition*, 12-14.

Italian government, having already survived its own governmental reform in mid-1916, entered the 1916-1917 winter conferences with a much more stable civil-military relationship than her western allies. Cadorna still controlled the army with an iron fist, and Sidney Sonnino, the foreign minister who had helped lead Italy to war, still dominated Italian international politics.<sup>58</sup> Cadorna himself remained unsure why the Allies had called for a conference, but he suspected an effort to bully the Italians into supporting the foundering efforts in Greece. To that end, Cadorna wrote that “we are all well resolved not to send even one additional soldier to that front.”<sup>59</sup> Clearly, as Italian casualties, and some successes, increased on the Isonzo front, Cadorna became less optimistic about the utility of expanded operations in the Balkans. Under these conditions, Lloyd George and Briand reached out to Italy to better coordinate her involvement in the war effort. What better way to ask a country for help than to hold a conference there? Although Lloyd George requested that the conference be held in Rome, as opposed to the Italians insisting it be held there themselves, the request still marked the first time an Allied conference was held in Italy since she had joined the war.<sup>60</sup> The location implied an expanded effort by the “easterners” to shift Allied strategy towards peripheral theaters to defeat the Central Powers at their weakest point. Germany was simply too strong to be defeated outright. Penetrating Germany’s central position through what Winston Churchill later coined the “soft underbelly” of Europe offered more sanguine prospects for victory – and, not coincidentally, shifted the onus for campaigning onto Britain’s allies.

However, although the British and the French may have called the conference and dominated its proceedings, Italy’s role in future campaigns now seemed more critical than ever. Trieste and Laibach (Ljubljana), two of Sonnino’s coveted post-war demands, were much closer

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<sup>58</sup> Orlando, *Memorie*, 49-51. John R. Schindler, *Isonzo: The Forgotten Sacrifice of the Great War* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001), 149-150.

<sup>59</sup> Luigi Cadorna, *Lettere Familiari*, ed. Raffaele Cadorna (Milan, Italy: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1967), 184.

<sup>60</sup> Robertson, *From Private to Field Marshal*, 292.



to the Italian front line than the respective Anglo-French objectives. Defeating the German Army on the Western Front and recovering Belgium, Alsace-Lorraine, and the overrun areas of northern France appeared a much more difficult task. The loss of Serbia and Bucharest, the Romanian capital, in 1916 significantly threatened the multi-national Allied Army of the Orient at Salonika. Lloyd George believed the Italians should have a greater interest in this subsidiary theater. He believed that “any catastrophe to the Allied Army of the East would have a very serious repercussion upon Italy herself.”<sup>61</sup> Correspondents for *The Times* in Rome praised Lloyd George as “the hero of the moment” and thanked local newspapers that acknowledged “for the first time Italy has become the centre of the unity of aims and actions” among the Allies.<sup>62</sup> This idolization of Lloyd George as the superstar of the coalition often ignores the part the Italians played in shaping Allied strategy. The importance of the Italians to the conference has been overshadowed by the subsequent defeat at Caporetto at year’s end. The British Prime Minister had circulated a supposedly helpful memorandum at the start of the conference outlining his opinion on what the focus should be for the 1917 campaign. This circular conveniently left out the reality that, the more Italian soldiers and supplies went to Salonika, the fewer British resources would be spent in that theater. By 7 January, the politicians had come to an impasse over Italy’s support for the Salonika campaign and General Cadorna and the Italian Minister of Transportation, Enrico Arlotta, had to be brought in to settle some of the trickier details.<sup>63</sup> The British and French requested Italian combat engineers to improve the both the railway lines to and from the Italian port of Brindisi and the Albanian port of Santi Quaranta. These enhancements allowed the Allies to easily ship men

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<sup>61</sup> Lloyd George, CAB 28/2, IC 15(a), “Conference of the Allies at Rome on January 5, 6, and 7, 1917: Memorandum Circulated by the Prime Minister,” 3.

<sup>62</sup> “Allied Statesmen in Rome,” *The Times*, 6 January 1917, 7, The Times Digital Archive.

<sup>63</sup> CAB 28/2, IC 15(b), “Notes of the Meeting on Morning of 7 January at 1000,” 7.

and supplies from England all the way to Monastir, Greece, without risking the more hazardous passages of the Atlantic Ocean.<sup>64</sup> While the Italians readily acknowledged the importance of these upgrades, they also remained loath to part with engineers who were badly needed to improve defenses on the Isonzo line. Ultimately, they arranged a compromise: the Italians would “do their best” to provide about 2,000 laborers to complete the job while the French supplied the engineers.<sup>65</sup> Sonnino and Cadorna understood the significance of being asked to play a larger part in the coalition. But they would not needlessly move men and equipment in contravention of their own national interests and objectives. Despite Lloyd George’s protests, the Salonika campaign never became anything more than a peripheral sideshow no matter its proximity to the Italian Front. The promise of Allied artillery reinforcements to the Italian campaign, however, proved to be a horse of quite a different color to Cadorna.

Lloyd George’s second pet project at the Rome Conference (other than emphasizing the Salonika campaign) involved sending 300 medium and heavy pieces of artillery to the Italian Front for a spring offensive. Notwithstanding the logistical issues already mentioned, Lloyd George also seemed to be ignoring the Allied preparations for the Nivelle Offensive in France set to occur in February.<sup>66</sup> The scheme to provide a few hundred guns to an Allied army and make *that* force the primary offensive thrust for the Allies bore all the hallmarks of British coalition-building at its very worst. The idea, which had been conjured up in London without consulting the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, ignored the zero-sum truth that moving cannons from one theater affected all the others. In addition, the plan placed the onus of rejecting the friendly gesture squarely on the

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, vol. 3, 1444.

<sup>66</sup> John Dillon, “*Allies are a Tiresome Lot*” *The British Army in Italy in the First World War*, Wolverhampton Military Studies no. 12 (Solihull, England: Helion and Company, 2015), 32. The Nivelle Offensive was ultimately delayed until April.

Italians. Cadorna graciously rejected the offer but not because he did not need the guns. Italy's weak industrial capacity and dearth of experienced heavy-artillery gunners meant that the general very much wanted the additional reinforcements.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, the loaned guns promised to be just the start of a great avalanche of Allied material and manpower reinforcements that would allow the *Comando Supremo* to conquer Trieste and defeat Austria-Hungary. Nevertheless, the demands of the Nivelle Offensive in France meant that the guns were available only until the beginning of April before the British and French needed them again. Cadorna had no intention of being rushed by the Allies into a hasty winter offensive in the snowy foothills of the Julian Alps or along the frigid shores of the Adriatic. Sonnino also rejected the Allied offer out of his own long-term concerns. If the war was meant to cement Italy's status as a great power once and for all, constantly asking for Allied military support to conquer stretches of territory from Germany's weak neighbor was hardly the ideal method of achieving that goal.<sup>68</sup> The Italian habit of pursuing, often unsuccessfully, an independent policy as a member of the now-defunct Triple Alliance now translated into a similar streak of autonomy as a member of the Allies. However, unlike Germany and Austria-Hungary, who found they could afford to go to war in August 1914 even without the Italian Army, the Allies in 1917 realized they could no longer prosecute the war without increased Italian support.

Although the official Allied statement at the end of the conference noted, rather optimistically, that they were in "complete agreement . . . on the various questions discussed," nothing could have been further from the truth.<sup>69</sup> The conference ended with a noncommittal pledge to improve the Allied supply situation in the Balkans. Lloyd George's ascension as Prime

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<sup>67</sup> Cadorna, *La Guerra alla Fronte Italiana*, vol. 2, 34-35.

<sup>68</sup> Sidney Sonnino, *Sonnino*, ed. G. Rabizzani and F. Rubbiani (Milan, Italy: Casa Editrice Risorgimento, 1920), 98-100, Hathi Trust. Gooch, *Italian Army in WW1*, 204.

<sup>69</sup> "Allied Conference in Rome," *The Times*, 8 January 1917, 9, The Times Digital Archive.

Minister is often characterized by historians as the beginning of greater inter-Allied cooperation among politicians who were tired of watching generals bleed their armies dry. Overall, the conference has most famously been described as the first sign of the conflict between Lloyd George and William Robertson for control of British strategy. While this dispute clouded future inter-Allied conferences, the meeting in Rome also portended a greater role for the weakest of the western Allies. Italy's increased importance to the coalition meant that her offensives in 1917 played an essential part in shaping Allied strategy. While the British languished in Flanders, the French mutinied, and the Russians revolted, the Italians launched a series of high-stakes offensives that almost knocked Austria-Hungary out of the war . . . and set in motion a disastrous chain of events that nearly knocked Italy out in turn.

### **Artillery and 10<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> Isonzo**

The uncertainty of the commitments made by the Italians at the Rome Conference meant that additional meetings were needed to clarify joint strategy. From February through April, Generals Nivelle, Robertson, and Foch all met with Cadorna to iron out necessary military arrangements. Cadorna agreed to carry out a spring offensive in approximate coordination with the Nivelle attacks, and the Allies began laying the groundwork for the transfer of large-scale resources to the Italian Front in the event of a German attack there.<sup>70</sup> That the Italians themselves requested these meetings and that they accepted their offensive obligations as part of an alliance should not be readily discounted. Considering the heavy casualties sustained thus far in nine consecutive battles on the Isonzo River, the Italians could have been forgiven for adopting their

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<sup>70</sup> Mott, quoted in *The Memoirs of Marshal Foch*, 222. Robertson, *From Private to Field Marshal*, 296-297. Edmonds, *Military Operations Italy*, 27-30.

own “eastern” policy in favor of peripheral attacks in Greece or even against the Ottoman Empire. Their willingness to launch another attack on the Isonzo despite their deficit in artillery showed a faithfulness to Allied grand strategy. This commitment to coalition warfare aligned nicely with the reality that Italy’s immediate military objectives often doubled as their long-term war aims. Or perhaps that is simply the story told by Cadorna and Sonnino in their memoirs. They both wanted to highlight the faithfulness of their home country to the Allied cause, especially since they wrote their memoirs during a period of unrest and disillusionment in post-war Italy. If the 10<sup>th</sup> Battle of the Isonzo (12 May-5 June 1917) did not occur precisely when the French and British offensives did (they began almost a month earlier), the attack was hardly the first time nor would it be the last time a coalition failed to simultaneously execute operations. The attack accomplished no more than all the other battles on the Isonzo as Austro-Hungarian counterattacks wiped out small Italian gains achieved in the opening phases of the offensive.<sup>71</sup> The Italians lost 157,000 casualties while inflicting only 75,000 on their enemies.

The “Convention in the Event of Co-Operation of British Troops in Italy” signed on 7 May 1917, and similar arrangements with the French Army, demonstrated that the Italians remained aware of their own military and industrial limitations. The document included plans for moving, supplying, and incorporating up to 6 British infantry divisions (120,000 men) to the Italian Front “should it become desirable,” i.e., should the Germans attack.<sup>72</sup> Despite this cooperation, Robertson in his memoirs criticized the Italians for sluggishness because they constantly overestimated the size of the opponent facing them – although he makes scant mention of the difficult mountainous terrain in which the Italians had to fight for much of the war. Cadorna understood that, because Italy was the most vulnerable of the western allies, German successes in

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<sup>71</sup> Edmonds, *Military Operations Italy*, 32-33.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., see 416, Appendix IX for entire text of the Anglo-Italian convention.

the east in Romania and Russia increased the likelihood of an attack against his own position. The German withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line in early 1917 and their strategic defensive in France portended ill news for every other front the Germans wanted to attack. The Franco-Belgian front ran in a generally straight line which promised little chance for enveloping attacks in the mold of the original Schlieffen Plan. However, Italy's position was far different. Her troops on the Isonzo River in northeastern Italy formed part of a huge salient jutting into Austria-Hungary, an ideal position for offensive operations but not for defensive ones. The bulge could easily be cut off by concerted attacks from the Trentino area to the north of the Isonzo River Valley; indeed, the disaster at Caporetto followed that exact same pattern.

The renewed importance the Allies gave to the Italian Front at the start of 1917 appeared perceptive as spring brought a litany of defeats. The collapse of the Romanov dynasty significantly hurt Russian support for the war effort, while the disastrous Nivelle Offensives led to widespread mutinies in the French Army and another shakeup in leadership. Philippe Pétain replaced the disgraced Nivelle and believed that limited offensive operations, rather than a grand attack to win the war all at once, would restore the morale of his troops.<sup>73</sup> Although the Italians failed to make progress in their own attack, the demoralized state of the French Army by the summer of 1917 meant that the onus for major offensive operations was carried by the Russians, the British, and now the Italians. The Kerensky Offensive proved to be the last gasp of Russian participation in the coalition while the corresponding British attack in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battle of Ypres followed the well-worn pattern of battles of attrition on the Western Front. In contrast, the 11<sup>th</sup> Battle of the Isonzo (18 August-12 September 1917) actually achieved some of its strategic objectives. Expanding from the Gorizia bridgehead, the Italians captured much of the Bainsizza Plateau and threatened the port

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<sup>73</sup> Robertson, *Private to Field Marshal*, 310-311.

of Trieste.<sup>74</sup> The hard-fought, limited victory came at enormous expense as the Italians lost another 160,000 men in poorly coordinated frontal assaults.<sup>75</sup> While the Italians consolidated their hold over the Bainsizza, their political leadership tried to resolve the never-ending issue of promised Allied artillery support. Sonnino had gone to London from 7 to 8 August to request the loan of 400 heavy guns, but his request had been squarely rejected by Robertson, who believed all of Britain's efforts must go into the quagmire at 3<sup>rd</sup> Ypres.<sup>76</sup> The Italian 2<sup>nd</sup> Army had suffered heavy casualties and expended so much ammunition in the 11<sup>th</sup> Isonzo that Cadorna resolved to stop his offensive by mid-September instead of continuing the attack to Trieste. His men entrenched themselves in forward positions to resume the offensive by next spring, and he ordered hasty defensive preparations in the unlikely case of a late fall counter-attack by the Central Powers. This hesitancy, although inspired by sound reasoning, seemed to the British and French to prove the selfishness and sluggishness of the Italians, who had to be prodded every step of the way for their never-ending battles on the Isonzo River. The Allies responded by removing their artillery attached to the Italian Army and cancelling the pending transfer of another 100 French guns, much to Cadorna's dismay.<sup>77</sup> A few more Allied guns might not have made much difference in the impending disaster at Caporetto, yet their withdrawal marked a serious strategic decision by the British and the French. The war could not be won in Flanders by the fall of 1917, despite Haig's insistence on attacking at Passchendaele, but it could be lost in Italy if the Germans brought reinforcements from the east. Indeed, Italian gains after 11<sup>th</sup> Battle of the Isonzo had only

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<sup>74</sup> Luigi Capello, *Note di Guerra*, vol. 2 (Milan, Italy: Fratelli Treves, Editori, 1920), 116, 123-124. Edmonds, *Military Operations Italy*, 36-37.

<sup>75</sup> Thompson, *White War*, 282-283.

<sup>76</sup> Robertson, quoted in a letter to Haig, in *The Private Papers of Douglas Haig*, 251. Edmonds, *Military Operations Italy*, 35.

<sup>77</sup> Cadorna, *La Guerra alla Fronte Italiana*, vol. 2, 114-115.

heightened their vulnerability by pushing their salient deeper into Austro-Hungarian territory. The threat to Trieste prompted the intervention of Austria-Hungary's big brother to the north. Whether the fall of Trieste would have caused Austro-Hungary's withdrawal from the war is debatable, but this prospect led directly to the intervention of Germany for the first time on the Italian Front.<sup>78</sup>

## Conclusion

By 23 October 1917, the day before the Battle of Caporetto, Italy's involvement in the 1917 campaigns showed a significant improvement in Allied cooperation over the previous two years. Coordinated offensives, plans for reinforcements in the case of surprise offensives, and, yes, even the much-debated transfer of guns all gave more importance to the Italian front than ever before. As Romania and Russia lost ground, Italy's expensive limited gains against Austria-Hungary made her armies both more valuable to the Allies and more vulnerable to the Central Powers.<sup>79</sup> These reciprocal considerations forced a reorganization of Allied grand strategy in the aftermath of Caporetto. However, the effect that Caporetto had on the Italian Front, and on World War I as a whole, must be understood in the context of the gradual expansion of Italy's war effort before that fateful battle.

Italy had begun the war as a neutral power in 1914 and waited the outcome of the initial battles of maneuver. The vulnerabilities of her coastlines meant that she could ill-afford a war against the French and British navies. As the Western Front descended into deadlock, Sonnino seized the opportunity to complete Italian reunification and recover the irredentist territories from Austria-Hungary. By adding another front that the Central Powers had to fight on, even a weaker

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<sup>78</sup> Paul von Hindenburg, *Out of My Life*, trans F. A. Holt, vol. 2 (New York, NY: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1921), 82-83. Erich Ludendorff, *Ludendorff's Own Story: August 1914- November 1918*, vol. 2 (New York, NY: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1919), 94-95.

<sup>79</sup> Ludendorff, *Ludendorff's Own Story*, vol. 2, 117.



power like Italy profoundly changed the course of the war. She still proved to be a somewhat reluctant associate that fought on a single front for most of 1915 and offered little opportunities for more ambitious Allied operations. However, Italian interests in the Balkans coincided nicely with Allied efforts in that region. Even though the Central Powers ultimately enticed Bulgaria and conquered Romania and Serbia, they never dominated the entire peninsula. The Italians delivered more cooperation with Britain and France as the western Allies sought to coordinate operations near Salonika and Albania. Increased Allied support in terms of funding and artillery allowed Cadorna to ramp up attacks on the Isonzo River in 1916 and 1917. This more aggressive posture, encouraged by the Rome Conference, helped place Italy firmly in the status of one of the “Big Three” powers of the Allies, especially as Russian disenchantment with the war increased. Nevertheless, Italian military capacity could never do more than maintain the war of attrition on the Isonzo and a small base in Albania. The Italian influence on Allied policy was thus mostly constrained to areas where Italian armies were actively engaged. Paradoxically, it would take a catastrophic defeat at Caporetto to challenge, and then solidify, Italy’s importance to her confederates.

## Chapter 3 – Caporetto and Rapallo

The Battle of Caporetto lasted from 24 October to 9 November 1917.<sup>80</sup> The collapse of the Italian 2<sup>nd</sup> Army also led to the loss of the Isonzo River line. In two weeks the Central Powers undid two years' worth of Italian offensives, then invaded Italy in turn. Cadorna tried desperately to arrange a series of hasty defenses in the wake of overwhelming pressure from the combined German-Austro-Hungarian assault. While he stabilized the situation near the Piave River north of Venice, the Allies scrambled to support their flagging ally. The prospect of Italy surrendering or negotiating with the Central Powers, coming at the same time as the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, might doom the Allies.<sup>81</sup> Therefore, Britain and France sent their heads of government and chiefs of staff to Italy. The memoirs of Lloyd George, Robertson, and Foch all criticized Italian military leadership for botching the battle. No matter how poorly the Italians might have performed, though, the Allies still had to send assistance as soon as possible.

This chapter will briefly summarize the major events of Caporetto. The innovative German tactics used at the battle indicated their desire and ability to return to the offensive in western Europe by 1918. The qualitative superiority of German tactics and leadership provided an important counterpoint to British and French criticisms after the battle. Generals like Robertson and Foch, having spent most of the war focusing on battles of attrition in France, could not understand how the Germans had penetrated so deeply past a prepared defensive position on the Isonzo River. The implication – that Italians made bad soldiers and poor generals – has added to

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<sup>80</sup> Because Caporetto began on the Isonzo River, it can also be referred to as the 12<sup>th</sup> (and final) Battle of the Isonzo River. See Illustration 3.1 for a map of the overall battle and the withdrawal of the Italian Armies from the Isonzo River to their final line at the Piave River.

<sup>81</sup> The Julian calendar then in use in Russia meant that the Russian date for the Bolshevik Revolution was 25 October 1917 – hence, the commonly-used phrase “The October Revolution.” However, the more-commonly used Gregorian calendar in the rest of Europe made this date 7 November 1917 – the last day of the Rapallo Conference and as the Italians were reeling from the Central Powers offensive at Caporetto.

one of the persistent myths of the Italian military experience ever since reunification in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This chapter will then cover the monumental Rapallo Conference (5-7 November 1917). This conference was far from the one-sided affair that the historiography suggests. The Italians, though desperate for assistance, nevertheless negotiated and argued with their partners over issues like reorganizing the Italian military, firing Cadorna, and the size of the German offensive. Because Italy's part in the Rapallo Conference has often been minimized as that of a supplicant begging for help, Italy's role in the new Inter-Allied Supreme War Council, first created at Rapallo, has often been overlooked. This ignorance distorts the narrative of coalition warfare in World War I by arguing that only the strongest powers – Britain, France, and Germany – dictated and shaped strategy. But the Italians, in spite of their weak position, played a critical part in the creation of the council. Though Lloyd George proposed the idea he could not impose it on the French and Italians. Britain's partners had to agree to work together in the new council. Ironically, the terrible defeat at Caporetto only emphasized the expanded role that the Italians now occupied in their coalition. Few other events in the war had such long-standing strategic consequences for the Allies.

### **Caporetto and German Tactics**

The battle occurred at an unexpected time for campaigning in northeastern Italy. Late October meant heavy mists and the onset of cold weather that made fighting almost unbearable. At a smaller conference in London two months prior, General Alberico Albricci, representing Cadorna, had confidently told Lloyd George that “the latest season [for an offensive in Italy] was the end of August, after that an offensive must wait till the end of the spring, say 15<sup>th</sup> May.”<sup>82</sup> The

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<sup>82</sup> Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, vol. 4, 2291. John MacDonald and Zeljko Cimpric, *Caporetto and the Isonzo Campaign: The Italian Front 1915-1918* (South Yorkshire, England: Pen and Sword Military, 2011), 148.

Italians, having halted their last offensive in mid-September, remained in hastily dug-in forward positions ready to attack the next spring, not to fight a major defensive battle in late fall.

The German tactics utilized at Caporetto included a mixture of new features the western Allies had yet to face. General Oskar von Hutier first experimented with them when he had been tasked to conquer Riga in September 1917 to put increased pressure on the Russian Front. His battle plan utilized elite stormtroopers, armed with light machine guns, trench mortars, and grenades, as well as a short, heavy artillery bombardment that included two types of gas and high-explosive shells.<sup>83</sup> The brief cannonade provided little warning of an impending attack, as opposed to the usual pattern that took weeks of artillery preparation to register guns and soften targets.<sup>84</sup> The stormtroopers could then use the element of surprise and infiltrate weak points in the enemy defensive positions. While the vanguard penetrated and surrounded strong emplacements, the main body of regular infantry could slowly move forward and destroy the now-isolated fortifications. As long as the momentum of the lead stormtroopers could be maintained, the Germans could continue attacking and pierce successive defensive lines. The tactics worked and, fresh from their conquest of Riga, the Germans arranged for a similar attack against the Italian 2<sup>nd</sup> Army on the Isonzo River in late October.<sup>85</sup> The newly formed 14<sup>th</sup> Army under General Otto von Below included a mix of six German and eight Austro-Hungarian divisions with experience in mountain warfare. A short bombardment on the morning of 24 October differed a great deal from the usual

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<sup>83</sup> James Edward Edmonds, *Military Operations France and Belgium, 1918: The German March Offensive and its Preliminaries*, part of the British Official History of the Great War (London, England: MacMillan and Co., Ltd., 1935), vii. Ludendorff, *Ludendorff's Own Story*, vol. 2, 200-202. Bruce I. Gudmundsson, *Stormtroop Tactics: Innovation in the German Army, 1914-1918* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1989), 135-136.

<sup>84</sup> Registering artillery involves testing and observing where shells land whenever a gun is moved to a new location. Because of the inaccuracy of indirect fire, registration provided assurances that the guns would hit enemy positions and could also conduct counter-battery work against enemy guns. However, the practice of registering hundreds of artillery pieces before a major World War I offensive – a process which could take days if not weeks – usually ruined the element of surprise by warning the enemy of where an attack was coming.

<sup>85</sup> Mario Morselli, *Caporetto 1917: Victory or Defeat* (London, England: Frank Cass Publishers, 2001), ix.

Italian experience of lengthy, days-long bombardments before a major offensive. Using the fog and a critical bridgehead at Tolmino that had remained in Austro-Hungarian hands throughout 1917, the 14<sup>th</sup> Army moved rapidly through valleys to cut off Italian forces east of the Isonzo.<sup>86</sup> The rapidity of this advance isolated strong Italian mountain positions and prevented them from coordinating their defenses with other units. A young German captain named Erwin Rommel, leading a detachment of the Württemberg Mountain Battalion, criticized both Italian officers who “did not have their men well enough in hand,” and the disjointed nature of the Italian defensive system.<sup>87</sup> His detachment had a typical experience when it alone captured over 9,000 prisoners and 80 guns in the opening days of the offensive.<sup>88</sup> The new German tactics helped revitalize their Austro-Hungarian ally and caught the Italians by surprise.

General Luigi Capello, commanding the bloated Italian 2<sup>nd</sup> Army of nearly thirty divisions and sick at the moment the attack began, handed over control to his chief of staff just as the Germans enveloped his force from the north.<sup>89</sup> As communication lines broke down and forward units became surrounded, Italian resistance quickly collapsed and Below’s forces made remarkable progress. Once the Isonzo River line had been completely ruptured, Cadorna had little choice but to order the retreat of his entire army to the Tagliamento River or risk having it defeated in detail.<sup>90</sup> The Germans overran Cadorna’s headquarters at Udine, breached the Tagliamento line, and finally reached the Piave River by 9 November. The Italians lost 150 square kilometers of territory,

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<sup>86</sup> Capello, *Note di Guerra*, vol. 2, 123. Ludendorff, *Ludendorff’s Own Story*, vol. 2, 113. Francesco Fadini, *Caporetto Dalla Parte Del Vincitore: La Biografia del Generale Otto von Below e il Suo Diario Inedito Sulla Campagna d’Italia del 1917* (Florence, Italy: Vallecchi Editore, 1974), 38-39.

<sup>87</sup> Erwin Rommel, *Infantry Attacks* (Minneapolis, MN: Zenith Press, 2009), 174-175.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Cadorna, *La Guerra al Fronte Italiana*, 184-185.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 178-179.

sustained 40,000 casualties, gave up 280,000 prisoners, suffered 350,000 deserters, and lost almost 5,000 guns.<sup>91</sup>

Although much disparaged for his role in one of the worst defeats of World War I, Cadorna had not remained idle as the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army collapsed. The Army's official historian and Cadorna's aide, Angelo Gatti, praised the commander's sense of calm on the first day of the battle, although he privately wondered if this was more because Cadorna did not yet grasp the full extent of the German flanking maneuver.<sup>92</sup> Unfortunately, Cadorna's response, once he realized that the Germans had cut off the bulk of 2<sup>nd</sup> Army east of the Isonzo River, was to publish a series of Orders of the Day that roundly blamed his own men for failing to fight.<sup>93</sup> Historians have sometimes used this castigation of his own men to mark the end for Cadorna as the *Comando Supremo*. However, it was unlikely he could have survived the fallout of the defeat no matter what he had published in army bulletins. The decision over who relieved the Italian general became a contentious topic when the British and French eventually arrived to aid their ally. Criticizing his own men as they struggled to fight a new, innovative, and aggressive enemy certainly did not help the situation. However, an army commander scapegoating his own subordinates during a retreat should not have come as a surprise to the British or the French, who had seen John French and Joffre do much the same thing in 1914 and 1915. Regardless, Cadorna made the wise decision to abandon his headquarters at Udine while his army commanders did their best to arrange an organized withdrawal through a series of defensive river positions.<sup>94</sup> Eventually, the Italian line stabilized on the Piave River, where Cadorna had already built fortifications, just as massive

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<sup>91</sup> Morselli, *Caporetto*, ix.

<sup>92</sup> Angelo Gatti, *Caporetto: Dal Diario di Guerra Inedito (Maggio-Dicembre 1917)*, ed. Alberto Monticone (Bologna, Italy: Societa Editrice il Mulino, 1964), xlv-xlvii.

<sup>93</sup> AUSSME E2 GM 131, Cadorna, 26 October 1917. Cadorna, 28 October 1917, 1:00 p.m., Ministero Degli Affari Esteri. *I Documenti Diplomatici Italiani: 1 Settembre – 31 Dicembre 1917*, Vol. 9, 5th Series (Rome, Italy: Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca Dello Stato, 1983), 299, Hathi Trust.

<sup>94</sup> AUSSME E2 GM 131, LTG Duke of Aosta to Capo di Stato Maggiore del Esercito, 29 October 1917.

organizational changes took place in the direction of the Allied war effort. The “Miracle of Caporetto” for the Germans, who had seemed to crack the code on how to restore maneuver to deadlocked trench warfare, proved to be a bit of a miracle for the Italians as well. Despite their enormous casualties, the Italians did not exit the war and resolved to continue fighting the invaders. How that fight played out now depended on what the British and French did.

### **The Rapallo Conference**

Upon hearing of the news of Caporetto, Lloyd George sent General Robertson to aid Cadorna while the Prime Minister himself went to Paris to speak to Painlevé, who had also dispatched General Foch to Italy. Lloyd George and Painlevé agreed that the forthcoming conference at Rapallo, Italy, was an opportune time to discuss the idea of an inter-Allied military council to oversee the remainder of the war.<sup>95</sup> Meanwhile, Foch and Robertson coordinated with Cadorna to transfer four French and two British divisions to succor their stricken ally (two more British divisions would be added).<sup>96</sup> As British and French representatives settled in at the New Casino Hotel in Rapallo, a popular resort town near Genoa on the Ligurian Coast of northwestern Italy, they arranged for an ad hoc meeting without the Italian representatives on the night of 5 November.<sup>97</sup> General Foch opened the discussion with a briefing on what he had witnessed from General Cadorna and his staff in their new headquarters at Padua. Foch’s statement that the “Italian

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<sup>95</sup> Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, vol.4, 2315-2317.

<sup>96</sup> Robertson, *From Private to Field Marshal*, 312-313. Foch, *Memoirs*, 227.

<sup>97</sup> Rapallo was a popular location for major international conferences in the 1920s as Europe adjusted to the creation of new states in the aftermath of the Versailles Conference. European politicians went abroad so often in the inter-war period for conferences that they were criticized for taking advantage of international crises just to go on vacation in resort towns like Rapallo and Locarno, Switzerland. For a discussion of the post-war Rapallo treaties, see Sally Marks, *The Illusion of Peace: International Relations in Europe, 1918-1933* (London, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 27, 51, 64.

army had been attacked, but not very heavily,” clouded the outlook that the Allies had on the capabilities of their Italian partners.<sup>98</sup> This attitude also betrayed some of the orthodoxy of World War I generals. An army did not have to be significantly outnumbered to be beaten, and the French and British had yet to experience the new German tactics unleashed at Riga and Caporetto. Foch believed that Cadorna had all the men he needed to defend the Isonzo, but the German attack proved “more powerful than arguments” about what Cadorna should have done.<sup>99</sup> The French general also criticized Cadorna’s staff because there “was practically no Higher Command” to ensure that orders were properly carried out.<sup>100</sup> Robertson echoed many of his French counterpart’s views and provided an overwhelmingly negative perception of the Italian capacity to continue fighting. The two generals devised a scheme to reorganize the Italian General Staff with four different sections to supervise military organization, the state of the armies, cooperation with the local government, and cooperation with the Allies.

Lloyd George manipulated these results to push a twofold agenda. He had tried to take advantage of secondary theaters like the Italian Front back in January 1917 at the Rome Conference, but had deferred to the “westerners.” After having witnessed nothing but failure during the Nivelle and Passchendaele offensives on the Western Front, all while the Germans scored stunning victories in Russia and Italy, Lloyd George determined to wrest control of military strategy away from his generals. He repeatedly demanded the firing of Cadorna as a condemnation of poor Allied generalship in the war. This decision would provide Lloyd George with the political clout he needed to create a unified Allied council run by politicians. However, when Lloyd George

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<sup>98</sup> Foch, CAB 28/3, IC 29, “Meeting of Representatives of the British and French Governments, Held at the New Casino Hotel, Rapallo, Italy on Monday, November 5, 1917 at 8:00 p.m.”

<sup>99</sup> Foch, *Memoirs*, 227-228.

<sup>100</sup> Foch, CAB 28/3, IC 29, 1.



asked Foch if “anyone was capable of commanding” the Italian Army after Caporetto, Foch replied that “a change would shortly be made in the Higher Command.”<sup>101</sup> Since Foch had just come from Italian headquarters himself, his statement hinted that the new Italian government, now led by Prime Minister Vittorio Orlando, was already considering firing Cadorna. Lloyd George had suggested a similar change to Sidney Sonnino, but the Italian Foreign Minister “had merely replied that the Italian government would have to do something” without offering any specific course of action.<sup>102</sup> The British Prime Minister believed he could insist on Cadorna’s dismissal in exchange for the Allied reinforcements already on their way. This quid pro quo, which Lloyd George expressed repeatedly throughout the Rapallo Conference, was most likely a bluff. Would the Allies really have turned around eight divisions already embarked on trains or preparing to do so in mid-November? Probably not, especially if the British and French themselves believed that Italy would collapse without those reinforcements. They would have begrudgingly suffered Cadorna if the Italians had insisted on his staying in office. The Italians did not, and so their Allies did not have to. Lloyd George also erred in stating that “there was no time for conducting negotiations with General Cadorna as though he were a foreign power,” and in asserting that the Italians “were in such a difficult situation that they would take what we would give them.” As he soon found out, the Italians had plenty of time for negotiating each of the changes their Allies wanted.

Although Orlando and Sonnino had arrived at Rapallo on 5 November, they did not join the official conference until the next morning. Orlando, in office for barely a week, noted that “for long hours, [he had to] wait the outcome of the conferences which the Allies had among themselves.”<sup>103</sup> Although an experienced politician, he remained an inexperienced head of

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<sup>101</sup> Lloyd George and Foch, CAB 28/3, IC 29, 1.

<sup>102</sup> Lloyd George, CAB 28/3, IC 29, 2.

<sup>103</sup> Orlando, *Memorie*, 242.

government and had to learn as events transpired around him. That the Italians had to wait while the British and French decided how best to aid them, at a conference *in* Italy nonetheless, provided a clear indication of the balance of power among the three nations. Orlando later compared his waiting at the conference to the “desperate prayers and waiting [of] the garden of Gethsemane,” where Jesus Christ had prayed to God for relief, without success, the night before his crucifixion.<sup>104</sup> Despite this dramatic imagery, Orlando was not about to let Italy be martyred for the sins of her Allies. He also did not feel any particular attachment to General Cadorna, who did not have “the quality of a true, a great Captain.”<sup>105</sup> What really irked Orlando were Cadorna’s public accusations against his own soldiers during the retreat to the Piave River, without taking any responsibility for his own men shirking their duty in Italy’s most desperate hour. A conference with King Vittorio Emanuele III on 4 November at Peschiera had already agreed to replace Cadorna with General Armando Diaz.<sup>106</sup> Orlando therefore approached his first inter-Allied conference with an honest and open perspective, especially because he *did* need Allied assistance. When he addressed his colleagues on the morning of 6 November, he did not shy away from the debacle and acknowledged that the “Second Italian Army had given way.”<sup>107</sup> Italian intelligence estimated that 300,000 German soldiers had participated in the attack (there had been fewer than half as many Germans in reality) and Orlando feared that “the other Italian armies were hardly sufficient to defend this line [on the Piave]” in the face of this force.<sup>108</sup> Throughout the Rapallo proceedings, the Italians constantly overestimated the strength of the Central Powers’ armies that they faced. If the Italians were right and they were vastly outnumbered from the outset, the Battle of Caporetto

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 242.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 298.

<sup>106</sup> Gooch, *Italian Army*, 248.

<sup>107</sup> Orlando, CAB 28/3, IC 30, “Meeting of Representatives of the British and French Governments, Held at the New Casino Hotel, Rapallo, Italy on Monday, November 5 1917 at 8:00 p.m.,” 1.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 2.

could never have been won in the first place and they had simply been the right victims at the wrong time. However, if the Allied estimates were right and the Italians had collapsed from the beginning (which 2<sup>nd</sup> Army had done), then the Italians had bungled the battle and perhaps did not deserve to continue running their own operations independent of Allied planning.

A balance had to be struck somewhere between what both sides demanded. Orlando believed that anything less than fifteen Allied divisions on the Piave River “would be a military disaster,” and he warned that only “for the present [could] the Italian government guarantee internal order.”<sup>109</sup> The threat of Italian withdrawal from the war would have the gravest consequences on her Allies and not only from a military point of view. Reports had already begun trickling in of unrest in Russia that, by the very next day, boiled over into full-scale revolt against the Provisional Government there. The disaster at Caporetto might lead to a similar rebellion from pacifist and socialist elements eager to overthrow a government that had started an ill-advised war. What if the unrest in Russia spread to Italy and thence to Britain and France? If Orlando could rightly claim that “the future of Italy depended upon the decision which the Allies take now,” then the reverse was also true, and the future of the Allies depended on Italy staying in the war.<sup>110</sup>

Lloyd George turned the discussion away from Allied reinforcements and back towards the question of military command. He argued that “brave men had been led to their doom through lack of proper organization and staff work,” and he called for a change in Italian leadership.<sup>111</sup> He also complimented the deft handling of the Italian 3<sup>rd</sup> Army by General Emanuele Filiberto, the Duke of Aosta and a cousin of King Vittorio Emanuele III, who had withdrawn his men in good order back to the Piave River. Lloyd George had brought up the suggestion of the Duke as a

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Lloyd George, CAB 28/3, IC 30, 2-3.

replacement for Cadorna on 5 November when meeting only with the French. Lloyd George did not know that the king and Orlando had already agreed on a replacement for Cadorna, and one who was not the potential dynastic rival the Duke could be if he emerged from the war as the savior of Italy. Orlando likely kept this information to himself to use Cadorna's removal as a bargaining chip, of which he had few readily available considering Italy's militarily weak position. He indicated to his fellow prime ministers that "it was necessary to consider the difficulty of changing the Command at such a moment," while the defenses on the Piave River had not yet proven to be effective.<sup>112</sup> Agreeing with his British associate, Painlevé "had not very much to add" because the two ministers had already formulated this plan on their way to Italy.<sup>113</sup> The rest of the morning meeting continued in much the same way. The Italians continually pressed for more Allied divisions, while the British and French countered that the question of military command had to be decided first.

On the afternoon of 6 November, the Rapallo Conference resumed but now with the inclusion of Generals Foch, Robertson, and Henry Wilson, as well as the Italian Minister of War, General Vittorio Alfieri, and Cadorna's chief of staff, General Carlo Porro. Orlando acknowledged that he "was in a position to announce that a solution had been found" over the question of the Italian command structure.<sup>114</sup> General Cadorna would be promoted to the position of Italian Military Representative on the budding inter-Allied council. This maneuver allowed both Cadorna and his government to save face by not having to openly fire the one man who had controlled the Italian Front since May 1915. The conversation then focused on liaison officers between the

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<sup>112</sup> Orlando, CAB 28/3, IC 30, 3.

<sup>113</sup> Painlevé, CAB 28/3, IC 30, 3.

<sup>114</sup> Orlando, CAB 28/3, IC 30 (a), "Procès Verbal of a Conference of the British, French, and Italian Governments, Held at the New Casino Hotel, Rapallo, on Tuesday, November 6, 1917, at 2:30 p.m. Second Session," 1.

incoming Allied divisions and the newly-reorganized Italian General Staff. Sonnino insisted that “unity of direction would still remain in the hands of the Italian Commander-in-Chief,” no matter what representation the new reinforcements desired.<sup>115</sup> As much as the Italians needed Allied support to shore up their defenses on the Piave, they would not hand over command and control in their own theater of operations. The British, who had believed that the Italians would not be in a position to bargain over anything, discovered that their repeated demands for organizational changes made little impression on Orlando and Sonnino. In any case, the King of Italy remained the official commander-in-chief of the country’s armed forces, and so Allied questions about military changes could always be deflected by citing that simple fact.

Next, General Porro gave his briefing on the current military situation. He painted a bleak picture and “made the poorest impression on every mind at that conference.”<sup>116</sup> The fear that the Germans had another twelve to fifteen divisions on their way only furthered the apparent divide between Italian and British intelligence estimates. Objections to Porro’s analysis possibly masked some apprehension at what the Battle of Caporetto implied for 1918. While the Allies all understood that the imminent loss of Russia liberated German divisions to transfer to the west, they now had first-hand evidence of what those reinforcements could accomplish. As the Italian ambassador to England had warned Sonnino, Caporetto was “the natural result of the Russian collapse.”<sup>117</sup> Nevertheless, Foch and Robertson rejected the Italian general’s breakdown of relative strengths and acknowledged that the Italians had plenty of forces available to conduct a strong defensive campaign.<sup>118</sup> Lloyd George asked how “the Germans could attack at a time of year when

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<sup>115</sup> Sonnino, CAB 28/3, IC 30(a), 2.

<sup>116</sup> Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, 2318.

<sup>117</sup> Imperiali to Sonnino, 26 October 1917, 10:00 p.m., *I Documenti Diplomatici Italiani: 1 Settembre – 31 Dicembre 1917*, 285,

<sup>118</sup> Foch and Robertson, CAB 28/3, IC 30(a), 3-4.

it was impossible for the Italians to do so,” and he referred to his conversation two months before with General Albricci, who had claimed operations were impossible this late in the year.<sup>119</sup> The poor weather conditions had actually aided the initial German attack. If the Germans could launch offensives on the Italian Front late into the year, could the Allies have done the same? Could Allied support for General Cadorna in September, rather than continuing the attack at Passchendaele, have achieved a more decisive result against Austria-Hungary? In many ways, Lloyd George used the Rapallo Conference, and the minutes published by his secretary, to justify that the Allies would be in better shape if the politicians had run the war from the very beginning. The second session ended with confirmation by both Orlando and Porro that the Italians would hold onto the Piave River line and not retreat any further. So far, no truly extraordinary decisions had been made at the conference. The Allies already had eight divisions earmarked for transportation, and the Italians had already arranged to replace Cadorna on their own.

A few hours of refreshment and reflection allowed for a dramatic shift in positions by the time of the third session at 6:50 p.m. on the night of 6 November. Lloyd George, “after examining the proposition and hearing General Porro’s views,” realized the threat to the Italian Front “was more grave than he had anticipated.”<sup>120</sup> Though he had no problem using Robertson’s estimates of Italian leadership to call for Cadorna’s removal, Lloyd George now undercut his own intelligence service by agreeing with Porro. This sudden about-face provided the ammunition that Lloyd George needed to officially introduce his pet project, the inter-Allied council. After all, “no successes which could be achieved in France or elsewhere were in any way comparable with the disaster which would occur to the Allies if the Italian army were now routed.”<sup>121</sup> This remark

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<sup>119</sup> Lloyd George, CAB 28/3, IC 30(a), 4-5.

<sup>120</sup> Lloyd George, CAB 28/3, IC 30(b), “Procès Verbal of a Conference of the British, French, and Italian Governments at the New Casino Hotel, Rapallo, Tuesday November 6, 1917, at 6:50 p.m. Third Session,” 1.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

confirmed that by November 1917 the Italian Front had, for the first time in World War I, become the most important theater of the war. Campaigns in the Middle East and Flanders, revolts in Russia, the air and sea wars – none were as vital to the Allies as the need to ensure Italy kept fighting on the Piave River line. But if Italian and British intelligence estimates remained so far apart, the biggest issue facing the Allies at Rapallo was how best to streamline communication between different nations. Painlevé once again had little to add but to acknowledge that “it was necessary to secure the unity of the Western Front,” which, also for the first time in the war, included Italy as well as France and Flanders.<sup>122</sup> Orlando again brought up the idea of appointing General Cadorna as his technical advisor on any joint Allied staff. Only after two Italians, Porro and Orlando, had brought up relevant details did Lloyd George finally suggest “to prepare a protocol of the functions of the Staff of the Allies.”<sup>123</sup> He certainly would not have left the Rapallo Conference without bringing up his plan for the council, but he had to rely on his hosts for the impetus to introduce it. While the motivation for creating the Supreme War Council came from the British Prime Minister, he needed French and Italian support to achieve part of his goal. The key texts of his draft included:

The Inter-Allied Supreme Council assembled at Rapallo on the 7<sup>th</sup> November, 1917, directs its Advisory General Staff to report immediately on the present situation on the Italian front. Their first task should be, in consultation with the Italian General Headquarters, to establish the facts of the situation in regard to the present and prospective strength of the Italian army and of the enemy . . . The Inter-Allied Advisory Staff should make their recommendations in regard to the nature and extent of the reinforcements to be sent by the British and French Governments to the Italian front and the place of concentration of such

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<sup>122</sup> Painlevé, CAB 28/3, IC 30(b), 2.

<sup>123</sup> Lloyd George, CAB 28/3, IC 30(b), 3.

reinforcements. The Italian Government undertakes to instruct the Italian Higher Command to give every possible facility to the Inter-Allied Advisory Staff both in regard to documents, information, and personal visits to the front.

Thus, the creation of what became the Supreme War Council came about not just in response to an Italian crisis but in direct coordination with the Italian government and military. However, not every minister agreed to create this new organization right away. Sonnino believed “it was hardly opportune to improvise a new reference to an inter-Allied General Staff, the creation of which had not yet taken place.”<sup>124</sup> The Italian Foreign Minister had survived the political fallout of Caporetto, even if Cadorna and Boselli had not. His aim at Rapallo had been to secure Allied reinforcements after an embarrassing reversal. If the Italians could quickly integrate a few Allied divisions and reconquer the lost territory, Sonnino could still emerge from the war as a hero. From his perspective, the immediate material needs of the armies on the Piave were more important than the establishment of some vague Allied convention.

Nor was opposition to this scheme limited to just non-British representatives. If Orlando felt he played the role of the patiently-suffering Christ at Gethsemane during the conference, then General William Robertson might have been better cast as Pontius Pilate. The most famous event at Rapallo, when the Chief of the Imperial General Staff walked out of the fourth session on 7 November, even included Robertson saying, “I wash my hands of this.”<sup>125</sup> Robertson believed that the creation of a separate group of military advisors outside of the regular chain of command caused confusion and damaged the overall war effort – and, by extension, his own position as the government’s chief military advisor. By walking out of the project, he could both embarrass Lloyd

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<sup>124</sup> Sonnino, CAB 28/3, IC 30(b), 3.

<sup>125</sup> Robertson, *From Private to Field Marshal*, 328-329. Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, vol. 4, 2395. Pontius Pilate, the Roman prefect of Judea, agreed to crucify Jesus in response to the demands of a crowd. He “washes his hands” of the issue to absolve himself of any blame, even though he is the one who ultimately orders the execution.



George and deny any responsibility for anything that followed. His dramatics at Rapallo, and the battle between him and Lloyd George for control of British military strategy, have overshadowed many of the intricacies of Italian diplomacy in subsequent meetings. For his part, Painlevé disagreed with Robertson, saying the general scheme of a joint staff “had been in the mind of the French Government for a long time.”<sup>126</sup> The bulk of the fighting on the Western Front had been in France and therefore the French always had a strong motivation to unify multi-national contingents under one French command. The British simply could not replicate this attitude because no enemy force directly threatened their island home. Now, however, the Italians *did* have the same experience as the French and could sympathize in some part with the utility of a joint command. Orlando and Sonnino “were in entire agreement with the principles of the scheme” but agreed with the details “only in general.”<sup>127</sup> The British and French representatives, whose main armies were fighting together on the Western Front, could drown out any Italian dissent. The Italians likely feared that Allied strategy would gravitate away from the Italian Front once the initial emergency had been resolved.

From this basis of tentative support, the Italians began picking at the proposed Articles of the Supreme War Council. Sonnino worried that too much ambiguity allowed Russia to enter into the agreement, and he “expressed some doubt as to whether this was advisable under present disturbed conditions in Russia.”<sup>128</sup> Written the very day the Bolsheviks seized power in Petrograd,<sup>129</sup> Sonnino probably worried that any attention given to the distant Russians distracted from the present needs of his own countrymen. The Italian Foreign Minister also objected to the phrasing

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<sup>126</sup> Painlevé, CAB 28/3, IC 30(c), “Procès Verbal of a Conference of the British, French, and Italian Governments at the New Casino Hotel, Rapallo, Wednesday, November 7, 1917, at 11:00 a.m. Fourth Session,” 1.

<sup>127</sup> Orlando, CAB 28/3, IC 30(c), 1.

<sup>128</sup> Sonnino, CAB 28/3, IC 30(c), 2.

<sup>129</sup> St. Petersburg, the Russian capital, was renamed to Petrograd in 1914 to avoid sounding too German.

of Article 1 which said: “Whereas the situation that has developed on the Western Front and Europe renders the creation of a Supreme War Council necessary.” This exact phrasing implied that the SWC existed only because of Caporetto rather than because of the gradual desire to coordinate strategy among all the Allies.<sup>130</sup> In reality, both of those reasons were true, but Sonnino could hardly pronounce that Italy had agreed to a unified Allied organization in the wake of a military disaster. The Italians had to appear to be negotiating from a position of strength as a Great Power. After some debate over where the new council should convene, the ministers selected Versailles for the next meeting. The Rapallo Conference thus became the first official session of the Supreme War Council.

Before the Allied leaders left Italy, they met with King Vittorio Emanuele III at Peschiera on 8 November. The king used the opportunity to blame the loss of 30,000 Italian officers during the war and the “absence of highly trained professionals” for the defeat at Caporetto.<sup>131</sup> Lloyd George again explained why he felt entitled to call for a change in Italian leadership, but the king responded that although “he did not in every respect agree with the criticisms which had been made against General Cadorna . . . his government had already decided to remove him.”<sup>132</sup> He continued by congratulating the ministers on having worked together at Rapallo and expressed the hope that “the Italian campaign might assume very large and important proportions in the immediate future.” While the Italian Front had indeed achieved peak priority in the waning days of 1917, Italian diplomacy now had the opportunity to ensure this arrangement lasted through the winter meetings.

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Vittorio Emanuele III, CAB 28/3, IC 32, “Procès Verbal of a Conference Held at the Italian HQ at Peschiera on Thursday Morning 8 November 1917,” 1.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

## **Conclusion**

The year 1917, which had opened with such promise for the Allies, ended on a dismal note. Romania had begun negotiations with the Central Powers, Russia had fallen to the Bolsheviks, and now Italy had faced complete collapse in the wake of Caporetto. Italy's limited war on the Isonzo and in Albania had prevented her army from undergoing any doctrinal revival. However, that very same limited involvement is what made the Italian Front so appealing to Allied decision-makers in Rome in January 1917. Surely the Italians had strong manpower reserves to commit to a broader war. They just needed some additional assurances and artillery to turn a secondary theater into a major victory against a German ally. Unfortunately, increased Italian involvement brought them directly into contact with a vastly more experienced German Army that had been fighting half of Europe since August 1914. Once again, military realities seemed to limit the strategic influence of a weaker power. It had taken the Italian Army two years just to approach one of its major objectives at Trieste, and that effort had been undone in a span of a few weeks. Not even the promise of American reinforcements could fully assuage the fears of the Allied powers. After all, every time a major power engaged the German Army for the first time it had ended in spectacular defeat, including the Anglo-French forces at the Battle of the Frontiers, the Russians at Tannenberg, and now the Italians at Caporetto.

The Rapallo Conference transformed the landscape of Allied coalition warfare. Early war and pre-war conferences often consisted of vague promises and commitments for joint action in distant theaters. These promises rarely amounted to anything other than sporadically different attacks with mixed results. Meanwhile, anytime the Germans chose to put significant pressure on a certain front – the Schlieffen Plan in 1914, Poland and Serbia in 1915, Verdun in 1916, Russia and Italy in 1917 – the Allies had to radically alter their own preconceived strategies to react to

the enemy. While this pattern continued in 1918 with the German Spring Offensive, the Allies had finally come around to developing a framework staff that could in theory respond rapidly to any attack. Contrary to common perception, the Italians actively debated and manipulated the discussions at Rapallo to their own benefit. Combined with the threat of Italy leaving the war, Italian negotiations provided a strategic counter-balance to the loss of over half-a-million men in one battle. While Italy's military power had obviously decreased, her influence among her Allies had only increased. If anything, Britain and France made a concession by rushing their highest-ranking military and political leaders to Italy to ensure that she recovered after Caporetto.

The Russian and Italian experiences bear a closer comparison. Both nations had limited industrial capacities and relied heavily on French and British loans and resources. Socialist and pacifist unrest against the Romanov and Savoy dynasties increased the longer the war continued. The Russian and Italian Armies both fought mostly on one front for the duration of the war. The defeats suffered by both countries in 1917 significantly altered the organization of the Allied coalition. Despite Russia's stronger manpower reserves and her close ties with France, geographic considerations prevented her from receiving the same aid the Italians got. The Dardanelles and the Baltic Sea were closed to Allied shipping. While Russia's potential exit from the war plagued all the Allied leaders, they could do little to help her. However, Allied ministers and divisions could reach Italy within a matter of days. Thus, the geography of a coalition allowed a weak state to supplant a stronger one even though they both suffered considerable defeats.

Whether Italy could have held on to the Piave River line with or without Allied support is outside of the scope of this paper. The Italians certainly wanted Allied reinforcements to replace the loss of 2nd Army. They did not fix everything on their own and they did need the Allies. However, Allied support after Caporetto was part of the gradual expansion of Italy's war effort,

especially as indicated by the Rome Conference. While Caporetto was certainly the cause of the current support being offered, it was not a radical step taken without prior planning or coordination. This more balanced understanding of the battle and its aftermath helps explain how the Italians could still negotiate with their partners at Rapallo and afterward despite the magnitude of the defeat they had suffered. Without Caporetto, the Allies might have faced the Spring Offensive of 1918 deprived of any unified political structure when the Germans turned their new tactics on them for the first time.

## Chapter 4 – Winter Interlude

In the wake of the Rapallo Conference, the Supreme War Council (SWC) was supposed to provide better coordination for the Allied war effort. The coming winter of 1917-1918 offered plenty of time for a myriad of conferences. These meetings often included a rotating cast of attendees and a dizzying array of wide-ranging publications addressing everything from troop conditions in Italy to the transportation of food from the United States. The meetings did not have the same sense of urgency that the Allies had felt after Caporetto. In November 1917, the threat of Italy leaving the war combined with the fall of the Russian Provisional Government endangered the entire war effort. By December, the fear of internal collapse had been replaced by the certainty of a pending external offensive in the west. The massive build-up of German troops on the Western Front remained the proverbial sword of Damocles hanging over all the Allied plans for 1918. However, until the sword dropped and the Spring Offensive began, the SWC contented itself with debating the pet projects of each of its members.

Italy's ever-expanding role as an Allied power, solidified by the catastrophic defeat at Caporetto, had finally culminated in the central role she expected to play in the upcoming debates. This chapter will move chronologically through the arrival of the American Mission and then the Second, Third, and Fourth Conferences of the SWC to analyze how Italian representatives influenced Allied strategy even at a time of perceived weakness. The American Mission provided an important diplomatic opportunity for all the Allied powers to determine how best to use the military potential of the United States. But the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) arrived so slowly on the continent that it could not directly replace the abrupt loss of a fully mobilized Russian Army. Therefore, the Italians filled the temporary gap in military and diplomatic power during this time. The Second Conference was also the first real meeting of the SWC as an established

organization, in contrast to the more frantic pace of the Rapallo Conference. In the relaxed and luxurious atmosphere of Versailles, the Allies debated the impact of the collapse of the Eastern Front and the preparations needed for the inevitable transfer of German divisions to the west. The Italians used their new influence to object to many of the proposals of this conference. They preferred to let events in Russia, Poland, and Romania play out to avoid needlessly committing the Allies to additional military or diplomatic promises they could ill-afford to take on – and that might detract from any support the Italians themselves needed. The Third Conference had much more urgency as the German attack that everyone expected came closer to reality. Minor issues like the Salonika campaign and support for the anti-Bolshevik movement faded in the face of preparing for the coming German onslaught. The Italians supported the creation of a General Allied Reserve and hesitantly backed the idea of single unified commander for all the Allied armies. Neither of these ideas could be implemented by the Fourth Conference, which took place just one week before the start of the Spring Offensive.

### **The American Arrival**

Italy's role in the coming conferences remained closely connected to the purposefully weakened role the Americans chose to play in them. The arrival of the American diplomatic mission to Europe marked the transformation of the Allied powers into a new Big Four, with the United States eventually supplanting Russia's former role. However, since its great industrial potential had yet to be converted into real military power, the United States remained only an untested and weak ally. The head of the mission, Colonel Edward House, a close confidant of President Woodrow Wilson, had specific instructions to avoid any of the petty political disputes of the SWC. House argued that "it would not be wise for us to have a representative who at all

times would sit in with the Allied Prime Ministers.”<sup>133</sup> This decision could be explained as one of natural exclusion. The prime ministers of Great Britain, France, and Italy were all members of the SWC, but President Wilson was not going to spend the rest of the war travelling to and from Europe. To do so as a guest of his newfound allies, attending conferences and working far from his voter base, would have diminished his potential strength in any post-war negotiations as head of the American war machine. Instead, the Americans provided only a permanent military representative in the form of General Tasker Bliss, the Army’s Chief of Staff, and some diplomatic personnel to attend the meetings.<sup>134</sup> This conscious choice to participate in the SWC in a limited way caused tension in future conferences.

The first official meeting between the British War Cabinet and the American mission took place on 20 November 1917. Lloyd George welcomed the Americans and immediately downplayed Britain’s failure to win the war. He agreed that “we have made mistakes” in the “unexplored country” of war. Nevertheless, these mistakes still gave Britain “an advantage in any conversation” with the inexperienced Americans.<sup>135</sup> Assuming the role almost of elder statesman speaking to former colonists, Lloyd George painted a desperate picture for the coming year unless immediate American aid arrived. His summary of “the collapse of Russia and of Italy” and the “failure in the manpower of France” conveniently implied that only Britain had held up her part in the coalition so far.<sup>136</sup> As a result, he asked that the Americans send men to the front as soon as possible before nearly 80 German divisions moved from the collapsing Eastern Front to the

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<sup>133</sup> Edward Mandel House, *The Intimate Papers of Colonel House*, vol. 3, ed. Charles Seymour (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1928), 217-218. David F. Trask, *The United States in the Supreme War Council: American War Aims and Inter-Allied Strategy* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 31-32.

<sup>134</sup> Frederick Palmer, *Bliss, Peacemaker: The Life and Letters of General Tasker Howard Bliss* (New York, NY: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1934), 186-187.

<sup>135</sup> Lloyd George to American Military Mission, CAB 28/3, IC 33, “Procès Verbal of a Conference of the British War Cabinet and Heads of Government Departments with Certain Members of the Mission from the United States of America, held at 10 Downing Street, S.W., on Tuesday, November 20, 1917 at 11:30 a.m.,” 2.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*



Western Front. The Italians had just used this same fearmongering tactic s at Rapallo when they had repeatedly overestimated the size of the attacking 14<sup>th</sup> Army – and the Allies had roundly criticized the Italians for doing so. Clearly, the British saw no hypocrisy in applying the same technique when it came to reinforcements in their own theater of operations. But manpower remained only part of the problem. The shipping available to the Allies to move American personnel and equipment became a controversial issue throughout the coming winter months. The meeting duly concluded with Sir Joseph Maclay, Britain’s Shipping Controller, informing Admiral William Benson, America’s Chief of Naval Operations, that, no matter what transportation arrangements the Americans and British made, “France and Italy were also concerned” to have a voice in how men and resources moved throughout the Allied theater of operations.<sup>137</sup> The French and Italian armies both maintained active military fronts and had to take some precedence over the shipment and training of new American divisions.

The thorny question of transportation led to a follow-up meeting that afternoon. The Earl George Curzon of Kedleston, leader of the House of Lords, opened the meeting by refusing any proposal to pool Allied shipping for each nation to request at will. He would not “submit the shipping of Great Britain, which amounted to at least four-fifths of the whole, to international control.”<sup>138</sup> However, some of Curzon’s fellow ministers criticized this self-serving attitude. Britain could not win the war by hoarding all its shipping for its own purposes. Lord Robert Cecil, Britain’s Minister of Blockade, believed that a failure to coordinate tonnage had helped aggravate Italy’s coal shortage and that this breakdown “was one of the contributory causes of the Italian debacle” at Caporetto.<sup>139</sup> The British certainly had enough demands on their own naval power.

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<sup>137</sup> Sir Joseph Maclay to Admiral William Benson, CAB 28/3, IC 33, 9-10.

<sup>138</sup> Earl George Curzon of Kedleston, CAB 28/3, IC 34, “Tonnage Situation: Report of a Committee Appointed by the Anglo-American Conference on November 20, 1917,” 1-2.

<sup>139</sup> Lord Robert Cecil, CAB 28/3, IC 34, 2.

Maintaining the blockade of the Central Powers, ensuring overseas commerce to continue funding the Allied war effort, and transporting soldiers from all over the world's largest empire strained the reach of even the Royal Navy. Although Britannia still undoubtedly ruled the waves, she had to compromise on her own shipping demands to keep her Allies in fighting trim on the continent. Vance McCormick, the Chairman of the U.S. War Trade Board, acknowledged that French and Italian participation in the newly-created Interallied Shipping Advisory Committee "was not only desirable but absolutely necessary."

These early meetings demonstrated America's commitment to both work with her new partners yet stay out of discussions not directly related to military strategy. Both Britain and the United States understood that, until the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) arrived in force on the continent, the western Allies mostly dictated not only the disposition of forces but the outcome of any strategic debate. The vacuum created by the withdrawal of Russia from the war and by the limit of American participation in the SWC gave the Italians a stronger opportunity to influence the upcoming conferences.

### **The Second Conference**

By the end of November, the main Allied representatives of the new Big Four (Great Britain, France, Italy, and the United States) had arrived in Paris for the upcoming Second Session of the SWC. Prior to that meeting, however, the political representatives of each country met at the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 30 November 1917. They prepared the diplomatic groundwork before gathering for the SWC itself which included military representatives. Unfortunately, recent events in Russia made that groundwork very shaky indeed.

After the October Revolution, the Bolsheviks steadily expanded their sphere of influence outside of Petrograd against the anti-communist coalition of White Russians.<sup>140</sup> The Allies, fearing the imminent withdrawal of the Russians from the war and the subsequent release of German divisions, sought creative ways to take advantage of the cracks in Russian society. Stephen Pichon, the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, had spoken to the former Russian ambassador in Paris, Vasily Maklakoff, on a proposal recently received from the east. Sir George Buchanan, Britain's ambassador to Russia, had asked if the Allies might "release Russia from the engagement entered into in the Pact of London not to make a separate peace."<sup>141</sup> If the anti-Bolshevik White Russians could make peace with Germany or even fight on of their own accord, this flexibility could help restore public faith in Russia in the deposed Provisional Government. The return of a pro-Allied government, even a neutral one who had negotiated a truce with Germany, would still demand the military attention of the Central Powers in the east. Italian Foreign Minister Sidney Sonnino wondered "what advantage we could derive from making such a suggestion" that openly allowed a military ally, even an embattled one like Russia, to sue for peace on its own.<sup>142</sup> What if Italy had negotiated a truce with the Central Powers after Caporetto? Sonnino wanted to avoid setting a poor precedent that authorized an individual Ally to sue for a separate peace. Romania and Serbia, who still had armies in the field even though the Central Powers had conquered much of their territory,

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<sup>140</sup> The White Russians are known as such because of their collective opposition to the Soviets, who became known as the Red Russians. In this paper, the term "White Russians" refers generally to anti-Bolshevik elements in Russia. However, in reality, the Whites were a hodgepodge mixture of reactionary monarchists, former Army officers, exiles from the Provisional Government, Cossacks, and nationalists representing regions who wanted to break off from Russia completely. They never had a single leader or strategy uniting all anti-Bolshevik forces. The confusion in Russia over which people belonged to what organization greatly increased the uncertainty among the Allies over what action to take. As a result, subsequent Allied intervention in Russia proved to be as fractured and incoherent as the policies of the White Russians themselves.

<sup>141</sup> Stephen Pichon, CAB 28/3, IC 35, "Notes of a Conversation at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Paris, 30 November 1917," 1-2. Maklakoff was a representative of the now-defunct Provisional Government and thus could only unofficially represent some anti-Bolshevik elements in Russia and not the new Petrograd Soviet.

<sup>142</sup> Sidney Sonnino, CAB 28/3, IC 35, 2.

could embrace Buchanan's suggestion to negotiate their complete withdrawal from the war. These questions embarrassed Lloyd George, who had to clarify that the British government had not officially supported this position. Buchanan had sent the proposal of his own accord, as the British expert in Russian affairs, while witnessing the disintegration of a pro-Allied government. Sonnino continued his opposition to any official public statement, admitting that the Allies had no true understanding of the breadth of Bolshevik support and adding that any action they took "might strengthen the Bolsheviks."<sup>143</sup> The Italians, having themselves just survived a near-disaster that had strongly increased anti-war sentiment back home, did not want to take any initiative that might strengthen anti-war parties in eastern Europe. "The Allies were [just] exhorting the Italian government to incite the spirit of their people," Sonnino argued, but now in Russia the Allies "proposed to disarm them by the action now contemplated."<sup>144</sup> The repercussions could be disastrous and adversely influence socialist agitation in western Europe. Lloyd George, trying to retake control of the conversation and shift some of the pressure off himself, took umbrage at Sonnino's "do nothing" policy, calling it undiplomatic for missing the point of what Buchanan had intended to accomplish.

Sonnino wanted the Allies to say little in public because they could do little to help the White Russians. So why bother making any statement at all? Any declaration would simply be turned against the Allies as propaganda by the Germans or the Bolsheviks. And of course, any further efforts to prop up a flagging Russia came at the expense of a struggling Italian state still recovering from a near-fatal offensive. In addition, Sonnino's warning of the potential impact on "all the minor Allied states [that] were represented at the Conference" showed a grasp of how weak powers negotiate in a coalition. Britain and France had the power and influence to dictate policy

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

to minor states like Romania and Serbia. Italy, however, did not, and therefore it had to rely more on negotiating and cajoling than on outright force to implement its own foreign strategy. Colonel House, showing some of his inexperience in allied negotiations, rather vaguely supported a statement that “could be so drafted as to hearten everyone, including the smaller Powers.”<sup>145</sup> This feel-good approach ignored the fact that the Italians wanted to avoid expending unnecessary strength on a losing effort in Russia. At this point, the former Russian ambassador, Maklakoff, entered the room and gave his opinion that any statement on Allied war aims might “render some assistance to moderates in Russia,” which could help stem the rising tide of Bolshevism.<sup>146</sup> The combined representatives ultimately agreed to a combination of what Maklakoff and Sonnino wanted. Draft statements were proposed but nothing was published until the SWC Conference ended. Clearly, the Italians had every intention of making their own views heard even though they themselves had had very little prior military cooperation with Russia.

The Russian case presented a clear dynamic of the influence between the supposedly-humbled Italians and the newly-arrived Americans. The political representatives of the SWC continued to deliberate this subject throughout the conference. On 1 December 1917, the Allied ministers debated the different draft declarations. House’s declaration, purposefully designed to be general and not specifically aimed at Russia, combined some of Maklakoff’s proposals as well:

The Conference of Paris, while affirming the willingness of the Allies to pursue without relaxation the struggle against the common enemy until the establishment of a definite peace founded on the right of nations to liberty, regrets that the absence in Russia of a regular Government recognized by the nation has not enabled it to submit in common to an exhaustive examination of the objects of the war.

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<sup>145</sup> Colonel Edward House, CAB 28/3, IC 35, 3.

<sup>146</sup> Maklakoff, CAB 28/3, IC 35, 6.

Nevertheless, the Allies and the United States declare that they are not waging war for the purpose of aggression or indemnity. The sacrifices they are making are in order that the sword shall not continue to cast its shadow over the world, and that nations shall have the right to lead their lives in the way that seems to them best for the development of their general welfare.<sup>147</sup>

This declaration contained very general language but no specifics that really helped mobilize anti-Bolshevik forces. These types of ideological statements indicated how far, or rather, how little the United States, clearly delineated as a separate entity from “the Allies” in the draft, could go in terms of diplomatic commitments. House and his team wanted to focus only on the common goal of defeating Germany. Appearing to meddle in Russian internal politics certainly did not fit that ideal and showed how these constraints limited America’s diplomatic flexibility. Sonnino, on the other hand, had no such constraints. His proposal eliminated the flowery language yet also remained vague and noncommittal:

The representatives of the Great Powers who are signatories of the Treaty of London, dated the 4th September, 1914, and those who have since adhered to this treaty, declare that they are ready to proceed to the examination of the war aims and of the possible conditions of a just and durable peace in concert with Russia, as soon as a regular Government, having the right to speak in the name of the nation, shall be established in Russia.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> House and Maklakoff, CAB 28/3, Appendix to IC 35, “Draft Declaration to be Addressed to Russia,” section e, “Alternative Proposition Combining Proposals by M. Maklakoff and Colonel House,” 1.

<sup>148</sup> Sonnino CAB 28/3, Appendix to IC 35, section f, “Baron Sonnino’s Proposal,” 1.

This proposal absolved the Allies of any responsibility in the matter at hand. Only once the *Russians* had, on their own, reestablished a legitimate government would the Allies discuss war aims with them.<sup>149</sup> Fearing that he was now in the minority, the Italian Foreign Minister believed that his draft had little support. However, he soon received an unexpected boost from the unpredictable Lloyd George.

This new round of conferences had not begun well for the British Prime Minister. He already had been forced to deal with Buchanan's independent-minded proposals from Petrograd and the American refusal to wholly embrace the SWC. Then, on 30 November, Lord Henry Lansdowne published an infamous letter in the *Daily Telegraph* that called for peace with Germany based on the pre-war status quo.<sup>150</sup> Although the British government and press quickly denounced Lansdowne, the letter added to Lloyd George's discomfiture and forced him to come around to Sonnino's attitude on any possible declaration concerning Russia. Lloyd George now feared that any published document that suggested Russia could sue for peace "would be regarded as a support to Lord Lansdowne's point of view."<sup>151</sup> Sonnino could not help but claim victory as Lloyd George's change of heart represented "substantially an endorsement of his own [Sonnino's] view" and even Pichon favored the Italian baron's "formula."<sup>152</sup>

The discussion now turned towards the management of Allied relations with the rest of eastern Europe. Ferdinand I, the King of Romania, had asked the Italian minister at Iasi if the Allies guaranteed Romanian sovereignty (and, of course, his own dynasty) even in the event of an armistice with Germany.<sup>153</sup> The Romanians had been steadily forced into a dwindling pocket in

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> "Lord Lansdowne's Letter: Repudiation by Government," *The Times*, 1 December 1917, 9, The Times Digital Archive.

<sup>151</sup> Lloyd George, CAB 28/3, IC 35(a), 2-3.

<sup>152</sup> Sonnino and Pichon, CAB 28/3, IC 35(a), 3.

<sup>153</sup> Sonnino, CAB 28/3, IC 35(a), 6.

the northeastern corner of their country, and the Russian Revolution threatened to eventually bring the Bolsheviks to Romania's border with the Ukraine. Arthur Balfour, the British Foreign Secretary, agreed with the Romanian proposal made through Italian offices. The new Prime Minister of France, Georges Clemenceau, agreed with Lloyd George, and together they offered the same guarantees of pre-war borders and sovereignty to Serbia and Belgium.<sup>154</sup> This reciprocity of feeling between Britain and Italy now extended to the future of occupied Poland. Pichon acknowledged Polish requests for a guarantee of a post-war state – there was no independent Poland before the war – that included access to the Baltic Sea.<sup>155</sup> Lloyd George and Sonnino both disagreed with this plan and, in a replay of the Russia debate, confirmed that any public support would “only increase our difficulties.” Sonnino later acknowledged that any declaration that did not specify the territory that constituted an independent Poland would be dismissed by the Germans “as a new and unattainable war aim.” Lloyd George's more agreeable attitude on 1 December 1917 stemmed from domestic turbulence at home and the need for some success in coalition affairs abroad. Regardless, Italian overtures steadily won the day, even though they were over minor points of order on what kind of statements and guarantees should be made. The Italians at least played an important part in shaping the debate on redesigning the borders of eastern Europe, and this discussion dominated most of the post-war conferences as well.

In between these various debates on foreign policy came the far more contentious meetings of the Supreme War Council, which also included the military representatives of each nation. The Second Session of the SWC took place at 11:00 a.m. on 1 December 1917 at Versailles. Clemenceau, who had replaced Painlevé as Prime Minister of France less than two weeks prior, opened the meeting by asking the Permanent Military Advisers to make recommendations for

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<sup>154</sup> Lloyd George and Georges Clemenceau, CAB 28/3, IC 35(a), 6.

<sup>155</sup> Pichon, CAB 28/3, IC 3 (a), 6-7.



military operations for the next year. Notably, he “suggested that the situation in Italy . . . should be the first and most urgent consideration.”<sup>156</sup> The Germans had yet to transfer the bulk of their eastern divisions to the Western Front and so the Allies had to plan for an attack either in France or Italy. Considering these unknowns and the recent defeat at Caporetto, the first full meeting of the SWC focused almost exclusively on a combined strategy for the Italian Front. Most of the Allied ministers expected that the Germans would attack early in 1918 because the balance of forces rested in their favor until the AEF arrived. General Erich Ludendorff himself acknowledged this obvious fact in his memoirs: “All the world, including the Entente, knew we were going to attack in the West.”<sup>157</sup> Lloyd George meanwhile asked for an update on the manpower and reserves available on the Italian Front, while helpfully reminding everyone that at the Rome Conference in January 1917 he “had indicated the danger of Germany’s attacking Italy after disposing of Russia.” Maybe Caporetto could have been averted if the Allies had agreed to make a more concerted effort in Italy earlier in 1917. Regardless, while at the Rome Conference, Lloyd George claimed “it was found impossible to get in even ten minutes for the consideration of the problem of the Italian front.”<sup>158</sup> This public rebuke of the “westerners” as exemplified by General Robertson underlay all of Lloyd George’s actions. He had exploited Caporetto as an excuse to call for the creation of the SWC, and now he used the SWC to repeatedly undermine Robertson’s control of Britain’s strategy.<sup>159</sup> British support for operations in Italy steadily declined through the coming winter meetings as it became clear the Germans would not attack there again in 1918. Lloyd George could use the shaping of strategy at Versailles to assert his own dominance over Robertson. Sensing an

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<sup>156</sup> Clemenceau, CAB 28/3, IC 36, “Procès Verbal of the 2nd Session of the Supreme War Council, held at the Trianon Palace, Versailles, on Saturday, 1 December 1917 at 11 a.m.,” 1-2.

<sup>157</sup> Ludendorff, *Ludendorff’s Own Story*, vol. 2, 225.

<sup>158</sup> Lloyd George, CAB 28/3, IC 36, 2.

<sup>159</sup> Woodward, *Lloyd George and the Generals*, 221.

opportunity to put his nation once again at the forefront of Allied strategy, Vittorio Orlando now asked the British and French to send an additional twenty divisions to Italy to help restore the “military equilibrium.”<sup>160</sup> By “equilibrium” he meant recapturing the territory lost between the Isonzo and Piave Rivers, a feat which might help cement Orlando’s legacy as the savior of his own nation. Then the Allies could have their loaned divisions back.

However, no transfer of units to the Italian front could be accepted without discussing the increasingly complex transportation dilemma. If the Allies sent more troops south they would necessarily send less supplies that same direction. Lloyd George did not want to strengthen the Italian front at the expense of the Salonika campaign. Sending fewer supplies to Italy also prevented the Italians from forwarding some of those supplies to Albania and Greece.<sup>161</sup> Orlando offered six transatlantic liners from Genoa that could carry 3,000 men in a single night from France.<sup>162</sup> This move could simultaneously reduce the danger from submarines by moving at night and free up railways for the transportation of critical resources for both Italy and Greece. Clemenceau and Lloyd George then bickered as the French Prime Minister reminded his counterpart that “it was Italy that was under discussion” – not transportation everywhere.<sup>163</sup> Demonstrating his preference for secondary theaters, Lloyd George responded that Italian lines of communications impacted Allied operations in the Balkans and Egypt, and thus they affected the entire supply of rolling stock available on the Western Front. The SWC ultimately compromised by adopting Resolution Number 6, which called for the examination of Inter-Allied Transport by a single expert – Sir Eric Geddes, Britain’s First Lord of the Admiralty.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Vittorio Orlando, CAB 28/3, IC 36, 3.

<sup>161</sup> Lloyd George, CAB 28/3, IC 36, 3.

<sup>162</sup> Orlando, CAB 28/3, IC 36, 3.

<sup>163</sup> Clemenceau, CAB 28/3, IC 36, 3.

<sup>164</sup> Resolution Number 6, CAB 28/3, IC 36, 4.

Three major events strongly influenced the focus of the Second Session of the Supreme War Council and its subsidiary meetings: the imminent withdrawal of Russia from the war, the pending arrival of the Americans in the conflict, and the stabilization of the Italian front. That Caporetto had made Italy a far more vital member of the Allies could no longer be discounted. The Italians helped argued against many of the pet resolutions of the Second Session. Sure enough, their obstinacy eventually turned the conversation towards increased support for the Italian Front. By keeping the Allies focused on Italian issues and by downplaying the importance of acting on the Eastern Front, Sonnino and Orlando did their best to maintain Italy's primacy within the Allied cause.

### **The Third Conference**

The Third Session of the SWC was scheduled for the end of January 1918. The agenda of these meetings gravitated more towards how the Allies responded to any future German attack. The effort to provide a joint solution, even with the fear of a massive German offensive, met with as much resistance and debate as any other joint campaign of World War I. The Italians again played a central part in the debate over Allied strategy for 1918.

Once again, an Anglo-American meeting before the conference impacted the direction of future Allied planning. On the eve of the third round of talks, Lloyd George brought the Chief of the Imperial General Staff (Robertson), the commander of the British Expeditionary Force (Haig), and his permanent military representative to the SWC (General Henry Wilson) to speak with Generals Tasker Bliss and John Pershing. With his very first question, Lloyd George shrewdly

asked the status of “the proposed incorporation of American battalions in British brigades.”<sup>165</sup> Remember that Lloyd George had rejected a similar proposal by the Italians to integrate Allied reinforcements directly into the Italian Army. The debates at Rapallo Conference provide context for what the British wanted to do now. Any respectable government leader wanted to maintain the independence of his own soldiers even when working with an ally – no politician could long survive the wholesale transfer of armies not only to another theater but to foreign control. However, by asking for American reinforcements directly into British brigades, Lloyd George and Robertson could frame the request as one of expediency rather than one of political maneuvering. After all, the more Americans fought and died in British units, then the fewer casualties Lloyd George had to answer for to the public and to Parliament. The British wanted to simultaneously bolster their own ranks with American troops and maintain direct control of their units fighting on the Italian Front. General Wilson also continued the fearmongering by claiming that over 200 German divisions could soon be on the Western Front, and that waiting until the AEF could arrive as an independent force was a mistake.<sup>166</sup> Nevertheless, Pershing rejected any effort to speed up American arrival in France by sending individual U.S. battalions directly to Allied divisions. He would allow arriving battalions to train with the Allies, but then these units would be incorporated into an independent army. There were only four American divisions in France at the time and, though two more divisions arrived each month, those units would first undergo an extensive training regimen. Thus, the Allies could not fully count on the United States for the first part of 1918.

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<sup>165</sup> Lloyd George to Tasker Bliss and John Pershing, CAB 28/3, IC 38, “Notes of a Conference Held at the Trianon Palace, Versailles 29 January 1919 at 12:00 p.m.,” 1.

<sup>166</sup> Henry Wilson, CAB 28/3, IC 38, 2.

Without the AEF, the Allies had to find other options to counter any coming German offensive. Much of the debate in the Third Session of the SWC, which began on 30 January 1917 at Versailles, covered the creation of a flexible, multi-national reserve force. General Foch opened the conference by acknowledging the vulnerability of the lengthy Allied defensive position “from Nieuwpoort to Venice.”<sup>167</sup> A unified reserve force allowed the Allies the flexibility to respond rapidly to any penetration of their defensive position if needed or to transition to a counteroffensive when possible. Orlando agreed that plans “for the defensive and the constitution of the General Reserve were intimately connected,” and General Cadorna also conceded the possibility of using a reserve to transition into a general Allied counter-offensive.<sup>168</sup> Caporetto had shown that the absence of a strong central responding force could lead to rapid territorial gains by the enemy. The influx of German troops from the east only increased this possibility. Haig and Pétain, the British and French field commanders, remained united in disagreement with any scheme that drew more divisions away from their respective fronts.<sup>169</sup> Instead, Pétain acknowledged that “he would have an army ready to support Sir Douglas Haig in an emergency” and vice versa. They hinted that they might support the plan only if American units were immediately amalgamated – an issue that never fully went away – into their own armies. But with the six-month training regimen for new American units and Pershing’s insistence on an independent AEF, the Americans gradually ceded any real say in planning for Allied strategy. That left an opening for the Italians, who comprehended the situation and decided not to press their luck by asking to incorporate American reinforcements directly into the Italian Army.

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<sup>167</sup> Foch, CAB 28/3, IC 39, “Procès Verbal of the First Meeting of the 3rd Session of the SWC held at the Trianon Palace at Versailles on Wednesday, 30 January at 3:00 p.m.,” 4.

<sup>168</sup> Orlando and Cadorna, CAB 28/3, IC 39, 5.

<sup>169</sup> Haig and Pétain, CAB 28/3, IC 39, 5-6.

The next afternoon, 31 January 1918, a second meeting saw the Italians and Americans at loggerheads over the manpower issue. The British and French had begun the meeting by debating how much effort should be given to secondary theaters in Greece and the Middle East in 1918 considering the pending German attack. What Clemenceau derided as the “treason of Russia” had put the Allies under significant pressure; maybe the similar destruction of one of Germany’s allies would put as much stress on the Central Powers.<sup>170</sup> However, since reinforcements had already been prioritized for the Western Front, Sonnino acknowledged that “no further resources in manpower could be found among the Western Allies.” He then asked the Americans about incorporating their units *only* into the French and British armies.<sup>171</sup> With American reinforcements, the Allies might be able to sustain both defensive operations in the west and offensive operations in the east. Potential attacks in Greece and Palestine might divert Austro-Hungarian and Turkish attention as well, an important consideration now that the defeat of Russia had also released more Austro-Hungarian divisions for service in Italy. Annoyed at the repeated suggestions of amalgamating his army and dividing his resources, Bliss refused to make any declaration on the issue. He urged the Allies to accept that he was preparing the “effective utilization of American manpower without the formal declaration by my Government which Baron Sonnino appears to desire.”<sup>172</sup> Why did Sonnino, who had opposed almost every declaration from the Second Session, now want a public statement on American manpower? Probably to prod the Americans into recognizing Italian interests in the coalition and to acknowledge Sonnino’s influence within the coalition, especially if Bliss had made the statement after Italian encouragement.

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<sup>170</sup> Lloyd George and Clemenceau, CAB 28/3, IC 40, “Procès Verbal of the Second Meeting of the Third Session of the SWC held at the Trianon Palace, Versailles, 31 January 1918 at 3:00 p.m.,” 11-12.

<sup>171</sup> Sonnino, CAB 28/3, IC 40, 13.

<sup>172</sup> Bliss, CAB 28/3, IC 40, 16.

On the next day, 1 February 1918, the third meeting opened with an acknowledgment that the Allies would not reinforce their secondary theaters. Every possible effort would go into preparing the Western Front. Now, however, the actual method of distributing orders through the SWC came under question. Obviously, the heads of government directed, or tried to at least, their own military affairs, but what role would the Permanent Military Advisors of the SWC play? They were, after all, advisors only – each without a place in his nation’s chain of command. But only the British had this arrangement with Henry Wilson serving as their representative. By contrast, Weygand was one of Foch’s closest advisors, Cadorna was the former commander of the Italian army, and Tasker Bliss was still technically the American Chief of Staff. Sonnino wondered “whether the plans of campaign [of individual armies] must necessarily be sent to the Supreme War Council or not” because of this confusion over how the SWC functioned.<sup>173</sup> Lloyd George responded that, where the “three governments and the three armies might all be concerned,” they should follow the Rapallo Agreement under which field commanders sent plans back to the military advisors for review and then to the SWC for approval.<sup>174</sup> Notably, the mention of only three governments and armies excluded the United States, at least temporarily, from this debate. Clemenceau now amended Joint Note 12, which dictated how the SWC reviewed plans:

The Governments will have the plans and schemes sent to the Supreme War Council, which will ensure the coordination of this combined action, and will be *entitled*<sup>175</sup> to take the initiative in any proposal with this object.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Sonnino, CAB 28/3, IC 41, “Procès Verbal of the 3rd Meeting of the 3rd Session of the SWC held at the Trianon Palace Versailles on Friday February 1, 1918 at 10:00 a.m.,” 19.

<sup>174</sup> Lloyd George, CAB 28/3, IC 41, 19.

<sup>175</sup> Italicization is mine.

<sup>176</sup> Clemenceau, CAB 28/3, IC 41, 19.

To this statement, Sonnino asked that the word “equally” be added before the word “entitled.”<sup>177</sup> This addendum ensured that any member of the council could object or review any submission. Not that the Italians planned on objecting to every proposal sent through the SWC body. However, they probably understood that the German build-up on the Western Front might make the Italian Front less important to the Allied cause and feared a corresponding decrease in influence, which is indeed what happened. Therefore, asking for a statement that all nations were “equally entitled” to review plans helped the Italians stay relevant in the SWC debates.

General Cadorna then made one of his few significant contributions to the SWC. The disgraced general wanted the council to understand “that decisions would sometimes have to be taken in case of emergency,” yet the SWC barely met once a month. What would the military representatives, nominally outside of the chain of command of their own nations’ armies, “do if they required an immediate decision from the Supreme War Council in the intervals” between meetings?<sup>178</sup> In other words, Cadorna wondered who controlled events in a crisis. Having just resolved an emergency of his own, the former *Comando Supremo* understood the value of one person providing clear instructions in a crunch. The idea of a single Allied supreme commander had been bandied about since the war had begun. The inefficiency of Allied cooperation often stood out in stark contrast to the single-minded ability of the Germans to attack or defend anywhere in Europe seemingly at will. Although the British and French understood the German penchant for surprise attacks, Cadorna had direct experience with their stormtrooper infiltration tactics. At Caporetto, he had seen how quickly events could get out of hand in the face of the new German doctrine. Therefore, he wanted the Allies to be prepared for the worst possible eventuality – a German attack that succeeded and an SWC too paralyzed to respond quickly.

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<sup>177</sup> Sonnino, CAB 28/3, IC 41, 19.

<sup>178</sup> Cadorna, CAB 28/3, IC 41, 19.



Would individual field commanders respond to orders from one Allied general? Lloyd George shared Cadorna's fears and worried that both Haig and Pétain would look mainly to their own positions during any German offensive.<sup>179</sup> This attitude could spell disaster by preventing the proper deployment of a reserve or by opening a gap in the Allied lines for the Germans to exploit. The uncertainty of what the Germans planned to do complicated this issue. British intelligence pointed to a German concentration on the Western Front, but Lloyd George knew that Italian intelligence claimed instead "a great concentration was taking place on the Italian Front."<sup>180</sup> Lloyd George, so dismissive of Italian intelligence at Rapallo, had no issues using that same information to broaden the authority of his beloved Supreme War Council. In order to turn plans of individual armies into a coherent inter-Allied defense stretching several fronts, Cadorna insisted "that all this would be the proper function of an Allied Generalissimo, if such a post existed."<sup>181</sup> It did not, and would not, at least not until the western Allies experienced the same crisis Cadorna himself had recently faced on the Isonzo River.

As the Allies came to grips with how the SWC functioned in reality, they now had to decide whether they actually wanted to build a General Reserve. At the fourth meeting of the Third Session of the SWC, held on the afternoon of 1 February 1918, Foch proposed that any reserve consist of British, French, and Italian units.<sup>182</sup> Robertson generally agreed but doubted that the Allies could afford to pull enough units away from the front lines to form a reserve. The CIGS believed that most Allied troops "were needed where they were, except in Italy."<sup>183</sup> Although he had always been opposed to sending troops to Italy, even after Caporetto, Robertson had no

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<sup>179</sup> Lloyd George, CAB 28/3, IC 41, 21.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Cadorna, CAB 28/3, IC 41, 22.

<sup>182</sup> Foch, CAB 28/3, IC 42, "Procès Verbal of the 4th Meeting of the 3rd Session of the SWC held at the Trianon Palace Versailles 1 February 1918," 30.

<sup>183</sup> Robertson, CAB 28/3, IC 42, 30-31.

objection to bringing American divisions to reinforce the BEF. Regardless, Robertson suggested that the General Reserve should be controlled by the chief-of-staff of the army wherever the reserve force deployed. Cadorna agreed, noting that sending the reserve did not necessarily have to be “a definite act of command,” because the body directing the reserves only transferred those soldiers to the temporary authority of the local army commander. Still, having one supreme commander made coordination easier.<sup>184</sup> Cadorna had himself been frustrated by his inability to directly control Allied reinforcements after Caporetto. Indeed, the Allies had refused to let the defeated general, in the middle of a desperate fight for national survival, control any British or French divisions without his first being replaced. What the Allies eventually agreed to bore all the worst impressions of coalition warfare: a multinational council would dispatch a joint reserve to any threatened theater, the reserve would pass under the control of an individual commander, and the Allies would continue fighting on their own fronts with no additional coordination. However, for the Italians, Sonnino’s earlier suggestion for the right of each nation to be “equally entitled” to review Allied plans now proved prescient. The Italian representatives had an equal share in deciding where the General Reserve went.

Using the military representatives to dispatch a General Reserve ran counter to Lloyd George’s idea of them as advisors only. Sonnino and Cadorna both agreed that the military representatives of the SWC “should have powers to take the decision and to act as delegates of their government” in the event of a crisis.<sup>185</sup> Even Bliss, who “spoke with some deference” because of his inexperience, believed that another committee or council to command the reserve was fruitless. Using the existing structure of the military representatives was ideal and also gave him

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<sup>184</sup> Cadorna, CAB 28/3, IC 42, 31.

<sup>185</sup> CAB 28/3, IC 42, 38-39.

some much-desired responsibility in the coalition.<sup>186</sup> Could the Italians make up part of the General Reserve? Lloyd George believed they could, since there were 1,440,000 Allied troops on the Italian front facing an estimated 860,000 enemy soldiers.<sup>187</sup> Lloyd George asked for eleven Italian divisions but wanted the Allied divisions in Italy to remain there to bolster morale and cooperation. Orlando agreed “in principle,” but acknowledged that the new Piave River line had not been entrenched for many years (unlike the British and French lines on the Western Front) and that the Italian Army still had to reconstitute divisions that had suffered heavily at Caporetto.<sup>188</sup> As supportive of the SWC and vocal in it as the Italians had been to this point, they balked at the suggestion to transfer hundreds of thousands of their own men to another theater. Lloyd George nevertheless believed that adding Italian soldiers to the Western Front helped fill Haig’s depleted ranks.<sup>189</sup> Orlando again agreed with the sentiment of his British colleague but could do little else. General Diaz was in the middle of reorganizing an army that had just lost over 600,000 men two months prior. Diaz himself had to agree to the large-scale transfer of troops, and he was not at Versailles in any case!

The meeting ended on a curious note. Orlando asked if the SWC wanted to discuss operations in Salonika, but Clemenceau said this discussion was better left to the military representatives.<sup>190</sup> Sonnino responded that if the Italians had to continue defending their outpost in Albania “it would be impossible for them to spare men for the Western front.” The Italian Foreign Minister bristled that almost an entire day had been wasted on issues solely relevant to the Western Allies despite the fact that “a matter which concerned Italy so closely should not be

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<sup>186</sup> Bliss, CAB 28/3, IC 42, 34.

<sup>187</sup> Lloyd George, CAB 28/3, IC 42, 41.

<sup>188</sup> Orlando, CAB 28/3, IC 42, 42.

<sup>189</sup> Lloyd George, CAB 28/3, IC 42, 54.

<sup>190</sup> Orlando and Clemenceau, CAB 28/3, IC 42, 56.

considered by the Supreme War Council but should be relegated.”<sup>191</sup> Sonnino definitely had a valid criticism. The Allies had wasted plenty of time over the years on the whole Salonika effort, whose potential utility was doubtful, but now they wanted to concentrate only on the fighting in France. The Italians themselves had mixed feelings about supporting operations in the Balkans. Though they appreciated the opportunity to extend their influence across the Adriatic, the Italians now changed their strategy to recovering the territory lost after Caporetto. Italy did not have the military or industrial power to afford major operations on additional fronts anymore. These self-interested motivations left the Italians in a difficult strategic situation by the time the conference ended.

The final meeting of the Third Session of the SWC took place on the afternoon of 2 February 1918. This meeting was much smaller and included only the prime ministers and foreign ministers of the three European powers, as well as A.H. Frazier, the secretary of the American embassy in Paris. The debate now turned to whether the Allies wanted to make any type of proclamation at the end of the conference. Sonnino used this opportunity to criticize the ideological speechmaking of his allies, which left the Italians feeling “that they had been rather left out in the cold.”<sup>192</sup> The strongest powers of the coalition could afford to waste time with ideological commitments that painted World War I as a broader conflict between democracy and militarism. As a weaker power, Italy had to remain more practical in her public statements. Italy remained the only combatant who had entered the war with clear territorial ambitions in the Trentino, Trieste, and Adriatic to secure her strategic position in the Mediterranean Sea. Sonnino wanted to ensure that Italy’s demands were not forgotten, and he insisted “that no declaration could be accepted

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<sup>191</sup> Sonnino, CAB 28/3, IC 42, 56-57.

<sup>192</sup> Sonnino, CAB 28/3, IC 44, “Procès Verbal of the Sixth Meeting of the 3rd Session of the SWC, February 2, 1918, 2:30 p.m.,” 63.

which suggested any renunciation of Italy's legitimate claims." Those claims included the occupation of territory inhabited largely by non-Italians, objectives that ran directly counter to ideological commitments to self-determination and to protections for ethnic minorities. Sonnino also recalled that the Italians had chosen to stay neutral in 1914 at a time when support of the Triple Alliance might have spelled disaster for the Allied cause.<sup>193</sup> This outright declaration of Italian ambitions unfortunately marred their clever handling of most of the SWC's more complex issues. Although her partners could ostensibly claim to be fighting to halt Prussian militarism in much of central and eastern Europe, the Italians could not assume this same moral high ground.

### **Conclusion**

The Fourth Session of the Supreme War Council ended a week before the start of the Spring Offensive. All of the Allied debates about declarations, hierarchies of command, and reserve units faded away in the face of Germany's final bid to win the war. No General Reserve was formed, nor was any one individual given the authority to coordinate a multi-national response if the Germans attacked two fronts at the same time. The coming offensive also proved to be the high-water mark of Italy's role as an equal Ally. The reality of the build-up of German forces in France overshadowed all other considerations. Topographical advantages and the utility of secondary fronts seemed much less important when the Germans threatened to unleash their full military potential on the Western Front. The Italian Army, still recovering from Caporetto, could do little on the Piave River to stop the pending attack. But despite this military weakness, the Italians themselves had demonstrated during the winter conferences that they could play an active role in shaping Allied policy. By shifting attention away from eastern European considerations, Orlando

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

and Sonnino had kept their country in a position of primacy. Support for reserve formations and a unified command structure made the other Allies think that the Italians had truly bought into the idea of fighting as part of a coalition. Thus in 1918, when the moment of crisis came, the Allies would take Italian support for granted. The resulting gulf between Allied expectations and Italian self-centeredness almost proved fatal.

The role of the Americans in the SWC must be understood in the context of the geopolitical structure of the world by the end of 1917. European imperialism had dominated international affairs for over a century. Meanwhile, America's defeat of Spain at the turn of the century could be minimized as a victory over a state in decline. American power by the start of 1918 was as yet only so much raw potential. President Wilson intended to reshape the globe with his support for ethnic self-determination in the great European empires. What seemed like an intelligent approach to purely military affairs created a power vacuum that allowed Italy to play a more significant role in the SWC than she otherwise might have. Perhaps if Wilson had been more committed to the political debates of the SWC, or had attended some of the meetings in person, he might have had more support at the Versailles Conference. Instead, he waded into Paris like a conquering hero intent on dictating terms to both the Allies and the Central Powers. But having agreed only to a military partnership with his partners, Wilson lacked the political and diplomatic support to enforce his mandates. In contrast, Italy had the political support but lacked the military power to implement her post-war demands.

## Chapter 5 – Spring Realities

The promises of winter quickly melted with the bitter truths of spring. The Allies remained woefully unprepared to conduct a joint defense of the Western Front. However, the British, French, and Italian armies at least had relatively well-established defensive positions that had been greatly strengthened through four months of training and preparation. Nevertheless, the initial German attacks during the Spring Offensive (there were five in all) still achieved rapid gains that threatened to split the link between the Allied armies in France. The resulting panic and confusion caused by new German tactics helped to redefine the nature of the Allied coalition for the final, and decisive, year of the war.

In short, the Italians lost out on the advantages they had gained ever since the Rapallo Conference. The crisis on the Western Front, the subsequent appointment of an Allied supreme commander, and the refusal of the Italians to launch supporting attacks on their own front all pointed to the steady decline of Italy's hard-won status as a coalition power. She had suffered much during the war to achieve a position of enhanced prestige by March 1918. The shrewd diplomacy that had finally placed Italy, if not at the forefront, at least at the center of coalition politics from November 1917 through March 1918 proved markedly absent during the greatest crisis of the war. Part of this inactivity was understandable. The initial disaster affected the British and French forces the most, and so they agreed, on their own accord, to resolve their disputes and create a unified command structure. However, when the two major powers decided to extend their new power-sharing arrangement, they invited first the Americans to agree to this system and then, one month later, the Italians. No clearer picture can be made of the new hierarchy of Allied power. General Diaz at least agreed to send some of his attached Allied divisions, and two Italian divisions, back to the Western Front. However, the majority of the Italian Army, still recovering

from Caporetto, remained inert and on the defensive while the rest of the Allies fought off a series of German offensives. Pleas from General Foch, soon to become the commander-in-chief of some of the Allied armies, for the Italians to launch diversionary attacks went unheeded. Once the Italians did have a chance to address the new command arrangements of their partners, they roundly objected to any Allied general giving direct orders to their Italian forces.

This chapter focuses on the gradual weakening of Italy's role in the Supreme War Council as Germany's Spring Offensive unfolded. Part of this explanation can be found in the reality that the Central Powers' main objective in 1918 was on the Western Front. The Austro-Hungarians made a weak effort to force the Piave River in mid-June, but the attack quickly petered out. However, Italy's decline in the SWC must be understood in the context of this paper's argument – Italy had become more important to her allies as the war progressed, had reached a level of peak relevance after Caporetto, and had played a critical part in planning during the winter months. The first section of this chapter will briefly summarize the major events of the first German attack, Operation Michael, and the subsequent panic that led the British and French to accept a unified command under Foch. Then, I will explain how the Americans, with their vast horde of potential manpower reserves, came to finally surpass the Italians in terms of military importance and power projection on the continent. The second section will discuss the fateful fifth meeting of the Supreme War Council in May 1918 at Abbeville. Here, the Italians finally had their chance to speak on the new power structure but bungled the attempt. The apparent selfishness of the Italians stood in stark contrast to the cooperation of her allies in the wake of the German onslaught. Even after their victory during the Second Battle of the Piave River, the Italians held back from a major counter-attack that might have drawn off significant German reserves from France. Thus, by the time the German spearheads had been worn down and the Allies launched the Hundred Days



campaign that won the war, the Italians had little to show for their efforts but the rout of the largely insignificant Austro-Hungarian Army in the Battle of Vittorio Veneto.

### **The Italians Are Out: The Doullens and Beauvais Conferences**

Germany's bid to win World War I, at least before the arrival of the AEF in force on the continent, began with Operation Michael on 21 March 1918. Three German armies formed the main thrust of the attack. Notably, two of the German commanders (Otto von Below commanding the 17<sup>th</sup> Army and Oskar von Hutier commanding the 18<sup>th</sup> Army) had won Germany's greatest victories in 1917. Foch, himself little more than an observer in the first days of the attack, acknowledged that "the methods which had succeeded at Caporetto and at Riga were employed without change on the French Front in the Spring of 1918."<sup>194</sup> Ludendorff sought to "bring about a rapid decision" by attacking the weak link between the British and French armies at St. Quentin (near the old Cambrai battlefield and east of the Somme River).<sup>195</sup> A salient defended by the English Fifth Army, itself overstretched and undermanned as Haig's southernmost unit, provided an excellent target for German stormtroopers. The decision to attack the English instead of the French had not just practical but also moral implications. Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg believed that the obstinacy of English soldiers would allow his forces to quickly infiltrate and surround defensive strong points. Indeed, he categorized the initial Allied response to the attacks as "local, fitful, and of varying violence."<sup>196</sup> The Fifth Army withdrew in the face of enormous German pressure that drove the English southern flank away from the French. Disaster seemed

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<sup>194</sup> Foch, *Memoirs*, 248-249.

<sup>195</sup> Ludendorff, *Ludendorff's Own Story*, vol. 1, preface, and vol. 2, 220-221.

<sup>196</sup> Hindenburg, *Out of My Life*, vol. 2, 136-137, 158.

imminent, especially considering the failure of the Allies to create a combined General Reserve that had the flexibility to counter any potential gaps in their defensive line.<sup>197</sup> The impressive amount of ground conquered in the first week of the offensive (96 square miles just on 21 March) turned fighting on the Western Front once more into a war of maneuver.<sup>198</sup> As the Germans approached the critical railway juncture of Amiens, they threatened to rupture the link between the British and French forces. Haig and his army commanders met with the French at Doullens to coordinate Allied strategy.

The meeting at Doullens mirrored those at Rapallo in 1917 a great deal. A routed national army, facing new German tactics and losing massive territory, requested immediate assistance from its Allies. This time, the British and French alone met to redress the immediate issues in the wake of the “breakdown of the [British] Fifth Army,”<sup>199</sup> which had “ceased to exist.”<sup>200</sup> The threat to the Amiens railhead and the withdrawal of Haig’s right flank meant that the stabilization of his position depended largely on French reinforcements arriving from the south. The conference has often been portrayed as the final ascension of Ferdinand Foch to the supreme command of the allied armies who, after years of partisan bickering, finally agreed to a united strategy led by one man. Nothing could be further from the truth. Bliss, although not in attendance, criticized the conference as a half measure and admonished the perception “that this action made General Foch the Allied Commander-in-Chief. It did not.”<sup>201</sup> Nevertheless, Field Marshal Haig, General Wilson, and Lord Milner all proved amenable to the idea of placing Foch in some type of overall

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<sup>197</sup> Tasker H. Bliss, “The Evolution of the Unified Command,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 1, no. 2 (15 December 1922): 25-26, JSTOR.

<sup>198</sup> Middlebrook, *Kaiser’s Battle*, 309, 346.

<sup>199</sup> Henry Rawlinson, CAB 28/3, IC 53, “Memorandum by Lord Milner on his Visit to France, including the Conference at Doullens, 26 March 1918,” 1.

<sup>200</sup> Philippe Pétain, CAB 28/3, IC 53, 2.”

<sup>201</sup> Bliss, “The Evolution of the Unified Command,” 28.

coordinating role. Of course, since the British needed assistance, they became more flexible than they had been in the winter meetings when they had shot down similar coordinating measures. Milner himself saw this idea as marking a “return to the original idea of the Council at Versailles, directing a general reserve.”<sup>202</sup> Clemenceau agreed and, after speaking to Pétain, wrote out one of the most important notes of the war: “General Foch is charged by the British and French governments to coordinate the action of the British and French armies on the Western Front.”<sup>203</sup> Though he agreed in principle, Haig countered that any command arrangement “should be extended to cover the other armies – Belgian, American, and possibly Italian – that might be employed on the present Franco-British Front.”<sup>204</sup>

The Doullens Conference marked the beginning of Italy’s decline in the Supreme War Council and the alliance structure of the western powers. She had no participants and no role in either the 26 March meeting or the subsequent conference with the Americans at Beauvais in April. Haig’s call to include the other Allied armies in Clemenceau’s message provided some important historical context. After all, in March 1918, nobody knew that the Spring Offensive would fail and thus every possible measure had to be taken to appease the other Allies, especially if the British were about to ask them for reinforcements. Haig needed – or at least felt he needed – every available division the Allies could muster to reinforce his position. As Milner noted, the transfer of Italian divisions to the Western Front had already been discussed in detail in previous SWC meetings. Indeed, the Italians already had two infantry divisions under General Alberico Albricci’s II Corps fighting in France as well as 60,000 laborers toiling away on expanding Allied

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<sup>202</sup> Lord Milner, CAB 28/3, IC 53, 3.

<sup>203</sup> Clemenceau, CAB 28/3, IC 53, 5.

<sup>204</sup> Haig, CAB 28/3, IC 53, 5.

fortifications.<sup>205</sup> While the Italians might be considered an after-thought to the Allied forces bitterly defending the approaches to Amiens, their potential as a reserve force still remained. Doullens showed the fatal weaknesses of the Supreme War Council as a political body in charge of military strategy. The pretenses of an international deliberating body gave way in the face of expediency to a hastily assembled committee of key decision-makers from the two most powerful Allied countries.

The improved coordination between the Allies, and the heavy attrition suffered by the Germans, ground Operation Michael to a halt by the beginning of April. However, even as the offensive lost momentum, the Allies understood that more attacks were likely. Germany's strategic position only weakened the longer the war went on as more American soldiers arrived on the continent. By 3 April, the Allies finally had enough breathing room to debate their continued response to any future German attacks. A conference at Beauvais included British and French leaders as well as Generals Pershing and Bliss representing American interests. If the Doullens Conference highlighted Britain's and France's roles as the first-class powers of the coalition, then the Beauvais Conference acknowledged America's ascendance on the world stage as well. However, the meeting was not without its disagreements. Clemenceau praised the "checking [of] the German attack" but felt that the Allies required a more coordinated response in the future. Foch also criticized the Doullens arrangement which implied "if there was no action there was nothing [for him] to coordinate."<sup>206</sup> The French feared that, once the initial danger had abated, individual army commanders would go back to making their own plans in a vacuum. Lloyd George took the

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<sup>205</sup> Foch, *Memoirs*, 357. Elizabeth Greenhalgh, *The French Army and the First World War* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 289.

<sup>206</sup> Clemenceau and Foch, CAB 28/3, IC 55(a), "Procès Verbal of Conference Held at the Hotel de Ville, Beauvais, on Wednesday April 3, 1918 at 3:15 p.m.," 1-2.

opportunity to lament the failure of all major commanders to work together in his beloved SWC where “a real effort had been made to coordinate the action of the Allies.”<sup>207</sup> He acknowledged that the Versailles winter meetings had failed to achieve the same unity of purpose that the Germans could impose on their strategy. When asked for their input, the Americans promptly spoke up in favor of a single command structure. Bliss recognized that the British and French, the powers “with the greatest stakes on the Western Front, had come to an agreement” at Doullens, and thus he tacitly gave his support. In addition, Pershing believed there was “no way to ensure such cooperation except by a single command.”<sup>208</sup> The Beauvais agreement eventually superseded the one at Doullens with the inclusion of American support into the original deal:

General Foch is charged by the British, French, and American Governments with the coordination of the action of the Allied Armies on the Western Front. To this end all powers necessary to secure effective realization are conferred on him. The British, French, and American Governments for this purpose entrust to General Foch the strategic direction of military operations. The Commanders-in-Chief of the British, French, and American Armies have full control of the tactical employment of their forces. Each Commander-in-Chief will have the right of appeal to his Government if, in his opinion, the safety of his Army is compromised by any ordered received from General Foch.<sup>209</sup>

Foch, therefore, did not become the supreme commander of all Allied forces. He could only coordinate strategy which, in practice, meant the movement (or withholding) of reserve divisions to threatened sectors of the western front. Each of the army commanders (Haig, Pétain, and Pershing) could appeal to his own government and refuse any potentially dangerous order from

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<sup>207</sup> Lloyd George, CAB 28/3, IC 55(a), 2-3.

<sup>208</sup> Pershing and Bliss, CAB 28/3, IC 55(a), 3.

<sup>209</sup> CAB 28/3, IC 55(a), 4.

Foch. Because the Italians had no say in this initial agreement and feared how it could be implemented, they had serious objections to the exact phrasing and nature of Foch's role.

Before the Italian point of view could be considered, the Germans struck again. They struck further north during Operation Georgette and sought to seize the Channel ports directly. However, Haig's northern armies were far better entrenched than his southern flank and the British absorbed the offensive, albeit not without great losses. By the time the second spring attack concluded on 29 April 1918, the British had suffered 240,000 casualties and the French a further 92,000. For their troubles, the Germans had lost nearly 350,000 men in their bid to win the war with their newly-arrived units from the east.<sup>210</sup> Though the new German tactics had some initial operational success, they did not impose a one-sided victory on the scale of Riga or Caporetto. Yet, as reserves of Allied manpower approached their nadir, the British and French became increasingly desperate for coalition support. Nor was this call for assistance limited to just the American Expeditionary Force. Foch used his new position to ask for more support from Diaz. Italian unwillingness to adhere to the essence of the Doullens and Beauvais agreements significantly hurt their accumulated political capital acquired since Caporetto.

### **The Italians Come In: Abbeville and the End of the War**

Italian hostility to the March and April deals contravened the general spirit of cooperation that prevailed between the British and French governments and the American military mission. Their chance to address their concerns finally came at the Fifth Session of the Supreme War Council at Abbeville from 1 to 3 May 1918. General Mario di Robilant, the former commander of

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<sup>210</sup>Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War* (New York, NY: The Penguin Press, 1999), 293-294. Doughty, *Phyrric Victory*, 444.

the Fourth Army at Caporetto, had become Italy's military representative on the Supreme War Council. Orlando and Sonnino also attended to ensure that Italy's place in the war effort was not lost even amidst the Spring Offensive. Unfortunately for them, Clemenceau clearly set the agenda for the entire conference when he indicated that the top priority was the "employment of American troops."<sup>211</sup> Lloyd George also proved anxious to sort out the organization of the five combat-ready American divisions in France which amounted to 125,000 men. The British Prime Minister feared that "the Germans were fighting with the object of exhausting our reserves." Meanwhile, his new Manpower Bill and the French recruitment class of 1920 would not arrive into the army's ranks until August, in contrast to the thousands of Americans who arrived every day.<sup>212</sup> Help had to come from somewhere else.

The search for fresh troops next led the council to turn its gaze to the Balkan Front where the British still had four divisions near Salonika. Lloyd George suggested that transitioning the infantry divisions there from the 12-battalion model to a 9-battalion model (which the British and French armies on the Western Front had already done) could free up to 10,000 soldiers. However, Foch, Clemenceau, and even Wilson all objected, citing the potentially disastrous impact of a German victory on the loyalty of Greek forces as well as the limited Allied shipping capacity available for this transfer.<sup>213</sup> Orlando, sensing his opportunity to begin shaping Allied strategy again, explained that while the Italians continued defending Albania, "what would the Serbians do if the Allies abandoned Monastir and the forward lines?"<sup>214</sup> With the drawing down of Central Powers' operations in Russia and Romania, the Allies had few secondary fronts on the continent

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<sup>211</sup> Clemenceau, CAB 28/3, IC 57, "Procès-verbal of the 1st Meeting of the 5th Session of the Supreme War Council held in the Chambre des Notaires, at Abbeville, on Wednesday, the 1st May of 1918, at 3:30 p.m.," 3-4.

<sup>212</sup> Lloyd George, CAB 28/3, IC 57, 6-7.

<sup>213</sup> Foch, Clemenceau, and Wilson, CAB 28/3, IC 57, 11-12.

<sup>214</sup> Orlando, CAB 28/3, IC 57, 13.

to distract Germany and her allies in 1918. The Balkan campaign at least had the added benefit of Serbian and Greek troops augmenting the Allied positions in Albania and Salonika. Orlando understood that if the Allies stopped protecting the minor powers of the alliance, a large-scale defection could occur in favor of Germany. The Balkan Front was also perilously close to the Italian one. If the Germans and Bulgarians rapidly occupied Macedonia and the Peloponnese, the next logical place for those troops to go would be to the Piave River line. Orlando and Clemenceau thus temporarily stalled Lloyd George's idea to transfer troops from Greece. In the end, the SWC agreed to send a delegate to Salonika to discuss the matter further.

As the conference returned to debating operations on the Western Front, the Italians questioned the specific arrangements of both the SWC as well as the Doullens and Beauvais agreements. Specifically, the powers of the now-defunct Executive War Board – the military representatives of the SWC who directed the also-defunct Allied General Reserve – had been vested solely in the person of Ferdinand Foch. Orlando questioned if this was true or not. Lloyd George and Clemenceau both admitted that, for all intents and purposes, the EWB no longer existed.<sup>215</sup> Then the council began pressing the Italians for a more meaningful contribution in the form of two additional infantry divisions to double their contingent already in France. Di Robilant had telegraphed this request to General Diaz “who had replied that it was not at present possible to release further divisions.”<sup>216</sup> Diaz's absence from these meetings hurt Italy's ability to quickly project power in the coalition. While it was dangerous for Diaz to leave his command once seasonable campaigning weather had returned, his absence at Abbeville (or any of the SWC meetings) prevented the Italians from making any definite military commitments. Perhaps this was what Orlando and Diaz intended all along because the Italian Army had yet to recover entirely

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<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>216</sup> Mario di Robilant, CAB 28/3, IC 57, 16.



from the Caporetto disaster. Regardless, Di Robilant acknowledged that part of the confusion resulted from his having no idea if his own government had acceded to the Beauvais agreements yet.

Here the Italians started getting into trouble. Orlando's unhelpful interpretation of the twin deals of 1918 rested on two main points. He acknowledged "the transfer of the functions of the Executive War Board to General Foch" and the "entrusting of command to General Foch when two armies cooperate in a great battle."<sup>217</sup> In other words, Foch coordinated strategy only when two or more independent armies fought in close proximity. This analysis conveniently provided Foch control over Haig and Pétain in France and Belgium, while it simultaneously prevented Foch from issuing orders to Diaz who had no army but his own in Italy. The French and British divisions assigned to the Italian Army were clearly, and correctly, not identified as independent formations in this formula. How reserves would be employed again became a major issue. Could Foch transfer Italian reserve divisions to the Western Front in response to a major German offensive? Yes, according to the Beauvais conference. However, Orlando wondered "what *was* the right interpretation of the Beauvais agreement?"<sup>218</sup> After all, neither he nor any other Italian representative had been there. Therefore, Foch could not unilaterally transfer troops from the Italian Front. This attitude actually agreed with the part of the Beauvais deal that allowed commanders to ignore Foch's orders if they felt it was in their nation's best interest to do so. The uncertain outcome over the agreement might have been avoided had the British and French invited the Italians as well as the Americans to participate in the March and April conferences. The Italians were not blameless either, however, as they could have either brought Diaz or a representative who could dictate operations for the army. Maybe Orlando, having only come to power on the brink of

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<sup>217</sup> Orlando, CAB 28/3, IC 57, 17.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid., 18. Italicization is mine.

a military disaster, felt uncomfortable interfering with Diaz's reorganization of a fragile army after Caporetto. Whatever the reason for Italian hesitation, the first day of the Abbeville conference ended without a firm resolution of the Beauvais dispute.

Nor were the Italians just worried about the movement of armies on the ground. The Abbeville meeting resumed on the morning of 2 May 1918 by discussing a previous conference. The Third Allied Naval Council, which had met in Paris from 26 to 27 April 1918 to address the continued shipment of American troops and equipment, the continued blockade of the German and Austro-Hungarian coastlines, and the potential threat of the Russian Black Sea Fleet falling into enemy hands. That council had passed a resolution calling for the Italians to send dreadnoughts to Corfu and free up the French battleships stationed there for service in the Aegean. Clemenceau took up this cry and "urge[d] the Italian government to give their consent . . . with the least possible delay."<sup>219</sup> But Orlando refused to be hurried and responded only that he had to return to Rome to discuss this appeal with his own war committee. Italian stubbornness must have been grating for their Allies who surely started to see the logic in excluding them from Beauvais and Doullens.

In an effort to bring the Italians back into the fold, the conversation returned to the matter of the Beauvais agreement. Clemenceau objected to Orlando's blueprint that Foch should only coordinate strategy when two or more allied armies fought together. The French Premier criticized that "this formula was too vague. Who was to judge?" when an army qualified for Foch's direction.<sup>220</sup> The Americans had already accepted Foch's jurisdiction over their own troops so "there was no reason why the Italian Government should not equally fall into line."<sup>221</sup> Although

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<sup>219</sup> Clemenceau and Orlando, CAB 28/3, IC 58, "Procès Verbal of the 2nd Meeting of the 5th Session of the Supreme War Council held in the Chambre des Notaires, at Abbeville, on Thursday, the 2<sup>nd</sup> May of 1918, at 11:35 a.m.," 20-22.

<sup>220</sup> Clemenceau, CAB 28/3, IC 58, 26-27.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

Italian real military power on the ground still dwarfed that of the AEF, American potential and cooperation had started to accelerate Italy's decline as a coalition partner. Foch and Lloyd George sought to assuage Orlando's fears by acknowledging that Diaz still commanded his own forces and that the Italian general was not required to commit to any operations to which he objected.<sup>222</sup> Orlando agreed to the principle of Foch coordinating overall military strategy, but that was "all that he was prepared to accept at the present" as he had not yet assented to Foch as the supreme commander of the Allied forces.<sup>223</sup> For the second meeting in a row, the council adjourned without any firm resolution on Italy's acceptance of the Beauvais power structure. Even though Italy had yet to fight a major campaign in 1918 and had no direct role in the Spring Offensive, and despite Italy's lack of cooperation with her allies, she still loomed large in any multi-national debate as a major military power. However, that time was soon at an end.

On the afternoon of 2 May 1918, the final meeting of the Abbeville Conference took place. Clemenceau once again opened with a proposal for increased Italian involvement. The fifth resolution of the conference, "The Extension of General Foch's Powers to the Italian Front," included three provisions. First, General Foch was officially acknowledged as the commander-in-chief of the Italian troops *on the French front* (i.e. the II Corps of two divisions) "just as he is of the other Allied troops." Second, "the powers of coordination conferred on General Foch by the Agreement of Doullens are extended to the Italian Front." Finally, "should circumstances bring about the presence on the Italian Front of Allied armies fighting together in the same conditions as in France," then, and only then, would Foch become the General-in-Chief of the Italian Army.<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>222</sup> Foch and Lloyd George, CAB 28/3, IC 58, 27-28.

<sup>223</sup> Orlando, CAB 28/3, IC 58, 28-29. Foch, *Memoirs*, 277.

<sup>224</sup> Clemenceau, "The Extension of General Foch's Powers to the Italian Front," CAB 28/3, IC 59, "Procès Verbal of the 3rd Meeting of the 5th Session of the Supreme War Council held in the Chambre des Notaires, at Abbeville, on Thursday, the 2<sup>nd</sup> May of 1918, at 2:45 p.m.," 33.

The Supreme War Council formally adopted the resolution and Orlando had seemingly won the day. He had maintained the independence of Diaz's command unless the British and French armies were somehow transferred entirely over to the Italian Front. Considering that those same armies had been fighting in Flanders and France since 1914, this eventuality would likely never occur. Nevertheless, Foch tried to make the best of the situation and he still had "the right of scrutiny over the Italian front" for realizing his own strategic plans. Foch wrote to Diaz on 7 May and encouraged an Italian offensive to recover the territory lost between the Isonzo and Piave Rivers in October and November 1917.<sup>225</sup> Foch believed that such an attack could draw off German attention and, if not prevent another full-scale offensive on the western front, might perhaps reduce its scale. After some miscommunication between liaisons, Diaz responded on 30 May and confirmed that, "in the face of the Austrian threat" to his lines, he could not launch any major offensives. By then, the French had their hands full with the third German offensive of the year, Operation Blücher-Yorck, launched on 27 May near the Aisne River. The final opportunity for the Italians to radically alter the strategic landscape of the war had faded away.

## Conclusion

From 27 May until 7 August, Ludendorff maintained steady pressure on French forces as he tried to expand the Aisne salient, cross the Marne River, and perhaps capture Paris. Although these attacks lacked strategic direction and cost the Germans heavily, they also placed a great deal of stress on the war-weary French. News of Italian forces knocking Austria-Hungary out of the war with a major offensive or, perhaps more flamboyantly, of Italian soldiers getting into French taxi cabs and fighting in the Second Battle of the Marne, might have positively affected the Allied

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<sup>225</sup> Foch, *Memoirs*, 278, 349. Gooch, *Italian Army in World War I*, 278.

perspective of Italy's military performance in 1918. Instead, Italy ended the war as she had begun it: looking out for her own self-interest above every other obligation. When Italy had been hard-pressed in November 1917, she had managed to recover the situation partly on her own, but she also had faithful allies who came running to her immediate assistance. Indeed, Italy's proximity to the Western Front had allowed her to receive support instead of the faltering Russian Provisional Government. The Italians had parlayed this support into a position of diplomatic strength during the winter meetings and seemed eager to work with their Allies in 1918. Instead, when the British and French were similarly hard pressed in the fateful spring and summer of 1918, the Italians consciously took a step back and focused only on their own front. In a way, they were successful. Diaz's husbanding of Italian power allowed him to repulse an Austro-Hungarian offensive during the Second Battle of the Piave. He inflicted over 143,000 casualties and suffered only 85,000 himself. However, his failure to follow up his victory with a general counter-offensive discouraged Foch. Sonnino understood that Italy's failure to work with the Allies during this critical period hurt her ability to demand territory in any post-war settlement.<sup>226</sup> By August, Germany's manpower was spent, and the Allies transitioned into their own Hundred Days Offensive that ended the war. All the effort the Italians had spent on manipulating Allied strategy during the winter meetings gave them a chance to support military operations in France. They refused, and thus squandered their opportunity to play a decisive role.

Italian weakness at the Versailles Conference, and in the immediate post-war world, did not occur because the Italians refused to send two more divisions to France in the Spring of 1918. However, their desire to focus on the Albanian and Italian campaigns showed a distinct lack of common cause with their struggling Allies. Diaz rightly feared how well his reconstituted army

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<sup>226</sup> Gooch, *Italian Army in World War I*, 281-282, 284.

could handle another major battle, as well as how losing troops to France would make his position even more vulnerable. To defend Italy was his first priority. However, the British, French, and Americans were all bickering and looking at scraping up manpower from wherever they could to help defend a critical front in May and June. While each of these countries certainly looked out for their own interests first, the reality was that the war was being decided in France in 1918 and nowhere else. The Italians could have played a role in this battle and chose not to, all the while criticizing their allies for failing to include them in all the relevant meetings. The realities of the spring and summer led not only to the fall of 1918 but also the fall of Italy's wartime ambitions.

## Chapter 6 – Conclusion

Too often, Italy's mixed performance during World War I has been used as a direct link from Caporetto to disillusionment at the Versailles Peace Conference to the rise of fascism. The looming specter of Mussolini often overshadowed everything that came before it. A weak Italy could not enforce its demands guaranteed in the Treaty of London, especially along the eastern shores of the Adriatic. Therefore, because the Italians remained militarily weak and did not achieve all their post-war ambitions, they came to blame the Allies as the state turned towards the violent rhetoric of socialists and fascists. Anger towards Allied slow-footedness encouraged nationalists like Gabriele D'Annunzio to take extreme measures. The noted poet and soldier occupied Fiume on the Adriatic coast to create the Italian Regency of Carnaro.<sup>227</sup> However, this narrative ignores the fact that none of the Allied powers really ever achieved all their post-war aims. Russia had already collapsed from internal revolution and sued for peace. France did not permanently cripple Germany. The U.S. Senate rejected the Treaty of Versailles. Britain remained saddled with debts after financing much of the war-time coalition. If Italy could accuse her allies of abandoning her after being a faithful partner, her allies could (and did) likewise blame each other for failing to achieve all their aims. A young Benito Mussolini best encapsulated this presumed betrayal when he argued that the young nation had been "treacherously deceived" as it entered "the darkest and most painful period of Italian life."<sup>228</sup>

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<sup>227</sup> Gabrielle D'Annunzio, *La Reggenza Italiana del Carnaro: Disegno di un Nuovo Ordinamento dello Stato Libero di Fiume* (Fiume, Italy: 1920), 5-7, Hathi Trust. The Free State of Fiume would actually declare war on Italy in objection to the perceived Allied betrayal at Versailles, but it was ultimately annexed by Italy in 1924.

<sup>228</sup> Benito Mussolini, *My Rise and Fall* (New York, NY: Da Capo Press, 1998), 56, 62.

But there is another explanation for Italian disappointment in the post-war world. They had failed to live up to their end of the bargain as an equal Ally. Ever since the Treaty of London in 1915, Italy had steadily, and painfully, increased its role in the war through repeated offensives along the Isonzo River, the expansion of the Balkan Front, and the deployment of its navy to patrol the Mediterranean. Italian commitment to the war effort emulated the increased totalization of the conflict among all the other belligerents. Italy's strategic position and large army made her an invaluable partner to Britain and France. The late 1916 and early 1917 meetings, coming at a time of increased vulnerability among the Allies, provided the Italians with an opportunity to expand their role in the coalition. Losses at Verdun, the Somme, Gallipoli, Serbia, and in Poland all accelerated Italy's ability to play a decisive role in the war.

The Italians dutifully complied, understanding that to achieve most of their war aims they had to conquer them by force. The 11<sup>th</sup> Battle of the Isonzo opened the road to Trieste and threatened Austro-Hungarian withdrawal from World War I. This tentative victory seemed to open the way for grander Italian designs for 1918. But the Germans intervened, and the disaster at Caporetto in turn endangered not only Italy's post-war ambitions but also her very participation in the conflict. Still, the defeat came at an opportune time for Italy. The onset of winter and the British offensive at Cambrai in late November 1917 prevented any continued German involvement in a secondary theater. The collapse of Romania and the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia left few important allies for Britain and France, the original Entente powers. Until the promise of American power turned into a decisive battlefield instrument, the United States could play only a limited role in defining Allied strategy. Therefore, although Italy's military strength waned after Caporetto, her diplomatic power had never waxed stronger.



Caporetto, like all major transformative defeats, thus brought its share of good and bad results. The Rapallo Conference, the second consecutive Allied meeting held in Italy that year, made the Piave River the central theater of coalition planning for the first time in the war. Nor was the conference simply organized by Lloyd George and Painlevé to impose their own wishes on the Italian Front. The decision to relieve Luigi Cadorna from his command involved at least as much Italian acceptance as it did Allied insistence. The Italians hesitated to fully embrace the first vestiges of the Supreme War Council, preferring to focus on stabilizing their new defensive positions rather than giving away any direction over their own war effort. In their own memoirs, many British and French leaders congratulated themselves on saving Italy from disaster. But the Italians at the very least must get some credit for holding the Piave River line and choosing a more competent commander in Armando Diaz. Nor was Cadorna himself going anywhere, and he at least played an important part in the upcoming meetings of the Supreme War Council.

The onset of the 1917-1918 winter ensured that the defeat at Caporetto loomed large in any Allied plans. Vittorio Orlando, the new prime minister, and Sydney Sonnino, the architect of Italian involvement in the war, used their new-found influence to criticize and affect every possible theater of operations from France to Siberia. The Italian objection to supporting eastern European ventures ensured their own primacy in the coalition. America's conscious decision to abstain from full political involvement in the meetings of the Supreme War Council provided a vacuum of power readily filled by the Italians. By March 1918, the Italians had reorganized their army, promised to assist in the creation of a general allied reserve, and seemed poised to play a major role in the defensive battles of 1918.

It was not to be. When push came to shove, the strongest Allied powers, Britain and France, simply debated strategy among themselves without Italian involvement. While Ferdinand Foch

was not made the supreme commander of all the Allied armies outright, he did coordinate the forces fighting the decisive battles on the Western Front. His cries for assistance from the Italians during the difficult spring of 1918 went unheeded because Diaz refused to risk his resurrected forces in an uncertain offensive. Once the Italians did get a say in the new military hierarchy of the Allies, they roundly condemned it and refused to support Foch's new status. The evolution of Italy as a coalition partner must also be understood considering German supremacy by March 1918. With Russia defeated and America not yet in strength on the continent, Germany had a major strategic advantage that it ultimately squandered in a series of costly offensives. Because Britain, France, and America defeated the spring and summer offensives, those nations dominated the post-war settlement.

Weak powers play an indispensable part in any alliance. The reality of military considerations has always shaped strategic decision-making in such coalitions. Weak powers find a way to shape events through their geography, their involvement in the conflict, their own military potential, and their ability to manipulate public policy. Nevertheless, their actions are often overshadowed by those of the stronger nations around them. Italy has experienced this unfortunate truth ever since reunification in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. The shrewd diplomatic efforts by Camillo Cavour to unite the peninsula under Piedmontese sovereignty had only succeeded because of the French victory at Solferino and the Prussian victory at Königrätz. Appeasement during the Scramble for Africa meant that Italy walked away from the Berlin Conference empty-handed, watching in horror as the French established a Tunisian protectorate and even little Belgium gained control of the Congo. British support for increased Italian intervention in East Africa was only a ploy to impede French ambitions. With this encouragement, the Italians promptly invaded Ethiopia and suffered a resounding defeat at Adowa. Even membership in the Triple Alliance was itself a

poisoned chalice. In exchange for partnership with Germany, who had the strongest army in Europe, Italy had to swallow working with Austria-Hungary, who had the territory the Italians so desperately craved. Nor did this mixed performance occur only before the Great War. Benito Mussolini's regime was famous for outlandish claims and presumed diplomatic agreements that showcased the fascist state as a world power. But those promises, like the ones made after the first Rapallo Conference, could never be translated into real strength on the most important battlefields.

Additional research into this topic can expand the discussion of Italian diplomacy either before or after World War I. How did significant military defeats change Italian international policy and commitments? There are certainly plenty of examples to choose from: the naval disaster at Lissa (1866), the reverse at Adowa (1896), and the disastrous campaigns in Greece and North Africa (1940-1943). Did the perception of Italy as an ineffectual power actually undermine her role in a coalition? In *Hitler's Empire: How the Nazis Ruled Europe* (2008), Mark Mazower argues that the weakness of the Italian state in World War II made her leaders *more* practical than those of Nazi Germany. By mid-1940, Germany was so much stronger than the rest of Europe combined that her plans soon became fantastic and unreasonable. In contrast, Mazower believes that the Italians always understood their secondary role in a new partnership and acted accordingly. Thus, the minor Axis powers and the nations of occupied Europe often turned to the Italians to intercede on their behalf with Germany. How did Italian diplomacy with Eastern Europe evolve after Caporetto? There was certainly an attempt to incorporate dissatisfied Austro-Hungarian subjects and deserters – mostly Czechs – into the Italian Army in 1918. Finally, this thesis can also be used to address the evolution of military doctrine. Did Allied generals use the Italian experience at Caporetto in their training exercises during the winter of 1917-1918? A study of military pamphlets

can perhaps trace some of the Allied defensive preparations before the Spring Offensive back to Italian familiarity with the new stormtrooper tactics.

As Italy turned away from a constitutional monarchy and towards an outright dictatorship, she did not immediately break with her international commitments. Those coalition partners still existed and remembered, each in their own way, how much Italy had contributed during the war. Unfortunately, the legacy of Caporetto could never be entirely erased and left a lasting impression on her Allies. This defeat has also dominated much of the historiography of Italy's war for the past hundred years. The Germans could at least point to victories like Riga and even Caporetto as they came to grips with their own failures. The British and French had stymied the Spring Offensive and seen the war through to a victorious conclusion. The Americans came to see the arrival of the AEF as *the* decisive instrument of the war. Unfortunately for the Italians, their limited victories at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Piave and Vittorio Veneto had too little of an impact on the outcome of the war. Nevertheless, Caporetto did not simply highlight Italian military incompetence and force the nation to be rescued by its Allies. Nor were military defeats or calls for foreign assistance unique only to the Italians. Instead, Caporetto provided a new opportunity for Italy, whose involvement as an Ally had steadily expanded since 1915, to play a critical part in the shaping of the new Supreme War Council. Although the Italians failed to live up to the promises of their greater role in the war effort, the effects of their decisions are still felt to this day. The Supreme War Council provided the framework for the creation of the League of Nations, and that spirit of mutual assistance among international powers provided the framework for the United Nations during World War II, a body that still exists today. And where such a body exists, weaker powers will always play a critical role as middle-men and functionaries in times of crisis.

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