

Merely a transitory evil:
the diplomatic benefits of Italian military defeats from 1896 to 1918

by

Claudio Roberto Innocenti

B.S., United States Military Academy, 2009
M.A., Kansas State University, 2018

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of History
College of Arts and Sciences

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Abstract

This dissertation counters the general perception of Italian military ineffectiveness in the 19th and 20th centuries to argue in favor of the political values of military disasters. Major defeats at Adwa in 1896 and Caporetto in 1917 enabled the Kingdom of Italy to gain more political leverage over both allies and rivals in a way that was not possible before those failures. In particular, a special relationship with Great Britain provided the opportunity for Italian politicians to manipulate stronger states from a position of weakness. Thus, battlefield disasters provide the impetus for nations to embark on internal reforms and to secure international support to redress a state of temporary weakness.

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Approved by:

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Dr. Andrew Orr

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Dedication

I want to dedicate this work to my wife, Kitty, and to my two sons. The study of military history helped bring clarity and meaning to my life. Luca and Ollie, I am privileged every day to watch you two grow up as you find the purpose of your own lives.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Do Italians make good soldiers? I often asked myself this question as a teenager and later as an officer in the U.S. Army. As a second-generation Italian-American, I spent a lot of time living with my family in the so-called Old World. My family often encouraged me to remember the importance of our culture and ancestry as we settled into life in the United States. That desire to learn about the past led me to focus on military history. As an avid reader of military history, I felt disappointed when I read about famous Italian defeats at Lissa, Adwa, Caporetto, and in North Africa during World War II. Well-worn jokes about poor equipment and worse leaders abounded in histories and lecture series. Australian historian Richard Bosworth even published a damning book called *Italy, the Least of the Great Powers* to make clear his perception of the nation's utility.¹ After all, unified Italy lacked the military success of millennia past when the Roman legions conquered the Mediterranean. Much of Italian military history seemed shaped around the idea of recapturing some of the glory of a long-lost empire. Italians writing about their own history thus grapple with longstanding themes of national identity and cultural heritage.

I reflected on this reality throughout my own military career. Whether in training or on deployment, I wondered how much of my own relatively average career was affected by my lineage. Perhaps Anglo-American or German-American soldiers simply performed better due to a mythologized version of their ancestral blood. I found myself reading newspaper headlines and analyzing last names whenever fellow soldiers did something good or bad during the Global War

¹ Richard J. B. Bosworth, *Italy, the Least of the Great Powers: Italian Foreign Policy before the First World War* (London, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

on Terror. Such mental score-keeping demonstrated the influence of my upbringing and the desire to stay in touch with some part of my heritage.

These considerations may seem irrelevant to a broader audience, but they formed a lot of my thinking when I transitioned to graduate school. I had hoped to become the “Italian Way of War” historian in America in the same mold as Robert Citino’s work on *The German Way of War: From the Thirty Years’ War to the Third Reich*. Citino traced a strategic culture of maneuver warfare from the 1600s through to Nazi Germany.² Strategic culture as a concept linked a nation’s “geography and resources, history and experience, and society and political structure.”³ Nations thus developed unique approaches to waging war based on their experiences and traditions. I wanted to follow in the same vein. Unfortunately, the most common trend I found in Italian military history since the *Risorgimento* involved a litany of repeated military defeats. This supposed cultural heritage stood in stark contrast to the lionized military histories of some other Great Powers. Ironically, the German “Way of War” also included some remarkable disasters at Jena-Auerstedt, on the Western Front in World War I, and in Russia in World War II to name a few.⁴ The failure to capture Moscow in December 1941 ultimately signaled the end of this Germanic approach to fighting. Nevertheless, the assessment of the Germans as superior soldiers to the Italians has continued to persist. These differences in historical perception fascinated me as I recalibrated my thinking. Citino had integrated Prussian and German failures into his broader argument about the importance of maneuver warfare to a

² Robert M. Citino, *The German Way of War: From the Thirty Years’ War to the Third Reich* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 306-307. Citino uses the operational term “bewegungskrieg” to more appropriately describe a strategic culture designed around a war of operational maneuver.

³ Thomas G. Mahnken, “United States Strategic Culture,” 13 November 2006.

⁴ Citino, *The German Way of War*, 138-141 (discussion of post-Jena reforms), 264-267 (post-WWI reforms).

national strategic culture. The Prussian and German states found a way to reform even after critical defeats. This process of defeat, reform, and victory continued in a deadly cycle. This core concept of reform helped me think through my historical question and argument.

Regardless, I struggled to produce a templated thesis from my research on an Italian subject until I read Mark Mazower's *Hitler's Empire: How the Nazis Ruled Europe*. That book helped me clarify my thoughts on the relationship between strong, medium, and weak states and how they interact with each other on both important and trivial subjects. On several occasions, representatives from smaller Axis nations needed some support from the Germans during World War II. However, the Balkan allies went to the Italians first with their request as a stronger intermediary to intervene on their behalf with the Germans. Despite his nation's internal weaknesses, dictator Benito Mussolini still ran a powerful enough state that could communicate with the strongest coalition member: Nazi Germany. The power imbalance of Germany's weaker allies thus led to a hierarchical support structure.⁵ Mussolini's regime could still influence German strategy in particular ways even though his forces performed poorly on the battlefields of World War II.⁶ In short, the Italians possessed enough agency to attempt to achieve some of their own goals despite the inherent flaws in their military and economy. Germany worried more about Italian support as the war turned against the Axis coalition in the Mediterranean Sea. This fear helped me understand the value of weaker powers after military disasters. Even in defeat, the Italian government possessed some ability to achieve policy aims that belied its real power. I

⁵ A. Dirk Moses, Review of *Hitler's Empire: How the Nazis Ruled Europe*, by Mark Mazower, *The American Historical Review*, vol. 115, issue 3 (June 2010): 885-886. <https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr.115.3.885>.

⁶ Mark Mazower, *Hitler's Empire: How the Nazis Ruled Europe* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2008), 400-402.

now understood how to revisit my idealized version of Italian strategic culture as one consumed by constant defeat.

Mazower's analysis helped define the lens to interpret some of these defeats: that military setbacks on the battlefield might provide some political utility for the losing side. The scope of this argument does not seek to rehabilitate Italian performances on the battlefield. Instead, Italian diplomatic and military strategy in the aftermath of significant defeats demonstrated an institutional resilience for leaders' ability to maintain the nation's international standing with other Great Powers. Policymakers could create a sense of impending doom in Africa and Europe unless the Italian state received significant succor in its moment of crisis. These considerations, when combined with the ambitions of the other Great Powers, convinced other governments to temporarily prioritize supporting an otherwise weak Kingdom of Italy. Defeats thus provided a significant benefit for the losing side.

The special relationship between Great Britain and Italy provided meaningful context on the period from 1896 to 1918. Both states had much in common as liberal constitutional monarchies that were geographically vulnerable from the sea. However, the recently unified Italian kingdom could never match the political stability, economic prosperity, and imperial strength of Great Britain. Italian defeats at Adwa in 1896 in Ethiopia and at Caporetto in 1917 on the Isonzo River helped improve the relationship with Great Britain. Policymakers manipulated the impact of these defeats to mitigate internal unrest and ensure the success of foreign policies. However, the weakness of Italy as a Great Power depended on the capabilities of stronger states in times of crisis. That reliance on external support present throughout much of modern Italian history did not diminish the agency of weaker states.

Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz argued that “the ultimate outcome of a war is not always to be regarded as final.”⁷ He would know. Clausewitz had bitterly suffered through Napoleon’s destruction of the Prussian Army and subsequent diminution of the Prussian state. Nevertheless, Clausewitz saw military defeats as “merely a transitory evil” for the losing side.⁸ Prussia’s own reform program eventually culminated in decisive coalition victories at Leipzig and Waterloo. Therefore, a state can recover from a temporary defeat to achieve a broader victory with enough support between the government, the armed forces, and the people. This argument influenced much of my thinking on the Italian integration of the Clausewitzian trinity that linked the government, people, and military together in applying grand strategy.⁹ According to this concept, nations can perform better in conflict when they link together the different elements of society. Clausewitz also warned of the danger in the lack of finality of any one individual conflict.¹⁰ He directed his caution at states that did not fully embrace conflict because they understood that a later war or event could always salvage a current defeat. Italy from 1896 to 1918 fit into this model. The kingdom readily struggled with creating and implementing a cohesive grand strategy, and this vacuum continued during the Fascist Period. Grandiose

⁷ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 80.

⁸ Ibid. For a discussion on Prussian reforms, see: Charles E. White, “Scharnhorst’s Mentor: Count Wilhelm Zu Schaumburg-Lippe and the Origins of the Modern National Army,” *War in History* 24, no. 3 (2017): 284–85. See also: Dennis E. Showalter, “Manifestation of Reform: The Rearmament of the Prussian Infantry, 1806–13,” *The Journal of Modern History* 44, no. 3 (1972): 379–80.

⁹ Andreas Herberg-Rothe, “Clausewitz’s ‘Wondrous Trinity’ as General Theory of War and Violent Conflict,” *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory*, no. 114 (2007): 50–51. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41802382>. Harry G. Summers, “Clausewitz and Strategy Today,” *Naval War College Review* 36, no. 2 (1983): 45–46. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44636277>.

¹⁰ Clausewitz, *On War*, 80.

schemes rarely matched the instruments of national power available to Italian leaders, which caused the state to frequently run major risks. Ultimately, those risks ended in the collapse of Mussolini's regime in 1943.

A more patient approach to strategy over a longer period of time did not suit all modern states. Clausewitz also knowingly acknowledged that the remedy for a defeat "may still be found in political conditions at some later date."¹¹ The vagueness of the term "some later date" did not inspire great confidence in leaders who watched soldiers and civilians perish because of their own actions. The willingness to see events play out over time linked more closely with Mao Zedong's concept of a long People's War during the post-1945 decolonization period than in the limited conflicts of the Age of Imperialism. A defeat in an overseas province rarely critically damaged any individual Great Power. However, over time other nations might expand their own spheres of influence at any one state's expense. A defeat in a place like Ethiopia could thus open the proverbial door for British, French, and Russian interests to supplant Italian ones. From that perspective a defeat might turn into a calamity as the Italians were herded into a smaller position in East Africa. States thus must balance the willingness to achieve policy aims in the long term with more immediate domestic and international dangers of losing a battle. Nevertheless, even defeats in more important theaters of a war could eventually be "made good" with enough time and strategic planning.

The tendency to focus on military power limited the appreciation for the other instruments of national power. These other instruments become far more relevant in the wake of a military defeat. National leaders sought to explain their setbacks to a grieving or even vengeful

¹¹ Ibid.

public.¹² The manipulation of bad news enabled government officials to maintain control of the impact of disasters as more information became available. Such defeats challenge the identities of strong states.¹³ In addition, leaders like Mussolini actively embraced defeats of the previous regime to draw a clear delineation between Fascist and Liberal Italy. Even the Christian Bible took a similar stance on the political utility of defeat. The punishment of cities like Sodom and Gomorrah or the Babylonian subjugation of Israel provided plenty of fodder for prophets. These holy figures pointed to manmade and natural disasters as harbingers for a renewal of spiritualism to bring future success.¹⁴ Only then would God reward the faithful for their stalwartness during difficult times. Likewise, the Italian government cast about for scapegoats to explain away defeats and for reformers to maintain the nation's status as one of the Great Powers.

Historiography

The general historiography of the Italian military experience since reunification has been a profoundly negative one. Significant defeats both in Africa and the world wars stunted Italy's imperial designs. As a result, the Kingdom of Italy's imperial grasp never reached further than a few small provinces in the Mediterranean and Africa. Italy certainly had plenty of experience in dealing with failure as it sought to join the growing list of world empires near the end of the nineteenth century. However, the recovery process after such defeats can often be as important to Italy's history as the event itself. The pressure of aspiring to Great Power status, especially for economically underdeveloped countries like Italy, meant that an appearance of military strength

¹² Laura Roselle, *Media and the Politics of Failure: Great Powers, Communication Strategies, and Military Defeats* (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 1.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Brad E. Kelle, "Dealing with the Trauma of Defeat: The Rhetoric of the Devastation and Rejuvenation of Nature in Ezekiel," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, vol. 128, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 469-470, 474.

must always be maintained. A complicated tangle of military defeats, international alliances, domestic struggles, and technological challenges all forced the Italians to reform their military structure without an adequate industrial base or the manpower necessary to sustain this force. Ultimately, Italy's attempts at reorganization from 1896 to 1918 created a hybrid creature: a more efficient and more cooperative military system, but one plagued with nagging problems that hindered any operation larger than a regional colonial conflict. Nevertheless, internal weaknesses and foreign fears of an Italian collapse could be manipulated in the wake of the political pressure caused by defeats. That manipulation allowed the Italian state to then achieve more limited policy aims.

Weak States

This dissertation focuses specifically on the relations that Italy enjoyed with the other Western Great Powers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The Battles of Adwa and Caporetto provide case studies for understanding the political aftermath of these defeats. Thus, Italy was a relatively weak state when compared to Great Britain, France, and Germany. This definition remains true even when the Italians lost a battle to the much weaker Ethiopian state in 1896 at Adwa or to a highly innovative Austro-German army in 1917 at Caporetto. The malleability of Italian responses thus measured state power by subjective perceptions rather than firm quantitative measures of diplomacy, information, military, and economic strengths. Some additional methods to gauge a weak state's ability to sway stronger ones focused on less tangible means like influence and vulnerability.¹⁵ These broader concepts provide an alternate lens into

¹⁵ Hanna S. Kassab, "Weak States and Major Powers in the 21st Century" (Doctoral dissertation, University of Miami, 2014), 8-12. Ulf Lindell and Stefan Persson, "The Paradox of Weak State Power: A Research and Literature Overview," *Cooperation and Conflict*, vol. 21, no. 2 (1986): 80. See also: Randall L. Schweller, "The Concept of

qualifying state power. In addition, weak powers were not just failing states in the modern era.¹⁶ Other Great Powers that resolved their internal political struggles near the same time as Italian unification – namely, Russia, Germany, and the United States – emerged far stronger towards the end of the 19th century. However, Italy was weak even when allied with Great Britain and France – the leaders of the World War I Entente – or with Germany – the leader of the pre-World War I Triple Alliance. Even a “Great Power” can thus be classified as a “weak state.” Weak states can massively escalate tensions and conflicts with stronger powers, or deescalate them through external bargaining.¹⁷ Therefore, weak states must always be aware of the dangers of massed counter-escalation by their stronger neighbors and enemies.

However, weaker powers do not necessarily need to always be failing states. Even Great Powers have an ability to distinguish themselves from each other. Thus, the Kingdom of Italy mostly struggled to achieve its goals because it was a relatively weaker Great Power that depended on the support of the stronger states in the international order. Italian journalist and politician Luigi Barzini argued that “fragility and precariousness” were the only constant in Italian politics since the days of the Roman Republic.¹⁸ Barzini argued against the historical Italian dependence on some outside force to preserve the political normalcy of life in the peninsula.¹⁹ This undoubtedly pessimistic view influenced a desire for greater control of the

Middle Power,” eds. Victor D. Cha and Marie Dumond, in *The Korean Pivot: The Study of South Korea as a Global Power*, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 2017, 3-5.

¹⁶ Mick Moore, “Globalisation and Power in Weak States,” *Third World Quarterly* 32, no. 10 (2011): 1771-1773. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41341198>.

¹⁷ Øystein Solvang, “Escalation in Asymmetrical relations: A Rational Strategy for Weak States?” (Master’s thesis, UiT The Arctic University of Norway, 2021), 102-103.

¹⁸ Luigi Barzini, “Italy: The Fragile State,” *Foreign Affairs* 46, no. 3 (1968): 563. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20039324>.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 564.

nation's own destiny. However, the perspective that Italian dependence on foreign support was some sort of hereditary failing missed the mark. That same dependence became an essential component of *successfully* achieving foreign policy aims in the face of stronger opposition.

Political scientist Arjun Chowdhury assessed weak states as those that could not provide basic services to their people nor control tools of violence in their territory.²⁰ He argued that Western states formed in the 19th century during periods of intense conflict created stronger governments than 20th century states unified in periods of relative peace. In its 19th century formation, the relative weakness of Italy depended on military conflict to transform the peninsula from “a geographic expression” into a country.²¹ Only then could the Italians create a strong modern state. Chowdhury theorized that weak states would thus become more common in the 21st century. However, he did not then distinguish between the strengths and weaknesses of Great Powers like Italy and more powerful states.

Weak states wield influence over stronger ones in a variety of measures to make up for a large gap in relative power. Andrew Mack, the British author of the *Human Security Reports* who focused on the impact of the international community on continuing post-Cold War conflict, published “Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars” in 1975. He rationalized that victory in asymmetric conflicts resulted due to political victories against a larger power that could neither prevail nor be defeated through military means.²² The focus on asymmetric wars, or

²⁰ Arjun Chowdhury, *The Myth of International Order: Why Weak States Persist and Alternatives to the State Fade Away* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018), 2-3.

²¹ Ibid., 49-50. Alan Reinerman, “Metternich, Italy and the Congress of Verona, 1821-1822,” *The Historical Journal* 14, no. 2 (1971): 263–265. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2637956>.

²² Andrew Mack, “Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars: The Politics of Asymmetric Conflict,” *World Politics* 27, no. 2 (1975): 176–177.

unconventional conflicts between vastly different belligerents, does not directly apply to the perspective of conventional Italian wars. Mack's argument framed the concept that a wide power disparity enabled an "interest asymmetry" where the public or ruling elite lose interest in a conflict against a perceptibly weak enemy.²³ Ultimately, the lack of political resolve can lead stronger nations to lose against weaker ones. My argument will demonstrate the elements of continued political resolve in an Italian state wracked by internal divisions and external weaknesses. Ivan Arreguin-Toft, a Harvard Kennedy School professor and expert on defeats in asymmetric conflicts, expanded on Mack's thesis. Toft concluded that strong states lost wars when they used the wrong strategy. States that fought wars won when they applied the same strategy as their weaker opponents, and likewise they lost when applying a different strategy that favored time over other values.²⁴ Thus, a nation employing a conventional strategy in direct warfare would tend to win against a weaker power using a similar style of fighting. Therefore, nations even when they did not engage in unconventional warfare needed to match ways and means against the capabilities of their opponents.

Studies on weak state-powerful state interactions tended to focus on asymmetrical conflicts or on post-1945 conflicts in the Cold War. The era of decolonization contained many examples of the so-called Third World holding its own or even prevailing against the might of richer and more technologically advanced powers.²⁵ Regardless, some principles of "weak versus strong" also applied to the Age of Imperialism. Political scientists Ulf Lindell and Stefan Persson argued that post-1950 weak states in a bipolar world achieve influence through four main

²³ Ivan Arreguín-Toft, "How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict," *International Security* 26, no. 1 (2001): 94-95.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 121-122.

²⁵ Lindell and Persson, "The Paradox of Weak State Power," 80-81.

strategies: alignment (or even non-alignment), exploiting great power weaknesses, bargaining power, and issue escalation.²⁶ Yet, the Italians applied some of these same principles even in a multipolar world of Great Power competition in the early 20th century. In particular, the Italians gained incredible bargaining power against stronger states in the wake of critical military defeats. This power allowed a relatively weak power like Italy to find a new way to achieve its foreign policy aims.

The contrast between “bandwagoning” (joining a stronger coalition) and “balancing” (joining a weaker coalition to preserve the balance of power) provided some justification for Italian strategy.²⁷ Political scientists Kevin Sweeney and Paul Fritz argued that Italy allied with Germany and Austria-Hungary individually in 1882 to bandwagon together and form a stronger coalition bloc.²⁸ Such an approach definitively placed Italy at the bottom of the list of six great European powers, which in decreasing order of capabilities were the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Russia, Austria-Hungary, and then Italy. The overall perception of Italy as a weaker great power negatively influenced assessments of the efficacy of independent grand strategy.

Italian Grand Strategy and Defeatist Literature

Evaluations of Italian strategy tend to downplay the nation’s agency in favor of external factors. Strategist Brian Sullivan argued that Italy did not truly achieve “great power status” until 1918 with the collapse of Austria-Hungary and the defeat of both Russia and Germany in World

²⁶ Ibid., 85-88.

²⁷ Kevin Sweeney and Paul Fritz, “Jumping on the Bandwagon: An Interest-Based Explanation for Great Power Alliances,” *The Journal of Politics* 66, no. 2 (2004): 429. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2508.2004.00158.x>.

²⁸ Ibid., 432.

War I.²⁹ He criticized the nation's inability to learn the correct lessons from military conflict. His description of the 1866 conflict as a "military disaster" looks through a surprisingly limited tactical lens. The Italians did fail to achieve military success against Austria during the Seven Weeks' War, but the ultimate Prussian triumph nevertheless allowed the Italian annexation of Venice. Sullivan appeared to criticize the Italian dependence on French and Prussian allies to achieve unification, as well as the shifting nature of Italian politics.³⁰ However, this diplomatic strategy *enabled* Italian unification by allowing a relatively weak kingdom to compete against the strength of the well-established Hapsburgs. Italian strategic culture worked as long as this system survived or the defeats were not too catastrophic. Waves of successive governments sought to expand the Kingdom of Italy into a true empire on the model of the Romans but lacked the institutional capacity for long-range strategic thought. Only the king and his top ministers could plan for military operations in a shroud of secrecy that prevented effective strategizing.³¹ Sullivan described a grasping Italian power seeking to find its place in the sun against the wishes of the other Great Powers. Defeats at Adwa and Caporetto thus shattered Italian prestige and left the nation still reaching for Great Power status.

The disaster at Adwa marked the crossroads of both European interventions in Africa as well as that of multiple competing historiographical interpretations. First, Italian soldiers who survived the battle in 1896 sought to apportion blame and to find heroes in the aftermath of the

²⁹ Brian R. Sullivan, "The Strategy of the Decisive Weight: Italy, 1882-1922," in *The Making of Strategy: Rulers, States, and War*, eds. Williamson Murray, MacGregor Knox, and Alvin Bernstein (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 307-310.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 311-313.

tragedy.³² Fascist scholars followed a similar approach in the 1920s by broadening the blame to include an indictment of Liberal Italy as a failed project that had let down its noble people too many times.³³ Thus, the fascists cast the defeats at Adwa and Caporetto as purifying experiences for the nation. The Battle of Adwa has also been utilized by historians who want to demonstrate that Africans could overcome the supposed technological and racial superiority of white Europeans.³⁴ Ethiopia could thus be a symbol of decolonization at a time when the rest of Africa was, directly or indirectly, dominated by Western powers. British and French historians focused on the limitations of Italian grand strategy abroad.³⁵ From their perspective, the Italians had little to do with the subsequent British invasion of the Sudan and the French decision to reopen trade with the Italians. Meanwhile, Italian historians did give more agency to the young Kingdom of Italy.

Political scientist Marco Rimanelli analyzed the failures of Italian ambitions over the period of several hundred years. The Italians “repeatedly sought to shape the Mediterranean world,” but “their political fragmentation left them prey to foreign attack.”³⁶ Major errors in Italian foreign policy plagued both the Liberal (1875-1920) and Fascist (1935-1943) eras. The

³² Giovanni Gamera, *Ricordi di un Prigioniero di Guerra nello Scioa* (Florence, IT: G. Barbera, 1898), 31-33, accessed 20 November, 2016, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/nyp.33433043908924>. Eduardo Ximenes, *Sul Campo di Adua; Diario, Marzo-Guigno*, 1896 (Milano, IT: Fratelli Treves, 1897), 234, accessed 25 October 2016, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.32044017956632>.

³³ Alberto Pollera, *La Battaglia di Adua* (Florence, IT: Carpigani & Zipoli, 1928), iv.

³⁴ Abebe Hailemeleket, *The Victory of Adwa and What We Owe to Our Heroes: The First Victory of Africa over Colonialists*, trans., Yohannes G. Selassie (Addis Ababa, ET: Abebe Hailemeleket, 1998), 167.

³⁵ Richard Pankhurst, “British Reaction to the Battle of Adwa: As Illustrated by The Times of London for 1896,” in *The Battle of Adwa: Reflections on Ethiopia’s Historic Victory Against European Colonialism*, eds. Paulos Milkias and Getachew Metaferia (New York, NY: Algora Publishing, 2005), 219.

³⁶ Andrew Rolle, Review of *Italy Between Europe and the Mediterranean*, by Marco Rimanelli, *Italian-Americana*, vol. 17, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 234-235.

biggest continuity in Italian policy involved maintaining a balance of power in the Mediterranean Sea. However, the inability of repeated Italian governments to “subordinate all national resources to the attainment of regional power” meant that their means could never achieve broader ends.³⁷ The Italians compensated through shifting partnerships with land powers such as Germany and France or naval powers such as Britain and the United States. However, even these measures failed to make Italy the preeminent Mediterranean power. Thus, Rimanelli argued that Adwa did not greatly change Italian foreign policy which still stuck closely to the Triple Alliance while also easing tensions with Britain and France.³⁸ The country suffered from too much international isolation and domestic unrest after the defeat. This “nightmarish international strategic position” only improved by 1900-1902 with colonial deals with Britain and France.³⁹ Rimanelli’s approach thus negated the immediate fallout of Adwa and how radically Italian policy aims and strategic approaches changed in 1896.

Assessments of Italian strategy after the defeat at Adwa in 1896 struggled to give the nascent kingdom much agency in its own foreign policy successes. This issue continued well into the historiography of another prominent defeat at Caporetto in 1917 during World War I. Common perspectives again gave British allies the primacy in rescuing the Italian position before dragging them into a unified council in charge of grand strategy.⁴⁰ Such an approach reduces the importance of Anglo-Italian relations to the development of effective coalition

³⁷ Marco Rimanelli, *Italy between Europe and the Mediterranean: Diplomacy and Naval Strategy from Unification to NATO, 1800s-2000*, in *Studies in Modern European History*, vol. 21 (New York, NY: Peter Lang Inc., International Academic Publishers, 1997), xxiii.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 313.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 314-315.

⁴⁰ David French, *The Strategy of the Lloyd George Coalition: 1916-1918* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1995), 6. David Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, vol. 4 (London, UK: Ivor Nicholson and Watson, 1934), 2238-2239.

warfare. Similarly, Francophile historians looked at the relevance of France itself to the geography of the fighting on the Western Front and to gaining control of the Supreme War Council.⁴¹ Once again, an Italian ally dictated events due to its superior military and economic strength. Even the latest newcomers – the Americans – thus influenced coalition strategy to a greater degree than the Italians blooded on the Isonzo River in twelve different engagements.⁴² Italian historians generally sought to rehabilitate the effectiveness of the Italian military.⁴³ This approach tended to shy away from looking at the political influence gained from these defeats, but at least gave the Italians some greater agency in determining their own fates.

Anglo-Italian Relations

The most powerful driving force in Italian foreign affairs was the island nation of Great Britain. Certainly, the power of unified Germany and the Franco-Russian alliance both possessed impressive military arsenals. However, the long coast of Italy and its overseas ambitions made the nation depend on British naval support – or at least, not its enmity. In addition, the continental alliance systems both included targets for Italian ambitions. The Italians still resented France for requiring Nice and parts of Savoy in exchange for military support in 1859, whereas Italian unification had come at the expense of most – but not all – of Austria-Hungary's territory in northern Italy. The primacy of Anglo-Italian relations continued even after Rome joined the Triple Alliance.

⁴¹ Robert A. Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory: French Strategy and Operations in the Great War* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 397. Elizabeth Greenhalgh, *Victory through Coalition: Britain and France during the First World War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 169.

⁴² David F. Trask, *The United States in the Supreme War Council: American War Aims and Inter-Allied Strategy* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 14, 18-19.

⁴³ Mark Thompson, *The White War: Life and Death on the Italian Front 1915-1919* (London, UK: Faber and Faber Limited, 2008), 319-320.

Italian perceptions of Britain mixed both heady admiration with an inferiority complex for a formerly Roman province that Italian historian Jacopo Pili evaluated two historical camps and their comparison of Anglo-Italian relations: one viewed Mussolini as a pragmatist who constantly sought some sort of accommodation with the British empire, and the other that viewed the fascist experiment through the lens of rampant expansionism. Pili argued that Italian Anglophobia saw Britain as the foundation of a dying liberal world order soon to be replaced by fascist authoritarianism.⁴⁴ Britain's importance during and after World War I made the nation a useful scapegoat for different sources of Italian frustration. Pili does demonstrate how the Great War played a role in beginning to pry apart a long tradition of Anglo-Italian friendship.⁴⁵ That friendship had its origins in British sympathy for Italian unification during the *Risorgimento*. However, he does not point to any significant military defeats as affecting this friendship in one way or the other, and massive disasters like Caporetto did not even get mentioned.

The Italians rarely figured very prominently in British power projections. From 1896 through 1918, stronger powers like Germany and the Franco-Russian Dual Alliance posed a much greater threat. Erik Goldstein argued in his 2003 anthology *Power and Stability* that British foreign policy pursued international stability to preserve global commerce.⁴⁶ To that end, a flexible approach allowed the British to shift between competing alliance systems in different regions. The Royal Navy and the size of the British Empire enabled a more independent

⁴⁴ Jacopo Pili, *Anglophobia in Fascist Italy* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2021), 3.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv2cmrbq3.3>.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

⁴⁶ Erik Goldstein and B. J. C. McKercher, *Power and Stability: British Foreign Policy, 1865-1965* (London, UK: Frank Cass, 2003), 1.

approach to individual regional “questions” like “the Egyptian question” and more.⁴⁷ Thus, Prime Minister Lord Robert Salisbury could and did cooperate with the Italians and Austro-Hungarians to fend off Russian interests in the eastern Mediterranean Sea.⁴⁸ The lack of direct threats to British power enabled this variable diplomacy. Goldstein argued that the period 1900 to 1904 witnessed a significant evolution in the British diplomatic approach to the other Great Powers thanks to increasingly aggressive German and Franco-Russian foreign policies. This argument does not give enough credit to the combustible elements inherent in Great Power competition in the Scramble for Africa by the 1890s. In particular, all European powers sought to establish and protect their own spheres of influence. Not counted in this tabulation were the dangers of African victories against European expansion. Usually, such setbacks simply led European powers to bide their time before returning with a vengeance. However, in the case of the Italian defeat at Adwa the British came to fear the creation of a huge power vacuum.

Divergences over types of overseas empire also distinguished British and Italian relations. The small Italian holdings in Eritrea and Libya by 1914 paled in comparison to the global British Empire. Italian historian Patrizia Palumbo’s appropriately titled *A Place in the Sun: Africa in Italian Colonial Culture* analyzed the impact of colonial dreams on Italian beliefs. If the “sun never set” on the British Empire, then the best the Italians could was to fight for a place under that same sun. That space did not need to be very large to assure Italy of its Great Power status. The two nations placed very different demands on their African colonies: the British approach of “democratic colonialism” integrated raw materials, manpower, and trade in

⁴⁷ Margaret MacMillan, *The Road to 1914: The War that Ended Peace* (New York, NY: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2013), 38-39.

⁴⁸ Goldstein, *Power and Stability*, 5.

sharp contrast to the semi-feudal and impoverished Italian territories.⁴⁹ Ultimately, the British came to distrust fascist imperial aggression after World War I during a time when the British desperately sought to maintain the status quo.⁵⁰ Palumbo's analysis integrates the importance that European states put on their national and imperial identities. Similarly, Beverly Allen and Mary Russo focused on themes of national meaning when linking states together. For example, white Westerners in the 19th century perceived Italian immigrants as an inferior "black race" that could be demeaned and forced to work menial tasks.⁵¹ To counter perceptions of "otherness," Italian soldiers distinctly assumed identities as white Europeans when occupying Eritrea or attacking Ethiopia.⁵² These assumed roles prevented large-scale intermingling with the locals on the model of Spanish-African-Indian mestizo and mulatto populations in the Americas. Britain and Italy both shared this sense of racial distinction from their conquered territories. The combination of mass emigration of poor elements of society combined with imperial colonization provided Italy the opportunity to redress the lack of economic prosperity promised by unification.⁵³

Threads of imperialism, race, politics, and culture all impact Anglo-Italian relations in some dramatic way. These histories all tend to significantly downplay the importance of Italian defeats in these narratives. This perspective makes sense when considering the power imbalance between the two countries. In this relationship, the British clearly assumed the role of the strong

⁴⁹ Patrizia Palumbo, *A Place in the Sun: Africa in Italian Colonial Culture from Post-Unification to the Present* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 43 . <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520936263>.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 313.

⁵¹ Beverly Allen and Mary Russo, *Revisioning Italy: National Identity and Global Culture*, NED-New edition. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 5.

⁵² Ibid., 7-8.

⁵³ Ibid. 8.

Great Power while the Italians fought to achieve their more limited objectives as the relatively weaker Great Power. Therefore, the interpretation of the influence of weaker states on stronger ones can even help evaluate the shifting balances between two of the most powerful states in the world by the turn of the 20th century.

Sources Used

This dissertation ties together several unique source bases. The Italian sources include published government records of diplomatic correspondence from the 19th and 20th centuries. Parliamentary meetings offer the official version of events that can be contrasted with local newspapers and individual memoirs. In particular, government documents published in 1896 and 1917 right after military defeats focused on the political survival of their authors. The revolving door of Italian governments meant that most politicians could find their way back into power, but they still needed to maintain their influence in the wake of disaster. I also included work done on a research fellowship at the Italian Army's Archives in Rome, Italy. The necessity for scapegoating after these defeats often led to internal reviews that accompanied the disgraced dismissal of previously influential commanders. British Cabinet Papers and newspapers are also integrated to demonstrate how British politicians and military leaders reacted to Italian initiatives.

The theoretical background is rooted in grand strategy with a focus on assessments of the value of defeats. Additional support came from histories that discussed the effects that weak powers can have on stronger ones. The United States Military Academy at West Point teaches three types of strategy: the annihilation of the enemy in a decisive battle, the attrition of the

enemy force over time, or the exhaustion of the enemy public will over time.⁵⁴ None of these definitions provide a reasonable evaluation for evaluating Italian political influence in the wake of military defeats. Samuel Johnson and John Gaddis argued for the importance of personal experience in conflict to develop effective strategies over time.⁵⁵ More importantly, survivable defeats offer a better platform for improving – not perfecting – strategy for a nation-state. In addition, power depends on the relative nature of international relations and the context of the states wielding a certain level of influence.⁵⁶

I have spent the past six years developing the individual components of this dissertation and weaving them together into a coherent whole. The research process was greatly hampered by the tribulations of the COVID pandemic that limited access to outside sources for significant periods. As a result, much of this work focuses on digitized archival sources with a strong bias in favor of British and Italian sources. The relative closeness of Anglo-Italian relations during the period 1896-1918 thus permeates throughout this work as two nations – one stronger and one weaker – forged a common destiny in Africa and Europe before widely diverging from each other in the postwar world.

Argument and Organization

Military defeats provided relatively weak countries with political leverage by making them temporarily more important in interstate affairs. The historical perception of Italy remains

⁵⁴ Cliff Rogers, “Strategy, Operational Design, and Tactics,” in *International Encyclopedia of Military History*, ed. James C. Bradford (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006).

⁵⁵ Colin S. Grady, “School for Strategy: Teaching Strategy for 21st Century Conflict,” *Strategic Studies Institute*, U.S. Army War College (2009): 33.

⁵⁶ Marshall R. Singer, *Weak States in a World of Powers: The Dynamics of International Relationships* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1972): 54-55.

that of a weak nation often overshadowed by its more powerful neighbors. However, a substantial historiographical gap in the scholarship fails to explore how defeats gave Italy more influence in achieving its foreign policy aims. In particular, the special relationship with Great Britain grew relatively closer during a period of radical transformation at the end of the 19th century. Ultimately, military defeats mostly benefitted the Italian state from 1896 through 1918 because internal reforms recalibrated foreign policy aims and diplomatic leverage ensured foreign support.

Chapter 2 introduces the Battle of Adwa in 1896 against the Ethiopians with a brief description of the campaign and battle and the historiography before expanding on the central argument of Italy's ability to sway stronger powers to achieve policy aims after the defeat. Chapter 3 evaluates battle's impact on Italian foreign relations. The danger of an Italian withdrawal from the Upper Nile played a vital role in the British invasion of the Sudan and the subsequent French march to Fashoda that almost ignited an international war. The Italian government leveraged the defeat to achieve a critical rapprochement with both its Mediterranean rival in France as well as Great Britain. Thus, Italy began its slow but fateful turn away from the Triple Alliance with Germany and Austria-Hungary in favor of Western Europe. Chapter 4 focuses on the period of military reform in the aftermath of the Italian defeat to demonstrate the long shadow that Adwa cast over strategists. These changes made Italy a viable and attractive partner for the competing coalition system in Europe in the early 20th century.

The second half of the dissertation links a period of key reforms after Adwa to the outbreak of World War I where the Italians struggled to achieve even limited success on the Isonzo River. However, the attrition of the Great War slowly provided more power to the Italians vis-à-vis the Allied coalition. Thus, the Italian state could move to secure its own borders,

replace its own leaders, and achieve a modicum of independent policy aims. Chapter 5 moves to 1914 and the beginning of World War I. Chapter 6 shows the destructive outcome of the Battle of Caporetto and how the Italians rescued their own military and political position. Chapter 7 explores the creation of a Supreme War Council often seen as dominated by Britain and France. Nevertheless, the Italians used the threat of their defeat to temporarily achieve more influence in this council before squandering their opportunity. The dissertation conclusion in Chapter 8 ends with the interpretation of Italy's historic defeats and how they affected the mindset of policymakers during the Fascist Period. These individuals used historic losses as a means for achieving a decisive break with the weaker Kingdom of Italy. Nevertheless, the nation continued to struggle militarily during Benito Mussolini's rule. The scope of disasters radically accelerated during World War II and, when combined with the loss of British naval and diplomatic support, spelled the end of Italy as a Great Power.

Chapter 2 - Adwa Introduction and the First Italo-Ethiopian War (1895-1896)

The 1895-1896 Campaign

On 1 March 1896, Emperor Menelik II of Ethiopia decisively defeated an Italian army at the Battle of Adwa. The Italians had invaded Ethiopia in 1895 to expand the nascent Italian empire in Africa.¹ After several months of campaigning, General Oreste Baratieri launched a feigned attack on the night of 29 February 1896 against what he believed to be a fraction of Menelik's 100,000-man army. Baratieri hoped to force part of the Ethiopian army into a frontal assault against prepared Italian positions in the mountainous terrain east of Adwa.² Instead, three of his four brigades became widely dispersed and the Ethiopians defeated them in detail. The Italians lost over 7,000 of their 16,000 men while Ethiopian casualties exceeded 10,000 soldiers.³ The Italians, after losing almost half of their army in the battle, withdrew back to their Eritrean colony and signed a peace treaty guaranteeing the independence of Ethiopia.⁴ The battle marked a decisive turning point in Euro-African relations. For the first time in modern history, an African army decisively defeated a European army *and* forced a Great Power to sign a humiliating peace treaty. Thus, Ethiopia entered the 20th century as one of only two independent African states, which further added to Italy's embarrassment. The importance of this battle

¹ Salvatore Saladino, *Italy from Unification to 1919: Growth and Decay of a Liberal Regime* (New York, NY: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1970), 83.

² Oreste Baratieri, *Memorie d'Africa (1892-1896)* (Torino, IT: Flli. Bocco, 1898), accessed 03 November, 2016, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/nnc1.0040402282>, 372.

³ Domenico Quirico, *Adua: La Battaglia che Cambio la Storia D'Italia* (Milano, IT: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore S.p.A., 2004), 366-367.

⁴ Ibid., 366-367. Hailemeleket, *The Victory of Adwa*, 195.

transformed Italian foreign relations heading into the 20th century. The main themes of the campaign and the historiography section organize the contextual background necessary to also understand the evolution of the Anglo-Italian relationship. The next chapter clarifies the immediate effects of Adwa on Italian, British, and French policymakers. Then, the last chapter on Adwa explains the battle's long-term impact on recalibrating Italian foreign policy and strategy through to 1911 and the origins of World War I.

From its origins, Italian imperial ambitions depended on the goodwill of stronger powers. The First Italo-Ethiopian War of 1895-1896 reflected a series of diplomatic agreements made entirely between Europe's Great Powers without any input from African policymakers. Italian politicians, disappointed at French expansion in Tunisia (1881) and the lack of any tangible benefits from the Berlin Conference (1884-1885), looked to the Horn of Africa for future expansion.⁵ British support allowed the Italians to occupy Massawa in Eritrea in February 1885.⁶ Prime Minister Agostino Depretis appreciated British sensitivity over any expansion along the critical road to India. In addition, the Italians still faced serious enemies on their northern land borders. The subsequent desire for friendlier Anglo-Italian relations followed Italy's dangerous entry into one of the two major competing alliance systems in Europe at the time – the Triple Alliance with Germany and Austria Hungary. Germany's strength nominally guided the general direction of the alliance. German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck appreciated the 1871 status quo

⁵ Alfred Franzis Pribram, *The Secret Treaties of Austria-Hungary: 1879-1914*, vol. 2, ed. Archibald Cary Coolidge (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1921), 10. Giovanni Giolitti, *Memoirs of My Life*, trans. Edward Storer (London, UK: Chapman and Dodd, 1923), 12. Robert Gale Woolbert, "Italian Colonial Expansion in Africa" in *The Journal of Modern History*, 4, no. 3 (September 1932): 431, JSTOR.

⁶ Abdullah Nasir Al-Subaiy, "Anglo-Egyptian Relations under Lord Salisbury, 1885-1892," Ph.D. diss., (Michigan State University, 1980), 86-87.

when Prussia had gained sole control of the Germanic states and unified them in three short wars. He sought to placate Great Britain, to keep Russia relatively friendly, and to prevent France from gaining powerful allies that could encircle Germany's central position. However, Germany's desire to avoid antagonizing France often came at the expense of the wishes of its southern Italian neighbor. As a result, the Italians often charted their own course in terms of expanding in Africa. Thus, the Italians invaded Ethiopia in 1895 to gain greater control of East Africa in one of the few areas not already claimed by the other Great Powers.

The 1895-1896 Ethiopian Campaign marked the culmination of over a decade of border skirmishing and political intrigue between the two countries. The commercial benefits of both the Italian colony in Eritrea and the protectorate in Somalia paled in comparison to the potential wealth of Ethiopia. Menelik II, formerly the King of Shewa in southern Ethiopia, eventually consolidated his power base with Italian support and crowned himself emperor in 1889.⁷ Just like other European colonizers during the Scramble for Africa, the Italians now sought to gain greater control over a useful proxy. The Treaty of Wuchale signed that year between Menelik and Count Pietro Antonelli bore important differences in the Italian and Amharic translations. The Italian text declared Ethiopia as a protectorate that "should" use Italy for all foreign exchange, whereas the Amharic text only said that Menelik "could" use Italy as its intermediary.⁸ In short, the

⁷ Robert P. Skinner, *Abyssinia of Today: An Account of the First Mission Sent by the American Government to the Court of the King of Kings, 1903-1904* (New York, NY: Longmans, Green, 1906), 143-144. Pietro Antonelli, *Menelik, Imperatore d'Etiopia* (Rome, IT: Stabilimento Tipografico Italiano, 1891), 42-43.

⁸ Lare Marghinotti, *Il Protettorato Internazionale nella sua Natura Giuridica* (Sassari, IT: G. Dessi, 1905), 95. Paulos Milkias, "The Battle of Adwa: The Historic Victory of Ethiopia over European Colonialism," in *The Battle of Adwa: Reflections on Ethiopia's Historic Victory Against European Colonialism*, ed. Paulos Milkias and Getachew Metaferia (New York, NY: Algora Publishing, 2005), 44. Robert L. Hess, "Italian Imperialism in its Ethiopian Context," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 6, no. 1 (1973): 94, 107, JSTOR.

Italians claimed Ethiopia as a protectorate that could not negotiate with other European states on its own. Furious over this betrayal, Menelik denounced the document and raided the Eritrean-Ethiopian border in 1894 and 1895. Similarly, his Italian counterpart also took umbrage over the interpretation of the treaty. Prime Minister Francesco Crispi, believing the Ethiopians had themselves negotiated in bad faith, used this opportunity to order the subjugation of the country.⁹ The geographical importance of East Africa threatened to spill the Italo-Ethiopian conflict into other vital regions. The Italian invasion of Ethiopia threatened to significantly impact events in the Sudan and Egypt.

The Egyptians and their British overlords also somewhat feared Crispi's expansion and any potential repercussions from neighboring powers. The British had pulled back from the Sudan after a disastrous defeat at Khartoum in 1885.¹⁰ A vastly expanded Italian sphere of influence combined with the British reluctance to reenter Sudan could threaten the Nile River's water supply at its base.¹¹ In addition, Italian expansion promised possible cooperation with or subjugation of the Mahdist fundamentalists in Sudan. This aggression corresponded with a gradual change in the Triple Alliance from a purely defensive coalition to a more offensive one in colonial affairs. Crispi in particular used French colonial interests as a scapegoat for his own schemes in Africa and the Mediterranean.¹² The Germans both feared French revanchism and wanted to distract the French into commitments outside of Europe and away from Alsace and

⁹ Calvin Alexander Roberts, "The Egyptian Question and the Triple Alliance, 1884-1904," Ph.D. diss. (The University of New Mexico, 1973), 111.

¹⁰ R. E. Colston, "The British Campaign in the Soudan for the Rescue of Gordon," *Journal of the American Geographical Society of New York* 17 (1885): 125-126, <https://doi.org/10.2307/196615>.

¹¹ Al-Subaiy, "Anglo-Egyptian Relations," 155.

¹² Mary Joanne Sugnet, "The Relations of France and England with Italy, based on the Franco-Italian Accord of 1902, Between 1902 and 1914," Master's thesis (Canisius College, 1956), 3-4.

Lorraine. Unfortunately, the Italians could not reliably provide a large enough counterweight to French interests in Africa. Therefore, any expansion needed to negotiate a middle path between French hostility and British caution over African spheres of influence.

At the same time, French and British relations continuously deteriorated over the control of Egypt and the vital Suez Canal. The Earl of Cromer Evelyn Baring served as Britain's Consul-General in Egypt during the end of the 19th century. He believed that by mid-1882 "the force of circumstances had unfortunately severed the *entente cordiale* between England and France."¹³ That entente referred to the original easing of Anglo-French relations that occurred in the 1840s between Queen Victoria and Louis-Philippe. By the 1880s, the lack of political unity and the fear of German and British interests paralyzed French activity and prevented them from investing more effort into controlling Egypt. This failure haunted future endeavors by the British to co-opt the French and avoid the appearance of unchecked imperialism.¹⁴ The Great Powers seemed to decide among themselves when a colony was worth bickering over. The vast resources of Egypt and its critical lines of communication proved a significant prize in the Age of Imperialism.¹⁵ Regardless, French antagonism combined with an alliance with Russia could make life for the British very difficult. The isolationist British turned to other states to fill the vacuum of power and maintain the appearance of a combined control of Egypt. Thus, Sir August Paget, the ambassador to Rome, asked on 24 July 1882 for Italian cooperation to protect the Suez

¹³ Evelyn Baring, *Modern Egypt*, vol. 1 (New York, NY: The MacMillan Company, 1908), 307.

¹⁴ Robert L. Baker, "Britain's Hold on the Suez Canal," *Current History* (1916-1940) 43, no. 3 (1935): 287-289. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45335170>.

¹⁵ British control of Egypt into the 20th century proved the value of imperialism in international affairs, particularly in the world wars when dominance of the Suez Canal enabled Allied commerce to survive even after severe military setbacks.

Canal.¹⁶ The Italian refusal was borne out of military weakness and the inability to risk the ire of more powerful states like France. This same inaction occurred during the Berlin Conference. The Italians were strong enough as stakeholders on the world to be invited to discuss the ground rules for colonizing Africa. However, the Italians could not realistically conduct a more independent foreign policy. Likewise, the French could not yet lash out at Britain itself in the case of conflict, but did have the military power to fight Italy. This predicament demonstrated the fragile balance that existed between allied, neutral, and hostile states in the great game of international politics of the late-19th century. In particular, disagreements affecting one particular region like East Africa could easily spill across borders into other divisive areas of conflict.

Ultimately, the Italian invasion of Ethiopia failed because of a poorly executed strategy. The campaign depended on the occupation and consolidation of Tigray province in northern Ethiopia that hoped to wean support away from Menelik.¹⁷ However, General Oreste Baratieri lacked both the troops to block the southern passes of Tigray and the funds to bribe local rulers. African expansion was attractive to European leaders because they assumed that it could be done at little expense and with few soldiers. Therefore, Finance Minister Sidney Sonnino refused to authorize more than 13 million *lire* for the Eritrean budget of 1895-1896. This sum amounted to barely 6 percent of the army's total budget for that same year, even though Baratieri's army was

¹⁶ Baring, *Modern Egypt*, vol. 1, 308-309.

¹⁷ Oreste Baratieri to Francesco Crispi, 7 April 1895, in Ministero Degli Affari Esteri, *I Documenti Diplomatici Italiani: Seconda Serie 1870-1896*, vol. 27 (Rome, IT: Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca Dello Stato, 2000), 11. Milkias, "The Battle of Adwa," 51. Augustus Blandy Wylde, *Modern Abyssinia* (London, UK: Methuen and Co., 1900), 51-52.

the only Italian force in active combat at the time.¹⁸ Thus, the Italian dispositions in Tigray remained spread out and vulnerable when the rainy season in Ethiopia ended in September 1895 and Menelik gathered his full army. Major General Giuseppe Arimondi, commanding a combined detachment of 10,000 Italian and Eritrean troops, retired in the face of the Ethiopian advance into Tigray in late November.¹⁹ However, Arimondi's desire for aggressive forward patrols to disrupt the Ethiopian advance contrasted with Baratieri's more defensive approach. The Ethiopian advance isolated some of these critical forward positions. The Ethiopians overran Major Pietro Toselli's expedition at Amba Alagi on 7 December 1896 and then captured Major Giuseppe Galliano's garrison at Mekelle on 21 January 1896.²⁰ The supposedly cheap and easy conquest of Ethiopia was not going according to plan for either General Baratieri or Prime Minister Crispi, whose continued political viability depended on a victory. The increased investment in time and resources damaged Italian prestige abroad.

Supply problems also played a key role in compelling the Italians to fight at Adwa. Although the Italian navy could move reinforcements and supplies to Eritrea, these took weeks to get from Naples through Eritrea to Baratieri's advancing army.²¹ The navy could do little to improve Baratieri's mobility the longer his campaign lasted. The further he advanced into

¹⁸ Crispi to Baratieri, 14 September 1895, DDI, 235. Giolitti, *Memoirs of My Life*, 121. Ministero del Tesoro, *Il Bilancio Italiano nel Primo Cinquantennio della Unificazione del Regno* (Rome, IT: Tipografia Nazione di G. Bertero E.C., 1911), 59.

¹⁹ "Guerra d'Africa Documenti sul Combattimento d'Amba Alagi e Sulla Difesa di Maccale," in *Rivista Militare Italiana 1896* (Rome, IT: Enrico Voghera Tipografo dell LL. MM. Il Re e La Regina, 1896), 62.

²⁰ Giuseppe Arimondi to Baratieri, "Relazione del Generale Arimondi sulle Operazioni Militari Eseguite nel Tigre dal 24 Novembre al 10 Dicembre 1895," 13 December 1895, GAD, 66-68. N. Bazzani to Arimondi, 14 December 1895, *Ibid.*, 79-81. Edward Gleichen, *With the Mission to Menelik, 1897* (London, UK: E. Arnold, 1898), 326. Arimondi to Baratieri, 20 December 1895, GAD, 44-45.

²¹ Jonas, *Battle of Adwa*, 152.

Ethiopia, the longer reinforcements and supplies took to reach him. Thus, a weak logistical train also limited the force that could rapidly be brought to bear at any given time. The withdrawal towards Eritrea allowed the Italians to shorten their supply lines and receive more reinforcements in the opening months of 1896.²² Crispi, realizing his political future rested on Baratieri's performance, agreed to send him nine battalions of infantry to bolster his forces.²³ The size of Menelik's force meant that logistical challenges also restricted his ability to pursue the Italians out of all of Tigray province. He therefore paused during his pursuit and fortified his camp in late February at Adwa, the capital of Tigray, approximately 250 kilometers southwest of the Red Sea.

The Ethiopian encampment offered an opportunity for Baratieri to achieve the decisive victory he had missed in 1895. Poor *askari* intelligence portrayed the Ethiopian army as badly spread out, with no more than 20,000 men in Adwa itself.²⁴ Baratieri believed he could destroy a portion of the Ethiopian army and thus achieve his campaign goal. Accordingly, on 28 February 1896, Baratieri ordered his commanders to conduct a night march on two mountain roads "to surprise an idle enemy" and establish a defensive perimeter near the slopes east of Adwa.²⁵ Major General Matteo Albertone's brigade, which consisted mainly of *askari* scouts, far outpaced its counterparts and marched quickly past Chidane Meret, the hilltop where it was

²² Baratieri, *Memorie d'Africa*, 363.

²³ Francesco Crispi, *La Prima Guerra D'Africa: Storia Diplomatica della Colonia Eritrea dale Origini al 1896*, ed. T. Palamenghi-Crispi (Milan, IT: Fratelli Treves, 1914), 381-382.

²⁴ Baratieri, *Memorie d'Africa*, 364. Giuseppe Canuti, *L'Italia in Africa e Guerre con L'Abissinia* (Florence, IT: Adriano Salani, 1897), 227. Gamera, *Ricordi di un Prigioniero*, 30.

²⁵ Baratieri, *Memorie d'Africa*, 364-365. Charles Edward Callwell, *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice* (London, UK: Harrison and Sons, 1906), 48.

supposed to set up a forward-defense.²⁶ By the morning of 1 March, Albertone's brigade had advanced four miles southwest of Baratieri's main force and into a valley a few miles away from the Ethiopian camp at Adwa. Albertone established his defensive position flanked by two hilltops that he believed to be unpassable. However, his rapid march left him dangerously separated from the bulk of the Italian army.

Menelik saw this extremely vulnerable brigade and organized a concentrated attack against it in the early morning of 1 March.²⁷ In response, Baratieri ordered his 2nd Infantry Brigade under Major General Vittorio Dabormida to support Albertone, but this force marched west and thus away from Albertone.²⁸ Dabormida knew he could not break through the 25,000 Ethiopians attacking his beleaguered comrade, and he instead launched a diversionary spoiling attack to the northwest in the Mariam Shavitu valley.²⁹ This deployment caused a perilously large gap to develop in the Italian army. Menelik took advantage of this mistake and destroyed the two isolated Italian brigades piecemeal.³⁰ Then, the Ethiopians overran the central 1st Infantry Brigade under General Giuseppe Arimondi. Menelik's troops killed Generals Dabormida and Arimondi and inflicted 4,500 dead, 1,500 wounded, and 2,000 prisoners.³¹ Although they fought bravely, poor Italian reconnaissance of both the terrain and the Ethiopian army had led them into a hopeless battle. Baratieri retreated with the rest of his army into Eritrea.

²⁶ Baratieri, *Memorie d'Africa*, 373. Ximenes, *Sul Campo di Adua*, 217-218. Bruce Vandervort, *Wars of Imperial Conquest in Africa: 1830-1914* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998), 162-163. Pollera, *La Battaglia di Adua*, 53-54.

²⁷ Jonas, *Battle of Adwa*, 194-195.

²⁸ Vandervort, *Wars of Imperial Conquest*, 163.

²⁹ Valentino Chiala, *Il Generale Dabormida* (Rome, IT: E. Voghera, 1897), 6-9. Jonas, *Battle of Adwa*, 189.

³⁰ Gamerra, *Ricordi di un Prigioniero*, 32-33.

³¹ Quirico, *Adua: La Battaglia*, 366-367. Nicola Labanca, *In Marcio Verso Adua* (Turin, IT: Giulio Einaudi Editore, 1993), xi.

The campaign ended with a humiliating truce recognizing Ethiopia's sovereignty that at least prevented the victorious Menelik II from invading the remnants of Italy's miniscule African empire. The defeat at Adwa devastated the Italian public. Thousands of Italian prisoners paroled after the war railed against the incompetence of Italian generals and the poor treatment of Italian conscripts. Specifically, the limited strategic vision of Baratieri and the tactical mistakes of Albertone led to Baratieri's court martial – he was acquitted but forced to resign – and the establishment of a court of inquiry into this defeat.³² The disaster brought down the conservative government of Italy that had been intent on expanding the Italian empire.

Adwa increased the political instability in a young country still dealing with the repercussions of socialism, industrialization, and unification. The nation reduced its foreign policy aims, adopted a more limited approach, and yet still maintained the appearance of strength. Diplomatic negotiations with the British enabled the rescue of a symbolically important garrison, and treaties with the French eased a spirit of hostilities and resumed commercial agreements. A period of retrenchment followed as the Italian military adopted a defensive strategy focused on fighting closer to home in the Mediterranean. Whether consciously or not, soldiers and politicians who acknowledged this reduced strategic sphere did so in the shadow of Adwa's embarrassing legacy. At the strategic level, war ministers realized that Italy could not rely solely on an isolated army fighting hundreds of kilometers inland to achieve victory. The application of both land and naval power together allowed Italy to fight limited wars with more success. Key qualitative reforms made the army both better trained and equipped. At the tactical level, new aerial technology offered a chance to rectify the glaring reconnaissance failures at Adwa. The navy also attempted a series of reforms to reorganize naval units and to secure supply

³² Jonas, *Battle of Adwa*, 328.

lines in any future expeditions. However, the difficult political and international climate of Italy at the end of the century always complicated any potential military reforms.

Historiography

The destinies of Italy and Ethiopia have been intricately linked since the Italians first established a colony near the Horn of Africa in 1885. Italian expansionist ideals contained the inherent racism and arrogance of Victorian Age imperialists, but Italy lacked the strength to carry out its ambitions further inland. More importantly, the divided Ethiopians only seemed capable of uniting under a capable ruler when threatened by foreigners. The major historiographical debates concerning the defeat at Adwa focused on several competing themes. Italian historians placed more emphasis on the centrality of Adwa in terms of influencing later events in Italy, but they also looked at the battle more negatively as a hallmark of state weakness instead of political flexibility. African historians centered the battle from the viewpoint of resistance and the impact of Ethiopian success on post-1945 decolonization. These approaches tended to ignore the battle's constructive effects on Italy's diplomatic and political position in Europe. French historians tended to see the rest of 1896 through the perspective of French rapprochement with little agency for Italian policymakers in the aftermath of the battle. Thus, the defeat came to symbolize European fears of imperial overstretch.

For nations to undertake the arduous process of attempted reform they often must suffer through a transformative event. The Italians underwent just such an experience at the Battle of Adwa.³³ Although Baratieri's losses represented a small fraction of Italy's overall military capacity, they demonstrated Italy's status as a second-rate Great Power on the international

³³ Vandervort, *Wars of Imperial Conquest*, 163. Hailemelekot, *The Victory of Adwa*, 167. Pollera, *La Battaglia di Adua*, xii.

stage. Severe doubts grew among the other European states about Italy's viability as a military ally when it could not even defeat an African nation. The Italians themselves viewed Adwa as a national tragedy that profoundly shook their belief in their country's prestige. From 1896 through 1911 when the Italians invaded Libya, Adwa played a unique role in the memory of the Italian people: it was a warning sign against imperial ambitions but also a rallying cry for nationalists eager to see Italy respected as a world power. A broad range of literature, published in the immediate aftermath of the battle by both survivors and politicians back home, tried to assign blame and explain how an African kingdom had defeated a Great Power.³⁴

The battle wrought enormous long-term changes in both Italy and Ethiopia. The Italian prime minister, Francesco Crispi, and the commander of the invasion of Ethiopia, General Baratieri, resigned from their positions.³⁵ The suppressed expansionist urges of the Italian government, when eventually combined with disappointing gains from the Treaty of Versailles at the end of World War I, played a critical role in the rise of Benito Mussolini and the ultra-nationalist Fascist regime in 1922. The subsequent Italian conquest of Ethiopia in 1935 attempted to correct the perceived slights suffered at the hands of the Abyssinians.³⁶ Victory at Adwa also solidified Ethiopian monarchical rule for another 80 years in a country suffering from

³⁴ The Central Directorate of Colonial Affairs published a bibliography in *Racolta di Pubblicazioni Coloniali Italiane* (Rome: Italy, Tipografia Della Camera dei Deputati, 1911) at the end of the period covered in this article. For further reading on the impact of Italian colonialism in Africa, start with this bibliography for a good list of primary sources.

³⁵ Giolitti, *Memoirs of My Life*, 122-123.

³⁶ Chris Prouty, *Empress Taytu and Menelik II: Ethiopia 1883-1910* (London, UK: Ravens Educational and Development Services, 1986), xi. "Abyssinian" was often used incorrectly to describe Ethiopians in general. However, most Ethiopians belonged to several cultural groups (Oromo, Tigray, Amhara, Showa). "Abyssinian" specifically referred to the Amhara people of northern Ethiopia.

intense ethnic divisions.³⁷ As the only indigenous African country to survive the Scramble, Ethiopia believed the legacy of Adwa would convince other Africans to throw off their imperial shackles and unite for continental independence.³⁸ Although Ethiopian Pan-Africanism never fully materialized, the battle nevertheless played an important role in destroying the myth of the invincible European colonizer. Ultimately, both Italian dreams of conquest and Ethiopians hopes for stable independence were dashed by the battle's impact.

The memoirs of the Italians who survived Adwa played a critical role in establishing the narrative of the battle as a largely negative experience. These accounts contained both villains responsible for the disaster and heroes who fought against insurmountable odds. Authors hand-picked memoirs and select results of official investigations to produce these oft-competing storylines. However, they generally agreed that the defeat resulted from tactical mistakes made by the individual commanders.³⁹ These decisions provided plenty of fodder for reporters and politicians to support particular narratives in the aftermath of Crispi's fall from power. Some more objective accounts like Major General Valentino Chiala's *Il Generale Dabormida nella Giornata del 1 Marzo* tried to rehabilitate his superior's (General Oreste Baratieri) reputation.⁴⁰ Normally, the commanders who survived suffered public recriminations while those who died on the battlefield – even the ones who did so because of their own mistakes – were hailed as martyrs. General officers like Chiala and Baratieri had the best understanding of tactical

³⁷ Jonas, *The Battle of Adwa*, 320.

³⁸ The only other notable independent state was Liberia, which was a propped-up state established and guaranteed by the United States for free African-Americans to build a new life.

³⁹ The Native Brigade was composed primarily of *askari* scouts from Italy's Eritrean colony. Gamera, *Ricordi di un Prigioniero di Guerra*, 31-33, accessed 20 November, 2016, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/nyp.33433043908924>. Ximenes, *Sul Campo di Adua*, 234. Jonas, *Adwa*, 322-323.

⁴⁰ Chiala, *Il Generale Dabormida*, 5-6.

decisions. They therefore sought to preserve their own reputations and rationalize the deaths of their fellow generals.⁴¹ Thus, their closeness to the events that transpired brings their objectivity into doubt. These books analyzed the various orders issued by Baratieri to his subordinates during the disaster. Chiala's attempt to analyze the decision making of specific individuals contrasted with the more critical accounts of Italian soldiers who blamed their superiors for the defeat. Baratieri himself took a different approach in *Memorie d'Africa* (1898) where he tried to defend himself by providing an excellent description of both the campaign and the battle itself. He spent a significant amount of time describing the war council he held the night before the battle so that he could share the blame with subordinates who broadly agreed with his plan of attack.⁴² By showing that all his generals agreed to fight a particular way, Baratieri blamed his brigadiers for failing to adhere to the original plan. These themes created a profoundly negative view of a military force at war with itself that reflected poorly on the offensive capabilities of the Italian state.

Additional memoirs by former soldiers sought to find some positive takeaways from the engagement. These works included Giovanni Gamerra's *Ricordi di un Prigioniero di Guerra nello Scioa* (1898) and Eduardo Ximenes' *Sul Campo di Adua* (1897), which celebrated the strength and courage of Italian soldiers during the battle while massively outnumbered by the Ethiopians.⁴³ These firsthand studies established a narrative of absolving or assigning blame. These authors portrayed the same inherent racism common in European colonial expeditions to Africa: the white "civilized" army should have won the battle against the "barbarian hordes."

⁴¹ Ibid., 7-9. Baratieri, *Memorie*, 372.

⁴² Baratieri, *Memorie*, 363-364.

⁴³ Gamerra, *Ricordi*, 32-33, 36. Ximenes, *Campo di Adua*, 234, 250.

Therefore, Italian leaders must have lost the battle rather than the soldiers fighting at the lowest levels. Italian historians and soldiers pointed out the individual mistakes that cost them the battle rather than the strengths that won the Ethiopians the battle. These authors represented a somber attitude towards the failure of Italian expansionism, which fit the broader Europe perception of Africa as the dangerous “Dark Continent.” In the aftermath of the failed invasion, Italians dominated the historical scholarship of the battle of Adwa as they sought to apportion blame for the catastrophe. While Ethiopia continued to survive as an independent country, Italy suffered through a series of revolving door governments, socialist riots, and even the assassination of King Umberto I on July 29, 1900, for his support of reactionary measures.⁴⁴ By finding a scapegoat for the defeat at Adwa, scholars could continue to portray Italy as a weak country still seeking to assert its own identity as a true Great Power.

During the Fascist Period (1922-1945), Italian historians turned away from lamenting the reasons for the defeat and instead focused on the benefits of the battle at laying bare the internal weaknesses of the Piedmontese aristocracy. This rationale emphasized the martyrdom of the brave Italian soldiers carelessly cast aside by an incompetent style of government.⁴⁵ This school criticized the denouement of Italian imperialist ambitions and attacked the resulting liberalization of Italian society before World War I. After the Great War, fascist historians reinterpreted the battle as a glorious example of the perseverance of average Italians sacrificed needlessly by

⁴⁴ Pollera, *La Battaglia di Adua*, iv. Saladino, *Italy from Unification*, 95.

⁴⁵ Although Mussolini was deposed in 1943, he was liberated by German paratroopers and established a puppet state in German-occupied Italy that lasted until 1945. Technically, Italian Fascism existed in some form until the war’s end.

Rome.⁴⁶ However, not even reimagining Adwa as a crucial first step on the road towards fascism could wholly erase the embarrassment. Thus, when the Italians finally *did* conquer Ethiopia in 1936, they left a lasting physical impression on the old Adwa battlefield: a bust of Benito Mussolini himself.⁴⁷ Such an apparently petty gesture demonstrated the powerful hold that the defeat held on Italians even four decades later.

After World War II – and the subsequent destruction of the statue by British artillery – Italian and Ethiopian historians both began appraising the battle’s impacts more objectively. As forty years of bitter rivalry faded into memory, Adwa became simply another milestone for African independence and Italian presumptiveness. Although Adwa remained a rallying cry for independence, its legacy did not propel Ethiopia to dominate African continental politics. Ethiopian internal struggles played a critical role in preventing it from taking full advantage of the victory. The fall of the monarchy in 1974 to a communist coup and the establishment of a government built on ethnic lines in 1991 ensured that Ethiopia remained a divided state.⁴⁸ Adwa slowly regained its historical importance as the centennial approach in 1996. The scholarship on the battle after this anniversary celebrated the accomplishments of Emperor Menelik in preserving independence instead of explaining away the reasons why the Italians lost.⁴⁹ Although

⁴⁶ See Pollera, *La Battaglia di Adua* – and the foreword by Aldo Valori – for an example of fascist literature on the battle. Valori’s foreword included scathing criticisms of rising socialist rhetoric and the failures of the national government. Pollera himself focused mainly on the geography of the battlefield and how it affected the outcome.

⁴⁷ Jonas, *The Battle of Adwa*, 329. The image of the statue was first published in *La Preparazione* (February 1936). Image taken from Richard J. B. Bosworth, *Mussolini* (London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010), image 14.

⁴⁸ Haggai Erlich, “The Ethiopian Army and the 1974 Revolution,” *Armed Forces & Society* 9, no. 3 (1983): 455–456. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45304695>.

⁴⁹ Abebe Hailemeleket, *The Victory of Adowa*, 167. Milkias, “The Battle of Adwa,” 44.

these more recent works focused more on Ethiopian strengths than Italian weaknesses, some of them also analyzed why Adwa was not a solvent for all of Ethiopia's problems.

Raymond Jonas, an American historian who worked on connecting themes of the broader Atlantic World, nevertheless viewed the Battle of Adwa through a limited lens that praised the importance of the battle to African independence. He also used a narrow interpretation for the imperial implications for the defeat of a Great Power. He believed the battle "determined the color of Africa" and set the conditions for African decolonization fifty years later.⁵⁰ The Italians turned inwards and gained a newfound respect for the Ethiopians as human beings rather than as savage conquerors who massacred white soldiers. This interpretation survived at least until the Mussolini regime. Jonas also explored the impact of the defeat on the American population. African-Americans saw the battle through the lens of segregation and the failure of Reconstruction. They found inspiration from an all-black state defeating white soldiers in battle. In contrast, Italian-Americans were embarrassed by a defeat that confirmed their place near the bottom of America's emerging racial hierarchy for white immigrants.⁵¹ This approach linked the impact of a battle from 1896 with a modern American audience, but diverted Jonas away from the battle's immediate implications for the Italian state in Europe. Ironically, Italian-Americans in the United States faced some of the same forms of racial prejudice as did African-Americans, although nowhere close to the scale and scope of the black experience. Interestingly, Jonas saw the defeat of Baratieri's army as unique to other major defeats suffered by the European powers, such as Khartoum and Isandlwana, because the Italians did not avenge their loss. This assessment posed an interesting debate over how long a country needed to wait before

⁵⁰ Jonas, *The Battle of Adwa*, 1.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 302-303.

“avenging” a defeat. After all, by 1936 Fascist Italy *had* conquered Ethiopia, but the British quickly liberated Italian East Africa during World War II and the Mussolini regime collapsed.

In the anthology on *The Battle of Adwa*, Richard Pankhurst compared British concerns for the stability of the Italian monarchy in 1896 and 1935. In both cases, conservative British newspapers criticized threats against either Francesco Crispi or Benito Mussolini because of the potential destabilization of the collapse of the monarchy and the impact on European affairs.⁵² Pankhurst summed the attitude of *The Times* as one of “Friendship for the aggressor, qualified only by a criticism of Italian tactical mistakes.”⁵³ This sympathy had several origins: keep the French from expanding in the Horn of Africa, maintain Italian support in the Mediterranean, and prevent unrest in British colonies that bordered Italian territories.⁵⁴ Unfortunately, these arguments only partially explained the British response after Adwa. Prime Minister Robert Salisbury was already pulling out his support for the Mediterranean Agreements with Italy and Austria-Hungary in early 1896 *before* the defeat at Adwa. In addition, Pankhurst did not try to connect how recent British disasters against the Boers in South Africa and the Mahdists in the Sudan factored into the broader context of British support for the Italians after their own defeat. Empathy for another Great Power was thus combined with the need to succor a possible friend at a time of military weakness to limit a more hostile power from taking advantage of the situation.

Francophile historians characterized the rapprochement between France and Italy after Adwa as a French initiative. Once again, Italian diplomatic strategy played little role when compared to the stronger regional neighbors. Mary Sugnet’s work on Franco-Anglo relations

⁵² Richard Pankhurst, “British Reaction to the Battle of Adwa,” 219.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 223.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 224.

with Italy saw Théophile Delcassé's appointment as Foreign Minister in 1898 as the origin of a "conciliatory policy towards Italy."⁵⁵ In addition, the appointment of Visconti Venosta to the Foreign Ministry in 1896 – after Adwa – helped spur a renewal of commercial ties between the two countries.⁵⁶ In this narrative, the Italians used the threat of France to gain concessions in Africa from their German allies. In addition, the Italians included provisions in the Triple Alliance with assurances that the coalition did not pose a threat to British interests. Italy sought to integrate Britain into the Triple Alliance and to use Britain to ward off the French. Thus, Sugnet did acknowledge some of the major difficulties between Italian and French cooperation, but she focused on French initiatives such as Camille Barrère's mission to Rome.⁵⁷ This approach discounted the Italian perspective shaped by the disaster at Adwa, even though Sugnet rightfully pointed to the year 1896 as a major turning point in the relation of the two powers. She acknowledged that the Italian recognition of the French protectorate in Tunis as the origin of these improved relations.⁵⁸ This narrative missed the role of Adwa in forcing that humiliating confession from Rome in the first place.

Jon Hendrickson's 2012 dissertation "We are Now a Mediterranean Power" argued that the increased British focus on the North Sea in the early twentieth century allowed Austria-Hungary and Italy to strengthen their naval security in the Triple Alliance while forcing Britain and France to cooperate in a more hostile Mediterranean Sea. Hendrickson placed the Italian rearmament in the late 1890s against the threat of French opposition to the Triple Alliance and

⁵⁵ Sugnet "The Relations of France and England with Italy," 1-2.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 116.

the fear of Austro-Hungarian naval funding.⁵⁹ Italy's drift from the Triple Alliance and towards France and Britain increasingly centered around the Italo-Turkish War over Libya in 1911. This approach largely ignored the impact of Adwa. Hendrickson traced the nadir of Italo-French relations to 1882 when Italy joined the Triple Alliance, and these relations stayed "frosty through the rest of the 1890s."⁶⁰ In addition, the campaign for closer relations with France was seen as a French initiative led by Barrère's and Delcassé, with minimal agency for their Italian counterparts. Hendrickson did not draw a clear thread between periods of increasing and decreasing tension. The battle also increased concerns over naval security in the Mediterranean and beyond. The long-term impact saw Italy as "diplomatically isolated" by the 1911 Italo-Turkish War over Libya.⁶¹ Hendrickson portrayed a nation with fewer diplomatic choices from 1896 to 1891, but the reality was that Italian defeats actually increased the nation's diplomatic flexibility. A military defeat like Adwa demonstrated the clear weakness of the Italian military and political establishment, the vulnerability of that establishment to major military defeats, and the need for future governments to compromise policy aims in the wake of such disasters. This thread can be drawn through a general period of increased cordiality against potential threats.

Calvin Roberts' analysis of "The Egyptian Question and the Triple Alliance, 1884-1904," came closest to identifying 1896 and Adwa as turning points in Italian foreign policy. This policy remained "fairly constant" from 1884 to 1904 with respect to Egypt due to the rivalry with French interests in the Mediterranean. The European interest in Egyptian affairs made the Nile River far more important to the continental alliance. Germany in particular resorted to "extortion

⁵⁹ Jon K. Hendrickson, "'We Are Now a Mediterranean Power': Naval Competition and Great Power Politics in the Mediterranean, 1904-1914," Ph.D. diss., (Ohio State University, 2012), 5,7.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 156.

⁶¹ Ibid., 8.

and cooperation” to achieve a more expansive foreign policy, whereas the Italians wanted more limited colonies at first.⁶² Roberts claimed that Italian support for and French opposition to the British in Egypt were “to remain the only two constant, unwavering factors in the diplomacy surrounding the Egyptian question.”⁶³ Thus, the three powers – which represented three unique alliance structures and spheres of influence – stood in stark contrast to each other over Egyptian affairs. Roberts pointed to the period between Salisbury’s return to power in 1895 and the crisis at Fashoda as an “era ... from which sprung major realignments in European commitments.”⁶⁴ In addition, Roberts highlighted Adwa as a central moment in a decisive year, since the news of the defeat spurred the Italians to ask for British support and Salisbury agreed in turn. Roberts acknowledged that “one phrase to summarize the determining force of 1896, it would be ‘disaster at Adwa.’”⁶⁵ The defeat put a halt in Anglo-French colonial cooperation with the sudden power vacuum after the Italian withdrawal from Ethiopia, and the Triple Alliance responded by supporting the British reconquest of the Sudan in exchange for aiding the Italians.⁶⁶ However, Roberts wrongly asserted that the defeat “weakened Rome to such an extent that ... Prime Minister Antonio Starabba, Marchese di Rudini, felt compelled to seek adjustment of Italy’s position in Europe.”⁶⁷ The Italians definitely changed their foreign policy with regards to the Horn of Africa, but their position in Europe was not significantly weakened. This evaluation overstated the disaster at Adwa in terms of weakening a Great Power. In fact, Italy

⁶² Roberts, “The Egyptian Question and the Triple Alliance,” ix.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 183.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 183.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

gained significant political advantages without needing to leave its present alliance structure. The Italian state thus found itself able to drift between competing alliances without ever being completely locked out of both at the same.

Italian historians placed more emphasis on the centrality of Adwa in terms of dictating events after 1896. C. J. Lowe and F. Marzari clearly stated that the defeat “led directly to the Franco-Italian *Entente* ... [and] produced the British advance to Dongola and the reconquest of the Sudan.”⁶⁸ They stopped short of calling the defeat a net positive for the Italian state. This analysis most clearly delineated the general theme of this dissertation. Lowe and Marzari also argued that Italy’s commitment to the Triple Alliance did not waver over this period of improved relations with France and Britain. Nevertheless, they described Italy’s role as a great power in terms of material and industrial strength rather than in terms of perception. The other Great Powers continued to treat Italy like a Great Power; therefore, it was. In addition, Lowe and Marzari did give the Italians more agency in their narrative, but they still placed the conclusion of Italo-French commercial agreements in the hands of French actors first.

No nation could afford to remain passive after such a setback in an increasingly polarized Europe. To do so could fatally undermine the importance of public perception as a Great Power. The British themselves suffered humiliating defeats but they redoubled their efforts to achieve lasting victories. The Italian response to Adwa proved quite different. Rather than calling for vengeance against the Ethiopians, the Italians saw the battle as just one more example of the inefficiency of their own government. The defeat started a period of introspection and retrenchment by the Italians that ended in the Italo-Turkish War with the Ottoman Empire in

⁶⁸ C. J. Lowe and F. Marzari, *Italian Foreign Policy 1870-1940* (London, UK: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), 67-69.

1911–1912 and entry into World War I soon after. The repercussions of the battle significantly altered the Italian political landscape by setting it down a path on which irredentism and the need for a major diplomatic victory proved irreconcilable with its military capabilities.⁶⁹ The target of that irredentism gradually focused away from France and towards Austria-Hungary, Italy's tenuous ally in the Triple Alliance with Germany. Adwa marked the beginning of a fifteen-year effort of military reforms juxtaposed with a difficult domestic situation that included rapidly alternating government heads, increasing socialist unrest in industrialized areas, and a growing emigration crisis. The recollection of the battle heavily influenced the theorists and technocrats charged with rebuilding the nation's strength and prestige. These reforms aimed to prepare Italy to enter the 1910s as a nation that could not only conquer territory in Africa, but could also challenge the other European nations. Ultimately, the reforms settled on half-measures that created a false perception of strength as Italy entered unprepared into an era of modern warfare with the other Great Powers.

The next two chapters show how Italian strategists and policymakers increased their country's political influence and military power in the aftermath of the defeat at Adwa. The Battle of Adwa proved surprisingly constructive for Italian political aspirations both in Europe and abroad. The defeat allowed the Italian government to modify its outsized ambitions with a more realistic policy for maintaining control of small Eritrea rather than conquering Ethiopia and beyond. The subsequent British intervention in the Sudan did not just use Italian calls for assistance as a pretext for war. Ultimately, no matter the justification, the British invasion of Sudan provided continuing legitimacy to Italy's status as a colonial power. In addition, Italian politicians reached out to their counterparts in France to begin a rapprochement that blurred the

⁶⁹ Sugnet "The Relations of France and England with Italy," 32-33.

increasingly ossified coalition lines that had taken shape in Europe. The battle provided a transformative moment in Italian and European history that began the slow recalibration of competing alliance systems. The 19th century's Concert of Europe of Prussia, Russia, Austria, France, and Great Britain had fractured into two competing spheres by the end of the century: Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy formed the Triple Alliance, and the Franco-Russian partnership formed the Dual Alliance. Events after 1895 gradually pushed both the British and the Italians closer to the camp of the Russian and French coalition. The narrative of this dissertation demonstrates how military disasters gradually helped Italy influence much stronger foes and potential partners. Chapter 3 will identify the initial Italian responses and attempts to manipulate foreign opinions especially in Britain and France, two nations with which Italy was not allied in 1896. Chapter 4 will then analyze the long period of reform influenced by defeat that allowed the Italian military establishment to recover and prepare for a new sort of war. In this way, the Italians both helped accelerate the road to World War I and also to change their diplomatic standings in foreign relations to one more closely allied to the eventual Entente powers.

Origins of Great Power Rivalries

The defeat at Adwa helped start the transformation of Italy's relationship with both Great Britain and France almost twenty years before the nations became official allies in World War I. In particular, the Anglo-Italian relationship proved fruitful from 1896 until the end of the Great War in achieving some of the policy aims of both powers. The Great Powers all had a series of complex and interconnected rivalries around the globe during the Age of Imperialism. Nations used small treaty ports and coastal fortifications as starting points to claim huge tracts of land in Africa and Asia. The economic advantages provided also gave a certain reassurance: European

states that could meddle in the internal politics of other continents were thus the guarantors of a Western world order. Adwa rapidly hastened the inherent danger of imperial competition as well as eventually provided the space for diplomacy to reduce the tension.

Britain's international vulnerabilities provided opportunities for weak states to achieve more influence at select times. The empire's manifold global commitments by the end of the 19th century required a series of diplomatic intercessions to prevent a multiplication of possible enemies. A period of rapprochement with Japan and the United States reduced threats in more distant waters. The empire seemingly had to prepare with a conflict against the dangerous Franco-Russian alliance that combined massive spheres of influence with powerful naval and land forces.⁷⁰ "Splendid isolation" no longer worked as a matter of foreign policy as the nation sought to maintain its commercial and naval superiority over the other Great Powers. In particular, the British adhered to a two-fleet strategy that meant outnumbering the next two strongest naval powers at any one time. However, drawing too close to the Triple Alliance of Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy also had the dangers of sucking the British into any future continental conflict. In particular, Germany's shift towards dreams of global empire promised a dangerous new European rival. The British therefore needed to balance their strategy by prioritizing closer threats at home over potential enemies in East Asia and North America. A weaker power like Italy with limited resources and aspirations could not hurt the British, but could threaten some aspect of a fragile balance of global power.

Similarly, French antagonism with Britain and Germany overshadowed the nation's turbulent relationships with its Mediterranean neighbor. French dreams of a colonial empire took

⁷⁰ Keith Neilson, "'Greatly Exaggerated': The Myth of the Decline of Great Britain before 1914," *The International History Review* 13, no. 4 (1991): 699-700. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40106488>.

on a new light after the German victory in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871. The loss of Alsace-Lorraine and the strength of Imperial Germany meant that the French could not realistically fight by themselves on the continent. Instead, they had to look elsewhere to assuage their wounded national pride. Expanding the empire in Africa and Southeast Asia offered the perfect opportunities to achieve some significant success. By 1891, the French consolidated their rule over Indochina, which antagonized British interests in Thailand.⁷¹ Indeed, in most places around the world where the French sought to expand during the Age of Imperialism, they tended to bump into the interests of Britain. Most importantly, the French ultimately lost out on control over Egypt's internal politics and the Suez Canal after gradually ceding power to the British.⁷² France's increasingly frustrated foreign policies searched eastward for answers to redress the nation's repeated humiliations. As a result, a series of agreements between France and Russia from 1891 to 1894 to guarantee each other's safety in the event of conflict eventually created the Franco-Russian alliance.⁷³ In one stroke, the French had surrounded their German enemies while also putting pressure on British overseas interests.

In contrast, the Italian struggled to pursue as independent a foreign policy as their future partners due to the internal weaknesses of the state. Italy's experience as a "Great Power" by 1896 had not been an entirely happy one, but nevertheless these events provided the context for Italy's expanded role in the aftermath of Adwa. Independence and unification had been achieved

⁷¹ Kees van Dijk, "The French Expansion Westwards into Southeast Asia," in *Pacific Strife* (Amsterdam, NL: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 229-230. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt15nmjw8.15>.

⁷² Frederic C. Penfield, "England's Absorption of Egypt," *The North American Review* 165, no. 493 (1897): 682-684. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25118924>.

⁷³ V. I. Boykin and D. W. Spring, "The Franco-Russian Alliance," *History* 64, no. 210 (1979): 25-26. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24411365>.

in the 19th century through the aid of stronger powers. The First Italian War of Independence from 1848 to 1849 – like so many other European revolutions during that time – ended in failure against the strength of the conservative Concert of Europe.⁷⁴ The small Italian kingdoms simply could not effectively compete on their own on the battlefield. Likewise, Sardinia-Piedmont suffered a serious reverse during the Second War of Independence at the Battle of Custoza in 1859. Ultimately, French aid at the battles of Magenta and Solferino led to independence from Austria – as long as the Italians gave up Nice in return.⁷⁵ This time, support from one Great Power allowed Sardinia-Piedmont to drive Austria out of part of northern Italy.

Relying on stronger allies did not necessarily mean that Italy had no agency to achieve its own goals. This process of defeat succored by stronger allies repeated itself in following conflicts. During the Austro-Prussian War, the Italians suffered another debacle at sea at Lissa and again on land at Custoza. However, an overwhelming Prussian victory at Königgrätz allowed the Italians to prevail anyways and to secure the province of Venice.⁷⁶ Thus, Italian strategic culture during unification relied on stronger partners to redress the weaknesses of the state. Italian perceptions of Austria and France as the main rivals was complicated by the relative

⁷⁴ Patrick J. Kelly, “The European Revolutions of 1848 and the Transnational Turn in Civil War History,” *Journal of the Civil War Era* 4, no. 3 (2014): 431–43. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26062178>.

⁷⁵ F. A. Simpson, “England and the Italian War of 1859,” *The Historical Journal* 5, no. 2 (1962): 129. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3020318>. G. J. Thurston, “The Italian War of 1859 and the Reorientation of Russian Foreign Policy,” *The Historical Journal* 20, no. 1 (1977): 140–141. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2638592>.

⁷⁶ Stanley L. Sandler, “The Day of the Ram,” *Military Affairs* 40, no. 4 (1976): 175–176. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1986700>. William Moul, “Counting the Seven Weeks War: Dyads, Disputes and Balances of Power,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science / Revue Canadienne de Science Politique* 38, no. 1 (2005): 156–157. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25165778>.

strength of these powers vis-à-vis Italy.⁷⁷ With unification achieved, ambitious prime ministers like Francesco Crispi looked outward to acquire overseas colonies for both their economic value and as additional symbols of Great Power status. American Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan's publication of *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* in 1890 had famously summarized the importance of naval supremacy and commerce to successful empires.⁷⁸ The ability to project power abroad and to expand delineated the powerful states from those that could be tampered with. The Italian state needed to both acquire more colonies and to establish a reputation for military success, or else it would make for a poor partner in future conflicts.

However, Italian colonial ambitions did not match with the reality of a poorly industrialized state looking for territory while the powers of Europe carved up Africa and Asia. Following the infamous "Tunisian slap" in 1881 where the French established a protectorate in Tunisia despite Italian commercial interests there, the Italians joined the Triple Alliance in 1882.⁷⁹ This controversial decision to partner with Germany and Austria-Hungary in spite of Italian territorial designs on their Austrian neighbors provided security against French machinations after their occupation of Tunisia.⁸⁰ Italian statesmen also adopted a conciliatory policy at the Berlin Conferences that divided up much of Africa between the European Great Powers. This "clean hands" approach meant that Italy could not and would not directly oppose

⁷⁷Jari Eloranta, "From the Great Illusion to the Great War: Military Spending Behaviour of the Great Powers, 1870-1913," *European Review of Economic History* 11, no. 2 (2007): 266. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41378465>.

⁷⁸ Paul Kennedy, "The Influence and the Limitations of Sea Power," *The International History Review* 10, no. 1 (1988): 2-3. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40107086>. Theodore Ropp, "The Modern Italian Navy," *Military Affairs* 5, no. 2 (1941): 104-106. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2937603>.

⁷⁹ Roberts, "The Egyptian Question and the Triple Alliance," 10-11.

⁸⁰ Christopher Duggan, *Francesco Crispi: From Nation to Nationalism* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2002), 420.

French and British ambitions in North Africa. Giovanni Giolitti, a future prime minister who came to dominate Italian politics in the first decade of the 1900s, lambasted this cautious approach that only received Eritrea and Somalia “as a consolation prize.”⁸¹ As a result, the desire for expansion remained strong among a core group of hardened politicians who wanted to cement the newly-unified nation’s place as a Great Power. Thus, Italy, Great Britain, and France all shared some level of common interest and imperial competition as they looked to Africa and beyond.

British Concerns

The defeat at Adwa demonstrated the unique nature of an Anglo-Italian partnership that officially was nothing more than a friendly relationship. The battle suddenly imperiled one of the many loose strands that wove together into the British Empire. The context preceding the battle explained British fears in its aftermath. The British government negotiated numerous deals in the late 19th-century to balance against potential threats. The creation of new *Renown*-class battleships sought to operate in American and Japanese waters far from home due to a growing list of naval challenges.⁸² These rising threats all around the world strained British foreign policy in the 1890s because of the increased size of competitive empires. The admiralty’s shipbuilding program for 1896-1897 continued to diversify under Naval Controller John Fisher. Fisher argued for the construction of ten new “torpedo-boat destroyers” designed for the purpose of “blockading the French torpedo-boat stations and ... of overtaking and destroying torpedo-boats met with in the narrow seas of the Mediterranean.”⁸³ By early 1896, the British shipbuilding

⁸¹ Giolitti, *Memoirs of My Life*, 119-120. Bosworth, *Italy, the Least of the Great Powers*, 135.

⁸² John Fisher, “Memorandum by the Controller of the Navy, January 1896: Description of Vessels to be laid down in 1896-1897,” British Cabinet, “Ship-Building Programme” Cabinet 37/4/1 1896 Number 2, the National Archives.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

program continued to address a wide variety of new threats. The increased naval armaments of France, Italy, Russia, and Austria-Hungary all made the Mediterranean a more dangerous place where the Royal Navy could no longer operate unchecked.⁸⁴ The Mediterranean, the Suez Canal, and the Red Sea constituted a virtual highway of British dominance from Gibraltar to India.

These commitments explained both British vulnerabilities to individual crises as well as the desire to keep costs low wherever possible. Nevertheless, the perception of the Franco-Russian alliance as the most dangerous strategic opponent remained even during the early days of German *Weltpolitik*. The British settled their Canadian border disputes with the United States by appointing “a permanent judicial officer, to be called an Arbitrator” to handle any public disputes or dispute over territory or international law.⁸⁵ Naval expansion and the focus on new and more ships severely limited the available funds for naval construction. The need to refocus interests closer to home predominated by the end of the century. In February 1896 Austen Chamberlain, the Civil Lord of the Admiralty and son of Secretary of State for the Colonies Joseph Chamberlain, tallied the growing cost. Austen Chamberlain advised the cabinet that Navy expenditures increased 50 percent from £12,000,000 pounds to £18,000,000 while the tonnage of total ships afloat or completed had doubled.⁸⁶ Thus, the British found themselves facing the vastly rising cost of empire while at the same time seeking to contain the increasing naval strength of the continental powers.

⁸⁴ K. Hendrickson, “We Are Now a Mediterranean Power,” 7.

⁸⁵ British Cabinet, “Proposal for Arbitration of Differences between the United Kingdom and the United States,” Cabinet 37/4/11 1896 Number 11, 8 February 1896, the National Archives.

⁸⁶ Austen Chamberlain, “New Works: Memorandum by Civil Lord of the Admiralty,” British Cabinet, “New Works,” Cabinet 37/4/1 1896 Number 4, 4 February 1896, the National Archives.

Salisbury sought unconventional allies to support his policy aims. The British reached out to secure a Second Mediterranean Agreement with Italy and Austria-Hungary partly in response to pressure from Crispi for a unified front in the Eastern Mediterranean.⁸⁷ Two-thirds of the Triple Alliance now seemed to be working with the strongest navy in the world. Such an arrangement would inevitably threaten French and Russian ambitions. Salisbury also used the agreements to keep his newfound partners at arm's length with an agreement instead of an alliance.⁸⁸ The distrust of Crispi's motives and ultimate ambitions encouraged the British government to tread a careful path. The collapse of this agreement in conjunction with the Italian defeat at Adwa suddenly removed much of the challenge to the Dual Alliance, but the fall of Crispi's government also initially reduced British misgivings. Initially, Salisbury felt that he did not have to worry about the dangers of Italian adventurism.

The British investment in Egypt made both governments vulnerable to any immediate political or financial crisis in Africa. The "Egyptian Question" determined which Great Power would dominate internal Egyptian affairs. The British intervention in Egyptian internal affairs dated back to the purchase of shares of the Suez Canal in 1875 by Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli.⁸⁹ By 1 July 1895, Salisbury's government "entered upon the full possession of the shares" and could earn dividends without interest costs. The first full dividend was thus due in the period of 1895-1896 in the amount of £670,000.⁹⁰ Therefore, those two years proved critical

⁸⁷ Roberts, "The Egyptian Question and the Triple Alliance," 14.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 114.

⁸⁹ Joseph Chamberlain, "No. 1 Memorandum by Mr. Chamberlain respecting the Suez Canal Shares," 15 November 1895, in British Cabinet, "Suez Canal shares scheme" Cabinet 37/4/1 1896 Number 1, 8 January 1896, the National Archives, 133.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

for discovering the financial viability of continued British involvement in Egypt. In addition, a massive military campaign during that time would put a major dent into the profitability of the Egyptian venture. The prospect of recouping a full sum of the Egyptian investment encouraged a cautious foreign policy along the Nile River. Joseph Chamberlain, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, estimated that the total cost of the purchase at approximately £2.1 million whereas the shares themselves were worth well over £23.8 million— an enormous increase.⁹¹

Nor did everyone in the cabinet want to reinvest the income from Egypt back into that state. E. W. Hamilton proposed a temporary halt to specially applying these shares to Egypt alone. He wanted to consider diverting the income to other pet projects in the colonies.⁹² Chamberlain wanted to create a special Suez Canal Account used purely for pet projects like funding the Ugandan Railway or opening the interior of Africa to more expansion.⁹³ These schemes could also ensure greater British control and keep out foreign competitors like France from the center of the continent. The danger with the “Suez Canal Shares Scheme” was the likelihood of “the French becoming even more agitated and might, as shareholders themselves, become more troublesome.”⁹⁴ All foreign policy negotiations involve a balancing act of some kind, and the French resentment over British occupation of a French-built canal continued to linger. These divisions made 1896 an important year for the British to maintain stability and to

⁹¹ Ibid., 2

⁹² E. W. Hamilton, British Cabinet, “Further Memorandum on the Suggested Canal Shares Scheme,” Cabinet 37/41 1896 Number 15, 4 March 1896, the National Archives, 1.

⁹³ Ibid., 134-135.

⁹⁴ E. Hamilton, “No. 3 Memorandum by Sir E. Hamilton respecting the Suez Canal Shares Scheme,” Cabinet 37/41 1896 Number 1, 8 January 1896, the National Archives, 135.

ensure low costs in Egypt. From this perspective, the Battle of Adwa would significantly impact not only Italian but also British foreign policy.

Internal political divisions also strained the cost of empire. The British Liberal Party had criticized Disraeli for purchasing shares in the canal and bemoaned the cost of the investment, but now the Conservative cabinet praised Disraeli's foresight in turning a political investment into a profitable one.⁹⁵ These back-and-forth accusations – while certainly not unique to any political system – demonstrated the increasing value of Egypt to the British government as it turned away from the Ottoman Empire as the guarantor of its route east to India. Edward Hamilton, the permanent secretary to the Treasury, warned that taking profits from the canal and investing them into imperialist projects would turn “an eyesore to France” into a project that “may tend to tread on French toes.”⁹⁶ In addition, Egypt was not just a “milk cow.” Indeed, Hamilton pointed out to Chamberlain that “while many of our Colonies have benefited by the Suez Canal,” the increased investment in Egypt also forced an “increase [in] our naval and military expenditure in the Mediterranean and Red Sea.”⁹⁷ Thus, even from a financial sense no estimate of the value of the Suez Canal could be separated from considerations in the two neighboring seas. The British well understood how much the French resented their intervention in Egypt. In addition, the size of the empire was hurt its manifold commitments and the need to sustain profits continuously expanded. French obstructionism and diplomacy had not forced the British to loosen their hold on Egypt, so they turned instead towards building an expedition that

⁹⁵ Chamberlain, “No. 1 Memorandum,” 2.

⁹⁶ Edward Hamilton, “No. 3 Memorandum by Sir E. Hamilton respecting the Suez Canal Shares Scheme,” 14 December 1895, in British Cabinet, “Suez Canal shares scheme” Cabinet 37/4/1 1896 Number 1, 8 January 1896, the National Archives, 133.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 138.

could reach the Nile and extract more valuable concessions.⁹⁸ Finally, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir Michael Edward Hicks-Beach, disagreed with Chamberlain and indicated that the British government had indeed invested a lot in opening all of its colonies, particularly in areas like East Africa and South Africa where Britain faced more military resistance.⁹⁹

A failure to maintain the rate of expansion opened new avenues for other Great Powers to challenge British concerns. Salisbury had relied on British expansion and exploration to secure further claims in Africa. The persistent German efforts to expand into Zanzibar continued to regularly annoy British foreign policy.¹⁰⁰ Salisbury saw his interests as under attack by several nations at multiple points of entry. Only a patient and widespread diplomatic process could keep them all at bay while securing the primacy of his own goals. In addition, the British needed the Triple Alliance's support to back the *Caisse de la Dette* in Egyptian affairs and to limit French intrusion along the Nile.¹⁰¹ This institute was formed on 2 May 1876 by France, Italy, Austria-Hungary, and Britain to supervise the finances and credit of Egypt.¹⁰² The subsequent Mediterranean Agreements were an attempt to maintain Italian and Austro-Hungarian support in the Eastern Mediterranean over the Egyptian question.¹⁰³ These diplomatic maneuvers sought to isolate France and Russia from each other and shore up Britain's position in Egypt. However, the deals limited Salisbury's flexibility by tying his continued success with that of the weaker

⁹⁸ Roberts, "The Egyptian Question and the Triple Alliance, 1884-1904," 146.

⁹⁹ Michael Edwards Hicks-Beach, "No. 3 Memorandum by Sir E. Hamilton respecting the Suez Canal Shares Scheme," 29 December 1895, in British Cabinet, "Suez Canal shares scheme" Cabinet 37/4/1 1896 Number 1, 8 January 1896, the National Archives, 133.

¹⁰⁰ G.N. Sanderson, "The Anglo-German Agreement of 1890 and the Upper Nile," *The English Historical Review*, vol. 78, no. 306 (January 1936): 49.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 51. Al-Subaiy, "Anglo-Egyptian Relations," 12.

¹⁰² Baring, *Modern Egypt*, vol. 1, 12.

¹⁰³ Al-Subaiy, "Anglo-Egyptian Relations," 87-88.

members of the Triple Alliance. Italian efforts to “nationalize” the Egyptian question by including either more Great Powers or ensuring stronger Egyptian control were part of a larger strategy to prevent an Anglo-Franco stranglehold on the vital region.¹⁰⁴ The attempt to secure the large Italian commercial interests on the African coast struggled to compete with the real military strength of Britain and France. Their German allies also saw Egypt as useful diversion for the French to prevent Paris from looking with hungry eyes on the lost provinces of Alsace and Lorraine.¹⁰⁵ Thus, Italian policy in Egypt was one of compromise and agreeing to proposals made by the stronger powers.

The balance between established and up and coming powers created more explosive tensions. In particular, the importance of prestige on the world stage made individual nations collectively sensitive to perceived and real slights against their honor and their interests. The Earl of Cromer – Evelyn Baring – saw a difference in the “honest” British diplomacy that sought to “throw off the Egyptian burden” in contrast to French diplomacy that “was mainly interested in preventing the Englishman from planting his foot firmly on the banks of the Nile.”¹⁰⁶ He assessed that the French would be more disagreeable in any combined projects in the future. This danger thus limited Britain’s diplomatic options. Meanwhile, the Italians “hovered around, clamorous to satisfy the restless ambition ... by obtaining some share of government on the cosmopolitan soil of Egypt.”¹⁰⁷ The distrust of Italian ambitions amounted to looking down on imperial projects that needed British support in the first place. This perspective soon changed after Adwa. The Italians had tried to keep the Khedive of Egypt – Ismail Pasha – in power and

¹⁰⁴ Roberts, ““The Egyptian Question and the Triple Alliance,” 8-9.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 9.

¹⁰⁶ Cromer, *Modern Egypt*, vol. 1, 130-131.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 131.

even offered him exile after the mounting debt crisis reached a fever pitch.¹⁰⁸ The Italian efforts to navigate a somewhat independent foreign policy in Egypt were overwhelmed by the combined pressure of Germany, Austria-Hungary, Russia, Britain, and France in supporting the removal of Ismail Pasha from power. Ottoman diplomats sought to work with the consuls of the Triple Alliance to both placate the Great Powers and support local revolts in Egypt.¹⁰⁹ This middle course could prove dangerous to British and French interests in the region, as demonstrated far in the future when the Ottoman Empire joined Germany and Austria-Hungary during World War I. Some British officials had already written off southern Egypt as lost. They assumed that either the Dervishes or the Italians would gain control given time.¹¹⁰ Should Italy and the Triple Alliance turn hostile or unfriendly then the position on the Nile River could be seriously damaged. Yet any invasion of the Sudan to secure Britain's position in Egypt would certainly raise the alarm of the French.

Contentious European politics on the continent and abroad slowly changed the perception of power between Britain and Italy. Salisbury's efforts to defend the Ottomans and work with Italy and Austria-Hungary in the eastern Mediterranean belied the idea of a nation basking in "splendid isolation."¹¹¹ As early as February 1864, Salisbury and the Tories feared the dynamism of German and Italian nationalism as well as the impact these forces would have on the continent. A united Italy was "a student's dream if there had been no misgovernment to warm it into life."¹¹² This dismissive attitude of the success of the Italian Risorgimento made sense

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 188-189.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 285.

¹¹⁰ Al-Subaiy, "Anglo-Egyptian Relations," 158.

¹¹¹ Andrew Roberts, *Salisbury: Victorian Titan* (London, UK: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999), 629-630.

¹¹² Ibid., 45.

because of Italy's economic and military weaknesses, as well as the new nation's strategic vulnerability to naval power. Salisbury could easily reject Count Francesco Corti's offer of an Anglo-Italian alliance in February 1887.¹¹³ Notably, Salisbury's approach tried to avoid growing too close to any one particular nation. He wanted to preside and dominate continental affairs without getting sucked into a competing alliance system. Events of the 1890s would soon bring that political theory to an end. Indeed, mounting tensions in the Balkans between Russia and the Ottoman Empire – where war would soon break out in three months – forced the British to counter the Italian offer with the Mediterranean Agreements. The Russians posed a series of threats to British interests in Constantinople, in the Eastern Mediterranean, in Afghanistan, and in India. These agreements with Italy and Austria-Hungary provided vague promises of support and left the British enough flexibility to avoid a direct entanglement with the Triple Alliance while also providing some counterweight to the Dual Alliance. Italy might be “a hungry Power: but the objects of her hunger are no great matter to” British interests.¹¹⁴ Salisbury and his cabinet believed that Italian ambitions would not pose a threat to British policy aims. They were wrong.

The key personalities involved in European politics sustained the perception of Italy as a weak power with little influence on major events. Salisbury and Bismarck ensured the orderly division of Africa during the scramble while preventing the outbreak of a major European war.¹¹⁵ Germany's influence in the international system cannot be understated. By comparison, Italy's role was always that of a weak power that could not realistically alter the status quo nor its position near the bottom of the pack of the Great Powers. Lord Salisbury's return to power in

¹¹³ Ibid. 431.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 519-520.

1895 marked a renewal of a Conservative-Unionist coalition that balanced support for Irish Home Rule with a more moderate foreign policy. Britain shied away from its historical role of propping up the defunct Ottoman Empire as a barrier to Russian expansion.¹¹⁶ Salisbury resumed his policy of “leaning to without joining” the Triple Alliance as a more effective bulwark against Russia and France.¹¹⁷ The Italians served as useful interlocutors that Salisbury could buy off with cheap promises of support in East Africa without making more concrete promises in case of a war with France. In turn, the Germans – the real power behind the Triple Alliance – guaranteed Salisbury a free hand in Egypt while also leaving the Mahdists alone in the British sphere of influence in the Sudan. Unfortunately, Prime Minister Francesco Crispi’s more aggressive policy in Ethiopia threatened the delicate balance of relationships that secured British control of the Nile Valley. After Adwa, Salisbury and Cromer realized that they could no longer passively ignore the Mahdist threat that threatened to combine with the victorious Ethiopians for a sustained assault on European pretensions in Africa.¹¹⁸ The Italian defeat not only forced their hand, but also showed the danger of a closer alignment with the Triple Alliance.

The power of Germany always loomed behind the comparatively tame ambitions of their weaker Italian partners. Kaiser Wilhelm II famously fired his chancellor, Otto von Bismarck, in 1890 in order to assume greater personal control over foreign affairs. The embarkation of *Weltpolitik* would eventually end in disaster and the downfall of the Hohenzollern monarchy during World War I. However, in 1890 the movement away from a German-Russian pact and in favor of a more aggressive foreign policy increased the importance of support from both the

¹¹⁶ David Steele, *Lord Salisbury: A Political Biography* (London, UK: UCL Press, 1999), 323.

¹¹⁷ Ibid. Robert Taylor, *Lord Salisbury* (London, UK: Allen Lane, 1975), 137, 167.

¹¹⁸ Steele, *Lord Salisbury*, 343-344.

Triple Alliance and Great Britain to German policy.¹¹⁹ These competing spheres needed to work together to thwart the ambitions of the French and Russian Dual Alliance. From this perspective, Italian adventurism in East Africa seemed needless and could only result in antagonizing the British or the French at some point. Certainly, there were no great gains in either Eritrea or even Ethiopia that could instantly transform Italy's real instruments of military power. However, the Germans could not be seen to leave their ally foundering on their own in the aftermath of such a great humiliation. The Italians also struggled with their role in this alliance. Crispi claimed in January 1896 that "we alone have felt the burden" of an alliance that hurt Italy in world affairs by increasing tensions with the British and the French.¹²⁰ The price of German protection was French ire, and Italy simply lacked the independent strength to ignore France on its own. Crispi leaned into an economically disastrous anti-French policy that drove him to the mountains of Ethiopia seeking for a decisive rebalancing of military power. Instead, he lost his position and the Italians were left wondering where else they could achieve their long-term policy aims. The context of Great Power struggle meant that the British were wary of what Italian successes in Africa could bring while the French actively fought against their Italian neighbors.

The spirit of Great Power competition created a dangerous position for both Britain and Italy by the time of the Ethiopian Campaign of 1895-1896. The British sought to maintain a flexible foreign policy that limited the strategic reach of the European continental alliances. At the same time, Salisbury's government wanted to secure access to critical lines of communication in Asia and Africa. At the same time, the lack of Italian strength combined with overambitious plans and dreams of a fabled past. This heady mixture seemed relatively harmless

¹¹⁹ Roberts, "The Egyptian Question and the Triple Alliance," 120, 129.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 180, 182-183.

until one thread untangled in the Horn of Africa. Then, the explosive potential of Ethiopian, Mahdist, and French expansion against British and Italian spheres of influence almost culminated in a world war. The military disaster at Adwa significantly augmented Italy's negotiating position by increasing the threat to the British Empire.

Chapter 3 - Adwa's Impact on Anglo-Italian Cooperation (1896-1898)

Ending the Ethiopian War

The new Italian government took advantage of the defeat at Adwa to reform foreign policy aims to something more achievable. A series of limited objectives allowed the Italians to negotiate a balanced peace with Ethiopia, to convince Britain to launch a friendly invasion of Sudan, and to end the cold war with France. Ironically, most Italian politicians who opposed expansion in Africa in the 1890s became strident nationalists in the 1900s.¹ Thus, Crispi's downfall came from the failure of his expansionist policy rather than simply from fear over his ambitions. The Italians nevertheless utilized the news of the great defeat. The first concern for the new government was making peace with Ethiopia to end the war. The new Governor of Eritrea, General Antonio Baldissera, warned the Minister of War, Cesare Ricotti, about the limits of the Italo-Ethiopian border in the aftermath of negotiations with Emperor Menelik II.² Despite the defeat, the Italians wanted to maintain their sphere of influence near the Horn of Africa. Critical lines of communication remained open to border outposts. Baldissera needed to maintain a tight hold of his new forces to stabilize both the immediate military situation and Italy's precarious diplomatic position. Ricotti told his commander that any peace deal must ensure that

¹ Donald A. Limoli, "F. Crispi: A Study in Italian Foreign Policy," Ph.D. diss., (Princeton University, 1960), 383.

² Antonio Baldissera to Cesare Ricotti, 12 March 1896, DDI, Third Series, vol. 1 (10 March 1896 – 30 April 1897), (Rome, IT: Libreria dello Stato, 1953), no. 3.

Ethiopia rejected protectorate status from any other great power.³ After all, Menelik had been an Italian client during his own rise to power before the outbreak of war.

The Italian government wanted to maintain some semblance of the antebellum status quo. In addition, the upcoming rainy season in May made the Italians less desperate than they had been in the immediate aftermath of Adwa.⁴ Fears of Menelik marching into Eritrea and annihilating the remnants of Baratieri's original force slowly receded. The new approach relied more on diplomacy with the other European powers than on military strength to conquer Ethiopia. If the Italians could not dominate Ethiopia, then nobody else could either. However, this negotiating position came from a source of weakness as Menelik still had anywhere between 50,000 to 80,000 men close to the Eritrean border that could potentially invade the small Italian colony.⁵ Likewise, the demoralized Italian defenders could not realistically survive such an onslaught. The Italians looked now to preserve their relatively weak position and keep other major actors out.

The Italian reverses threatened dangerous consequences for the British in East Africa. Baldissera not only faced a vast Ethiopian force to the southwest but also a renewed Mahdist threat to the north. The arrival of European imperialists had interrupted the constant border raids between the Sudanese and Ethiopians during the 19th century.⁶ However, from 1884 to 1896 both areas had fought off significant British and Italian incursions. These European powers now

³ Ricotti to Baldissera, 13 March 1896, DDI, no. 4.

⁴ Henry Lansdowne, "Proposed Advance Up the Nile Valley," Cabinet 37/41 1896 Number 21, 24 March 1896, The National Archives, 2.

⁵ Baldissera to Ricotti, 13 March 1896, DDI, no. 5.

⁶ Fikru Gebrekidan, "From Adwa to OAU: Ethiopia and the Politics of Pan-Africanism, 1896-1963," *International Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 6, no. 1/2 (2012): 72–74. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41756935>.

wondered whether the Islamic Mahdists in Sudan and the Ethiopian Christians could make common cause to preserve their independence. On 13 March 1896, Baldissera wrote to Ricotti again and explained that a force of up to 7,000 Sudanese dervishes could threaten his overland lines of communication north through Kassala.⁷ The Ethiopians and Mahdists – who were not actually working together – could not realistically take the offensive as long as the British and the Italians maintained powerful armies in nearby Egypt and Eritrea. The British had once worried about an internal Mahdist collapse that could greatly strengthen the Italian position at the headwaters of the Nile River.⁸ An increased Italian sphere of influence on its own was not a threat, but limiting the British sphere to only a section of the Nile could prove dangerous. The Italians – or another power – might conceivably move on to Khartoum and further inwards. This approach would cut off British dreams of further southern expansion to solidify their position in Egypt. That scenario had seemingly reversed with an Italian defeat promising the arrival of stronger Mahdist, Ethiopian, and even French forces. The subsequent balkanization of East Africa was perilous to the powers who failed to get something from this part of the Scramble for Africa.⁹ The British eventually shifted their concerns away from wondering if the Italians would break out of East Africa to wondering who might break into the region.

Italian concerns also focused on maintaining key garrisons for symbolic reasons. Any colony during the Age of Imperialism could be greatly magnified in the wake of a crisis, or could even become the *cause* of such a crisis. Indeed, Fashoda would become just such a trigger point in 1898. The Italian concerns after Adwa proved far more mundane but equally important in the

⁷ Antonio Baldissera to Cesare Ricotti, 13 March 1896, DDI, no. 7.

⁸ Roberts, “The Egyptian Question and the Triple Alliance,” 113, 116.

⁹ Gebrekidan, “From Adwa to OAU,” 73.

game of Great Power politics. Crispi had made a deal with Ethiopia back in May 1889 that ensured support for an Italian expansion into a base at Kassala.¹⁰ This location was not central to the broader conflicts of the 1890s, but became more vital in the aftermath of the defeat at Adwa. Baring had met with Crispi in Naples in September 1890 to discuss the Kassala problem, but the Italians refused to withdraw their position.¹¹ Negotiations throughout 1891 encountered both the beginning of the renewal of the Triple Alliance and the Italians at loggerheads with the British. German Chancellor Leo von Caprivi and his ministers feared that the Italians were unnecessarily antagonizing the British over issues in the Sudan.¹² Such a process might complicate negotiations both within the Triple Alliance and with other states. Generally, the Great Powers remained ambivalent about the possibility of major successes for the relatively weak Kingdom of Italy.

The convoluted tangle of domestic and international politics repeatedly shifted. The Italians had promised not to alter the flow of the Atbara River (Red Nile), which led to the Nile River itself, and the occupation at Kassala was agreed to be a temporary one until British-backed Egypt could regain control over its southern borders.¹³ The two sides fixed the Egyptian-Eritrean border from the cape at Ras Karar on the Red Sea then south to the Blue Nile. Di Rudinì could hardly be expected to come into power in 1896 and immediately cede territory to the British while also seeking a humiliating negotiation with Emperor Menelik II. The Kassala position had never been intended as a permanent one from the British perspective. Regardless, any cession at a time of weakness could dramatically harm Italy's political viability among the other Great Powers of Europe. Indeed, even Kaiser Wilhelm II feared that di Rudinì might stray away from

¹⁰ Al-Subaiy, "Anglo-Egyptian Relations," 87-88.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Roberts, "The Egyptian Question and the Triple Alliance," 118.

¹³ Al-Subaiy, "Anglo-Egyptian Relations," 116.

Crispi's hardline anti-French policies, which had conveniently redirected some French animosity away from Berlin and towards Rome.¹⁴ Mediterranean powers adventuring in Africa proved a useful distraction from irredentism closer to home.

The disaster at Adwa left the Italians scrambling to save their remaining strongholds on the Red Sea. The Italian government and military needed to demonstrate their military effectiveness in the wake of their defeat. The kingdom had once sought to conquer all of Ethiopia. Now, di Rudini's regime was just preserving control of Eritrea and the northern border town of Kassala. Kassala itself provided an important trade town in Eastern Sudan with the potential for railway construction further south, and was ostensibly under control of Egypt. Of course, the Ottomans supposedly ruled Egypt even though the British occupied and controlled the government. The Italians captured the town in 1894 to preserve the position against Mahdist influences.¹⁵ Baratieri's men built a fort there to sustain their ambitions in East Africa. Ultimately, the new Italian government decided to abandon the location in 1897, but the manner of this abandonment demonstrated a renewed prowess in Italian diplomatic strategy.

The precarious military position continued to show the shrewd strategy of Italian leaders. A flurry of communiques on 13 March 1896 indicated both the dangers and opportunities of this situation. Di Rudini, Ricotti, and Caetani sought to give Baldissera the liberty to "immediately retire the [Kassala] garrison" if such a move seemed "militarily convenient."¹⁶ Already, the new liberal government provided its commander a longer leash than Crispi – who had desperately needed a decisive African victory – had afforded Baratieri. The shift towards possibly

¹⁴ Carlo Lanza to Caetani, DDI, 20 March 1896, no. 28.

¹⁵ G. J. Fleming, "Kassala," *Sudan Notes and Records* 5, no. 2 (1922): 71. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41715633>.

¹⁶ Antonio di Rudini, Cesare Ricotti, and Onorato Caetani to Baldissera, DDI, 13 March 1896, no. 8.

abandoning Kassala at least demonstrated a willingness to leave on Italy's terms as part of a negotiation rather than a humiliating surrender in the face of the crushing blow at Adwa. The acceptance of the abandonment of Kassala also showed a willingness to be more flexible with military strategy. The threat to the caravan crossings there at the Upper Nile could also be used to intimidate the British into succoring the Italian position in East Africa.

Almost immediately after assuming office, di Rudinì on 10 March 1896 sent a telegram to General Baldissera to express confidence in the new Governor of Eritrea.¹⁷ Baldissera outlined the building blocks needed to make an immediate peace with Ethiopia in an urgent telegram to the new Minister of War, Ricotti.¹⁸ The generals agreed and Ricotti immediately responded with the authorization of di Rudinì, Baldissera, and Salvago-Raggi. Then, the Agency Regent at Cairo wrote a confidential letter to Caetani, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, explaining "how much relief" he felt that to see new officials dedicated to "the good of the direction of the affairs of our poor country."¹⁹ Self-deprecatingly referring to himself as "a bit deluded," Salvago-Raggi believed that the defeat at Adwa might finally "open Italian eyes" and ultimately benefit the country.²⁰ Critically, Baldissera's bleak assessment of the strategic situation seemingly indicated that neither the Italians nor the Ethiopians wanted to continue fighting. Menelik still possessed between 50,000 to 80,000 well-armed warriors against a badly demoralized Italian force that had lost many of its best officers.²¹ Baldissera's telegram of 13 March 1896 ended with the important

¹⁷ Rudinì to Baldissera, DDI, 10 March 1896, 1.

¹⁸ Baldissera to Ricotti, DDI, vol. 1, 12 March 1896, 1.

¹⁹ Giuseppe Salvago-Raggi to Caetani, DDI, vol.1, 10 March 1896, 1.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Baldissera to Ricotti, DDI, vol. 1, 12 March 1896, 3.

note that “communication with Kassala is still active.”²² He understood the weakness of his current position and was doubtless thinking through the prospects of a stronger Mahdist or even Ethiopian advance on Kassala.

The British had tried to protect their own interests when they withdrew from the Sudan following Gordon’s defeat. Sudan had been particularly embarrassing for British foreign policy aims ever since the destruction of Chinese Gordon’s forces at Khartoum in 1885. A *Times* editorial on 6 March 1896 opined that “English policy regards [Italy] as an essential and most valuable factor in the political equilibrium of Europe.”²³ The withdrawal of Egyptian garrisons on the border with Sudan could be redressed by letting the Italians move into Kassala.²⁴ Interestingly, the Italians and the British made a habit of aiding each other during times of defeat in Africa. The partnership thus developed did not transform into an actual alliance until World War I, by which time memories of sudden arrangements in Sudan were replaced by the far more immediate threat of the Central Powers. Of course, the real military power Italy could deploy in or beyond Europe paled in comparison to that wielded by the British. This balance seemed to imply that British actions would have a greater influence on the Italians. The dramatic scale of the reverse at Adwa actually provided the Italians with some important leverage. Before 1 March 1896, none of the European powers dared to intervene in support of the Italians. After that deadly day, these same powers suddenly changed both their policy aims and adopted strategies to aid the discomfited Italians.

²² Ibid.

²³ “The Italian Crisis. Scene in the Chamber,” *The Times*, 6 March 1896, Issue 34831, 9.

²⁴ J.C. Ardagh, “Inclosure 1 in No. 1: Memorandum by Sir J. Ardagh on the Somali Protectorate in view of the withdrawal of Italian Claims to Suzerainty over Abyssinia” 23 December 1896 in British Cabinet, “Intelligence Division to the Foreign Office,” Cabinet 37/44, Number 10, 1.

Although it did not gobble up as much territory as the other powers did during the scramble, Italy's successes placed its burgeoning empire along important lines of communications of the other powers. Likewise, its failures could drastically impact those same critical lines. The public perception was that Italy could only grab the scraps left behind during the Scramble for Africa. Expeditions occupied the port of Massawa that provided access to the Red Sea and beyond, and conquered the town of Kassala on the Sudanese-Eritrean border, which proved critical to future Anglo-Italian relations.²⁵ Massawa became a focal point of the overseas Italian empire. The taxing of foreign merchants in Eritrea allowed the Italians to flex their imperial muscles, while also clearly indicating that the port town was no longer subject to Ottoman rule.²⁶ Such a blatant land grab and ignorance of Ottoman sovereignty bode poorly for the Sick Man of Europe as it started bleeding provinces to stronger powers. This process fatefully accelerated during the early 20th century. Meanwhile, Kassala's location near the headwaters of the north-flowing Nile River made its occupant – no matter how weak – of vital concern to British foreign policy. The signing of the Second Mediterranean Agreement on December 12, 1887 between Britain, Italy, and Austria-Hungary demonstrated a desire by these three countries to preserve the status quo and also to avoid overseas entanglements.²⁷ After all, Austria-Hungary had no colonies and Italy's lengthy coastline made it too vulnerable to the Royal Navy to ever be a credible military threat. The agreement did not specifically refer to Egypt but had a significant impact on future deals regarding the German-led coalition and its

²⁵ Francesco Crispi, *La Prima Guerra d'Africa*, 223, 233-234.

²⁶ Roberts, "The Egyptian Question and the Triple Alliance," 90-91.

²⁷ Duggan, *Crispi*, 512. Graham H. Stuart, *French Foreign Policy from Fashoda to Serajevo (1898-1914)* (New York, NY: Century, 1921), 80. Austria-Hungary had no colonies, and Italy's lengthy coastline made it too vulnerable to the Royal Navy to ever be a credible military threat.

erstwhile British partner.²⁸ The British now had at least a publicly stated they would support or acknowledge the foreign policy aims of two of Germany's allies. This position radically worried the French.

Thus, Italy proved to be a useful intermediary for the British to buy German support without many concessions or directly antagonizing France.²⁹ The potential for a true Anglo-Saxon coalition now threatened to encircle a Dual Alliance that had already encircled the Triple Alliance! The interweaving of notes, negotiations, and border treaties between the Great Powers constantly adjusted the balance of power both in and outside of Europe. The French remained uneasy with the British now signing deals with two members of the Triple Alliance. Franco-Italian relations came to a boiling point in February 1887 when Prime Minister Francesco Crispi's hostility towards France resulted in a disastrous trade war which cost Italy two-thirds of its exports.³⁰ Both sides had plenty of reason for anger: Italy resented the loss of Nice and Tunisia, while France feared the Italian alliance with the hated Germans who had achieved unification at the expense of Alsace and Lorraine. Thus, Italian foreign policy by the 1890s appeared a dangerous assortment of positives and negatives: an alliance with a nation it wanted territory from in Austria-Hungary, a trade war with its largest commercial partner in France, and a friendly attitude towards the world's greatest empire that controlled the most valuable colonies while Italy only had scraps by comparison. The Italians had not done very well but still occupied key positions on the European continent, in the Mediterranean, and in eastern Africa by the time of Marchand's expedition in 1898. If nothing else, Italy's small colonial empire at least opened a

²⁸ Roberts, "The Egyptian Question and the Triple Alliance," 87.

²⁹ Al-Subaiy, "Anglo-Egyptian Relations," 87.

³⁰ Duggan, *Crispi*, 518, 523.

new avenue of diplomacy with Britain and France in foreign affairs. These communications played a key role in the disasters to come.

Although the Italians were in no position to refuse British aid in their time of need, they nevertheless remained wary of Salisbury's ultimate ambitions. Minister of Foreign Affairs Onorato Caetani clearly told his ambassador in London that the Italians "wished for now to maintain the occupation of Kassala."³¹ The position at Kassala was largely invulnerable as long as some Italian army remained in the field. Salisbury's hesitancy before 1896 to intervene directly in the Sudan and the weakness of the Egyptian Army ensured the continued existence of the Italian position.³² In addition, pressure for the British public and the Liberal opposition to avoid another disaster like Khartoum limited Salisbury's options abroad. Kassala was not some critical trade post or strategic chokepoint like Gibraltar or the Suez Canal. However, after Adwa the location took on a greater meaning as Baldissera worried about the potential ramifications to his own position.³³ A Mahdist assault on Kassala combined with an Ethiopian invasion of Italian Eritrea could spell disaster. Choosing to return Kassala to the Egyptians thus became part of Italian foreign policy. Indeed, Tornielli, the ambassador to France, acknowledged that "the position of Cassala gains value for us to which only an unavoidable necessity should make us give it up."³⁴ A deliberate withdrawal meant that the Italian state still could control its own affairs abroad. Another defeat or humiliating surrender in 1896 could seriously hurt Italy's perceived image with the other Great Powers. Thus, the relatively conciliatory government of di

³¹ Caetani to Ferrero, DDI, no. 17.

³² Al-Subaiy, "Anglo-Egyptian Relations," 157.

³³ Henry Lansdowne, "Proposed Advance Up the Nile Valley," Cabinet 37/41 1896 Number 21, 24 March 1896, The National Archives, 1.

³⁴ Giuseppe Tornielli to Caetani, 12 March 1896, no. 8.

Rudini refused to compromise on the issue of maintaining an otherwise meaningless insignificant town.

These considerations came with the understanding that the new administration wanted peace with Emperor Menelik II.³⁵ Baldissera, from his new headquarters in Massaua, worried that the Ethiopian leader might “desire peace today” but could look for opportunities to break the truce and crush the remaining vestiges of Italian colonialism in Eritrea.³⁶ A passive defensive approach in Ethiopia only worked if accompanied by signs of Italian military and diplomatic strength abroad. The administration in Rome agreed and acknowledged the willingness to continue the present conflict until borders agreeable to both sides could be guaranteed.³⁷ Di Rudini lacked Crispi’s ambitions, but the new prime minister understood the inherent dangers of a wholesale withdrawal in the wake of both Sudanese and Ethiopian demands. Caving to their advances could signal a fatal weakness in the Italian position on the international arena. Thus, the size of the Italian Empire abroad did not matter as much as that such an empire existed. After all, even minor powers like Belgium, Portugal, and the Netherlands controlled extensive colonial holdings. The perception of Great Power status thus relied on the perception of an Italian state that could still project influence. Now, that influence needed to be employed to give the British a reason to move into the Upper Nile River. Such an advance would reduce the military and political pressure that threatened the few, but increasingly prestigious, Italian positions in East Africa.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Baldissera to Ricotti, DDI, 13 March 15, 1896, no. 10.

³⁷ Di Rudini and Ricotti to Baldissera, DDI 13 March 1896, no. 11.

British Aid: The Kitchener Expedition to Sudan

The British did not depend on Italian support, but definitely relied on an amenable relationship to confirm an African status quo largely propped up by London. The defeat at Adwa clarified the vulnerability of Britain's position in Egypt. In 1890, Salisbury and Cromer wanted an Italian guarantee to confirm British control of the Nile River's vital affluents.³⁸ This border arrangement mirrored one of the hundreds of similar deals struck by European powers all over the world. The Italian Empire such as it was in Africa did not pose a serious challenge to British control of the Nile, but the broader spectrum of the Triple Alliance potentially could cause problems. On 24 March 1891, Italy agreed to recognize Egypt's claim to Sudan and Kassala in return for British support of a protectorate over Ethiopia.³⁹ Of course, the Italians would have to fight and win to secure their claim, and at that they failed. Regardless, the British remained highly cognizant of the proximity of Italian borders to the vital headwaters of the Nile.

The British struggled to achieve a clear understanding with their Italian counterparts in East Africa. Foreign policy seemed remarkably tolerant of the Italian upstarts with aspirations to Great Power status. Anglo-Italian border arrangements included a protectorate in Oppia, control of key ports in Eritrea, domination of parts of Somalia, and recognition of an Italian protectorate over Ethiopia.⁴⁰ British consent enabled the Italian position in Africa, which was otherwise untenable in the face of British naval power and imperial reach. Thus, Italy's "position on paper appeared all [it] could desire" although its sphere of influence "was merely formal" in most areas.⁴¹ Greater conquests were needed to delineate stronger and larger borders for the upstart

³⁸ Al-Subaiy, "Anglo-Egyptian Relations," 161.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ J.C. Ardagh, "The Somali Protectorate," 2.

⁴¹ Ibid.

Italians. The defeat at Adwa ended any aspirations of dominance over Ethiopia, but the remaining territory in Somalia and Eritrea were useful tools for negotiations in international politics. The value of the unofficial status as a Great Power remained true even if “the Italian Colony, from a commercial point of view, is a hopeless failure.”⁴² The threat of initial Italian expansion into Africa in the 1880s came at the same time as the British suffered severe setbacks in the Sudan. Some mutual empathy thus existed between the two powers. While Rome’s ambition included dominating the entire Red Sea, Prime Minister Robert Salisbury hesitated to go that far in terms of his lukewarm support.⁴³ Such expansion would create a chokehold on the route from the Suez Canal to India.

However, Italy’s relative harmlessness as an individual nation was belied by its partnership to Austria-Hungary and, far more importantly, to Germany. The British thus feared the dangers of Italian expansion as a German pawn, but they also understood the limitations of Rome’s ability to effectively project power abroad. Salisbury’s tendency to drift closer towards the Triple Alliance had not paid off in the case of support for Crispi’s expansionist policy. London simply would not make any overt moves in favor of any one particular nation no matter the friendly relations with Rome. The hope that “Italian supremacy might keep France and Russia out of Abyssinia has proved delusive” especially since those powers helped support Ethiopian resistance against Italy.⁴⁴ Therefore, the British needed to decide whether to aid the Italians, to establish a border agreement with the Franco-Russian alliance over spheres of influence along the Upper Nile, or to chart an independent course in East Africa. Ultimately, the

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Al-Subaiy, “Anglo-Egyptian Relations,” 86-87.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

decision to launch the Kitchener expedition came as a result of the increased danger posed by Mahdists in the wake of the Italian defeat, as well as the public perception that the British advance would help succor the discomfited Italians.

The defeat at Adwa also reaffirmed Italy's dependence on British military and political support. From that perspective, the defeat continued a well-worn trend of Italian reliance on stronger forces to achieve foreign policy aims. The Italian relationship with Britain had always been marked by friendship and an understanding that the Royal Navy's Mediterranean Fleet posed a significant threat to Italy's long coastlines. Therefore, the Italians had made an exception that Britain should be excluded from any provisions of the Triple Alliance.⁴⁵ On 30 March 1896, di Rudinì himself told Bernhard von Bülow, the German ambassador, that Italy's friendly ministerial declarations with Britain remained in effect.⁴⁶ The Germans urged the Italians to refrain from repeating this message to the Austro-Hungarians. Nevertheless, di Rudinì continued the policy of friendship with Britain no matter how uncomfortable that made his allies.

Adwa radically shifted British perceptions by transforming a wary foreign policy to one committed to aiding a Great Power to which London was not officially aligned. Salisbury ordered the Earl of Cromer Evelyn Baring to organize a military demonstration in Dongola "to make a diversion in [Italy's] favor" by putting pressure on the Sudanese.⁴⁷ These apparently backhanded deals infuriated the opposition parties – derided as radicals by the Italian ambassador for wanting to halt military support – in the British Parliament.⁴⁸ The opposition felt that Salisbury and Cromer had unnecessarily and surreptitiously gotten involved in Italy's

⁴⁵ Sugnet, "The Relations of France and England with Italy," 5-6.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴⁷ Onorato Caetani to Antonio di Rudinì, DDI, 13 March 1896, no. 9.

⁴⁸ Ferrero to Caetani, DDI, 18 March 1896, no. 25.

disastrous campaign – and in a region of the world where General Charles Gordon’s forces at Khartoum had met a fate similar to Baratieri’s at Adwa. The Italians needed British succor to relieve their position in East Africa, or at least to reduce the pressure of a possible Mahdist-Ethiopian assault. Salisbury agreed “to start a military demonstration ... and to make a diversion” in favor of the Italians.⁴⁹ This request put the British squarely in the crosshairs of any potential rivals also vying for the affection of Menelik and his victorious legions.

The Italian request for assistance eventually bore fruit. The subsequent campaign of Herbert Kitchener’s forces into Sudan thus came at the confluence of many competing issues: the British feared French intervention in Ethiopia due to the Italian defeat, as well as the danger of either the Ethiopians or Mahdists driving the Italians out of Somalia and threatening the Upper Nile. General Joseph Wolseley, the Commander in Chief of the British Army, informed the cabinet that Kitchener’s force would reinforce the Egyptian Army and march up the Nile River Valley to Dongola.⁵⁰ These instructions also included the decisive statement that “Dongola, once occupied, is not to be again abandoned,” which indicated the British desire to stabilize a long-term position in Sudan. This position greatly differed from the previous policy of inaction and waiting to see how events might transpire in Upper Egypt and beyond. Interestingly, Wolseley indicated that Kitchener would report to Cromer in Egypt rather than to the War Office in London.⁵¹

Even the political opposition understood the utility of using the Italian defeat at Adwa to justify the upcoming expedition. The desire to let the commanders in Egypt fight the war on their

⁴⁹ Caetani to Rudini, 13 March 1896, DDI, no. 9.

⁵⁰ Joseph Wolseley, “Memorandum. By the Commander-in-Chief,” Cabinet 37/41 1896 Number 19, 8 May 1896, the National Archives.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

own as they saw fit did not necessarily sit well with the rest of Salisbury's Cabinet. Lord Henry Lansdowne, the Secretary of State for War and a Liberal Unionist, wrote on 12 and 24 March 1896 asking for better clarification of the Egyptian Campaign. Lansdowne specifically requested that the War Department "should receive definite instructions as to the eventualities for which it is expected to be prepared in the Nile Valley."⁵² This request came at odds with Wolseley's more detached approach to managing the Egyptian forces. He acknowledged that British intervention "was provoked by the imminent peril which at one moment appeared to threaten the Italian Forces at Kassala and Adigrat."⁵³ This admission demonstrated the reliance on the Italian defeat to justify a further advance into the Sudan. He also shifted the responsibility for any upcoming operations away from the War Office and his own department. Lansdowne accepted the advice of Cromer and Kitchener, "placed the direction of operations in their hands," and then positioned the success or failure of the upcoming campaign in their hands.⁵⁴ In this way, Lansdowne could disown any possible defeats. Though Sir Francis Grenfell (Kitchener's predecessor) admitted that the Anglo-Egyptian force would likely win, Lansdowne warned that "it is useless to disguise from ourselves that we are running a certain amount of risk" and that the nation was not prepared for another disaster like Gordon's at Khartoum.⁵⁵ The danger of a fatal reversal was magnified by the simple reality that most European campaigns in Africa constituted a small minority of white soldiers backed up by African auxiliaries and technological advances like the Maxim

⁵² Henry Lansdowne, "Proposed Advance Up the Nile Valley," Cabinet 37/41 1896 Number 21, 24 March 1896, The National Archives, 1. This same Henry Lansdowne appears later in this dissertation as the infamous author of the "Lansdowne Letter" during World War I that sought to end the war with Germany via negotiation.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Henry Lansdowne, "The Military Operations in Egypt," Cabinet 37/41 1896 Number 19, 12 May 1896, the National Archives, 1.

⁵⁵ Lansdowne, "Proposed Advance Up the Nile Valley," 2-3.

machine gun. If those systems failed, then the puny imperial forces would simply be overwhelmed by the sheer might of African manpower.

The British government took on a serious political risk by choosing to send another army into an area where two different empires had already met with catastrophe. Lansdowne understood that British intimations to “the other Powers and to Egypt has, however, been inconsistent with the idea that the successful feint in the interests of Italy was all that we intended.”⁵⁶ He also explained the suspicions of the other Great Powers and that using the Italian defeat as an excuse was a weak premise for the invasion of Sudan. Thus, the military risks of Kitchener’s campaign also ran several serious political risks, but Salisbury and Baring pressed forward anyways. Lansdowne insisted on a more cautious point until several unknown quantities became clearer: Italy’s strength in the Nile River Valley, the attitude of the Egyptians, possible opposition to Kitchener’s advance, and the possibility of foreign complications.⁵⁷ Unfortunately, waiting for events to play out risked putting the British on the passive side and ceding the initiative to any of the competing states now vying for greater influence in the wake of the Italian vacuum of power.

Internal political divisions split over the Italian requests for aid. Lansdowne continued that the initial “object of effecting a diversion in [the Italians] favour” allowed the British to announce their intent “to advance up the valley of the Nile, and that it seems to us expedient to occupy Dongola.”⁵⁸ This “announcement” justified Kitchener’s expedition while seeking to avoid any further inflammation over Egyptian affairs. The juggling of various concerns of

⁵⁶ Ibid., 2.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

French issues with Sudanese expansion meant that the British needed to keep the other Great Powers from interfering in the power vacuum just voluntarily created by the Italians. The Secretary of State for War also admitted that the support for the Italians was merely a convenient *casus belli*. His “explanations to Lord Cromer have, however, been more specific, for we have told him that, while the movement was intended to help the Italians, the ulterior object was to restore a portion of her lost territory to Egypt.”⁵⁹ Thus, the defeated Italians could vacate their positions that rightfully belonged to Egypt, and the Sudanese expedition could be portrayed as a selfless campaign that would help both the Italians and the Egyptians. This perception could be used in international affairs to ward off French claims of unprovoked British expansion.

Lansdowne explained that “the movement of a force composed largely of Egyptian troops, and paid for mainly from Egyptian funds, will not be very easy to justify unless we are able to guarantee to the Egyptian Government some material advantage as the result.”⁶⁰ However, the tropical rains expected by May 1896 mean that the “situation will thereby be modified in favour of the Italians” especially if they “succeed in coming to terms with King Menelik” whose army could not stay in the field.⁶¹ Thus, the Italians would still control their remaining colonies in the Horn of Africa, Menelik would have his treaty with his recent foes, and the Ethiopian army would not stay in the field capable of threatening either the Italians or the Upper Nile. As Lansdowne succinctly put it: “If we are able to show that we have advanced the railway 50 or 60 miles, if we are also able to claim with reason that our ‘diversion’ materially assisted the Italians, that it probably induced them to retain Kassala, and thereby detained in the neighborhood of that

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., 2.

place a large body of dervishes which might otherwise have operated towards the Egyptian frontier, neither Italy nor Egypt will be able to complain of us.”⁶² The campaign had to be undertaken with an eye towards how all the other states would react. The Great Powers suspected British interests in Egypt. The first goal of reoccupying the Sudan seemed risky to Lansdowne because “at this moment Egypt is half-hearted and the Powers suspicious.”⁶³ Although the Khalifa was stronger at the moment due to the Italian setbacks, Salisbury himself admitted to Cromer on 29 February 1896 that “the power of the Khalifa tends steadily to diminish and a waiting game is the obvious policy.”⁶⁴ However, Cromer also understood the dangers of a Mahdist renewal if the Italians were ousted from the position at Kassala. Thus, the British expedition faced serious internal and external obstacles.

Adwa further exposed the dangerous position of the British and their difficult relationships with both Egypt and the Sudan. An Italian defeat thus radically changed the foreign policy of the British government. The Khalifa Abdullah had “always cherished the prospect of an invasion of Egypt” especially as the Mahdists launched repeated raids along the Nile River between Dongola and Wadi Halfa.⁶⁵ The lack of a strong European response only further emboldened more attacks on outposts and vulnerable positions. Meanwhile, the manifold internal and financial issues that plagued Egypt prevented the mounting of any effective response. Anglo-Egyptian forces were not suddenly stronger but they were now given an impetus to move further

⁶² Ibid., 4.

⁶³ Ibid., 3.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ British Cabinet, “Résumé of Events on the Egyptian Frontiers since 1885 as affecting the Military Situation and the present advance in the Nile Valley,” Cabinet 37/41 1896 Number 22, 31 March 1896, The National Archives, 1. Such raids had been launched in 1886 at Sarras, in 1889 at Toski, and in 1893 against the Murat Wells outpost.

south. Neither were the Dervishes content to sit patiently by and wait for events to unfold around them. The constant skirmishing both in Dongola and near Kassala indicated a willingness to at least test the borders of the Great Powers. The British Cabinet received intelligence that a stronger Mahdist campaign was planned against Wadi Halfa in 1894, but that effort was stopped by the Italian victory at Agordat on 21 December and the subsequent occupation of Kassala on 17 July 1894.⁶⁶ The Italian success in the Sudan and encroachment in Ethiopia provided useful distractions that enabled Salisbury's "wait-and-see" policy against the Khalifa. As long as the Italians succeeded then the British did not have to get more involved in the Sudan, especially with mounting pressure on other imperial frontiers. Nor did Khalifa Abdullah dare take the field as long as Baratieri had a large standing army campaigning out of Eritrea and against the Ethiopians. Baratieri's forces therefore provided a useful buffer against further British extension into the Nile. Everyone but the Italians seemed content to wait the unfolding of future events rather than risk blundering with too large of an offensive.

However, Crispi's desperate need for battlefield success led him to hound his generals to achieve a decisive strategic victory. Baratieri's preoccupation with the Ethiopians reduced some of the pressure on the Sudanese. Nearly 700 Dervishes had been spotted renewing the attack on the outpost at Murat Wells on 26 February as Baratieri and Menelik prepared for their decisive clash. Salisbury's cabinet agreed that the state of affairs on the Upper Nile "may fairly be said to have become intolerable" and necessitated a strong response. The passive approach of both the Sudanese and the British drastically changed after Adwa. The Khalifa, "emboldened by the reverses suffered by the Italian arms at the hands of the Abyssinians ... abandoned his passive

⁶⁶ Ibid.

attitude on the Atbara and caused Kassala to be invested by an army of 10,000 Dervishes.”⁶⁷

Suddenly, the Italian position was seriously threatened at a moment of intense weakness for Baratieri’s replacement, Baldissera.

The grave situation thus created threatened the safety of Egypt and called imperatively for active measures to be taken without delay.”⁶⁸ If the British did not muster a campaign and the Mahdists expanded from the Sudan, then the useful Italian buffer zone could disappear. The British certainly had the strength to deal with the challenge from the Dervishes. However, the greater threat always loomed from the jealous French who sought any approach to make further inroads and loosen Cromer’s hold on Egypt. Ultimately, Salisbury cabinet agreed that “to have left matters alone, and to have awaited the issue of the struggle between the Italians and the Dervishes, would have been most impolitic.”⁶⁹ The defeat at Adwa fundamentally shook Salisbury from a more passive acceptance of the status quo that had existed in Sudan ever since the death of General Gordon at Khartoum. Now, an Italian defeat or withdrawal from Kassala may lead to “an outbreak of fanaticism will ensure, and that the attack of the Khalifa’s forces, encouraged by the prestige of a victory, real or imagined, over Europeans, will fall with full force upon the khedive’s dominions.”⁷⁰ These dangers exacerbated the vulnerabilities of an already overstretched empire.

The Italian request for aid gave the British the opportunity to provide assistance at a time when Salisbury’s government was more amenable to help. This aid enabled di Rudinì to maintain control of Kassala for nearly another year and to continue negotiating from a position

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

of relative strength with regards to ending the Ethiopian War. The British had little interest in supporting an Italian invasion of Ethiopia, but now they had interest in preserving their own sphere of influence. Salisbury was thus willing to help when Ferrero, the Italian Ambassador to Britain, asked on 2 March 1896 for British assistance regarding the Kassala garrison.⁷¹ The Italian defeat awoke the British government to the dangers looming in East Africa. The battle forced a significant policy change that threw Italian and British designs together. Obviously, Baratieri had not planned on losing the engagement nor had Crispi counted on resigning in disgrace. Nevertheless, the previously ambivalent British attitude towards events in Sudan and Ethiopia now transformed into one of urgency. The French and Russians refused to use Egyptian money monitored by the *Caisse de la Dette* to be used for Kitchener's planned campaign.⁷² This recalcitrance increased the importance of the planned invasion of Dongola as the Dual Alliance clearly sought to benefit as much as possible from Italian discomfiture.

The British also feared another disaster during Kitchener's expedition similar to Gordon's humiliating defeat at Khartoum. Lansdowne's instructions on military operations in Egypt warned that Kitchener and Cromer were "running a certain amount of risk, and that, were a disaster to occur, we should be without the means of promptly repairing it."⁷³ The need to build and maintain a railway while also using the Nile River as a line of communication created nervousness in the British Cabinet. The confusion between what the commanders in Egypt desired was amplified when Lord Cromer wrote the cabinet on 1 April 1896 to ask "whether Her Majesty's Government really mean to move on Dongola, or whether their only object is to create

⁷¹ Roberts, "The Egyptian Question and the Triple Alliance," 169.

⁷² Ibid., 170, 174-175.

⁷³ Lansdowne, "The Military Operations in Egypt," 3.

a diversion in favour of the Italians.”⁷⁴ Ironically, the fabricated *casus belli* of purportedly aiding the Italians in order to deal with the real threat of the Mahdists now seemed to dictate future strategy in the Sudan. Lansdowne feared that the projected rate of advance might leave Kitchener too exposed on the road to Dongola and that “the Sirdar is likely to leave the railway far behind him.”⁷⁵ These fears were exacerbated by the movements of other Great Powers who threatened to complicate the British position on the Nile.

Intelligence estimates understood that the power vacuum left behind by the Italians threatened the intervention of stronger more hostile powers. The multi-faceted issues arising from Adwa were complicated by “French and Russian influence in Abyssinia, by the recent reverse experienced by the Italians at Mogadoxo,”⁷⁶ by the French project for a railway from Jibuti to Harrar, and by the appearance of a Russian ship of war at Raheita.”⁷⁷ Taken individually these affairs did not pose much danger to the interests of the British Empire. However, when combined together they presented a more sizable threat that attracted the notice of the British cabinet.

The Italian defeat at Adwa significantly amplified British fears of a renewed attack by the Mahdists in the Sudan. Any increased vulnerability in one of the weakest Great Powers opened new opportunities for competition in Britain’s perceived spheres of influence. Under Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs George Curzon admitted to the House of Commons on 20 March 1896 that the government’s decision to launch a punitive expedition into the Sudan “was undoubtedly

⁷⁴ Lansdowne, British Cabinet, “Operations in the Nile Valley,” Cabinet 37/41 1896 Number 24, 31 March 1896, The National Archives, 1.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 5.

⁷⁶ Mogadishu.

⁷⁷ J.C. Ardagh, “The Somali Protectorate,” 2.

influenced by the communications received from the Italian Government.”⁷⁸ Baratieri’s retreat to Eritrea meant that the Italian position at Kassala was now open to attack by either Ethiopian or Mahdist forces. Lord Cromer wrote to Prime Minister Salisbury that “any civilized Power holding the upper waters of the Nile at Khartoum will in reality dominate Egypt.”⁷⁹ Nor was replacing a weak, neutral, and amicable European state with the hostile Islamic dervishes a palatable option. While the defeat at Adwa offered the British an international pretext to subdue the Mahdists, the loss also haunted politicians who feared another European disaster at the hands of African forces.

British journalists understood that the international ramifications of the Italian defeat could threaten British interests. The Conservatives struggled with how far they could criticize Italian foreign policy without implicitly attacking their own. *The Times* generally sympathized with the Italian predicament, which closely emulated official British government messages of sympathy for the reversal.⁸⁰ Baratieri did receive some criticism for fighting against a “civilized power” as the Ethiopians were eventually described.⁸¹ Nevertheless, the Italians were portrayed as friends who had suffered an unfortunate setback rather than as a hostile power that deserved to lose in humiliating fashion. The newspaper’s editors “deplored Italy’s seriously weakened position” in an era of nearly unchecked European colonialism.⁸² A fraternal bond tied the white

⁷⁸ George Curzon, UK Parliamentary Papers, “Commons Sitting of Friday, 20th March 1896,” 19th Century House of Commons Hansard Sessional Papers, Fourth Series, vol. 3, 1458-1459, accessed 30 OCT 2019 at <https://parlipapers-proquest-com.er.lib.k-state.edu/parlipapers/docview/t71.d76.cds4v0038p0-0014?accountid=11789z>. Francesco Crispi, *La Prima Guerra d’Africa*, 223, 233-234.

⁷⁹ Sanderson, “England, Italy, the Nile Valley and the European Balance, 1890-91,” 97.

⁸⁰ Pankhurst, “British Reaction to the Battle of Adwa,” 220-221.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 218.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 223-224.

Great Power imperialists in their efforts to subjugate the rest of Africa. A defeat for one such power was thus a setback for all the others. Ironically, *The Times* lamented the Italian disaster while also admitting that the British could do little to help their friends. Two weeks later Kitchener launched his expedition to the Sudan.

The conservative *Pall Mall Gazette* carefully worded its criticism by describing Adwa as the “Italian Majuba,” alluding to the disastrous British defeat at Majuba Hill in 1881 during the First Boer War.⁸³ William Gladstone’s Liberal government had been forced into a humiliating peace treaty with the Boers soon after, a notion not lost by 1896 even with the Liberals out of power. In this way, the *Pall Mall Gazette* could criticize previous liberal policies without attacking those of Salisbury’s government. Neither the British in 1881 nor the Italians in 1896 seemed capable of reversing their embarrassing defeats against African forces. However, some Conservatives feared being drawn into Ethiopia to succor the Italians because the French had provided Menelik with arms and ammunition.⁸⁴ The defeat of General Baratieri added “the further peril of an [attack] on Kassala by the bands of Dervishes operating in the vicinity of that place.”⁸⁵ Thus, the Ethiopian victory might lead to a broader Ethiopian-Mahdist uprising against European interests in the Sudan and the Horn of Africa. If the two anti-colonial powers drove Italy out of East Africa, they could attack British positions elsewhere and open space for stronger European powers to intervene. Even a weak Italian presence in East Africa had the benefit of keeping the French in Djibouti separate from the British interests in the Nile.

⁸³ “The Lesson of Adwa,” *Pall Mall Gazette*, 4 March 1896, Issue 9654.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ “The Disastrous Defeat of the Italians Forces,” *The Standard*, 4 March 1896, Issue 22363.

Therefore, the British feared the consequences of a wholesale Italian withdrawal. The conservative *The Morning Post* used this logic to criticize a wait-and-see approach regarding the Italians and to call for a decisive intervention by Salisbury's government. This increased involvement should include public support of Crispi's policies in Africa and financial aid to allow the Italians to send a stronger expedition to Abyssinia.⁸⁶ The editorial emphasized both the decisive role that the Italian Navy could play in any contest between the French and British Mediterranean Fleets, as well as how public support for a member of the Triple Alliance could calm tensions with the Germans.⁸⁷ Thus, aiding a weak new regime di Rudinì would placate the Italians while also blunting the territorial ambitions of the far more dangerous French and Germans. Italy's fall as a Great Power would upset the delicate balance of power in Europe established since German victory in the Franco-Prussian War in 1871. The split among Conservative opinion allowed the Liberals to mount a series of attacks on what they saw as a muddled foreign policy.

Liberal journalists provided a more well-rounded understanding of the implications of the defeat. The *Daily News*' correspondent in Berlin criticized the Germans for fearing that Adwa might lead "to a total revolution of political affairs by which the Triple Alliance may be more or less affected and its very existence jeopardised."⁸⁸ Italy's main value to that alliance was to place an army on the French border as a diversion, and the Italians could still fulfill this obligation despite their recent setbacks. Kaiser Wilhelm II met with the Austro-Hungarian ambassador in Berlin on 9 March 1896 amidst increased worry over radical and socialist unrest in northern

⁸⁶ "The hour of trial has come for Italy, and it behoves England, in the moment of her supposed isolation, to shower her generosity and her strength.," *The Morning Post*, 5 March 1896, Issue 38608.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ "The Italian Disaster," *Daily News*, 5 March 1896, Issue 15580.

Italy. King Umberto's position in Italy was not seen as being strong enough "to insist upon his will and to face quietly all emergencies."⁸⁹ Indeed, support of reactionary measures to put down these revolts would ultimately lead to his assassination. Surprisingly, the defeat of a small Italian-Eritrean force in Abyssinia had serious ramifications for one of the two most powerful alliances in the world. The resignation of Francesco Crispi, the proverbial "soul of the Triple Alliance," implied a need to restructure the policies of the alliance. However, there was little the Germans and the Austro-Hungarians could do to help the new commander in Eritrea, General Antonio Baldissera, or the new prime minister, Antonio di Rudinì. One liberal correspondent now piled onto Germany's worries by linking the defeat at Adwa with Wilhelm's disastrous support for the Boers earlier in the year with his infamous Kruger Telegram on 3 January 1896 after the botched Jameson Raid in the Transvaal.⁹⁰ Surely the Germans must "see what a mistake they made with the famous Transvaal policy."⁹¹ Interestingly, agitation over the German and Italian failures in South and East Africa, respectively, would soon lead to renewed British expeditions in both those regions. These newspapers represented some of the initial shock that the British experienced and worried over increasing government commitments in Egypt and further south on the Nile River.

The Liberals in the British Parliament worried about the connection of the Italian defeat with Kitchener's expedition. MP (Member of Parliament) John Morley probed Kitchener's expedition by hypothesizing that Mahdism "will be stimulated by recent events, including the

⁸⁹ "The Italian Disaster," *Daily News*, 9 March 1896, Issue 15583.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ John C. G. Röhl, *Kaiser Wilhelm II*, trans. Sheila de Bellaigue (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 75.

defeat of the Italians at Adwa.”⁹² The British had long questioned the stability of the Egyptian regime in the wake of the siege of Khartoum. An uneasy peace in southern Egypt had lasted nearly a decade. Morley wondered why relieving the Italians at Kassala was suddenly such a pressing matter.⁹³ However, the defeat of the Italians threw this balance into disarray. Now General Herbert Kitchener’s expedition “moved across the frontier on 18 March [1896],” in an effort to reconquer Dongola province.⁹⁴ Adwa offered the pretext for the British to resolve their issues on the Upper Nile with the Mahdists by claiming to be helping the Italians. Nevertheless, the Liberals feared the cost and length of an expedition that was really designed to subdue Dongola and defeat the Mahdist threat.

British Conservatives struggled to respond to accusations of launching an invasion of the Sudan in bad faith. MP William Harcourt, the Leader of the Opposition, criticized the government for ordering an advance “which has been announced in the papers” before he asked if such an operation was indeed taking place.⁹⁵ This criticism was directed at the secrecy of the Salisbury regime that seemed to be hiding the true facts from the rest of Parliament. Curzon’s response linked the importance of Italian failures with British interests. He argued that the government had received reports of a Dervish advance towards Kassala in February while Baratieri’s invasion of Ethiopia had stalled in the wake of defeats at Amba Alagi and Mekele.⁹⁶

⁹² John Morley, UK Parliamentary Papers, “Commons Sitting of Friday, 20th March 1896,” 19th Century House of Commons Hansard Sessional Papers, Fourth Series, vol. 3, 1486-1487, accessed 30 October 2019.

⁹³ Morley, UK Papers, 1488.

⁹⁴ Herbert Kitchener, Dispatch from the *London Gazette*, cited in J.B. Rye and Horace G. Groser, *Kitchener in his own Words* (New York, NY: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1917), 110.

⁹⁵ William Harcourt, UK Parliamentary Papers, “Commons Sitting of Friday, 16th March 1896,” 19th Century House of Commons Hansard Sessional Papers, Fourth Series, vol. 38, 1027, accessed 12 June 2019.

⁹⁶ George Curzon, UK Parliamentary Papers, “Commons Sitting of Friday, 16th March 1896,” 19th Century House of Commons Hansard Sessional Papers, Fourth Series, vol. 38, 1027-1028, accessed 12 June 2019.

Despite the weakness of the Italian position in East Africa, the removal of those colonies would significantly threaten British influence along the Nile. Curzon dramatically outlined the eruption “of forces unchained in Central Africa which, if flushed by victory and if swollen by any perfectly possible combination of arms, may constitute a serious danger, not merely to Italy, to Egypt, and to the British position in Egypt, but I will go further and say to the cause of Europe, which is the cause of civilisation in Africa.”⁹⁷ Tellingly, Curzon did not directly answer Harcourt’s question about British operations but instead used the Italian disasters as evidence to cover up Kitchener’s ultimate goals. The defeat of the Italians and the increased Mahdist threat were the issue and not the launching of a military expedition without Parliament’s complete approval.

The Liberal attacks brought to the foreground the reasons for the British presence in Egypt. Conservatives had inveighed against expensive campaigns in the Sudan in 1884 when the Liberals were in power.⁹⁸ The rebellious nature of frontier peoples along the far reaches of the Nile River made any expedition there difficult to mount and to sustain. However, Morley focused on the lack of foresight behind government policy in Egypt. He argued that “the Egyptian question should not be raised in Europe,” yet the rapid decision to dispatch Kitchener’s forces in the wake of Adwa created a different perception for the other colonial powers.⁹⁹ The French might have cheered the destruction of Baratieri’s forces but they would not react the same way to a strong British force marching south towards the center of Africa. In addition, if the other European powers could question British suzerainty in Egypt, then they could

⁹⁷ Ibid., 1028-1029.

⁹⁸ Morley, 1492, HathiTrust

⁹⁹ Ibid., 1493, 1495.

theoretically place territorial claims on weakly controlled regions such as the Sudan. Thus, the Battle of Adwa and the Sudanese expedition made the British government in Egypt vulnerable to questions in the international arena. Secretary of State for the Colonies Joseph Chamberlain weakly responded about the civilizing mission the British had achieved by stabilizing Egypt over the past fifteen years.¹⁰⁰ Nevertheless, he could not publicly convince the Liberals that Kitchener's attack was a deliberate part of British policy and not simply taking advantage of the Italian discomfiture to expand Britain's sphere of influence.

By December of 1896, the British position had improved somewhat. A memorandum written to Salisbury's cabinet saw a favorable opportunity to evaluate the British position in the Horn of Africa.¹⁰¹ The congruence of the issues between the Dual and Triple Alliances had been redressed somewhat by Kitchener's initial success on Sudan. The cabinet definitely saw itself as having an "exceptionally benevolent attitude" towards Italian ambitions since the middle of the 19th century.¹⁰² This generosity of spirit had seemingly been repeated since the rout of Baratieri's forces at Adwa.

The period between 1895 and 1898 was one of significant political realignments in Europe. These commitments then coalesced into a new series of competing spheres of influence that gradually hardened in the leadup to World War I.¹⁰³ These problems were manifold: Salisbury's return to office, the competition between the Dual and Triple Alliances, the French advance on Fashoda, the British advance on Sudan, the victorious Ethiopian armies, and the intransigent Mahdist forces. However, the Italian defeat at Adwa threatened to rapidly unhinge

¹⁰⁰ Chamberlain, 1497-1499.

¹⁰¹ J.C. Ardagh, "The Somali Protectorate," 2.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Roberts, "The Egyptian Question and the Triple Alliance," 164.

the stability of East Africa as well as the headwaters of the Nile River. This defeat brought about a less Francophobic government to power in Rome that worked to renegotiate from a position of perceived weakness. Yes, the French embargo had hurt the Italian economy, but Crispi's regime continued its hostile attitude towards Paris as long as some success could still be gleaned from the Ethiopian campaign.¹⁰⁴ Once military victory could no longer prop up this hostility then the Italians recalibrated their foreign policy. Such a course was not inevitable as seen by Crispi's various terms in and out of office. However, by March 1896 the landscape had shifted significantly enough to allow a significant rapprochement between the two border states.

Recalibrating Foreign Policy Aims with France

In September 1898, the world watched with bated breath as a British army led by General Herbert Kitchener faced off against a French expedition under Major Jean-Baptiste Marchand at Fashoda in the heart of the Sudan.¹⁰⁵ The French claim to the interior of the African continent threatened British control of the all-important headwaters of the Nile River, as well as the link from Egypt to South Africa and Asia. The incident created a diplomatic crisis that almost led to all-out war between the world's largest colonial empires. However, cooler heads prevailed, the French ultimately backed down, and two nations that had been enemies for nearly one thousand years finally entered a period of *détente* that proved critical during the world wars of the 20th century. The defeat at Adwa largely removed the Italian desire to compete for a stronger sphere of influence in East Africa. That vacuum enabled both France and Britain to make greater

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 165-166.

¹⁰⁵ H.H. Wilson, Inclosure 2 in No. 1, "Memorandum by Captain Wilson on French Aims on the Nile Valley," 1 February 1897, 5.

inroads. However, the Italian initiatives to calm relations with France from 1896 through 1898 helped heal the diplomatic strains since Italy first joined the Triple Alliance.

The eventual development of the Entente Cordiale between Britain and France had its origins in the diplomatic resolution of the Fashoda Crisis. Yet there were two other European Great Powers who came to join the Entente. Fashoda did not have a similarly cooperative effect on all these countries. Russia formed its own alliance with France beginning in 1891 but it had no overseas colonies in Africa. Italy, on the other hand, had significant African territory and commercial interests that sat astride both British Egypt and French North Africa. The understanding of Fashoda as a purely Anglo-French affair – a bias which followed all the way through to World War I as a conflict fought chiefly on the Western Front – misrepresented the role of Italy during the Fashoda crisis. The defeat actually worked to the Italians' advantage. Italy's weakness after Adwa and the international crisis of the Fashoda Incident provided a justification to end its long-standing feud with France while ensuring closer cooperation with Great Britain. These foundations laid the seeds for Italy's ultimate decision to ally with Western European powers twenty years later.

The defeat significantly altered Italo-French relations, which had reached their nadir under Crispi. Count Giuseppe Tornielli, the ambassador to France, warned that “the France of today, despite its reasons for internal weakness, cannot be judged with the criteria that prevailed over the last few years.”¹⁰⁶ The Franco-Russian alliance had greatly strengthened France's strategic position. France's actions from 1895 until March 1896 showed “a character that it [France] had lost over twenty-five years” due to shortsighted politics.¹⁰⁷ Tornielli evaluated the

¹⁰⁶ Tornielli to Caetani, DDI, 12 March 1896, no. 6.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

resurrection of French power abroad in the wake of a devastating defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871. He estimated that France's new diplomatic objective "was the isolation of the German Empire," Italy's partner in the Triple Alliance. France could not defeat Germany on the battlefield but could support causes that hurt Germany's interests and allies abroad. This realistic outlook allowed some Italians to take the French support for Menelik in stride. French policy was anti-Italian largely because it was anti-German. The Franco-Russian alliance also threatened the British position on Africa and Asia through fierce commercial rivalries that worried the cabinet in London.¹⁰⁸ The defeat at Adwa reduced French fears of a larger Italian empire in East Africa that could threaten their interests in the center of the continent.¹⁰⁹ Thus, the Dual Alliance and the Italian defeat made the French more amenable to listen to Italian overtures. Tornielli's outlook on the future tried to identify how his nation could manage an international sphere where the Italians suddenly seemed much weaker than their Mediterranean neighbors.

The defeat at Adwa resulted in a practical realignment of policy aims that matched Italian capabilities. The immediate flurry of diplomatic correspondence in the aftermath of Adwa should be read with some skepticism. Eager ministers and generals sought both to assert their own influence and position with the new regime while distancing themselves from any close association with Francesco Crispi's fallen government and the mistakes that led to the disastrous battle. Tornielli wrote a letter to the new Foreign Minister, Onorato Caetani, on 12 March 1896 that sought to articulate the strengths and weaknesses of the Italian position vis-à-vis France. The reference to French defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871 highlighted an important sticking point in relations between the new and old Great Powers. After all, Italian and German

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Mary K. Allen, "The Relations between France and Italy, 1885-1915," Ph.D. diss., (Clark University, 1927), 7.

unification had come at the expense of the traditional continental powers of Austria and France. Nevertheless, French policy had turned away from the impracticality of immediately recovering Alsace-Lorraine even though “it would be an error to believe that the French had renounced all ideas of reclaiming territory.”¹¹⁰ Instead, Tornielli urged his government to understand that French diplomacy had evolved and was now seeking to diplomatically isolate the German Empire.¹¹¹ The understanding of this position had serious implications for the Italians. Although Bismarck had encouraged closer Italian ties with Great Britain, a rapprochement with France (and perhaps its Russian ally) would certainly upset Berlin.

Tornielli took great pains to acknowledge the steadily improving relationship between Britain and France in the early 1890s. Agreements over Siam, Niger, and Tunisia, as well as the signing of the Franco-Russian Dual Alliance, appeared to limit the possibility of a more destructive European conflict. In particular, European focus on Africa and Asia helped divert nationalist attention outwards away from the competing alliance blocs. Nevertheless, French relations with Italy continued to be strained. The recent cabinets of Alexandre Ribot and Léon Bourgeois had made friendly gestures to Italy, but these “had not penetrated in the sentiment of the French public,” which was convinced of “the unreasonable convictions of the necessity for hostility between Italy and France.”¹¹² Thus, a lot of friction had to be overcome for both sides to work together in addition to the conflicting interests of their respective alliances. In addition, the revolving-door of coalition governments in both countries meant that each state had to worry if “a parliamentary vote might ruin any agreement.”¹¹³ This hazardous state of affairs prevented

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Tornielli to Caetani, DDI, 12 March 1896, no. 6.

¹¹³ Ibid.

amicable ideas from passing the initial stages of any negotiations. The perception from these communications was that both countries wanted closer relations, but the cloud of mutual distrust prevented any more serious changes to the status quo before the Italian invasion of Ethiopia.

Italian defeats changed the diplomatic position of both countries. The major issues of contention covered African spheres of influence, the position of Italian citizens in , and the easing of commercial and travel restrictions.¹¹⁴ Tunisia in particular remained a conflict point. The French protectorate over Tunisia had precipitated Italy joining the Triple Alliance with Germany and Austria-Hungary. The Italians had originally wanted specific spheres of influence laid out in the Horn of Africa, particularly in Harrar, the Danachili Desert, and Obock, to limit French expansion into the hinterland.¹¹⁵ These policy aims closely aligned with Britain's desire to stop the French from expanding into the Nile watershed or the Horn of Africa. Tornielli hinted that the delimitation of Franco-Italian borders in Africa remained incomplete when Baratieri's army suffered its first serious reverse at Amba Alagi in 1895.¹¹⁶ The erosion of Italian political and commercial relations combined with significant military defeats in Africa appeared even more disastrous as the other great powers continued their normal affairs with France. The Italians "lost precious time as the other powers [especially England and Austria-Hungary]" had already accepted to negotiate directly with Paris over recognition of Tunisian commercial treaties.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid. A common strategic opening during the Scramble for Africa was to claim a series of coastal areas for an initial claim before making a broader expansion in the vast African hinterland. Perhaps the most nefarious of these claims was the Belgian Congo from its small access to the sea to its enormous control over the Congo Basin. Therefore, all of the European powers had to worry about neighboring claims out of fear that other states would secure greater rights and territory.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 7.

Therefore, the more the Italians hesitated to recognize the French position in Tunisia then the more they fell behind in the scramble for Africa.

The Italian public and press feared the increasing ascendancy of France and its colonies in Africa. Meanwhile, Italian journalists began hounding their government about the amount of material aid that the Ethiopians received from France. The agitation of the Italian press hurt any chance of continued negotiations with France.¹¹⁷ The campaign in Ethiopia itself was thus self-defeating because the Italians lost influence in Tunisia and could not prevent the expansion of French influence in either Ethiopia or the African hinterland. Nevertheless, as the ambassador to France, Tornielli hesitated at claiming that the French violated “the laws for international neutrality” by arming Ethiopian fighters against Italy. Tornielli understood the importance of French support after Adwa, and that bringing up a politically sensitive topic in an international court or conference would only heighten the ongoing tension between the neighboring powers.

Adwa ushered in a new Italian government that could accomplish some long-term policy aims with respect to France. Marcellin Berthelot and the outgoing Minister of Foreign Affairs, Gabriel Hanotaux, both bemoaned the current state of Franco-Italian relations and offered their condolences over the Italian disaster.¹¹⁸ Tornielli assessed these sympathies from the perception that imperialist campaigns were “a source of future dangers for all the countries launching colonial businesses.” Clearly, the French signs of support masked a desire to isolate Germany from its southern ally while also warning the Italians against renewed ambitions that might continue to antagonize France.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 8.

If the Italians were thrown out, any number of Great Powers might come and replace them. After all, the French and Russians had armed the Ethiopians with the modern weapons and technical advisors that had allowed them to overmatch Baratieri's men at Adwa.¹¹⁹ In March 1897, Ambassador Léonce Lagarde arrived at Addis Ababa and conferred most-favored nation status to the Ethiopians. At the same time, the French supported the political independence of the African state. Russian or French control of Ethiopia would place one of those allied powers astride Britain's main waterway to India. The victory of the Russians in the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878 weakened the British influence in Constantinople and solidified the Ottomans as the proverbial "Sick Man of Europe."¹²⁰ Another route to protect India needed to be secured. Either the French colonial empire might stretch west to east across the center of the continent, or Russia could now envelop the British Raj from Central Asia and the Horn of Africa. The Italian call for assistance offered a pretext to extend British support into the Sudan, and in return the vital region of Kassala would be returned to Egypt the following year.¹²¹ Italian military prestige may have suffered after Adwa, but the defeat offered plenty of opportunities for the nation to reassert its international position even if it came at the loss of an important border town. Improved relations with Great Britain may not have whetted the appetite of Italian imperialists, but they did shore up di Rudini's diplomatic influence at a time of external defeat and internal unrest. When the Fashoda Crisis occurred, Italy's position was not as weak as Adwa may have implied.

¹¹⁹ David Levering Lewis, *The Race to Fashoda* (New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1987), 136.

¹²⁰ Roberts, "The Egyptian Question," 96.

¹²¹ Ministero Degli Affari Esteri (MDAE), Commissione per la Pubblicazione dei Documenti Diplomatici, *I Documenti Diplomatici Italiani*, Third Series (1896-1907) vol. 2 (1 May 1897 – 23 June 1898) (Rome, IT: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1958), 25. HathiTrust. Lewis, *Race to Fashoda*, 154.

The defeat greatly improved Franco-Italian relations. The French signaled some sympathy for the Italian catastrophe.¹²² This attitude likely coalesced because of the diminished threat of a Triple Alliance sphere of influence to infiltrate Central Africa. However, both the French and Italian people still seemed to struggle with the idea of peace with their Mediterranean neighbor.¹²³ Attempts to improve Franco-Italian relations in the past two decades had always foundered due to some sort of external issue driven by the foreign policy aims of both nations. The defeat at Adwa assured the French of the limits of Italian power abroad and encouraged the Italians to offer concessions to avoid conflicts with France. By December 1896, both countries had agreed to the official recognition of the French protectorate in Tunisia as well as to end the destructive trade war that started during the Crispi regime.¹²⁴ The Italians understood that their defeat left them in no position to challenge a French position that had existed for nearly fifteen years in Tunis. The 11,000 Italians living in Tunisia were guaranteed autonomy, commercial rights, and the ability to create their own schools and hospitals.¹²⁵ Nonetheless, the Italian commercial position in Tunisia would be threatened by continued hostility with France. The Italians had once sought to ward off the French by integrating Britain into the Triple Alliance.¹²⁶ When those attempts failed, the disaster at Adwa convinced the Italians to realistically change their policy aims. The French ultimately agreed not to move into Tripolitania and left that province open for Italian exploitation that culminated in the Italo-Turkish War of 1911-1912.

¹²² Pankhurst, "British Reaction to the Battle of Adwa," 217.

¹²³ Tornielli to Caetani, DDI, 12 March 1896, no. 6.

¹²⁴ Sugnet, "The Relations of France and England with Italy," 5.

¹²⁵ William I. Shorrock, "The Tunisian Question in French Policy toward Italy, 1881-1940," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 16, no. 4 (1983): 633. <https://doi.org/10.2307/218270>.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 21-23.

Although the French disliked the surprising Italian invasion of Tripoli in 1911, the agreements in the late 1890s soothed Franco-Italian relations and created space for closer cooperation.¹²⁷

Delcassé's appointment to the French Foreign Ministry in June 1898 has often been portrayed as the beginning of French efforts to pry the Italians away from the Germans.¹²⁸ However, that narrative misses the role that Adwa played in making the Italians more amenable to friendly relations with the French. Visconti Venosta's appointment as the Italian foreign minister in July 1896 began improving relationships with France, which led to a commercial agreement in December in exchange for Italian recognition of the French protectorate in Tunis.¹²⁹ This calming of affairs also made the French more confident in expanding in other areas.

By 1 February 1897, a memorandum to Salisbury's cabinet outlined the dangers of the French position in central Africa. Captain Wilson wrote that the French clearly wanted some footing on the Upper Nile.¹³⁰ A small force of French officers could penetrate through Central Africa and make it to Sudan. This reality made the French and Russian support for Menelik far more dangerous. The supply of arms and ammunition helped the Ethiopians muster a large and dangerous army that could take the field for several months over large tracts of land.¹³¹ The defeat of the Italians, the continuance of dervish control of Sudan, and the arming of Menelik's forces combined to create a potentially explosive situation if the French reached too far inland. This fear could be realized if the French expanded from the Congo to Fashoda to Djibouti in

¹²⁷ Sugnet, "The Relations of France and England with Italy," 50.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 10-11.

¹²⁹ Sugnet, "The Relations of France and England with Italy," 10-11.

¹³⁰ H.H. Wilson, Inclosure 2 in No. 1, "Memorandum by Captain Wilson on French Aims on the Nile Valley," 1 February 1897, the National Archives, 5.

¹³¹ Ibid.

Somalia with a loyal Ethiopian ally that could later be subdued at will.¹³² Such an arrangement would dash not only British dreams of the fanciful “Cape to Cairo railway” but also permanently threaten their position on the Nile River.¹³³

In light of Italy’s military weakness by 1898, neither Giuseppe Tornielli, the ambassador to France, nor Felice Canevaro, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, could force France to reverse policy in its own territory. Instead, Canevaro informed his Tunisian consulate that Italian notables must understand “the necessity of prudent tranquility.”¹³⁴ These cautionary measures proved necessary to avoid complicating relationships with a French nation still angry at Italy’s alliance with Germany and still imposing a devastating tariff on a weak Italian economy. In Paris, Tornielli could do little more than “predispose the spirit of the foreign minister and persuade him” rather than simply demand French respect of Italian rights.¹³⁵ The Italians also feared French expansion east into Tripolitania, a province of the “Sick Man of Europe” in the Ottoman Empire. A French expedition into Turkish Libya, accompanied by Marchand’s into the Sudan, could fatally undermine Italy’s commercial interests and territorial ambitions in Africa. By the end of the summer, Italy’s political and diplomatic situation seemed to hang precariously in the balance.

The more pressing issue at Fashoda had another twist because the French government considered that “the record of the existence of an Anglo-Italian accord obliges Britain to defend

¹³² Ibid., 6.

¹³³ “Cape to Cairo” was a common saying that would extend British control from Egypt south to Cape Town in a great north-to-south empire that would dominate Africa.

¹³⁴ Felice Canevaro to Tommaso Carletti, DDI, 17 July 1898, vol. 3, no. 22.

¹³⁵ Canevaro to Tornielli, DDI, 17 July 1898, vol. 3, no 20.

the Italian coast in the case of French aggression.” The reduction in French provocations of the Italians during the Fashoda Incident had two important aspects: one, and most important, France did not have the political unity or military capability to fight Britain, which was considered to have some sort of defensive partnership with Italy. Second, war with Italy might also bring in Germany and Austria-Hungary against a diplomatically isolated France. By November, the crisis had subsided because the French “were persuaded of their inferiority in a naval war with England” and both sides agreed to a delimitation of their African spheres of influence. Soon after Marchand’s withdrawal, Delcassé confirmed that France “has no intention of occupying Tripolitania” and French aggression from Tunisia died down significantly. Clearly, it was not the Italians themselves who accomplished this feat but British determination during the “crisis.” Nevertheless, Italy’s role as “the least of the Great Powers” shored up by some international support gave it a unique role as mediator in any international negotiations. November ended with French support for a new commercial agreement with Italy that ended the ten-year trade war. Canevaro, knowing how such an action could be perceived by his allies, immediately informed his ambassadors in Berlin and Vienna to express that such an action “does not change our political orientation” as a member of the Triple Alliance.¹³⁶ Nevertheless, Italian and French economic and cultural ties ran deeper than Italy’s attachment to a short-lived agreement with the Germanic empires. In addition, France’s colonial and naval power could threaten Italian territory in a way that neither Germany nor Austria-Hungary could. Even irredentists in northern Italy received this news “with great enthusiasm” because they saw that this deal “signals the end of the Triple Alliance, the rapprochement of Italy and France, and, in a time not too far away, the end of Austrian domination of Trieste.” Fashoda thus offered the chance for the calming of

¹³⁶ Ibid.

relations with the weakest link in the Triple Alliance. The French and British finally recognized each other's spheres of influence in Africa on 21 March 1899, and this agreement formed the basis for a later Franco-Italian accord in 1900.¹³⁷ These accords enabled some Italian independence from British naval support.¹³⁸ The French and the Italians, while not outright allies, could plan for future operations where the two nations did not go to war. The British and French finally agreed to separate spheres of influence on 21 March 1899, thus ending the Fashoda Crisis.¹³⁹

Italy's experience during the Fashoda Crisis has been downplayed because of its humiliating defeat in the First Italo-Ethiopian War. The historiographies of both Adwa and Italian imperialism always described a period of retrenchment and unrest in which a revolving door of different governments avoided international affairs due to the decline in Italian prestige. These approaches ignore the opportunities that major defeats provide for a weak power. Di Rudinì asked Lord Salisbury, the British Prime Minister – and his own Foreign Secretary – for assistance in shoring up the Italian position in Africa. The Italians had been defeated in a solo adventure – a pattern that followed previous disasters earlier in the century – but now they had the potential to bring in far stronger allies, as they had done with the French and the Prussians. For his part, Salisbury feared that if Italy were expelled from Africa by the Ethiopians, then the Mahdist state of Khalifa Abdullahi could reemerge in strength in the Sudan, capture Kassala, and invade southern Egypt.¹⁴⁰ This threat had been simmering ever since the destruction of General Gordon at Khartoum a decade before.

¹³⁷ Sugnet, "The Relations of France and England with Italy," 10.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 12.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 10.

¹⁴⁰ David Steele, *Lord Salisbury*, 343.

There had been widespread opposition by both the British public and the Foreign Office to sending another costly, punitive expedition into the Sudan – an opposition that mirrored the unrest in Italy after Adwa – yet now this defeat offered all the pretext the British needed to march south. Replacing a weak, neutral, and amicable European state with the hostile Islamic dervishes was not a palatable option. Russian or French control of Ethiopia would place one of those allied powers astride Britain’s main waterway to India. Either the French colonial empire would stretch west to east across the center of the continent, or Russia would now envelop the British Raj from Central Asia and the Horn of Africa. Thus, immediately in the wake of Adwa, General Herbert Kitchener’s expedition “moved across the frontier on 18 March [1896],” in an effort to reconquer Dongola province.¹⁴¹ The Italian call for assistance offered a pretext to extend British support into the Sudan, and in return the vital region of Kassala would be returned to Egypt the following year.¹⁴² Italian military prestige may have suffered after Adwa, but the defeat offered plenty of opportunities for the nation to reassert its international position even if it came at the loss of an important border town. Improved relations with Great Britain may not have whetted the appetite of Italian imperialists, but they did shore up di Rudini’s diplomatic influence at a time of external defeat and internal unrest. When the Fashoda Crisis occurred, Italy’s position was not as weak as Adwa may have implied.

French provocations in Africa attempted to take advantage of Italy’s misfortunes and Britain’s fears. Marchand’s expedition left the Congo in the summer of 1896 but took fourteen

¹⁴¹ Herbert Kitchener, Dispatch from the *London Gazette*, cited in J.B. Rye and Horace G. Groser, *Kitchener in his own Words* (New York, NY: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1917), 110.

¹⁴² Ministero Degli Affari Esteri (MDAE), Commissione per la Pubblicazione dei Documenti Diplomatici, *I Documenti Diplomatici Italiani*, Third Series (1896-1907) vol. 2 (1 May 1897 – 23 June 1898) (Rome, IT: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1958), 25. HathiTrust. Lewis, *Race to Fashoda*, 154.

months before it reached Fashoda in July 1898. By that time, di Rudini's regime had collapsed after the army massacred over four hundred protesters in Milan in May, and he was replaced by a reactionary General Luigi Pelloux as Prime Minister. Likewise, Jules Méline's regime in France also buckled that summer under renewed outcry over the infamous Dreyfus Affair.¹⁴³ The appointment of Théophile Delcassé as French Foreign minister promised a government that did not see the "intimate friendship of Italy with Britain [as] cause for distrust." This potential for a closer relationship must be understood in the context of the hostility both sides had for one another. Resentment still existed around the open sore of Tunisia. Beginning on 12 July 1898, Tommaso Carletti, the Italian Vice-Consul in Tunisia, began reporting ominous infringements on the rights of the nearly 35,000 Italian citizens living in the French protectorate. These actions included: visitors having to immediately report to the local police upon arrival, the harassment of workers, and non-French citizens having to present travel documents to move to different cities.¹⁴⁴ These provocations violated the agreement in September 1896 where di Rudini had, in the aftermath of Adwa, recognized France's protectorate over Tunisia.

September brought a significant turn of events that radically altered the political dynamic between France and Italy. Kitchener won a decisive victory over the Mahdists on September 2 at Omdurman and then moved with 1,500 men to Fashoda to oppose Marchand by September 19th. Meanwhile, an Italian anarchist (Luigi Luccheni) murdered Empress Elisabeth of Austria-Hungary on 15 September during a conference in Geneva, Switzerland. Suddenly, both nations found themselves ostracized by the other Great Powers. Canevaro was placed under immediate

¹⁴³ Saladino, *Italy from Unification*, 87. Norman Stone, *Europe Transformed: 1878-1919* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 262. Giuseppe Tornielli to Felice Canevaro, DDI, 6 July 1898, vol. 3, no. 3.

¹⁴⁴ Tornielli to Canevaro, DDI, 11 November 1898, no. 108.

pressure by German and Austro-Hungarian diplomats to support a conference condemning all forms of anarchism. Tornielli pushed Delcassé to “take all measures to stop anarchist propaganda that foreigners take on [Swiss] territory,” and support an anti-anarchism conference but the Frenchman proved hesitant to do so. The French cabinet did want to be seen cavorting with the monarchies of the Triple Alliance. However, Delcassé offered an olive branch that he would support such a conference if all the Great Powers agreed to a statement condemning anarchist agents in Switzerland.¹⁴⁵ While anarchism and the Fashoda Crisis do not appear to have a clear connection, Delcassé was banking on manipulating international support. Marchand did not have the men to conquer the Sudan especially if the British resisted. However, by reaching the Sudan first and planting a flag both literally and figuratively, the French reasoned they could then call for an international conference and demand concessions from the British in the African interior. With the realization that Marchand could not hold out against Kitchener and the British public demanding a complete French withdrawal from Fashoda, Delcassé saw this anarchism conference as an event that could rescue something out of the ongoing crisis. The British public, insulted by French efforts to invade their sphere of influence in Egypt, began calling loudly for war with France. Delcassé could only realistically reach out to the Italians. Italy was uniquely positioned for being militarily non-threatening, friendly to Britain, yet also allied to the great central monarchies of Europe. Such a position provided Rome with plenty of bargaining power at a time of intense weakness. When Francesco de Renzis, the ambassador to Britain, brought up the same issue to Lord Salisbury, the Englishman cagily dismissed the conference as “imparting too much importance to anarchism, whose members above all live off vanity!” However, Salisbury also “asked repeatedly if France is among the governments who favored a conference,”

¹⁴⁵ Tornielli to Canevaro, DDI, 22 September 1898, no. 78, 46-47.

clearly fearing what else the French might demand from such a high-profile international gathering.¹⁴⁶ Italy's role as a valid go-between on this trivial issue while Britain and France stood on the brink of all-out war demonstrated the potential for a future partnership between three western democracies with competing agendas, as well as their respective strengths: Great Britain's naval power and financial strength allowed it to make unilateral demands even against France; France's military strength was potent but overshadowed by the British at sea and the Germans on land; and Italy could play the role of a peripheral mediator in one or two regions.

France and Italy decisively exchanged diplomatic notes in 1902 that changed the spirit of the position of the Triple Alliance vis-à-vis the two Mediterranean powers¹⁴⁷. The resolution of diplomatic territorial differences between Italy and France, as well as between Britain and France, demonstrated a level of strategic flexibility largely absent from Germany's increasingly antagonistic *Weltpolitik* at the turn of the century. France and Britain thus earned the ability to focus their forces on the growing German threat, but Italy also earned the flexibility to shift between a set of competing alliance and power structures seemingly at will. This power was born out of the defeat at Adwa.

While the anti-anarchism conference did finally take place, it did not entirely work considering King Umberto I of Italy was assassinated by an anarchist two years later. The sordid history of Italian anarchists and the potential threat they offered would traumatize the United States in the coming decades as well with the Sacco and Vanzetti trial. The more pressing issue at Fashoda had another twist because the French government considered that "the record of the existence of an Anglo-Italian accord obliges Britain to defend the Italian coast in the case of

¹⁴⁶ Francesco De Renzis to Canevaro, 20 October 1898, DDI, vol. 3, no. 99.

¹⁴⁷ Sugnet, "The Relations of France and England with Italy," 116.

French aggression.”¹⁴⁸ The reduction in French provocations of the Italians during the Fashoda Incident had two important aspects: one, and most important, France did not have the political unity or military capability to fight Britain, which French leaders erroneously believed had some sort of defensive partnership with Italy. Second, war with Italy might involve Germany and Austria-Hungary against a diplomatically isolated France.

The Fashoda Crisis was between France and Britain, and resolved by those two countries. However, Italy’s military weakness after Adwa left the country in a unique position to both ask for increased assistance and be bullied in the international sphere. French internal unrest and diplomatic isolation forced Delcassé to make peace with Britain and the Italians at the same time or risk a repeat of the Franco-Prussian War, when the Great Powers stood silently by as the Germans crushed their adversaries. Italy never really threatened the British position in Egypt, but its continued presence in Eritrea served as some guarantee that no other European country would border southern Sudan and the start of the Nile River. Likewise, as the French encountered a hostile British army in Africa and public will in Europe, they needed to maintain peaceful relations with the Italians. Also, the French needed to placate the British to prevent a full continental conflagration that would see France almost totally isolated.

The myth of Italian military incompetence has become too deeply ingrained in the historiography of Italy’s role as a Great Power. However, losing a battle and losing international influence to achieve long-term strategic aims were not necessarily tied together. Too often the analysis goes something like this: the Italians are unrealistically ambitious, the Italians lose the battle, and thus the Italians are unimportant. There are a number of problems with this narrative. All major powers suffered serious reverses during the Age of Imperialism. For every Adwa there

¹⁴⁸ Tornielli to Canevaro, DDI, 27 October 1898, vol. 3, no. 59.

was an Isandlwana. For every Caporetto there was a Sedan or Königgrätz or Tannenberg. While it is generally preferable to win a battle, losing a battle can sometimes provide your country with more diplomatic clout. A weak Italian presence in Eritrea did not offer much in the way of negotiating position, but the threat of the Italians being evicted from Eritrea in exchange for a stronger power did have an effect on British foreign policy. Likewise, French hostility towards the Italians in Tunisia could continue unabated after Adwa but not when the Fashoda crisis threatened an international war. The goal here is not to add the Italians to the narrative of every major political crisis and say, “They were, too!” Instead, understanding the international context of Italy’s behavior before and during the Fashoda Incident offers a lens into why Italy drew closer to the Entente during the 1900s. Well could Camille Barrère, the French ambassador to Italy, relate the story that Italian ministers told him in 1908: “No one wants the [Triple Alliance] anymore. It is dead, and nothing. Can revive it ... It only remains for us to hurry armament in order to be ready, in two years, to leave the alliance.”¹⁴⁹ Although this account missed the mark by four years, the Italian renewal of the Triple Alliance proved to be merely a façade in the face of a growing partnership with France and Britain. Indeed, the Austro-Hungarian annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina in the same year served to intensify the territorial antagonism of Italian irredentists who coveted the Dalmatian Coast and beyond.¹⁵⁰ Adwa fundamentally transformed Franco-Italian relations into a period of gradual improvement from 1896 to 1915 when Italy forsook the Triple Alliance once and for all during World War I.

The Italian attempt to get more definitive commitments from the British foundered with the expiration of the Mediterranean Agreements. Salisbury rejected any effort to renew these

¹⁴⁹ Sugnet, “The Relations of France and England with Italy,” 45.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 40.

deals early. Di Rudini privately told Berlin and Vienna on 30 March 1896 that the peaceful ministerial declarations with Britain, signed in the wake of the creation of the Triple Alliance, remained valid.¹⁵¹ In other words, Italy remained committed to a policy where the defensive nature of the alliance could never involve a war with Great Britain. This appeal must be understood in the context of di Rudini's position after Adwa. He had already reached out for British aid and the Germans had done so for him as well. Circulating such a diplomatic note early on in his tenure as prime minister indicated a more passive foreign policy than that of Crispi.

The international situation after 1896 also increased pressure on the Italian government. The British had originally encouraged Italian expansion in Africa as a means of containing French access to the Nile River.¹⁵² These two powers ultimately resolved their differences and went on to partition much of central Africa as a result. All the major European powers except Italy – and even some of the smaller ones like Belgium and Portugal – had something substantial to show from the Scramble for Africa. To add to the humiliation of Adwa, the Italians now abandoned their aspirations to Tunisia when they acknowledged the French protectorate there on 30 September 1896.¹⁵³ Italy's value to the Triple Alliance with Germany and Austria-Hungary also seemed dubious. If it could not defeat an Ethiopian army, then Italy might not provide much value in a potential continental conflict with the Franco-Russian alliance. Additionally, Italy's relationship with Austria-Hungary remained icy at best: the Hapsburgs had, after all, ruled much of northern Italy for centuries and still controlled the coveted Trieste and Trentino regions.

¹⁵¹ Sugnet, "The Relations of France and England with Italy," 9.

¹⁵² John Gooch, *Army, State and Society in Italy, 1870-1915* (London, UK: MacMillan Press Limited, 1989), 74-75.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 97.

Although Italy's weaknesses were galling, it still possessed a large military presence in a critically important peninsula that could affect strategic operations in the Mediterranean and southern Europe. Italy just needed to reform its military in order to make itself a viable ally once again.

The Italian government recalibrated and reduced the scope of its foreign policy aims in the aftermath of the disaster at Adwa. Humiliation in Tunisia and Ethiopia seemed to indicate the weakness of the Italian position as a Great Power. While Italy could not become immediately more militarily powerful, the nation could still achieve its policy aims. The British feared French intervention and a possible Sudanese-Ethiopian alliance amid the Italian power vacuum. As a result, the Italians could successfully request British assistance in the form of Kitchener's campaign. Likewise, di Rudinì and his cabinet worked with forces in Africa to negotiate a peace that ensured the antebellum status quo. These agreements also allowed the Italians to maintain some dignity by staging a deliberate withdrawal from Kassala instead of another humiliating surrender. Finally, the Italians humbled themselves and agreed to cooperate with the French after over a decade of hostile relations. These actions after Adwa strengthened the Italian economy and, more importantly, began the slow drift of Italy away from the Triple Alliance. Nevertheless, the humiliation at Adwa convinced successive governments of the need for a period of significant military reform for a Great Power still seeking some level of imperial control outside of Europe.

Chapter 4 - Adwa and Italian Reforms (1896-1914)

Internal Turmoil

The humiliation at Adwa forced a crisis of identity in a country challenged by enormous social and political change. As a result, the military system embarked on a fifteen-year period of reform from 1896 to 1911 to reestablish faith in the military's capacity for launching offensives to acquire territory. A successful expedition would also restore domestic and external confidence in the Italian government. Of course, this internal arms race occurred at a time of massive rearmament from all the major Great Powers.¹ Nevertheless, significant internal political and social issues influenced how land, naval, and aerial military services all adapted to a new world of apparent Italian weakness in the wake of Adwa. These reforms enhanced Italy's military power and helped bring Europe closer to the brink of World War I. Therefore, the defeat at Adwa enabled a long period of reform that allowed the nation to achieve more ambitious policy aims by 1911.

Internal issues continuously hampered the Kingdom of Italy. The economic problems were hampered by the large reliance on agricultural labor. By 1914, 57% of the population still worked in agriculture as opposed to industrial production.² That number was significantly higher before the turn of the century and made the nation more vulnerable to economic shocks. A series of poor harvests and augmented political consciousness led to strikes in major northern cities by

¹ John H. Maurer, "Arms Control and the Anglo-German Naval Race before World War I: Lessons for Today?" *Political Science Quarterly* 112, no. 2 (1997): 285–286. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2657942>.

² Paolo Malanima, "Energy Consumption in England and Italy, 1560-1913. Two Pathways toward Energy Transition: Energy Consumption in Italy and England," *The Economic History Review* 69 (2015): 95. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ehr.12109>.

May 1898.³ The government sent the army into Milan to suppress the strikes, killing or wounding nearly four hundred civilians.⁴ Some soldiers saw this slaughter as an opportunity to wipe out the stain of Adwa by suppressing dissidents at home and returning the army to its rightful place of prestige.⁵ However, martial law also tied the continuing stability of the government to the employment of the army in suppressing internal dissension. Di Rudini's government responded too harshly to these strikes and subsequent riots. Eventually, King Umberto I asked General Luigi Pelloux, a former Minister of War, to lead a new government in 1898. Paradoxically, the army that had been so badly embarrassed in Africa now had a general in charge of handling the national fallout of that disaster. Pelloux eventually turned towards more reactionary measures against socialist dissidents to quell rising dissent. The center-right Liberal Constitutional Party supported the repression of socialist agitation with a series of "Exceptional Laws" that prohibited strikes by public employees and rioting during public assemblies.⁶ Although these reactionary measures worked in restoring order, they forced the resignation of the party and ushered in a new liberal government dominated by Giovanni Giolitti.⁷ The assassination of King Umberto himself on 29 July 1900 proved another indicator of political turmoil. Revolving-door governments and riot-suppression did nothing to allay the severe social problems affecting the country. This foreign setback combined with a rise in socialist unrest

³ Richard Drake, *Byzantium for Rome: The Politics of Nostalgia in Umbertian Italy: 1878-1900* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 213-214.

⁴ Saladino, *Italy from Unification*, 87. Stone, *Europe Transformed*, 262.

⁵ Geoffrey A. Haywood, *Failure of a Dream: Sidney Sonnino and the Rise and Fall of Liberal Italy 1847-1922* (Florence, IT: Leo S. Oslchki Editore, 1999), 230-231.

⁶ Saladino, *Italy from Unification*, 89-90. Giolitti, *Memoirs*, 128-129.

⁷ Saladino, *Italy from Unification*, 94-95. Giolitti, *Memoirs*, 140, 158.

among the working class to constantly plague the nation in the late 1890s.⁸ Thus, the disastrous Ethiopian Campaign took place at the same time as Italy's struggle to assure its own political and social stability.

The poverty of the Italian industrial and agricultural workers, particularly in the South, encouraged migration to other countries. In 1869, 22,201 emigrants left the newly unified nation.⁹ However, by 1901 that annual rate jumped to 278,176 individuals, with the vast majority coming from the South.¹⁰ Several Italian soldiers captured during the Ethiopian campaign expressed a desire to emigrate because of their poor living conditions while fighting in Africa.¹¹ Indeed, such individuals had little opportunity for economic advancement even once they returned home. In addition, the annual emigration of hundreds of thousands of poor Italians to the United States created significant gaps in the worker population.¹² Emigration further drained the manpower available for industry, agriculture, and the military even if the emigrants provided a useful source of income with the money they sent back to their families.¹³ Additional social problems, present long before the Ethiopian campaign, stemmed from the ability of prosperous, educated northerners to pay their way out of conscripted service, much to the chagrin of the

⁸ Giolitti, *Memoirs of My Life*, 125-126. Sidney C. Sonnino, *La Politica Interna: Discorso Pronunziato dal Deputato Sidney Sonnino nella Tornata del 19 Giugno 1901* (Rome, IT: G. Bertero, 1901), 9. Labanca, *In Marcio verso Adua*, 374. Christopher Seton-Watson, *Italy from Liberalism to Fascism: 1870-1925* (London, UK: Methuen and Co Ltd, 1967), 319.

⁹ Grazia Dore, "Some Social and Historical Aspects of Italian Emigration to America," *Journal of Social History* 2, no. 2 (1968): 98. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3786745>.

¹⁰ Ibid., 117.

¹¹ Francis McCullagh, *Italy's War for a Desert; Being Some Experiences of a War Correspondent with the Italians in Tripoli* (Chicago, IL: F.G. Browne, 1913), 6.

¹² Bosworth, *Italy, the Least of the Great Powers*, 4. Tommaso Tittoni, *Italy's Foreign and Colonial Policy*, ed. Baron Bernardo Quaranta di San Severino (New York, NY: E.P. Dutton and Company, 1915), 162-163.

¹³ Saladino, *Italy from Unification*, 317. Seton-Watson, *Italy from Liberalism to Fascism*, 88, 188.

working poor. Employment in the army did not appeal to poor, working class Italians who feared campaigning, fighting, and dying against hordes of African troops hundreds of miles from home. In this case, although Adwa represented the performance of a small portion of the army, the defeat loomed large in the memory of average citizens who feared being conscripted to fight overseas. While “the nation remembers Adwa,” it also had no desire to experience such a defeat ever again.¹⁴ Moving to the United States, although challenging, offered a surer means of success for the poor than military service with the apparently incompetent army.

Army Reforms

Political turmoil went along with social unrest to force changes in the Army. In a country of thirty million people, the law required nearly two million males to serve in the Territorial Militia for potential conscription in times of war.¹⁵ These laws reduced the popularity of military service among the general public.¹⁶ The dreams of a vast Mediterranean or African empire remained the province of a few elite individuals variably in charge of foreign policy. The collapse of the Crispi government in March 1896 forced radical reforms from Minister of War General Cesare Ricotti, who wanted to reduce the army organizational structure by one-quarter of its then-current size from twelve corps to eight.¹⁷ A smaller army eased budgetary constraints, especially when those same constraints had made it difficult to sustain overseas adventures. A smaller force also received more training and better equipment for fewer elite troops, particularly because nearly two-thirds of all potential conscripts received no military training.¹⁸ King

¹⁴ Lionello de Benedetti, *Le Spese Militari e gli Ordinamenti per L'Esercito* (Naples, IT: Pierre e Veraldi, 1899), 15.

¹⁵ Charles Samuel Jerram, *The Armies of the World* (New York, NY: New Amsterdam Book Co., 1900), 189.

¹⁶ Whittam, *Politics of the Italian Army*, 151.

¹⁷ Saladino, *Italy from Unification*, 137-138.

¹⁸ Jerram, *The Armies of the World*, 189-190.

Umberto I, both the head of state and also the nominal commander of the armed forces, successfully opposed this measure because he believed it reduced the prestige of the military and the state already badly damaged by the failed Ethiopian campaign.¹⁹ This argument bore remarkable similarities to Baldissera's insistence on retaining the Kassala garrison at a time of intense weakness and pressure. Significantly reducing the army's size might help its quality, but would send a disastrous signal to the other European nations about Italy's status as a Great Power.

The defeat did not limit the army's desire to restore its own honor. Instead, the king turned to General Pelloux in the hope he could provide a more palatable style of reform. Pelloux embarked on a variety of improvements beginning with a series of ordinances in 1897 that set a fixed age of retirement and reorganized mobilization districts based on regional affiliation.²⁰ The age requirement prevented the retention of aging generals far past their prime and ultimately forced nearly 635 officers out of the army by 1910.²¹ Notably, the law would not have prevented Baratieri, ten years under the mandatory age when he lost at Adwa, from having commanded there; instead, these reforms aimed at using the battle's fallout to make the entire Italian command structure younger and more energetic. Although only a small colonial expedition had been defeated at Adwa, the entire Italian Army felt the effects of the defeat. The new mobilization plan allowed for locally stationed army corps to bring in regional draftees and depart for any threatened sector – either the border with France or Austria-Hungary – as opposed

¹⁹ Saladino, *Italy from Unification*, 185. Seton-Watson, *Italy from Liberalism to Fascism*, 184-185.

²⁰ Ministero Della Guerra, *L'Esercito Italiano Nella Grande Guerra (1915-1918)*, vol. 1, "Le Forze Belligeranti," (Rome, IT: Provvditorato Generale dello Stato Libreria, 1927), 7.

²¹ Gooch, *Army, State, and Society in Italy*, 98.

to the peacetime process of national recruitment and mobilization that spread recruits throughout the country.²²

However, the steady surge in military spending upset the more liberal members of the government who believed that the money could have been better spent on the nation's pressing domestic concerns. When Giustino Fortunato admonished the Chamber of Deputies in 1901 for allowing Italy to become "the most impoverished of all modern nations," he pointed out the wasteful expenditures in Africa "before the tragic hour had played" at Adwa.²³ The battle never remained far outside of the collective memory of either the public or the government. Even in a government increasingly dominated by liberals like Giolitti, Italy still had to increase its expenditures steadily to deal with the threat of an international arms race on the continent.

While Adwa played a part in the evolution of the Italian military, the international arms race also spurred technological and budgetary changes. The increase in European military expenses forced the Italian government to expand the army's budget from 284 million *lire* in 1896 to 564 million *lire* in 1911.²⁴ A larger budget allowed the addition of select elite units on a yearly basis to improve the Italian Army's capacity for field operations.²⁵ These additions normally included elite *Alpini* mountain infantry or artillery regiments to augment the army's firepower. One of the fiscal benefits of the defeat at Adwa included the reduction of colonial expenses in Eritrea, especially after the peace treaty with Ethiopia in 1897. The governor of Eritrea would eventually be a civilian in charge of all policy and the local commander controlled

²² Ibid., 66,101

²³ Fortunato Giustino, *Politica Militare: Discorsi alla Camera dei Deputati* (Rome, IT: Societa Editrice Laziale, 1901), 65, 120.

²⁴ Jerram, *The Armies of the World*, 203. Ministero Della Guerra, *L'Esercito Italiano Nella Grande Guerra*, 18-19.

²⁵ Ministero Della Guerra, *L'Esercito Italiano Nella Grande Guerra*, 14.

only military operations with barely 7,000 soldiers, most of whom were Eritreans.²⁶ This arrangement ensured that the colonial forces lived within their means and posed no threat to Menelik's forces. A more sustainable alternative kept the peace until the Italians could seek to expand their African sphere of influence once again.

A period of Italian rearmament helped maintain the perception of national greatness at a time of diplomatic weakness. Such demonstrations allowed Italy to appear strong to Germany, to counter Austro-Hungarian naval rearmament, and to limit French ambitions in and outside of Europe.²⁷ The creation of a Supreme Commission for the Defense in 1899 provided an organization to coordinate land and naval forces for the defense of the country.²⁸ Subsequent summer joint maneuvers meant that the staffs of both the army and navy were better acquainted with their counterparts, which facilitated some future planning. Although initially designed as a defensive command structure, the commission provided enormous planning experience for future offensive campaigns.

The defeat at Adwa also affected junior officers who were the future of the army. In 1906, the war college (Scuola d'Applicazione delle Armi di Artiglieria e Genio) at Turin, which had lost twenty-two of its graduates at Adwa, opened up a new curriculum on military sustenance and the administration of the commissary in order to avoid the logistical

²⁶ J. S. Herron, *Colonial Army Systems of the Netherlands, Great Britain, France, Germany, Portugal, Italy, and Belgium* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1901), 128,130. Alberto Aquarone, *Dopo Adua: Politica e Amministrazione Coloniale*, ed. Ludovica de Courten (Rome, IT: Ministero per i beni Culturali e Ambientali, 1989), 163-165.

²⁷ K. Hendrickson, "We Are Now a Mediterranean Power," abstract.

²⁸ Ministero Della Guerra, *L'Esercito Italiano Nella Grande Guerra*, vol. 1, 10. Gooch, *Army, State, and Society in Italy*, 110-111.

complications that had plagued Baratieri in Africa.²⁹ The unrest in Italy after Adwa also demonstrated the need to tie the army closer to the politics of the Italian government. In 1908, the Army Chief of Staff General Alberto Pollio supported reducing the term of conscription requirement from three years to two, which provided training for a larger number of people while reducing the burden of military service on the average citizen.³⁰ Efforts to support new conscripts were also affected by politics with the Electoral Reform Bill of 1911, which allowed all adult males to vote in elections.³¹ Unlike the soldiers at Adwa, who had felt abandoned by their government in the wake of the disaster, new Italians conscripts received more support from their politicians.

Despite these impressive efforts, army reforms were mandated from the highest levels of the Italian government and often failed to incorporate advice from junior officers. The stain of Adwa and slow promotion rates meant that the army as a professional career did not appeal to young, educated men. Junior officers during the early 1900s, when the army was at its lowest ebb, pushed for reforms that they believed were urgently needed. In 1903, Captain Fabio Ranzi began publishing a journal, *Pensiero Militare*, that advocated for faster promotion rates and better treatment of younger soldiers.³² Ranzi especially criticized senior generals and politicians who blamed the army's morale problems on dissident socialist agitators consisting of young officers and non-commissioned officers. Painting the army as an organization that "debated its uncomfortable morale" and "oscillated between brokenness and exasperation," Ranzi had no

²⁹ Rinaldo Costanzo, *La Scuola di Guerra dal 1867 al 1911* (Turin, IT: Tip. Olivero, 1911), 38-39, 56.

³⁰ Ministero Della Guerra, *L'Esercito Italiano Nella Grande Guerra*, vol. 1, 10.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 154.

³² David G. Herrmann, *The Arming of Europe and the Making of the First World War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 103.

patience for official journals like the *Rivista Militare Italiana* and *L'Esercito Italiano* that he perceived as nothing but mouthpieces for an army hierarchy not truly committed to reform.³³ The government soon court-martialed Ranzi to prevent the rise of ambitious 'Young Turks' with ideas of taking over the country.³⁴ National reforms could only go so far without risking the rise of internal divisions as would happen in the aftermath of World War I and another catastrophic defeat at Caporetto.

The army also suffered from the steadily declining participation of civilians in annual refresher training. Mobilization of conscripted civilians was a critical factor in national warfare during the industrial era. The participation of reservists and annual draft classes in this training dropped from seventy percent in 1896 to a low of forty-two percent in 1912.³⁵ Both the reduced numbers of trainees and the inability of the government to enforce mandatory training prevented the army from reaching peak efficiency in training its recruits. These examples indicate that the Italian army, despite some attempts at reform, consistently struggled with maintaining a force capable of fighting its potential continental enemies. Some of the reforms worked, but the nation's internal divisions prevented them from being fully implemented.

Adwa sparked reforms but it did not create them on its own. The military also benefited from new technology and doctrine as all of Europe entered into an arms race during the first decade of the twentieth century. However, when young Italian officers studied the military history of their country or more experienced generals developed plans for the future, they could not escape the reality that the nation's most recent expedition had been a disastrous one. No

³³ Fabio Ranzi, *Per il Morale dell'Esercito* (Rome, IT: Editore Il Pensiero Militare, 1906), 3, 14.

³⁴ Herrmann, *Arming of Europe*, 103.

³⁵ Ministero Della Guerra, *L'Esercito Italiano Nella Grande Guerra*, vol. 1, 21.

matter how impressive the Italian Army's reforms, and they only achieved part of their intended goal in any case, it could not on its own overcome the humiliation of Adwa. Nevertheless, by 1911 the standing army reached a respectable strength of 264,000 soldiers and was capable of limited offensive action again.³⁶ Although reforms usually led to strategic and organizational changes, some glaring tactical issues remained. Particularly worrisome was the failure of reconnaissance at Adwa and the overreliance on Eritrean scouts for intelligence. A few years after Adwa, a new technology appeared that had the potential to redress some of this tactical weakness.

The Power of the Airplane

Italian military reformers envisioned the potential that aviation technology could provide in redressing some of the army's battlefield deficiencies. Since the late nineteenth century, European and American aircraft enthusiasts had worked tirelessly to develop airplanes that could fly on their own power. France, still lamenting its defeat against the newly formed German Empire in the Franco-Prussian War, launched the first dirigible, *La France*, in 1884.³⁷ The French hoped that airpower could provide a technical advantage in any future war against a much more populous Germany. Subsequently, the French became the premier European power in terms of developing aviation technology. This belief that airpower could compensate for weakness on the ground spread to Italy as well. When the Wright brothers flew the first powered aircraft on 14 December 1903 at Kitty Hawk, they became celebrities and toured Europe to

³⁶ Ministero Della Guerra, *L'Esercito Italiano Nella Grande Guerra*, vol. 1, 29. Herrmann, *Arming of Europe*, 206-207.

³⁷ Paolo Ferrari, *La Grande Guerra Aerea: 1915-1918* (Valdagno, IT: Edizioni Gino Rossato, 1994), 17.

promote their airplane designs.³⁸ Wilbur Wright visited Rome in April 1909 and instructed two young officers, naval Lieutenant Mario Calderara and army Lieutenant Umberto Savoia, on the nuances of aviation.³⁹ The selection of both a soldier and a sailor for this program continued the post-Adwa legacy of increased inter-service coordination.

The technical advances in aviation had a significant effect on military doctrine at the time. For France, airpower provided a means of balancing the Germany Army's numerical superiority. Italy faced this same weakness when compared to its primary rivals, France and Austria-Hungary. However, airpower also provided a way for the Italian army to improve its tactics on the battlefield. Specifically, army doctrine utilized aircraft to photograph and bombard enemy positions.⁴⁰ Aerial reconnaissance could improve the army's ability to conduct effective reconnaissance. By resolving the reconnaissance challenge, air power provided the leverage to resume overseas expeditions.

Major Giulio Douhet, who became a preeminent airpower theorist after World War I, believed that electrical engineering could help spearhead Italy into the modern age. A technocrat by nature, Douhet in 1905 argued for the larger role of motorization in society and the military.⁴¹

³⁸ Lawrence Goldstone, *Birdmen: The Wright Brothers, Glenn Curtiss, and the Battle to Control the Skies* (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 2014), 79-80. Details of the flight published by the Wright Brothers in "Mechanical Flight," *Science, New Series*, no. 588 (April 6, 1906): 23, JSTOR.

³⁹ Tom D. Crouch and Peter L. Jakab, *The Wright Brothers and the Invention of the Aerial Age* (Washington, D.C., Maryland: Smithsonian Institution, 2003), 175. Umberto Savoia went on to found the *Società Idrovolanti Alta Italia* (SIAI), which became the Savoia-Marchetti company, one of the most famous Italian aircraft manufacturers in the post-World War I era.

⁴⁰ Ferrari, *La Grande Guerra Aerea*, 17.

⁴¹ Giulio Douhet, "Cenno Sommario Sullo Stato Attuale dell' Elettrotecnica; Serie di Conferenze Tenute agli Ufficiali del Presidio di Genova nell' Inverno 1903-1904," 111. Frank J. Cappelluti, "The Life and Thought of Giulio Douhet," Ph.D. diss., (Rutgers University, 1967), 9-10.

While impressed by the potential of technology to balance Italy's other weaknesses, Douhet's theories reflected the reality that half of the founding members of the first Italian air club were soldiers. The same technical journal that announced the creation of an Italian Aeronautical Society in 1903 also lamented the "disgraceful campaign of Africa" for causing more commercial and political crises in the country.⁴² Ultimately, Douhet came to believe that airpower provided Italy with a potent weapon and he began writing in 1909 of the potential strategic benefits of a large air force.⁴³ He believed that controlling the skies above another country would prove to be crucial in the next conflict. The promise that the aerial revolution held for the Italians was clearly seen at the 1909 air race in Brescia.⁴⁴ Hundreds of thousands of citizens, including the new king, Vittorio Emanuele III, came out to watch dozens of French and American planes compete in time trials. These events underscored both the Italian belief in the potential of the airplane and the weakness of the Italian industrial state – French and American planes dominated the races.⁴⁵

The concept of a large, independent air force braved many challenges because Italy did not have the industrial capacity to build and sustain it. Individual pioneers like Giovanni Caproni had the money to fund both their own aerial societies and manufacturing plants, but they concentrated mainly on developing recreational civilian planes.⁴⁶ The few military planes

⁴² D. Ruggeri, "Rivista Tecnica: L'Azienda delle Strade Ferrate Italiane dalla sua Origine a Tutto il 1900," *Annali della Societa Degli Ingegneri e Degli Architetti Italiani*, no. 51 (20 December 1903): 1217-1218.

⁴³ Giulio Douhet, "I Problemi dell Aeronavigazione," *La Preparazione* (1909), quoted this article in his later book *The Command of the Air*, ed. United States Air Force Warrior Studies (Washington, D.C., Maryland: Office of Air Force History, 1983), 27-28.

⁴⁴ Goldstone, *Birdmen*, 163.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Rob Mulder, "The Civilian Transport Aircraft of Caproni: 1918-1939," http://www.europeanairlines.no/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/The_civil_aircraft_of_Caproni.pdf.

available belonged to the artillery branch of the Italian army and not to an independent branch with its own leadership. The army intended for aircraft to be used primarily on reconnaissance missions.⁴⁷ Planes were not employed in a more direct role in combat because ‘aerial bombing’ at the time consisted of a pilot hand dropping grenades from his own cockpit, hardly a precise method of attacking enemy positions. Italy created an aviation school in 1910 and provided a 10 million *lire* grant for aircraft production that laid the groundwork for the construction of Italian-made combat aircraft.⁴⁸ However, the weakness of the Italian aircraft industry meant that by 1911, Italian pilots were mostly flying French planes, nine of which were earmarked for the Libyan campaign.⁴⁹ Until Italian production of fixed-wing aircraft met sustainable levels, dirigibles were employed to provide additional aerial support. The navy established a telephonically-linked dirigible in October 1907 to work with the cruiser *Elba* in mine-spotting off the Italian coast.⁵⁰ The brig *Cavalmarino* towed a similar dirigible to assist in coordinating targeting for Italian battleships.⁵¹ Lighter-than-air designs provided a much cheaper alternative, especially when there was little chance of them being shot down in an African campaign.

Adwa forced the Italians to reconsider their potential military options for reform.

Distasteful changes that included mandatory retirement and a potential reduction in army size all

⁴⁷ Richard Hallion, *Strike from the Sky: The History of Battlefield Air Attack: 1911-19145*, Smithsonian History of Aviation Series (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), 11.

⁴⁸ Tom D. Crouch, *Wings: A History of Aviation from Kites to the Space Age* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company, 2003), 135. Michael Paris, “The First Air Wars: North Africa and the Balkans,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 26, no. 1 (January 1991): 98, JSTOR. Whittam, *Politics of the Italian Army*, 161.

⁴⁹ Hallion, *Strike from the Sky*, 11. Andrea Ungari, “The Italian Air Force from the Eve of the Libyan Conflict to the First World War,” *War in History* 17, no. 4 (2010): 409-411. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26070820>.

⁵⁰ Vincent P. O’Hara, W. David Dickson, and Richard Worth, *To Crown the Waves: The Great Navies of the First World War* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2013), 204.

⁵¹ Ibid.

upset the conservative military establishment. However, airpower offered a surer means for reorganization while also helping to recapture the martial imagination of the Italian public. By 1911, Italy's nascent air force included a small variety of aircraft designed primarily for reconnaissance purposes and a larger number of lighter-than-air dirigibles. These weapons provided a limited but important increase in the army's ability to find and destroy enemy forces on the battlefield. Airpower also contributed to the overall strategic mobility of the Italian military by helping to coordinate different branches together against a common foe.

Unfortunately, the persistent shortage of planes consistently hampered these ambitious goals.

The Italians understood the defects of their new arsenal, yet they believed it was potent enough in small quantities to help fight a limited conflict. With army and aerial reforms well under way, the navy was the last branch needing an overhaul before the Italian military felt comfortable going to war again. Unfortunately, the limitations of the industrial complex in the country meant that the nation had only 60 viable planes by 1915, and these mainly of foreign production.⁵² The Italians thus had enough airpower to fight more effectively against a weaker Ottoman Empire in a distance province like Libya. As long as Italian ambitions remained limited and reasonable, the nation could employ military strategies and technologies to achieve its policy aims. Of course, the available number of planes greatly increased during World War I, but the reality was that limited airpower means could only achieve limited ends.⁵³ A prolonged period of peace and increased Italian negotiating power led the country's leaders to an unrealistic assessment of their own capabilities.

⁵² "An Official History: Italian Air Force," *Aerospace Historian* 20, no. 4 (1973): 178–179.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/44522821>.

⁵³ James J. Sadkovich, "The Development of the Italian Air Force Prior to World War II," *Military Affairs* 51, no. 3 (1987): 128–129. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1987515>.

Mare Nostrum and Naval Reforms

The Italian Royal Navy had previously undergone a period of decline and reform during the nineteenth century. An embarrassing defeat in 1866 at Lissa to a much smaller Austrian fleet resulted in the court-martialing of senior naval commanders.⁵⁴ Although the Italians still maintained naval control of the Adriatic, the humiliating defeat could only be succored by Prussia's victory on land during the Seven Weeks' War. The Battle of Lissa led to a decade of decline in new warship construction, but from 1873 to 1890 key naval personnel helped to design some of the most innovative ships in the world. Navy Minister Admiral Simone de Saint Bon and his chief engineer, Benedetto Brin, organized the first test between iron and steel armor when they built the *Duilio* in 1876.⁵⁵ The revolutionary design of the *Duilio* also included a central-citadel for the superstructure that saved space and allowed for heavier armor and guns.⁵⁶ The need for creative designs in Italian ships resulted from budgetary restrictions and resource shortages. The Italians therefore relied on quality over quantity in planning a war against their

⁵⁴ O'Hara, Dickson, and Worth, *To Crown the Waves*, 178. Note that in 1866, Austria was still one unified empire and did not split into the dual monarchy of Austria-Hungary until the following year (after their defeat in the Austro-Prussian War). Therefore, while most of this article references Austria-Hungary, the proper name for the fleet that fought at Lissa would be the Austrian one only. For a study of Austria-Hungary's naval responses to Italian modernization and strategy, see Charles W. Koburger, Jr. *The Central Powers in the Adriatic, 1914-1918: War in a Narrow Sea* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2001).

⁵⁵ Marco Rimaneli, "The 'Least of the Powers': Italy's Foreign, Security and Naval Policy in the Quest for Mediterranean Preeminence, 1860s-1989," Ph.D. diss., (John Hopkins University, 1990), 248, 252. David K. Brown, *Warrior to Dreadnought* (London, UK, Chatham Publishing, 1997), 77.

⁵⁶ Bernard Ireland and Eric Grove, *Jane's War at Sea: 1897-1997* (London, UK: Harper Collins Publishers, 1997), 38. Aldo F. Ordovini, Fulvio Petronio, and David Sullivan, "Capital Ships of the Italian Royal Navy, 1860-1918: Part 3: Pre-Dreadnought Battleships," *Warship International* 53, no. 4 (2016): 303. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44894450>.

two most likely naval opponents: France in the western Mediterranean and Austria-Hungary in the Adriatic Sea.

The defeat at Adwa, like the one at Lissa, put a temporary halt to Italian shipbuilding ambitions. At least the Italian Army took most of the blame for the disaster in Ethiopia.⁵⁷ This failure convinced the government of the necessity to improve the merchant marine, particularly in the method of supplying troops overseas. The Regia Marina's reforms thus blended unique naval theories based on emerging innovative designs, foreign assistance in shipbuilding, and government management of the merchant fleet. The fallout from Adwa came at a bad time for the navy's reform program. Saint Bon had died in 1892 and Brin passed away shortly thereafter in 1898. Naval officers had no reluctance in criticizing the army for its defeat but, as Italians, they also resented being associated with an incompetent military establishment. Some sailors refused to admit defeat even after Adwa. Popular naval journals called for the creation of an all-volunteer corps of 10,000 experienced soldiers to restore the situation in Africa.⁵⁸ However, the more experienced architects of the fleet understood that any continuation of the Ethiopian war offered little chance of restoring Italy's prestige. Brin, in a speech in 1897, wanted to remember the mistakes at Adwa "to avoid any new ones" and argued that the peace with Menelik offered the "most secure measure to preserve our finances." He feared that continuing the war in Ethiopia could drag on like the British conflicts with the Afghans or the Boers, and at an annual drain of 20 million *lire*, for little potential benefit.⁵⁹ The money wasted on colonial ventures

⁵⁷ Brian R. Sullivan, "A Fleet in Being: The Rise and Fall of Italian Sea Power, 1861-1943," *The International History Review* 10, no. 1 (1988): 111-112. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40107091>.

⁵⁸ Carlo Grillo, "Milizia Coloniale," *Rivista Marittima* (April-June 1896): 457-458.

⁵⁹ Benedetto Brin, *Discorso Pronunciato da Benedetto Brin, Ministro della Marina, a Torino il 17 Marzo 1897* (Rome, IT: Tipografia del Ministero degli Affari Esteri, 1897), 7, 9, 11-12.

could be better spent on training and on building new capital ships. After all, the war had prevented the launching of any significant ships for nearly an entire year. The need for money had also resulted in two already completed *Garibaldi*-class armored cruisers being sold to Spain and Argentina in 1896.⁶⁰ Not even training exercises could escape the malaise caused by Adwa.

That the navy even undertook its training regimen in 1896 highlighted many of the strengths and weaknesses of the fleet. The money for the training had already been budgeted and the navy still had to keep in fighting shape. However, the maneuvers themselves, fought out in the straits of the Tyrrhenian Sea, produced mixed results. Rear Admiral Carlo de Amezaga, the head of the Italian Royal Naval Reserve and an observer of the drills, produced a series of conclusions given the ‘exigencies of the political situation’ after the Ethiopian campaign. He called for an increase in annual recruits, the construction of more coaling ships to keep the fleet fueled, and for the improvement of communication via semaphore telegraphs along the lengthy Italian coastline.⁶¹ The outcomes of this exercise mirrored that of previous years when the attacking fleet always outflanked the defensive squadrons tied down to protecting sea lanes. British correspondents also criticized the Italian prioritization of shore bombardment as a decidedly ‘continental’ approach to naval warfare, unlike Britain’s supposedly superior ‘Nelsonian’ approach that involved always maintaining contact with the enemy fleet until it was destroyed.⁶² The defeat at Adwa led to a temporary reduction not only of Italy’s military budget,

⁶⁰ E. Weyl, “Progress of Foreign Navies,” in *The Naval Annual 1897*, ed. Thomas A. Brassey (Portsmouth, UK: J. Griffin and Co., 1897), 33-34.

⁶¹ Carlo de Amezaga, cited by James R. Thursfield’s “Naval Manoeuvres in 1896,” in *The Naval Annual 1896*, ed. Thomas A. Brassey (Portsmouth, UK: J. Griffin and Co., 1896), 179-180.

⁶² Thursfield, “Naval Manoeuvres in 1896,” 185. The “Nelsonian” reference is to that of Horatio Nelson, Britain’s most famous naval hero, who successfully destroyed several different enemy fleets in surface actions during the Napoleonic Wars.

but also on the scope of its own naval strategy as it focused more on fighting decisive open-sea battles.

European naval doctrine at the end of the nineteenth century sought to maintain and expand overseas empires. The most influential naval theoretician of that time, Captain Alfred Mahan, argued that overseas colonies and commerce created naval superpowers like the Roman and British Empires.⁶³ Additionally, intermediate refueling and resupply outposts allowed navies to extend their nations' interests further from home.⁶⁴ These concepts fed each other: the need for more colonies and supply outposts pushed the boundaries of emerging mercantile empires. A latecomer to colonization like Italy could occupy smaller strips of coastal land but still expand its trade interests to the Far East. Italian Eritrea, although sandwiched between French Somaliland and the British Sudan, still fulfilled Mahan's ideal of poor outposts as stepping stones to larger colonies. However, Italy's attempts to solidify its presence in Africa suffered a setback at Adwa, in part because of the navy's inability to supply the army adequately during the campaign. Italian theorists of the early twentieth century understood that the legacy of Adwa had greatly reduced the scope of naval strategy to limited operations in the Mediterranean.

Rather than risk the reformed Italian legions in distant campaigns with overextended supply lines, the Italians contested only 'their sea' against potential enemies like France and Austria-Hungary. Planners prepared for combat largely in the central Mediterranean because both the western (Gibraltar) and eastern (Suez) approaches were controlled by a British Royal Navy that dwarfed the Regia Marina. Therefore, Italian strategy devolved to fighting only in its

⁶³ Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, and Company, 1894), 28.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

neighboring seas rather than challenging Britain or France for oceanic supremacy.⁶⁵

Additionally, a weak industrial base meant that the Italians could not build an enormous fleet to challenge even those powers in the Mediterranean. Colonel Vittorio Cuniberti, an Italian naval engineer and theorist, believed that a modern fleet needed a new type of warship to dominate the seas.⁶⁶ Writing three years before the launching of HMS *Dreadnought*, he argued that instead of building ships with varying calibers of guns, Italy should build a naval juggernaut with twelve twelve-inch guns, twelve-inch armor plating, and that was capable of making twenty-two knots.⁶⁷ These “all-big-gun ships” fought by concentrating their firepower on individual ships, destroying them, and then moving on to the next target.⁶⁸ In theory, a relatively weak power could build just a few ships and still defeat a larger but qualitatively inferior force. Cuniberti’s views borrowed directly from Mahan’s vision of capital ships dominating the sea.⁶⁹ With the enemy fleet shattered, its colonies became vulnerable to an Italian nation starved for an overseas empire. As the European empires steadily grew stronger and the available list of places to colonize decreased, Italy would have to fight another Great Power in order to capture valuable overseas provinces and wipe out the stain of Adwa. Although most of these powers were

⁶⁵ Pribram, *The Secret Treaties of Austria-Hungary*, 36-37.

⁶⁶ John Leyland, “Progress of Foreign Navies,” in *The Naval Annual 1900*, ed. John Leyland (Portsmouth, UK: J. Griffin and Co., 1900), 39-40.

⁶⁷ Vittorio Cuniberti, “An Ideal Battleship for the British Fleet,” in *The British Battle Fleet: Its Inception and Growth Throughout the Centuries to the Present Day*, ed. Fred T. Jane (London, UK: The Library Press, Ltd, 1915), 142-143. Brown, *Warrior*, 182. Italo Zingarelli, *La Marina Italiana* (Milan, IT: Fratelli Treves, 1915), 66. Archibald Hurd, *Italian Sea-Power and the Great War* (London, UK: Constable and Company, Ltd, 1918), 32. Rimanelli, “The ‘Least of the Powers,’ ” 484-485.

⁶⁸ Cuniberti, “An Ideal Battleship for the British Fleet,” 141.

⁶⁹ Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power*, 416.

beginning to develop similar ships during the mid-1900s, Cuniberti was the first theorist to codify and push this idea to the public.

As the Regia Marina evolved from its post-Adwa sluggishness, the merchant marine remained firmly entrenched in a handful of private companies. The navy had to adjust its strategy for fighting overseas while also coming to terms with its role in the Ethiopian embarrassment. The merchant marine had also failed to provide adequate supplies and troops for Baratieri's Ethiopian campaign.⁷⁰ Failure to keep Baratieri adequately supplied had played a role in his defeat. Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti, in an attempt to break the monopolization of Italy's commercial ships, ordered his cabinet to conduct a formal inquiry into this issue in 1903.⁷¹ He prioritized mercantile reform as a way of rehabilitating Italy's prestige as a great power, especially because the monopoly 'created grave difficulties' and prevented any 'new scheme of maritime conventions' to modernize Italian shipping. The inquiry ruled against the civilian monopolization of Italian commerce by the shipping company Navigazione Generale Italiana (NGI).⁷² These trust-busting efforts resulted in three new mercantile companies, beholden to the government, that shared NGI's commercial routes.⁷³ These new companies primarily traded in the Mediterranean Sea (the NGI took over the oceanic routes), the expected theater of operations for the Regia Marina in any future war. Additional government investment in these companies, reaching nearly 20 million *lire* by 1911, meant that the government could mobilize part of Italy's commercial fleet in times of crisis.⁷⁴ These actions were designed to prevent any significant

⁷⁰ Canuti, *L'Italia in Africa*, 202. Baratieri, *Memorie d'Africa*, 363-364. Jonas, *Battle of Adwa*, 171.

⁷¹ Giolitti, *Memoirs of My Life*, 156.

⁷² Giolitti, *Memoirs of My Life*, 215. Giulianelli, "The State and the Sea," 152-154.

⁷³ Giulianelli, "The State and the Sea," 152-154.

⁷⁴ Direzione della Regia Marina, *Rivista Marittima: 1911*, 121-122.

supply shortages or delays as a result of civilian management, as had happened at Adwa.

Because the Regia Marina planned to operate primarily in the Mediterranean Sea, the reduced range and improved control of Italy's mercantile fleet now made amphibious operations more feasible.

By 1911, the Italian military was confident in its ability to conduct a major offensive operation for the first time since 1896. New shipbuilding programs developed faster, heavily armored, mono-caliber vessels according to Cuniberti's vision. The Italians proved to be the only major power not caught off guard by the launching of the British HMS *Dreadnought* in December 1906, which fulfilled the idea of the all-big-gun ship, started an international naval arms race, and rendered obsolete all previous multi-caliber battleship designs (now referred to as pre-dreadnoughts).⁷⁵ Even if the Italians had won at Adwa and seized Ethiopia, the Italian industrial base could only build enough ships to keep pace with its immediate rivals, France and Austria-Hungary, in the Mediterranean and little more.⁷⁶ Even then, the Italians lagged in the capital ship race against their Mediterranean neighbors. Regardless, even a smaller and overstretched Italian fleet could significantly shift the balance of power in the Mediterranean by choosing to join either of the two major European coalitions. Italian occupation of Rhodes and the Dodecanese Islands renewed some the naval rivalry with both France and Austria-Hungary and increased some tension in international affairs, but ultimately the outbreak of the Balkan Wars attracted more importance from the Great Powers.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, the Regia Marina was

⁷⁵ Brown, *Warrior to Dreadnought*, 190-191.

⁷⁶ Hendrickson, "We Are Now a Mediterranean Power," 281.

⁷⁷ Sugnet, "The Relations of France and England with Italy," 72, 84.

only one-third the size of the French fleet by August 1914.⁷⁸ The fleet itself struggled to engage in massive naval operations in a conventional war with other Great Powers.

Renewed Conflict in Africa and the Origins of the Great War

The defeat at Adwa had longstanding ramifications on internal and external Italian capabilities. The perspective of the battle as a defeat that hurt Italy's reputation did not fully take into account the nation's ability to use the defeat to its own advantage. Coming at a time of intense Great Power rivalry for spheres of influence and imperial colonies, Adwa provided the Italians with the ability to recalibrate a more sustainable foreign policy. First, the new government threatened to continue the war to guarantee its more defensible position in Eritrea and Kassala. Second, the Italians used the threat of their defeat to help convince the British to invade Sudan and relieve Mahdist pressure. Third, the Italians engaged in a series of negotiations to ease tensions with France. This combination of Italian-led diplomatic renewal also helped create a disastrous vacuum of power in East Africa that culminated in the Fashoda Crisis. That crisis was often seen as the rehabilitation of British and French relations. Likewise, Adwa marked Italy's long turn away from the Triple Alliance and towards what became the Entente Powers. This process was aided by significant political and social turmoil that fueled reforms on land, air, and sea for a humiliated military complex.

The "informal Mediterranean Entente" of France, Italy, and Great Britain supported each other during the Algeiras Conference as the First Moroccan Crisis shook Europe from 1905 to 1906.⁷⁹ The Italians obviously had no qualms about opposing Austro-Hungarian aims because of

⁷⁸ Sullivan, "Fleet in Being," 114-116.

⁷⁹ Hendrickson, "We Are Now a Mediterranean Power," 155. Sugnet, "The Relations of France and England with Italy," 32.

longstanding territorial and revanchist claims. However, opposing Germany was quite another matter. The defeat at Adwa had humbled the Italians into renegotiating trade deals with France and limiting French ambitions to Tripolitania. Likewise, calls for aid had secured British support in the Sudan that at least propped up the failing colonial position in East Africa. Britain, France, and Italy agreed to maintain the status quo in Abyssinia, but the Italian threat to abandon this deal would not deter the other two powers.⁸⁰ Ultimately, Italy lacked the strength to keep any other power out of Ethiopia and so compromising with the British and French preserved the perception of Italian strength in the region. The Italians had already taken great pains to exclude Britain as a possible target of the Triple Alliance in any future conflict.⁸¹ This cooperation turned into a form of dependence as the Italian position in Africa survived because of Menelik's guarantees but also to Britain's ability to deploy forces up the Nile River and check the Mahdists and French expansionist aims.

The Italian reform program after Adwa produced mixed results. The defeat had the most immediate impact on the army that had fought and lost the battle in the first place. New efforts to modernize the army, increase mobilization times, and make service more attractive to young conscripts could not overcome regional divides or an anachronistic promotion structure. While some officers chafed at the changes, others embraced them as well as the potential for new technology. Here the link to Adwa became less clear. Young officers, clearly writing in the wake of one of the most embarrassing defeats in the young nation's history, looked for new ways to dominate the battlefield. The dirigible and the airplane offered such an opportunity. A small

⁸⁰ Sugnet, "The Relations of France and England with Italy," 36.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

group of soldiers and sailors collaborated with engineers to help establish Italy's first aerial clubs. By 1911, a burgeoning air branch had developed, but most of the planes were foreign built and Italian industry could not keep up with the production of wealthier countries. Finally, the navy and merchant marine had to transform in the wake of the failed African campaign and in the face of a European naval arms race. The defeat at Adwa moderated Italian strategic designs to the more reasonable confines of the Mediterranean Sea.

It is no coincidence that Italian military theorists – like Douhet – or technological designs – like the dreadnought – came to prominence in the fifteen years after Adwa. The national tragedy forced servicemembers to come to grips with the defeat. The battle, once lost, could never be refought. However, innovative ideas could spur military reform to prevent such an embarrassment from ever happening again. But the underlying weaknesses of Italian industry and society always prevented these improvements from completely succeeding. Adwa did more than simply demonstrate the weakness of an underdeveloped Italian state. The defeat vastly multiplied the challenges of the Italian government at the end of the nineteenth century. The failed attempt at imperial expansion at a time of intense poverty, emigration, social unrest, and industrial weakness led to a significant loss of faith in the government's ability to lead the country. The promise of a strong, united Italy recreating the might of ancient Rome died on the battlefields of Ethiopia in 1896. Italy entered the twentieth century with a sense of victimhood and the need to avenge its honor on the international stage. Within this context, the 1911 invasion of Libya provided not only an easy victory against the declining Ottoman Empire, but the triumph also restored the prestige of Italian arms.

The plan worked, especially because the Balkan states attacked the remaining Ottoman territories in Europe in 1912. The Italo-Turkish War lasted barely a year before the Ottomans

were faced with all-out war in the Balkans. The subsequent destabilization of that region can be partly attributed to Italian ambitions in Africa and its need to demonstrate the effectiveness of a reformed military. The war in Libya did not by itself start World War I, but the conflict played a significant part in setting Europe down that path. The war with the Ottomans also demonstrated the potential of airpower and dreadnoughts for the first time in a European theater of war.

The Italo-Turkish War was hardly a momentous occasion in the annals of warfare, but it did mark a successful foreign campaign that added new territory to the diminutive Italian empire. With the stain of Adwa wiped away, nationalist sentiment in Italy gave even greater voice to the irredentist movement that wanted to recover lands under Austro-Hungarian rule. The increased commercial and naval ties with Britain ensured that Italy drifted further away from its allies, Germany and Austria-Hungary, during the 1900s. Ultimately, Adwa's legacy of military reforms led the Italians to believe they were strong enough to fight other European powers in a continental war. However, the underlying weaknesses of the Italian industrial state in an increasingly mechanized world could not be overcome. As the Italians broke away from their commitment to avoid strategic overextension, their military encountered many of the same problems it had confronted in the 1895-1896 campaign. Italy's struggles during World War I, with twelve consecutive battles on the Isonzo River, soon disabused the Italians of the effectiveness of their previous reforms. Failure to live up to the expectations of these reforms ultimately led an unprepared Italian Army into another disastrous conflict. Then, the Italian government entered a familiar cycle of political rehabilitation in the wake of a defeat to influence stronger powers to achieve more limited aims.

Chapter 5 - Caporetto Introduction and the Early War (1914-1917)

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 more noteworthy for its indecisive battles of attrition. The Italians lost over 600,000 men and withdrew nearly sixty miles to the southwest.¹ The Italian retreat to the Piave River provided plenty of fodder for western historians eager to uphold the myth of Italian military incompetence: a commander who ignominiously fled from his headquarters before being overrun by the Germans, 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.² 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 small role in the battle, even contributed to the post-war perception that the Germans had unlocked the key to restoring a war of maneuver in western Europe. This discovery came at the expense of the hapless Italians. The success of infiltrating stormtroopers when combined with later doctrine on mechanized maneuver mythologized the supposed arrival of modern warfare. The Italians have thus been left in the figurative dust of their northern European counterparts.

¹ Luigi Cadorna, *La Guerra alla Fronte Italiana*, vol. 2 (Milan, IT: 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, AT: Bohlau Verlag, 2014), 790.

² 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.

However, Caporetto's most important legacy did not lie in the near-defeat of Italy nor in the supremacy of new German tactics. Instead, the battle forced a reappraisal of Allied coalition-making that placed Italy, often regarded as one of the weakest great powers, squarely at the center of military strategy.³ In particular, cooperation between British and Italian leaders marked the culmination of two years of steadily-increasing Italian involvement in coalition warfare, and solidified Italy's importance to its Allies. British politicians took advantage of the Italian defeat to gain greater control of the war effort over military leaders who favored a wasteful war of attrition. In turn, a new Italian government hoarded its strength and kept its own disgraced leaders in positions of power to achieve territorial gains at the end of the war. Italy thus played a central role in the creation of the new Supreme War Council that coordinated Allied grand strategy until the end of the war. Coalition support enabled the Italians to ask for a series of territorial gains at the Versailles Conference. That the Italians did not gain as much land as they wanted was as much to do their own fumbling of numerous opportunities as it was their own internal weaknesses. Much like Adwa twenty-one years earlier, the Battle of Caporetto provided a temporary but important space that greatly enhanced Italy's ability to reframe and then achieve a series of more limited objectives.

A combination mainly of British, French, and American soldiers won World War I in 1918 by defeating the German army in France. Italy did end the war on the winning side, but the nation's military value has often been deemed as less significant to the ultimate outcome. Much

³ 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 was known as either the “Entente” or the “Allies.” Adding to this confusion was the fact that sometimes the coalition's correspondence referred to Germany and Austria-Hungary as the “Allies.” For this work, I prefer to keep symmetry with World War II and refer to the British and French side as the Allies.

of the history of the subsequent Allied conferences after Caporetto 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. The British and French dominated the alliance and the post-war settlement at Versailles with superior resources and influence. Therefore, these two powers also controlled most of the narrative about the utility of Italian involvement. Nevertheless, 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 combined military action earlier in the war had all failed spectacularly, but Caporetto provided a new incentive for cooperation.⁴ Italy's role in this evolution of coalition doctrine demonstrated how a weaker partner can influence its stronger associates during a war.

Historiography

The Allied conferences after Caporetto that solidified the Supreme War Council have often been portrayed as a British triumph. The fiery Welshman David Lloyd George had come to power as Britain's prime minister in the bitter waning days of 1916 as the nation reeled from both the bloody stalemate on the Somme and the surety that the "War to End All Wars" would not end anytime soon.⁵ Lloyd George came into immediate conflict with the so-called "westerners," or the men who believed the war must be fought and won against the main German field armies in Belgium and France. The Western Front had not moved much since the March to the Sea in late

⁴ NATO defines "joint operations" as "one involving two or more military services [of one nation]" whereas "combined operations" includes "the forces of two or more nations." Those doctrinal definitions will be used here. See Milan N. Vego, "Major Joint/Combined Operations," *Joint Force Quarterly*, Issue 48 (First Quarter, 2008): 114-116.

⁵ French, *The Strategy of the Lloyd George Coalition*, 6.

1914. 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 1916.⁶ This approach followed a more conventionally British style of indirect strategy that took advantage of the empire’s historical strengths at sea. 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.⁷ By imposing his strategy on the military he sought to return the seemingly directionless policy of the war effort to the civilian government. His first attempts to reassert control failed as the Allies blundered from one disaster to another in 1917. The result included a botched combined Allied effort in the Nivelle Offensive in April and a failed attack at Passchendaele from July to November that remained mired in the Flemish mud.⁸ 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

⁶ “British Disaster at Kut-el-Amara,” *Current History (1916-1940)*, vol. 4, no. 3 (June 1916): 551-552. Robin Prior, “The Strategy Behind Gallipoli: Strategic decision-making in the Dardanelles and Gallipoli,” *Australian Strategic Policy Institute* (2005): 7-8.

⁷ French, *The Strategy of the Lloyd George Coalition*, 122-123.

⁸ David Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, vol. 4, 2238-2239. Lloyd George somewhat derisively labeled the Passchendaele chapters with the sub-heading: “The Campaign of the Mud.”

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 showed 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 argued that the Field Marshal Herbert Kitchener's overbearing role in strategy making strongly influenced Lloyd George. In addition, the massive casualties suffered by Kitchener's New Armies for little gain served as a dangerous warning to the new prime minister.⁹ Although not discounting Lloyd George's political acumen, Woodward portrayed 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.¹⁰ Woodward demonstrated the dangers of Allied and British disunity at a time when the Central Powers seemed to dominating on the battlefield. Ideally, the proposed 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. Thus, Lloyd George could order Robertson to send additional divisions to assist the "shell-shocked Italians," and maintain

⁹ David R. Woodward, *Lloyd George and the Generals* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 1983), 24.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 221.

the implication that his decisions allowed the British to stabilize the front at the Piave River.¹¹

Woodward sympathized 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 becomes a mainly 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 argued 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.¹² 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. This perspective showed a shrewd politician able to look for the broader meaning of the war and its outcome. 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 the 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 in the post-war world. David French also showed that, although they welcomed American involvement in

¹¹ Ibid., 223.

¹² French, *Strategy of the Lloyd George Coalition*, 160. For a discussion of the political infighting between British politicians and generals, see also: David French, "Sir Douglas Haig's Reputation, 1918-1928: A Note," *The Historical Journal*, vol. 28, no. 4 (December 1985): 953-960.

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 acknowledged that the Italians had reformed their own lines along the Piave River long before any British or French reinforcements arrived by late November 1917.¹³ Nevertheless, the decision to send support and to relieve the Italian commander, General Luigi Cadorna, was 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. However, their role in creating and shaping the direction of the SWC was not mentioned by either Woodward or David French. This omission made sense for these authors because they place British actors as the central figures in the pivotal days after Caporetto.

Scholars have more recently sought to assert the primacy of the French role in the Allied coalition, after all a French general ultimately became the supreme Allied commander. American historian Robert Doughty argued the French viewed the war as a multi-front effort from the beginning by relying on a strong coalition with joint planning efforts, learning through trial and error, and persisting in fighting despite increasing manpower deficiencies. According to Doughty, the French played the critical role in keeping the Allies together near the end of 1917. Doughty presented the Italians as passive and credited General Ferdinand Foch, Chief of the French General Staff, and Robertson, his British counterpart, with convincing Cadorna that he hold a defensive line on the Piave River using mainly Italian units.¹⁴ Doughty emphasized that

¹³ Ibid., 163.

¹⁴ Robert A. Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory: French Strategy and Operations in the Great War* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 397.

British and French troops in Italy remained under their home government's control and were not subordinate to the Italian *Comando Supremo* (Supreme Command, the Italian Army headquarters).¹⁵ 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. Doughty also explained 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.¹⁶ However, only another military crisis during the Spring Offensive in 1918 finally convinced the Allies to agree to these supposedly extreme measures. Doughty thus painted a picture where the French, as one of the two strongest Allies, did not blindly follow along with Lloyd George's proposal, whereas the weaker Italians had no choice in the matter.

Elizabeth Greenhalgh, a British historian specializing in the French Army during World War I, also tried to rebalance the idea of the Allied coalition as being dominated by the British. In *Victory Through Coalition* (2005), she looked specifically at how perennial enemies Britain and France ironed out an effective partnership in the war. Greenhalgh agreed that the defeat at Caporetto “gave Lloyd George ammunition.” However, she contended that the two strongest Allied powers could plan an effective campaign if the Germans and Austro-Hungarians could effectively work together.¹⁷ Greenhalgh disapproved of David Woodward's contention that the

¹⁵ Ibid., 398.

¹⁶ Ibid., 399.

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

French meekly followed along with Lloyd George's suggestions for the new council.¹⁸ Instead, she claimed, much as Doughty did, that the French had always wanted better coordination for joint campaigns and so the Rapallo agreement was one entered into by two equal powers. While the French played a more equal role in this narrative, Greenhalgh still depicted the Italians as being "in shock after Caporetto" and therefore as having "no suggestions" for the conference.¹⁹ Thus, they possessed little agency in rescuing themselves from their own defeat, and more importantly in reframing Allied grand strategy in subsequent meetings.

Likewise, American perspectives on the war put a primacy on their reinforcements in 1917 as the decisive turning point in the war. 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 embodied the generally-held American view that the Allies had blundered through the war until the end of 1917 without a unified command structure. General John J. Pershing focused on retaining American independence from British or French control.²⁰ This command organization allowed the United States to project more power both during and after the war.²¹ Trask's analysis of President Woodrow Wilson resembled 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 admitted that Caporetto provided the "final blow" in the

¹⁸ Ibid., 171.

¹⁹ Ibid., 172.

²⁰ 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.

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

creation of a new Allied council to manage the war.²² Trask also claimed 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.²³ The Italians, again in a notably weaker position, passively accepted help to get much needed reinforcements. The Supreme War Council included the prime ministers of the major European powers, but Trask praised the Americans for refusing to appoint a political representative to the SWC in order to keep the focus on purely military matters. This argument stood in stark contrast to the political motivations behind American involvement in the war, and the reality that the use of military force is always a political act.²⁴

In *The White War: Life and Death on the Italian Front* (2008), Mark Thompson compared the harsh conditions of the Italian Front with the better-known war of attrition in France and Belgium. Thompson believed 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 criticized Cadorna's mishandling of both the battle of Caporetto and the subsequent retreat.²⁵ This author repeated many of the themes of the Rapallo Conference, including that the Allies only offered military support in exchange for Cadorna's immediate removal. Thompson hinted that this decision gave "cover to [Italian Prime Minister Vittorio]

²² Ibid., 23.

²³ Ibid., 28.

²⁴ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1976), 87.

²⁵ Thompson, *The White War*, 319-320.

Orlando's government" which wanted to remove Cadorna but did not have sufficient clout yet.²⁶

In that way, Orlando resembled his counterparts in France and Britain who wanted to reclaim political control of the war from the military officers who had bungled the conflict. Though he wrote that the arrival of Allied divisions near the Piave River proved absolutely critical in defeating the subsequent German attacks, Thompson also admitted that the Italians played some role in removing Cadorna and in incorporating Allied reinforcements.

The decision to remove an unpopular commander after a major defeat was 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 mattered 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, provided 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, showed how Cadorna brought the Italian army to the edge of collapse at Caporetto. Nevertheless, Gooch also demonstrated the ways in which a stunning Italian revival, aided only partially by the Allies, staved off ultimate disaster. Gooch pointed out that Cadorna had little chance of remaining in his

²⁶ Ibid., 321.

position after suffering such a defeat but that Orlando may have “wanted to exonerate him.”²⁷

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.²⁸ Although he uses the common narrative that the Allied commanders bullied the Italians into maintaining their defensive line on the Piave, Gooch also acknowledged the Italians as decision makers in their own right.

The context of Italy’s function as an ally before, during, and after the Battle of Caporetto greatly changed its relationship with the other Allied powers, particularly Great Britain. The progress of Italy’s part in World War I from 1915 to just before the Battle of Caporetto in October 1917 provided critical background to the coalition debates. This timeline included the first eleven of the Isonzo battles, but also covered how Italian influence among the Allies grew 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 British Prime Minister Lloyd George’s first attempt to rein in military control of the wider war effort. However, just by its location and timing, the conference imbued legitimacy at a time when Rome’s role in the alliance was becoming increasingly important. The major events of the Battle of Caporetto and the subsequent Rapallo Conference enabled a temporarily weakened Italy to still wield an inordinate amount of influence to achieve its objectives. Memoirs and the notes of various government officials from the meeting, especially when analyzed from an Italian perspective, showed how the Italians played a much larger role in firing General Luigi Cadorna and determining the outlook of the

²⁷ John Gooch, *The Italian Army and the First World War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 248.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 248.

new council. Next, the 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. Ultimately, the immediate reaction by the SWC to the Spring Offensive gave the Italians a new role in supporting the appointment of Ferdinand Foch as the supreme commander. The decision by the Italians to remain on the defensive for most of 1918 revealed more than just Italian military weaknesses after Caporetto. Instead, fears of Allied encroachment on the independence of their own 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 – along with the country's own internal social struggles and military-industrial weaknesses – hurt its post-war standing among the Allies and its ability to demand territory at the Versailles Conference.

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 combined strategic planning occurred because of Italy's lengthy membership in the Triple Alliance with Germany and Austria-Hungary.²⁹ Italy did not have a history of military cooperation with its new-found partners, whereas Britain, France, and Russia had experience with each other in grand strategy through a series of escalating agreements: the alliance between Russia and France (1891) designed to limit the power of the German Empire, the Entente Cordiale between Britain and

²⁹ Antonio Salandra, *Italy and the Great War: From Neutrality to Intervention*, trans. Zoe Kendrick Pyne (London, UK: Edward Arnold & Co., 1932), 23-24. Macmillan, *The War that Ended Peace*, 81-82.

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.³⁰ 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, these newfound partners.

Nevertheless, despite these initial difficulties, Italy's strategic importance to the Allies increased as its steadily-larger armies – combined with Allied defeats – provided a grander role in the decision-making processes of the coalition. Italy's difficult involvement in combined warfare during its first two years in the conflict enabled some increased demands. Eleven consecutive battles along the Isonzo River resembled the war of attrition in the trenches 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. Italy's initial commitment concentrated on one limited theater of operations. However, even these campaigns came at a desperate time for the Allies who, by May 1915, had suffered significant setbacks in Poland and Turkey. Prime Minister Antonio Salandra himself noted that Italy “had joined the Entente at a time when the fortunes of war were going against it.”³¹ Nevertheless, Austria-Hungary diverted more of its limited resources to defend the southwestern border in response to Italy's entry into the war. Thus, the armies under Luigi Cadorna achieved some effectiveness via an indirect strategy that targeted a weaker member of the Central Powers. This strategy bore remarkable similarity to the “easterners” who sought to attack Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and the Ottomans rather than the formidable legions of Germany. These secondary fronts became

³⁰ Macmillan, *The Road to 1914*, 158-159, 169, 210.

³¹ Salandra, *Italy and the Great War*, 366.

progressively more important as the stalemate continued in the West. 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.³² The new Allied governments 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-appointed 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.³³ 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. The government in Rome wanted the war to be seen as an *Italian* victory over Austria-Hungary to justify irredentist claims in any post-war peace treaty. Thus, the Allies continued to bicker over the method of conducting combined operations in the Balkans and 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

³² W. B. Ffest, "British War Aims and German Peace Feelers during the First World War (December 1916-November 1918)," *The Historical Journal* 15, no. 2 (1972): 286-288.

³³ Brock Millman, "A Counsel of Despair: British Strategy and War Aims, 1917-18." *Journal of Contemporary History* 36, no. 2 (2001): 241-70. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/261225>.

Russia made Italy progressively more essential as a partner.³⁴ As a result, by September 1917 only the British and the Italians still had large-scale offensive operations underway. This assessment does not mean the Italians were still running *decisive* offensive operations, but simply an affirmation that the real weaknesses of the Italian state did not prevent continued attacks. These offensives were primarily launched from a desire to claim land, but also had the added bonus of coordinating an offensive strategy with Allied powers. This delusion of perceived success was soon shattered a month later. Although his repeated attacks along the Isonzo River lacked creativity, Cadorna eventually seized significant bridgeheads that allowed him to threaten the critical port of Trieste.³⁵ 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. In addition, the increasing salient into enemy lines also provided a dangerous target of opportunity for the Central Powers eager for revenge against their former partner. 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.

³⁴ Leonard V. Smith, "War and 'Politics': The French Army Mutinies of 1917," *War in History* 2, no. 2 (1995): 180–182.

³⁵ Filippo de Filippi, "The Geography of the Italian Front," *The Geographic Journal*, vol. 51, no. 2, (February 1918): 65-69.

The Early War (1915-1916) and the Chantilly Conference

The first Italian offensive (23 June-7 July 1915) on the Isonzo River was a harbinger of the war to come and demonstrated that the Italians could at least continue fighting despite horrendous losses. Poorly coordinated and poorly supported attacks failed to achieve any significant territorial gains in an area dominated by difficult terrain.³⁶ Fighting from strong defensive positions, the Austro-Hungarian Fifth Army spent most of the year – indeed, most of the 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.

Allied conferences provided some space and time for Italian control of their own strategic narrative. 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 1915.³⁷ 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.³⁸ The Italian Second and Third Armies

³⁶ 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, UK: The Imperial War Museum, 1949), 13. Gooch, *The Italian Army*, 109.

³⁷ Luigi Cadorna, *La Guerra alla Fronte Italiana*, vol. 1, 13-14. Edmonds, *Military Operations Italy*, 9.

³⁸ 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:

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. Still, 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, the Italians could harass one weak link in the great middle position of the Central Powers.³⁹ This provocation was not strong enough to divert German attention from achieving a great victory in Poland in the Gorlice–Tarnów offensive of 1915.⁴⁰ This aggravation of the Austro-Hungarian western flank might also keep the Central Powers from detaching enough troops to conquer Serbia.

Italy's entry into the war 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. 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. Victory in the East would appear useless if the Serbians

“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 Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, vol. 1, 162-166.

³⁹ Cadorna, *La Guerra*, vol. 1, 121.

⁴⁰ “The Campaign in the Carpathians: Russian Victory Succeeded by Reverses and Defeat,” *The New York Times Current History of the European War*, vol. 1, no. 3 (June 1915): 489.

continued to undermine Vienna's authority over its polyglot kingdom.⁴¹ 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.

Unfortunately, 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 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.⁴² The loss of Poland during the Great Retreat of 1915 and the increasing difficulty of keeping Russia armed and fed limited the Russians 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 multinational meeting was "handicapped

⁴¹ 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.

⁴² Edmonds, *Military Operations Italy*, 14.

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.⁴³ 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, worried about the potential benefits of such an operation. 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.⁴⁴ 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.⁴⁵ Then Briand played his trump card: only 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 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

⁴³ William B. Robertson, *From Private to Field Marshal* (London, UK: Constable and Company, Ltd., 1921), 234.

⁴⁴ 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.

⁴⁵ Aristide Briand, CAB 28/1, IC 4(a), 1. Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, vol. 1, 408-409.

France.⁴⁶ Robertson asked for Italian representatives to study “the conditions under which Italy is prepared to act in the Balkans.”⁴⁷ 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. To be fair, these generals wanted to preserve their own troops for the most important fronts against the main enemy: Germany. Italy’s expanded role thus initially came at the behest of its more powerful coalition partners, regardless of the perceived utility of the nation’s forces or the Balkan campaign in general.

Italy’s delayed entry into the war and the abandonment of the Triple Alliance have often been criticized as openly selfish moves made solely in the hopes of territorial enlargement. This accusation was true, but the other Great Powers also entered the war with hopes of territorial aggrandizement or other material advantage. However, those war aims did not get clearly expressed until later in the war whereas the Italians bargained for what they wanted from the beginning. From this vantage point, the Treaty of London (signed 26 April 1915) can be seen as a relatively honest document, especially considering how much difficulty the other powers had in determining their own war aims. In the treaty, Guglielmo Imperiali, Italy’s ambassador to Great Britain, demanded Italian acquisition of the Trentino, Tyrol, Trieste, Dalmatia, and Valona.⁴⁸ The subsequent Italian campaign in Albania must be seen as not only supporting Allied efforts in

⁴⁶ William Robertson, CAB 28/1, IC 5(a), “Committee of Imperial Defense: Memorandum for the Meeting of Representatives of the Allied Armies,” 3.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 6-7. Rene Albrecht-Carrie, “The Present Significance of the Treaty of London of 1915.” *Political Science Quarterly* 54, no. 3 (1939): 364–365. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2143483>.

⁴⁸ 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.

the Balkans but as part of a desire to grab as much land as possible ahead of any post-war settlement.

This dual role as both faithful ally and self-interested expansionist was common in most war-time alliances. Ironically, the French opened World War I with a major offensive into Alsace-Lorraine for the clearly stated purpose of regaining territory. Nevertheless, Imperiali's blatant demands 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.⁴⁹ 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.⁵⁰ 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. Italian strategy looks even more blindly ambitious when placed next to Kitchener's warnings about the Allied position in the Balkans. 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.⁵¹ 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

⁴⁹ Luigi Cadorna, *Altre Pagine Sulla Grande Guerra* (Milan, Italy: Casa Editrice A. Mondadori, 1925), 108-109.

⁵⁰ Thompson, *The White War*, 26-27. Gooch, *The Italian Army*, 119.

⁵¹ Cadorna, *Altre Pagine*, 111-112, 114.

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 task organization 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. Cadorna and Sonnino have often been painted as inept leaders who hurled their nation into a fixed war of attrition on the same small front on the Isonzo. This criticism hardly differentiated these gentlemen from the political and military leaders in the other Great Powers during World War I. In addition, the British and French tendency to scapegoat their other allies comes to the forefront of this historiography that paints the Italians as graspers and the Western Allies as defenders of democracy against Prussian militarism. Such an approach always links the Italian ineptitude of World War I to the ineptitude of the failed fascist graspers in World War II. However, by 1915 both Cadorna and Sonnino actually had a 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 in a new style of attrition warfare, the Italian Army sought to expand its position on the Isonzo River in 1916. However, the massive German assault at Verdun 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).⁵² 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.⁵³ After all, such a loss would free up Bulgarian, Austro-Hungarian, and German forces for use in other fronts. 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.⁵⁴ 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 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.⁵⁵ Cadorna eventually 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 and Joffre. The Russians inflicted enormous casualties on the Austro-

⁵² CAB 28/1, IC 7, “Allied General Staff Conference Chantilly 12 March 1916,” 1. At least 1-2 more footnotes here.

⁵³ Joffre, CAB 28/1, IC 7(b), “Resumé of a Discussion at the Foreign Office, Paris, on March 27, 1916,” 1.

⁵⁴ Cadorna, CAB 28/1, IC 7(b), 3.

⁵⁵ Edmonds, *Military Operations Italy*, 18-19. Rauchensteiner, *End of the Hapsburg Monarchy*, 287.

Hungarian forces who had to divert resources from the easily defensible Italian theater to the vast expanses of Galicia.⁵⁶ 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 was 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.⁵⁷ The underdeveloped Italian economy 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 was financed by the British. Paolo Carcano, the Italian Minister of the Treasury, and Reginald McKenna, the British Chancellor of the Exchequer, ultimately signed the “2nd Supplementary Financial Agreement between British and Italian Governments” on 15 July 1916.⁵⁸ 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

⁵⁶ David R. Stone, *The Russian Army in the Great War: The Eastern Front, 1914-1917* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2015), 242-250.

⁵⁷ CAB 28_1, IC Paper 9A “Interallied Finance Conference on 15 July 1916,” 1.

⁵⁸ CAB 28/1, IC 9(c), “2nd Supplementary Financial Agreement between British and Italian Governments,” 1.

injection.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, the stalemated nature of the war could not be resolved with the stroke of a pen. 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. Therefore, 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.

The 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 considering the cooperation between Britain and France immediately before and upon the outbreak of the war. In addition, the main focus of the fighting on the Western Front was in France and Belgium.⁶⁰ The original Italian declaration of war and the first campaigns focused only on Austria-Hungary. This wariness became most apparent when the Italians waited until

⁵⁹ Edmonds, *Military Operations Italy*, 23.

⁶⁰ Robert H. Fife, Jr., "Italy and the Triple Alliance," *The North American Review*, vol. 200, no. 707 (October 1914): 538-539.

August 1916, after their victory at Gorizia, to declare war on Germany.⁶¹ This declaration could be taken as a formality, but nevertheless this act indicated Italy's willingness to go to war with all the Central Powers. The nation was starting to assume larger obligations to its coalition partners.

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 1914.⁶² The Western Allies were able to focus all their attention on the defense of Paris at the First Battle of the Marne without having to fight an Italian force. However, now Italy took on a much larger role than that of merely distracting Austria-Hungary. Repeated attacks on the Isonzo River suddenly seemed 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.⁶³ Meanwhile, Herbert Asquith's government in Britain collapsed in favor of former War Secretary David Lloyd George.⁶⁴ The Italian government, having already survived its own governmental reform

⁶¹ 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.

⁶² 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."

⁶³ 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. Dougherty, *Pyrrhic Victory*, 320-321.

⁶⁴ Douglas Haig, *The Private Papers of Douglas Haig: 1914-1919*, ed. Robert Blake (London, UK: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1952), 183. French, *Strategy of the Lloyd George Coalition*, 12-14.

in mid-1916, entered the 1916-1917 winter conferences with a relatively stable civil-military relationship. 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.⁶⁵ 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.”⁶⁶

Clearly, as Italian casualties and 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 its involvement in the war effort. Holding the conference in Rome sent a clear signal to Cadorna and Sonnino, even though at no point did Italian strength rival that of Britain and France. The Mediterranean power simply received more responsibility for an increasingly global war. 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 the Allies met in Italy since the war began.⁶⁷ The location implied an expanded effort by the “easterners” to shift Allied strategy towards peripheral theaters – even though Italy was not in the “East” – 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 hopeful prospects for victory – and, not coincidentally, shifted the onus for campaigning onto Britain’s allies.

⁶⁵ Orlando, *Memorie*, 49-51. John R. Schindler, *Isonzo: The Forgotten Sacrifice of the Great War* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001), 149-150.

⁶⁶ Luigi Cadorna, *Lettere Familiari*, ed. Raffaele Cadorna (Milan, Italy: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1967), 184.

⁶⁷ Robertson, *From Private to Field Marshal*, 292.

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 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 multinational Allied Army of the Orient at Salonika.⁶⁸ Lloyd George believed the Italians should have a greater interest in this subsidiary theater. He argued that "any catastrophe to the Allied Army of the East would have a very serious repercussion upon Italy herself."⁶⁹ 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.⁷⁰ This idolization of Lloyd George as the superstar of the coalition often ignored the part the Italians played in shaping Allied strategy. Obviously, British newspapers wanted to curry favor with the new head of government. The hint of gratitude towards the Italians also demonstrated the war weariness that had taken hold during a grinding stalemate.

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

⁶⁸ Christopher Phillips, "Stepping into Their Places: Britain's Transport Experts and the Expanding War, 1914–16," in *Civilian Specialists at War: Britain's Transport Experts and the First World War* (London, United Kingdom: University of London Press, 2020), 131-133. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvrs8z4b.10>.

⁶⁹ 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.

⁷⁰ "Allied Statesmen in Rome," *The Times*, 6 January 1917, 7, The Times Digital Archive.

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, politicians had come to an impasse over Italy's support for the Salonika campaign. General Cadorna and the Italian Minister of Transportation, Enrico Arlotta, had to be brought in to settle some of the trickier details.⁷¹ The British and French requested Italian combat engineers to improve 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 and supplies from Britain all the way to Monastir, Greece, without risking the more hazardous passages of the Atlantic Ocean.⁷² 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.⁷³ Sonnino and Cadorna understood the significance of being asked to play a larger part in the coalition. Still, they would not needlessly move men and equipment in contravention of their own national interests and objectives. Few nations willingly sacrifice their own self-interest for the greater good of their allies. Italy hardly stood alone in this respect, but the greater power of Britain, France, and eventually the United States proved to diminish the role of the Italians in the historiography of the war. Despite Lloyd George's protests, the Salonika campaign never became anything more than a peripheral sideshow no

⁷¹ CAB 28/2, IC 15(b), "Notes of the Meeting on Morning of 7 January at 1000," 7.

⁷² Ibid., 12.

⁷³ Ibid. Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, vol. 3, 1444.

matter its proximity to the Italian Front. The promise of Allied artillery reinforcements to the Italian campaign, however, proved far more important 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 ignore the Allied preparations for the Nivelle Offensive in France set to occur in February.⁷⁴ 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. Lloyd George repeated this procedure of withholding combat power to his commanders in 1918 as a way of preventing any prolonged battles of attrition. In addition, the plan placed the onus of rejecting the friendly gesture squarely on the Italians. Cadorna graciously rejected the offer but not because he did not need the guns.

Italian weakness could in some ways enhance its standing through such requests. Italy's weak industrial capacity and dearth of experienced heavy-artillery gunners meant that General Cadorna very much wanted the additional reinforcements.⁷⁵ 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 to defeat Austria-Hungary. Nevertheless, the demands of the Nivelle Offensive in France meant that the guns were available

⁷⁴ John Dillon, "Allies are a Tiresome Lot" *The British Army in Italy in the First World War*, Wolverhampton Military Studies no. 12 (Solihull, UK: Helion and Company, 2015), 32. The Nivelle Offensive was ultimately delayed until April.

⁷⁵ Cadorna, *La Guerra alla Fronte Italiana*, vol. 2, 34-35.

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.⁷⁶ 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.⁷⁷ The conference ended with a noncommittal pledge to improve the Allied supply situation in the Balkans. Lloyd George's ascension as Prime 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

⁷⁶ 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.

⁷⁷ "Allied Conference in Rome," *The Times*, 8 January 1917, 9, The Times Digital Archive.

the western Allies. Italy's increased importance to the coalition meant that the promised 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. These attacks almost knocked Austria-Hungary out of the war and set in motion a disastrous chain of events that nearly defeated Italy in turn.

Artillery in the 10th and 11th Battles of the Isonzo

The uncertainty of the commitments made by the Italians at the Rome Conference meant their allies needed more meetings to clarify combined 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.⁷⁸ 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 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 ... and to the nation's own territorial ambitions. This commitment to coalition warfare aligned nicely with the reality that Italy's immediate military objectives often doubled as their long-term war aims. However, perhaps that narrative was simply the story told by Cadorna and Sonnino in their memoirs. They both wanted to

⁷⁸ Mott, quoted in *The Memoirs of Marshal Foch*, 222. Robertson, *From Private to Field Marshal*, 296-297. Edmonds, *Military Operations Italy*, 27-30.

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 and in an effort to redeem their own blemished careers. Although the 10th 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.⁷⁹ The Italians lost 157,000 casualties while inflicting only 75,000 on their enemies. Clearly, more refined cooperation needed to occur for the Allies to perfect combined operations.

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 six British infantry divisions (120,000 men) to the Italian Front “should it become desirable,” which meant “should the Germans attack.”⁸⁰ 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 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

⁷⁹ Edmonds, *Military Operations Italy*, 32-33.

⁸⁰ Ibid., see 416, Appendix IX for entire text of the Anglo-Italian convention. Second quotations are my own words.

strategic defensive in France portended ill news for every other front. 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. Cadorna's troops on the Isonzo River in northeastern Italy formed part of a huge salient jutting into Austria-Hungary. This bulge in the line provided an ideal position for offensive operations but not for defensive ones. The salient 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.⁸¹ 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 Russian Provisional Government, 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 3rd Battle of Ypres followed the well-worn pattern of battles of attrition on the Western Front. In contrast, the 11th 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

⁸¹ Robertson, *Private to Field Marshal*, 310-311.

the Bainsizza Plateau and threatened the port of Trieste.⁸² The hard-fought, limited victory came at enormous expense as the Italians lost another 160,000 men in poorly coordinated frontal assaults.⁸³ 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 3rd Ypres.⁸⁴ The Italian 2nd Army had suffered heavy casualties and expended so much ammunition in the 11th 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.⁸⁵ 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

⁸² Luigi Capello, *Note di Guerra*, vol. 2 (Milan, IT: Fratelli Treves, Editori, 1920), 116, 123-124. Edmonds, *Military Operations Italy*, 36-37.

⁸³ Thompson, *White War*, 282-283.

⁸⁴ Robertson, quoted in a letter to Haig, in *The Private Papers of Douglas Haig*, 251. Edmonds, *Military Operations Italy*, 35.

⁸⁵ Cadorna, *La Guerra alla Fronte Italiana*, vol. 2, 114-115.

on attacking at Passchendaele, but it could be lost in Italy if the Germans brought reinforcements from the east. Indeed, Italian gains after 11th Battle of the Isonzo had only 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 was debatable, but this prospect led directly to the intervention of Germany for the first time on the Italian Front.⁸⁶

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 Cadorna's armies both more valuable to the Allies and more vulnerable to the Central Powers.⁸⁷ 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 that waited for the outcome of the initial battles of maneuver. The vulnerabilities of Italian coastlines meant that it 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 unredeemed

⁸⁶ 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.

⁸⁷ Ludendorff, *Ludendorff's Own Story*, vol. 2, 117.

territories from Austria-Hungary. By adding another front that the Central Powers had to fight on, even a weaker power like Italy profoundly changed the course of the war. However, Italy appeared as a somewhat reluctant associate that fought on a single front for most of 1915 and offered little opportunities for more ambitious Allied operations. Nevertheless, 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, only a catastrophic defeat at Caporetto finally challenged and then solidified Italy’s importance to its confederates.

The Crisis Unfolds: New Tactics at the Battle of Caporetto

The Battle of Caporetto lasted from 24 October to 9 November 1917.⁸⁸ The collapse of the Italian 2nd Army also led to the loss of the Isonzo River line. In just two weeks, the Central Powers undid two years’ worth of Italian offensives and then invaded Italy in turn. Cadorna tried desperately to arrange a series of hasty defenses in the wake of overwhelming pressure from the

⁸⁸ Caporetto began on the Isonzo River so the battle can also be referred to as the 12th (and final) Battle of the Isonzo River.

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.⁸⁹ 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.

The major events of Caporetto exemplified the resilience of the Italians for surviving this innovative assault. The new 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 seem to 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 one of the persistent myths of the Italian military experience ever since reunification in the 19th century. The monumental Rapallo Conference (5-7 November 1917) 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. Italy's part in the Rapallo Conference has often been minimized as that of a supplicant begging

⁸⁹ 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.

for help. Therefore, Italy's role in the new Inter-Allied Supreme War Council, first created at Rapallo, has often been overlooked. This ignorance distorted the narrative of coalition warfare in World War I by arguing that only the strongest powers like Britain, France, and Germany dictated and shaped strategy. Nevertheless, 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 before the decisive battles of 1918.

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 15th May."⁹⁰ The 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. A short, heavy artillery bombardment that included two types of gas and high-

⁹⁰ Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, vol. 4, 2291. John MacDonald and Zeljko Cimpric, *Caporetto and the Isonzo Campaign: The Italian Front 1915-1918* (South Yorkshire, UK: Pen and Sword Military, 2011), 148.

explosive shells preceded the infantry attack.⁹¹ 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.⁹² 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 2nd Army on the Isonzo River in late October.⁹³ The newly formed 14th 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 Italian experience of lengthy bombardments before a major offensive. Using the fog and a critical bridgehead at Tolmino that had remained in Austro-Hungarian hands throughout 1917, the 14th Army moved rapidly through

⁹¹ 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.

⁹² 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.

⁹³ Mario Morselli, *Caporetto 1917: Victory or Defeat* (London, UK: Frank Cass Publishers, 2001), ix.

valleys to cut off Italian forces east of the Isonzo.⁹⁴ 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.⁹⁵ His detachment had a typical experience when it alone captured over 9,000 prisoners and 80 guns in the opening days of the offensive.⁹⁶ The new German tactics helped revitalize their Austro-Hungarian ally and caught the Italians by surprise.

General Luigi Capello, commanding the bloated Italian 2nd 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.⁹⁷ As communication lines broke down and forward units became surrounded, Italian resistance quickly collapsed and Below’s forces made remarkable progress for a World War I campaign. 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.⁹⁸ The Germans overran Cadorna’s headquarters at Udine, breached the Tagliamento line, and finally reached the Piave River by 9 November. The Italians sustained 40,000 casualties, gave up 280,000 prisoners, suffered

⁹⁴ 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, IT: Vallecchi Editore, 1974), 38-39.

⁹⁵ Erwin Rommel, *Infantry Attacks* (Minneapolis, MN: Zenith Press, 2009), 174-175.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Cadorna, *La Guerra al Fronte Italiana*, 184-185.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 178-179.

350,000 deserters, and lost almost 5,000 guns.⁹⁹ In short, their collapse seemed imminent. The Russian Provisional Government was already buckling under the defeat at Riga and internal revolution from the Bolsheviks. The Italians seemed destined to follow the same path especially considering how much smaller the country was compared to its eastern ally.

Although much disparaged for his role in one of the worst defeats of World War I, Cadorna had not remained idle as the 2nd 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.¹⁰⁰ Unfortunately, Cadorna's response, once he realized that the Germans had cut off the bulk of the 2nd 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.¹⁰¹ Historians have sometimes used this castigation of his own men to mark the end for Cadorna as the *Comando Supremo*. However, the commanding general likely could not 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. Regardless, an army commander scapegoating his own subordinates during a retreat should not have come as a surprise to the

⁹⁹ Morselli, *Caporetto*, ix.

¹⁰⁰ Angelo Gatti, *Caporetto: Dal Diario di Guerra Inedito (Maggio-Dicembre 1917)*, ed. Alberto Monticone (Bologna, IT: Societa Editrice il Mulino, 1964), xlv-xlvii.

¹⁰¹ 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.

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.¹⁰² Eventually, the Italian line stabilized on the Piave River, where Cadorna had already built fortifications, just as massive 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. They used this defeat to barter more power for themselves in a coalition that had already made room for them.

¹⁰² AUSSME E2 GM 131, Duke of Aosta to Capo di Stato Maggiore del Esercito, 29 October 1917.

Chapter 6 - Caporetto's Immediate Aftermath (October 1917 – January 1918)

The Rapallo Conference

The disaster at Caporetto immediately signified both vulnerabilities and opportunities to the Allied powers. Newer British and French politicians sought to wrest control of grand strategy away from the “Westerners” who had squandered millions of lives for a few miles of trenches on the Western Front. By the fall of 1917, the Western Allies had made little headway against the Germans, who had in turn achieved significant victories in the East and now on the Italian peninsula. Caporetto thus dispelled any semblance of tepid negotiations on Allied strategic priorities. At the same time, the new Italian government needed to demonstrate a spirit of independence to have any possible voice in postwar negotiations. From that perspective, the arrival of Allied leaders to conference at Rapallo conveyed an awkward sense of increased importance that the Italians could use to their advantage.

The British saw a way to use this defeat. 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.¹ Meanwhile, Foch and Robertson coordinated with Cadorna to transfer four French and two British divisions to

¹ Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, vol. 4, 2315-2317.

succor their stricken ally (two more British divisions would be added).² 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.³ This attitude seemingly replicated that of the Berlin Conference of 1884 when the greatest Great Powers conspired together and froze out weaker nations like the upstart Kingdom of Italy. 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 army had been attacked, but not very heavily" clouded the outlook that the Allies had on the capabilities of their Italian partners.⁴ 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.⁵ The French general also criticized Cadorna's staff because there "was practically no Higher Command" to properly carry out orders.⁶ Robertson

² Robertson, *From Private to Field Marshal*, 312-313. Foch, *Memoirs*, 227.

³ 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.

⁴ 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."

⁵ Foch, *Memoirs*, 227-228.

⁶ Foch, CAB 28/3, IC 29, 1.

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. In addition, the Welshman would solidify his role as the leader of the Allies. However, when Lloyd George 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” anyways.⁷ 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.⁸ Such a vague deflection clearly sought to keep

⁷ Lloyd George and Foch, CAB 28/3, IC 29, 1.

⁸ Lloyd George, CAB 28/3, IC 29, 2.

the British Prime Minister at arm's length. Lloyd George nevertheless 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. The Allies could not have realistically turned around eight divisions already embarked on trains or preparing to do so in mid-November. Besides, the British and French themselves believed that Italy would collapse without those reinforcements. They probably 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 decide whether to carry out their threat. 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."⁹ 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."¹⁰ Although an experienced politician, he remained an inexperienced head of 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

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Orlando, *Memorie*, 242.

his crucifixion.¹¹ Despite this dramatic imagery, Orlando was not about to let Italy be martyred for the sins of its Allies. He also did not feel any particular attachment to General Cadorna, who did not have “the quality of a true, a great Captain.”¹²

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.¹³ Orlando therefore approached his first inter-Allied conference with an honest and open perspective, especially because he *did* need Allied assistance. Such external help would also shore up his own position back at home. 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.”¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ 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 could never have been won in the first place and they had simply been the right victims at the wrong time.

¹¹ Ibid., 242.

¹² Ibid., 298.

¹³ Gooch, *Italian Army*, 248.

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ Ibid., 2.

However, if the Allied estimates were right and the Italians had collapsed from the beginning (which 2nd 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.”¹⁶ 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. The unrest in Russia could spread to Italy and thence to Britain and France in the wake of further defeats. 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.¹⁷

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.¹⁸ He also complimented the deft handling of the Italian 3rd Army by General Emanuele Filiberto, the Duke of Aosta and a cousin of King Vittorio Emanuele III, who had

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Lloyd George, CAB 28/3, IC 30, 2-3.

withdrawn his men in good order back to the Piave River. Lloyd George suggested the duke as a possible 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 his weak military 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.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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.²¹ 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

¹⁹ Orlando, CAB 28/3, IC 30, 3.

²⁰ Painlevé, CAB 28/3, IC 30, 3.

²¹ 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.

controlled the Italian Front since May 1915. The conversation then focused on liaison officers between the 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.²² 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.”²³ 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 Britain had warned Sonnino, Caporetto was “the natural result of the Russian collapse.”²⁴ 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

²² Sonnino, CAB 28/3, IC 30(a), 2.

²³ Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, 2318.

²⁴ Imperiali to Sonnino, 26 October 1917, DDI, 285.

strong defensive campaign.²⁵ Lloyd George asked how “the Germans could attack at a time of year when 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.²⁶ 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, then the Allies could have done the same. Allied support for General Cadorna in September, rather than continuing the attack at Passchendaele, might have achieved a more decisive result against Austria-Hungary. Although unlikely, these considerations demonstrated the possible value of focused coalition efforts on one front rather than dispersed over many. The Germans had just proven this very point at Caporetto. From this perspective, 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. Thus, the potential aid to Italy just offered a sufficient pretext for political machinations. 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

²⁵ Foch and Robertson, CAB 28/3, IC 30(a), 3-4.

²⁶ Lloyd George, CAB 28/3, IC 30(a), 4-5.

Front “was more grave than he had anticipated.”²⁷ 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.”²⁸ This remark 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 ... and to enable Italy to join the Allied council. However, even 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.²⁹ 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.”³⁰ 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

²⁷ 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.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Painlevé, CAB 28/3, IC 30(b), 2.

³⁰ Lloyd George, CAB 28/3, IC 30(b), 3.

impetus to introduce the scheme. 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 7th 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 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.³¹

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.”³² 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

³¹ Annex I, “Decisions of a Conference of Representatives of the British, French, and Italian Governments assembled at Rapallo on November 7, 1917,” CAB 28/3, IC 30(b), 17-18.

³² Sonnino, CAB 28/3, IC 30(b), 3.

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. Orlando recalled that he felt he had played the role of the patiently-suffering Christ at Gethsemane during the conference. In that case, 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.”³³ 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 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.”³⁴ The bulk of the fighting on the Western Front had been in France and therefore the French always had a strong motivation to unify multinational contingents under one French command. The British

³³ 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.

³⁴ 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.

simply could not replicate this attitude because no enemy force directly threatened their island home outside of the troublesome German U-boats. 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.”³⁵ 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.”³⁶ Writing the very day the Bolsheviks seized power in Petrograd, Sonnino probably worried that any attention given to the distant Russians distracted from the present needs of his own countrymen.³⁷ The Italian Foreign Minister also objected to the phrasing 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.³⁸ In reality, both of those reasons were true, but Sonnino could hardly pronounce that Italy had agreed to a unified Allied organization in

³⁵ Orlando, CAB 28/3, IC 30(c), 1.

³⁶ Sonnino, CAB 28/3, IC 30(c), 2.

³⁷ St. Petersburg, the Russian capital, was renamed to Petrograd in 1914 to avoid sounding too German during World War I. Eventually, the Bolsheviks settled on “Leningrad.”

³⁸ Ibid.

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.³⁹ 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.”⁴⁰ 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.

The year 1917, which had opened with such promise for the Allies, ended on a dismal note. Romania began negotiations with the Central Powers, Russia fell to the Bolsheviks, and now Italy faced complete collapse in the wake of Caporetto. Italy’s limited fighting experience on the Isonzo and in Albania had prevented the army from undergoing any doctrinal revival. However, that very same limited involvement made the Italian Front so appealing to Allied

³⁹ 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.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

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. The Italian Army had taken nearly 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.⁴¹

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

⁴¹ See Dennis Showalter, *Tannenberg: Clash of Empires, 1914* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1991). See Holger H. Herwig, *The Marne, 1914: The Opening of World War I and the Battle That Changed the World* (New York, NY: Random House, 2009).

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, its influence among her Allies had significantly increased. If anything, Britain and France made a concession by rushing their highest-ranking military and political leaders to Italy to ensure the post-Caporetto recovery.

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. Ominously, the Germans also used this time to train more stormtroopers for the coming offensive. This surety of a pending German attack in 1918 put a ticking clock on any Allied preparation. 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 in Italy 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 the nation expected to play in the upcoming debates. The arrival of the American Mission and then the Second, Third, and Fourth

Conferences of the SWC demonstrated 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. However, 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."⁴² 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, could 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.⁴³ 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 the Allied failure to win the war to that point. He agreed that "we have made mistakes" in the "unexplored country" of war. Nevertheless, these mistakes still gave Britain "an

⁴² 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, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 31-32.

⁴³ Frederick Palmer, *Bliss, Peacemaker: The Life and Letters of General Tasker Howard Bliss* (New York, NY: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1934), 186-187.

advantage in any conversation” with the inexperienced Americans.⁴⁴ 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 its part in the coalition so far.⁴⁵ As a result, he asked that the Americans send men to the front as soon as possible before nearly 80 German divisions transferred from the collapsing Eastern Front. The Italians had just used this same fearmongering tactic at Rapallo when they had repeatedly overestimated the size of the attacking 14th Army – and the Allies had roundly criticized the Italians for doing so. Clearly, the British saw no hypocrisy in applying the same technique to reinforcements in their own theater of operations. However, manpower remained only part of a larger problem. The shipping available to the Allies to move American personnel and equipment became a controversial issue throughout the coming winter months.⁴⁶ The meeting duly concluded with Sir Joseph Maclay, Britain’s Shipping Controller, speaking to Admiral William Benson, America’s Chief of Naval Operations. The chiefs agreed that 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.⁴⁷ 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.

⁴⁴ 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.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Josephus Daniels, “The United States Navy in the World War,” *The North Carolina Historical Review* 4, no. 1 (1927): 116-118. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23514645>.

⁴⁷ Sir Joseph Maclay to Admiral William Benson, CAB 28/3, IC 33, 9-10.

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.”⁴⁸ 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.⁴⁹ The British certainly had enough demands on their own naval power. 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 the Allies in fighting trim on the continent. This situation was not markedly different from previous British coalition strategies that balanced the maintenance of effective armies. The Duke of Wellington and 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 needed.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ 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.

⁴⁹ Lord Robert Cecil, CAB 28/3, IC 34, 2.

⁵⁰ John K. Ohl, “The Navy, the War Industries Board, and the Industrial Mobilization for War, 1917-1918,” *Military Affairs* 40, no. 1 (1976): 17–20. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1986844>. Randall B. Kester, “The War Industries Board, 1917-1918; A Study in Industrial Mobilization,” *The American Political Science Review* 34, no. 4 (1940): 657. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1947819>.

These early meetings demonstrated America's commitment to both work with its 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 that 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.⁵¹ The Allies, fearing the imminent withdrawal of the Russians from the war and the subsequent release of

⁵¹ The White Russians were 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.

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."⁵² 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, could 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.⁵³ Italy might seek to negotiate a truce with the Central Powers after Caporetto. Such an action would free up even more German divisions for action on the Western Front. 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, 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

⁵² 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.

⁵³ Sidney Sonnino, CAB 28/3, IC 35, 2.

any official public statement and admitted that the Allies had no true understanding of the breadth of Bolshevik support. He added that any action they took “might strengthen the Bolsheviks.”⁵⁴ 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.”⁵⁵ 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 by calling him 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. Any declaration would simply be turned against the Allies as propaganda by the Germans or the Bolsheviks. 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 minor Allied states showed a grasp of how weak powers negotiate in a coalition.⁵⁶ Britain and France had the power and influence to dictate policy to minor states like Romania and Serbia. Italy, however, did not, and therefore 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

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Paul C. Helmreich, “Italy and the Anglo-French Repudiation of the 1917 St. Jean de Maurienne Agreement,” *The Journal of Modern History* 48, no. 2 (1976): 123-135. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1877819>.

supported a statement that “could be so drafted as to hearten everyone, including the smaller Powers.”⁵⁷ 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.⁵⁸ 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 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.

⁵⁷ Edward House, CAB 28/3, IC 35, 3.

⁵⁸ 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.⁵⁹

This declaration contained very general language but no specifics to help 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.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ 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.

⁶⁰ 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 reestablished a legitimate government on their own would the Allies discuss war aims with them.⁶¹ 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.⁶² 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."⁶³ 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."⁶⁴

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

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² "Lord Lansdowne's Letter: Repudiation by Government," *The Times*, 1 December 1917, 9, The Times Digital Archive.

⁶³ Lloyd George, CAB 28/3, IC 35(a), 2-3.

⁶⁴ Sonnino and Pichon, CAB 28/3, IC 35(a), 3.

an armistice with Germany.⁶⁵ The Romanians had been steadily forced into a dwindling pocket in 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.⁶⁶ 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.⁶⁷ 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.

⁶⁵ Sonnino, CAB 28/3, IC 35(a), 6.

⁶⁶ Lloyd George and Georges Clemenceau, CAB 28/3, IC 35(a), 6.

⁶⁷ Pichon, CAB 28/3, IC 3 (a), 6-7.

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 military operations for the next year. Notably, he “suggested that the situation in Italy . . . should be the first and most urgent consideration.”⁶⁸ 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.”⁶⁹ 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.”⁷⁰ This public rebuke of the

⁶⁸ 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.

⁶⁹ Ludendorff, *Ludendorff’s Own Story*, vol. 2, 225.

⁷⁰ Lloyd George, CAB 28/3, IC 36, 2.

“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.⁷¹ 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. Nevertheless, Lloyd George could still use the shaping of strategy at Versailles to assert his own dominance over Robertson. Sensing an 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.”⁷² 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.⁷³ Orlando offered six transatlantic liners from Genoa that could carry 3,000 men in a single night from France.⁷⁴ 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

⁷¹ Woodward, *Lloyd George and the Generals*, 221.

⁷² Vittorio Orlando, CAB 28/3, IC 36, 3.

⁷³ Lloyd George, CAB 28/3, IC 36, 3.

⁷⁴ Orlando, CAB 28/3, IC 36,3.

counterpart that “it was Italy that was under discussion” – not transportation everywhere.⁷⁵

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.⁷⁶

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 argue against many of the pet projects 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

These conferences demonstrated the utility of the Italians as weak yet useful coalition partners. 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 would respond to any future German attack. The effort to provide organized countermeasures met with as much resistance and debate as any other combined campaign of World War I. The Italians again played a central part in the

⁷⁵ Clemenceau, CAB 28/3, IC 36, 3.

⁷⁶ Resolution Number 6, CAB 28/3, IC 36, 4.

debate over Allied strategy for 1918. These debates ensured a primacy at the postwar negotiating table for a state that had just recently appeared on the verge of total collapse or withdrawal from the war.

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.”⁷⁷ Lloyd George had rejected a similar proposal by the Italians to integrate Allied reinforcements directly into the Italian Army.⁷⁸ The debates at the 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

⁷⁷ 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.

⁷⁸ Stephen J. Lofgren, “Unready for War: The Army and World War I,” *Army History*, no. 22 (1992): 14-15. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26302891>.

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.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, Pershing rejected any effort to speed up American arrival in France by sending individual U.S. battalions directly to Allied divisions. He allowed 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 first underwent an extensive training regimen. Thus, the Allies could not fully count on inexperienced American troops as cannon fodder for the first part of 1918. Without the AEF, the Allies had to find other options to counter any coming German offensive.

Italian reinforcements thus offered the opportunity to fill the temporary gaps on the Western Front. Such requests demonstrated the resilience of the stabilized strategic situation in Italy. Troops should now head in the opposite direction to defend France. 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, multinational reserve force. General Foch opened the conference by acknowledging the vulnerability of the lengthy Allied defensive position “from Nieuwpoort to Venice.”⁸⁰ 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

⁷⁹ Henry Wilson, CAB 28/3, IC 38, 2.

⁸⁰ 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.

a reserve to transition into a general Allied counter-offensive.⁸¹ 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, both disagreed with any scheme that drew more divisions away from their respective fronts.⁸² Instead, Pétain acknowledged that “he would have an army ready to support Sir Douglas Haig in an emergency” and vice versa.⁸³ 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.

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.⁸⁴ However, since

⁸¹ Orlando and Cadorna, CAB 28/3, IC 39, 5. The Allies did indeed launch a massive counterattack after defeating the German Spring and Summer Offensives of 1918.

⁸² Haig and Pétain, CAB 28/3, IC 39, 5-6.

⁸³ Elizabeth Greenhalgh, “Myth and Memory: Sir Douglas Haig and the Imposition of Allied Unified Command in March 1918,” *The Journal of Military History* 68, no. 3 (2004): 773-774. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3396728>.

⁸⁴ 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.

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.⁸⁵ 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.”⁸⁶ Sonnino had opposed almost every declaration from the Second Session, but he now wanted a public statement on American manpower. This tactic probably sought 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. Any sort of verbal commitment could also be used to their advantage in the decisive year of the war.

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 must 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. Permanent Military Advisors of the SWC needed to define their roles

⁸⁵ Sonnino, CAB 28/3, IC 40, 13.

⁸⁶ Bliss, CAB 28/3, IC 40, 16.

more clearly. They were, after all, advisors only – each without a place in his nation’s chain of command. 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.⁸⁷ 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.⁸⁸ 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* to take the initiative in any proposal with this object.⁸⁹ (Italics added)

To this statement, Sonnino asked that the word “equally” be added before the word “entitled.”⁹⁰ 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

⁸⁷ 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.

⁸⁸ Lloyd George, CAB 28/3, IC 41, 19.

⁸⁹ Clemenceau, CAB 28/3, IC 41, 19.

⁹⁰ Sonnino, CAB 28/3, IC 41, 19.

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. The military representatives, nominally outside of the chain of command of their own nations’ armies, did not know what to “do if they required an immediate decision from the Supreme War Council in the intervals” between meetings.⁹¹ 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 if a German attack succeeded and paralyzed the SWC from responding quickly. In this way, the Italians still maintained the focus on limited objectives of reconquering lost territory to the Isonzo River before pushing further northeast.

Individual field commanders might also not respond to immediate requests for aid from their neighbors. After all, any general usually needed to defend their own position before

⁹¹ Cadorna, CAB 28/3, IC 41, 19.

reinforcing another one. Lloyd George shared Cadorna's fears and worried that both Haig and Pétain would look mainly to their own positions during any German offensive.⁹² 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."⁹³ 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."⁹⁴ 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.⁹⁵ Robertson generally agreed but doubted that the Allies could afford to pull enough units away from the front lines to form a reserve. The

⁹² Lloyd George, CAB 28/3, IC 41, 21.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Cadorna, CAB 28/3, IC 41, 22.

⁹⁵ 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.

CIGS believed that most Allied troops “were needed where they were, except in Italy.”⁹⁶

Although he had always been opposed to sending troops to Italy, even after Caporetto, Robertson had no 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 by 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.⁹⁷ 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

⁹⁶ Robertson, CAB 28/3, IC 42, 30-31.

⁹⁷ Cadorna, CAB 28/3, IC 42, 31.

their government” in the event of a crisis.⁹⁸ 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 some much-desired responsibility in the coalition.⁹⁹ The Italians could make up part of the General Reserve even if it prioritized the Western Front over the Italian one. Lloyd George believed they could, since there were 1,440,000 Allied troops on the Italian front facing an estimated 860,000 enemy soldiers.¹⁰⁰ 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.¹⁰¹ 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 would help fill Haig’s depleted ranks.¹⁰² 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.

⁹⁸ CAB 28/3, IC 42, 38-39.

⁹⁹ Bliss, CAB 28/3, IC 42, 34.

¹⁰⁰ Lloyd George, CAB 28/3, IC 42, 41.

¹⁰¹ Orlando, CAB 28/3, IC 42, 42.

¹⁰² Lloyd George, CAB 28/3, IC 42, 54.

Thus, the Italians could reorient their objectives on seizing lost ground before pushing for expansion into Austrian-held lands in Veneto and Trieste. Orlando asked if the SWC wanted to discuss operations in Salonika, but Clemenceau said this discussion was better left to the military representatives.¹⁰³ 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 considered by the Supreme War Council but should be relegated.”¹⁰⁴ 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

¹⁰³ Orlando and Clemenceau, CAB 28/3, IC 42, 56.

¹⁰⁴ Sonnino, CAB 28/3, IC 42, 56-57.

ideological speechmaking of his allies, which left the Italians feeling “that they had been rather left out in the cold.”¹⁰⁵ 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 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.¹⁰⁶ This outright declaration of Italian ambitions unfortunately marred their clever handling of most of the SWC’s more complex issues. Although its 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. Instead, reconquering the territory lost after Caporetto provided Italian policymakers with a narrower and more achievable strategic direction.

Fears of a German Spring

The fear of the impending German offensive strained the relationships of all the Allied powers. The Fourth Session of the Supreme War Council ended a week before the start of the

¹⁰⁵ 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.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

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 multinational 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 unleashed 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 in France. However, despite this military weakness the Italians themselves had demonstrated during the winter conferences that they could play an active role in shaping Allied military strategy. By shifting attention away from Eastern European considerations, Orlando 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 took 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 when the war ended. Instead, he waded into Paris like a conquering hero intent on dictating terms to both the Allies and the Central Powers. 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 its post-war demands. These contravening approaches to strategic debates bode ill for the future of both nations.

Chapter 7 - Caporetto and the End of World War I (February – November 1918)

The promises of winter quickly melted with the bitter truths of spring. The Allies remained woefully unprepared to conduct a combined 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 year of the war. The British and French sought desperately to hold onto their defensive positions. Meanwhile, the Italians benefitted from having shifted some of the pressure of the conflict away from their own front lines. They could sit on the defensive against a much reduced Austro-Hungarian position and bide their time before counterattacking to recover the lands lost after Caporetto. At the same time, exasperation with Italian inaction promised an end to the special relationship with Britain, especially when Rome's postwar demands exceeded its supposed utility to the Allied war effort.

In short, the Italians lost out on the advantages they had gained ever since the Rapallo Conference but still managed to achieve their political aims. 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. Italy 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.

Thus, Italy's role in the Supreme War Council gradually weakened 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 came at the same time that it had become more important to its 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 major events of the first German attack – Operation Michael – and the subsequent panic led the British and French to accept a unified command under Foch. Then, 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 its 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 17th Army and Oskar von Hutier commanding the 18th 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."¹ 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).² A salient defended by the British Fifth Army, itself overstretched and undermanned as Haig's southernmost unit, provided an excellent target for German stormtroopers. The decision to attack

¹ Foch, *Memoirs*, 248-249.

² Ludendorff, *Ludendorff's Own Story*, vol. 1, preface, and vol. 2, 220-221.

the British instead of the French had not just practical but also moral implications. Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg believed that the obstinacy of British 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.”³ The Fifth Army withdrew in the face of enormous German pressure that drove the British southern flank away from the French. Disaster seemed 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.⁴ 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.⁵ 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 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,” which had “ceased to exist.”⁶ 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

³ Hindenburg, *Out of My Life*, vol. 2, 136-137, 158.

⁴ Tasker H. Bliss, “The Evolution of the Unified Command,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 1, no. 2 (15 December 1922): 25-26, JSTOR.

⁵ Middlebrook, *Kaiser’s Battle*, 309, 346.

⁶ 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. Philippe Pétain, CAB 28/3, IC 53, 2.

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.”⁷ Nevertheless, Field Marshal Haig, General Wilson, and Lord Milner all proved amenable to the idea of placing Foch in some type of overall 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.”⁸ 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.”⁹ 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.”¹⁰ The scrabbling for control over combined strategy desperately continued as the Germans made frightful progress on the Western Front.

The Doullens Conference marked the beginning of Italy’s decline in the Supreme War Council and the alliance structure of the western powers. Orlando had no representatives and no role in either the 26 March meeting or the subsequent conference with the Americans at Beauvais in April. The immediate emergency prevailed over broader themes of coalition strategy when the

⁷ Bliss, “The Evolution of the Unified Command,” 28.

⁸ Lord Milner, CAB 28/3, IC 53, 3.

⁹ Clemenceau, CAB 28/3, IC 53, 5.

¹⁰ Haig, CAB 28/3, IC 53, 5.

Italian Army could not suddenly reorient to another front. General Diaz's forces were still smarting from their reverse in October 1917. 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 fortifications.¹¹ 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. This statement should not be seen as an outright criticism of British and French actions. Their ability to work together ultimately prevailed against the might of the German stormtroopers.

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

¹¹ Foch, *Memoirs*, 357. Elizabeth Greenhalgh, *The French Army and the First World War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 289.

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."¹² 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 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."¹³ 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."¹⁴ The Beauvais agreement eventually superseded the one at Doullens with the inclusion of American support into the original deal:

¹² 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.

¹³ Lloyd George, CAB 28/3, IC 55(a), 2-3.

¹⁴ Pershing and Bliss, CAB 28/3, IC 55(a), 3.

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 order received from General Foch.¹⁵

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 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

¹⁵ CAB 28/3, IC 55(a), 4.

newly-arrived units from the east.¹⁶ 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 German Failures

The Italian desire to focus on their own objectives ensured their primacy in some negotiations even with the onset of increased American power. 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 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."¹⁷ Nor would these troops be wasted on the Italian Front. 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

¹⁶Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War* (New York, NY: The Penguin Press, 1999), 293-294. Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory*, 444.

¹⁷ 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.

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.¹⁸ 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 by 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.¹⁹ Orlando, sensing his opportunity to begin shaping Allied strategy again while the Italians continued defending Albania, asked “what would the Serbians do if the Allies abandoned Monastir and the forward lines?”²⁰ With the drawing down of Central Powers’ operations in Russia and Romania, the Allies had few secondary fronts on the continent to distract Germany and its 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

¹⁸ Lloyd George, CAB 28/3, IC 57, 6-7.

¹⁹ Foch, Clemenceau, and Wilson, CAB 28/3, IC 57, 11-12.

²⁰ Orlando, CAB 28/3, IC 57, 13.

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.²¹ 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 telegraphed this request to General Diaz “who had replied that it was not at present possible to release further divisions.”²² 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 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

²¹ Ibid., 15.

²² Mario di Robilant, CAB 28/3, IC 57, 16.

the Executive War Board to General Foch” and the “entrusting of command to General Foch when two armies cooperate in a great battle.”²³ 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. Foch could thus transfer Italian reserve divisions to the Western Front in response to a major German offensive. The Beauvais agreement implied he could. However, Orlando wondered “what *was* the right interpretation of the Beauvais agreement?”²⁴ 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 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.

²³ Orlando, CAB 28/3, IC 57, 17.

²⁴ Ibid., 18. Italicization is mine.

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, 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.”²⁵ However, 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.²⁶ 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.”²⁷ Although Italian real military power on the ground still dwarfed that of the AEF, American

²⁵ 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 2nd May of 1918, at 11:35 a.m.,” 20-22.

²⁶ Clemenceau, CAB 28/3, IC 58, 26-27.

²⁷ Ibid.

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.²⁸ 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.²⁹ 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 its allies, the Great Power still loomed large in any multinational 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

²⁸ Foch and Lloyd George, CAB 28/3, IC 58, 27-28.

²⁹ Orlando, CAB 28/3, IC 58, 28-29. Foch, *Memoirs*, 277.

Italian Army.³⁰ 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 1917.³¹ 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.

The War's End

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

³⁰ 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 2nd May of 1918, at 2:45 p.m.," 33.

³¹ Foch, *Memoirs*, 278, 349. Gooch, *Italian Army in World War I*, 278.

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 perspective of Italy's military performance in 1918. Instead, Italy ended the war as it had begun the conflict: looking out for its own self-interest above every other obligation. When Italy had been hard-pressed in November 1917, the country had managed to recover the situation partly on its own, but also with faithful allies who came running to provide immediate assistance. Indeed, Italy's proximity to the Western Front had allowed it 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.³² 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 its ability to demand territory in any post-war settlement.³³ By August, Germany's manpower was spent, and the Allies transitioned into their own Hundred Days Offensive that ended the war.³⁴ 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.

³² Ibid.

³³ Gooch, *Italian Army in World War I*, 281-282, 284.

³⁴ Ibid.

Italian weakness at the Versailles Conference, and in the immediate post-war world, did not occur just 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 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. Nevertheless, 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 8 - Conclusion

The Disastrous Fascist Experiment

An Italian strategic culture that took advantage of catastrophic defeats to achieve foreign policy aims was not indefinitely sustainable. In particular, this system relied on having strong enough partners in the international system whose temporary vulnerabilities in some way depended on Italian support and vice-versa. Ironically, a militarily stronger fascist state started losing its diplomatic ability to manipulate stronger powers. Benito Mussolini's attempts to chart a more independent foreign policy during the 1920s and 1930s did not significantly differ from Italian objectives in Africa in the 1890s and past the Isonzo River during World War I. Certainly the political style changed, but the same internal weaknesses plagued both liberal and fascist governments. Mussolini's shift away from a British-French alignment in favor of an alliance with Nazi Germany did not on its own mark the end of Italy as a Great Power.¹ However, the scope of Italian military defeats from 1940 through 1945 far outweighed the disasters at Adwa and Caporetto both in size and in impact. Ultimately, the Italians vacillated between two alliance systems during World War II, and both these coalitions occupied and fought over the peninsula. These twin occupations and the divided governments served as weak proxies dominated by either Germany or the Western Allies. Thus, the Italians lacked the ability to even define a unified foreign policy let alone an independent one. From that perspective, World War II and its aftermath marked the end of the European Great Power system in favor of a bipolar superpower world led by the United States and the Soviet Union.

¹ Norman Kogan, *The Politics of Italian Foreign Policy* (New York, NY: Praeger, 1963), 31.

The military history of Italy in World War II from 1940 to 1943 was marred by an inability to match objectives to realistic aims, by an economy and society ill-equipped to wage modern war, and by sheer incompetence. Italian forces had already achieved their greatest victories before 1940 with the conquests of Albania and Ethiopia, as well as the intervention in the Spanish Civil War. However, the high-water mark of Italy's involvement in World War II was its declaration of war on 10 June 1940. This pronouncement banked on an ultimate Axis victory after the fall of France and the ignominious flight of the British Expeditionary Force from Dunkirk. Instead, the Italian military suffered one disastrous defeat after another upon tying its fate to that of Nazi Germany: the loss of Italian East Africa, the destruction of the 10th Army in Egypt, the Greek counterattack into Albania, the loss of three battleships in the embarrassing Taranto raid, and eventually the loss of Libya before an invasion of Sicily that toppled Benito Mussolini's regime.² Most of these defeats came at the hands of the British who had moved further away from the fascist government.

Interestingly, the British in the 1890s feared to speak out against Prime Minister Crispi's ambitions in Africa much the same way that the British in 1935 refused to take steps to stop Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia.³ In both cases, the British were worried of the potential ramifications should the monarchy of a weak power fall and be replaced by a more hostile form of government. In addition, Italy's position from the 1890s to the 1930s was one of a useful continental counterweight for other powers in the sphere of international diplomacy. Setbacks like Adwa and Caporetto increased Italy's position as a liability that needed to be resolved, and

² MacGregor Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed 1939-1941: Politics and Strategy in Fascist Italy's Last War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 288-289.

³ Pankhurst, "British Reaction to the Battle of Adwa," 219.

thus proportionally increased the diplomatic leverage of Italian policymakers at a time of perceived weakness. However, this system eventually could not continue once radical political change took place in Rome.

Strategic cultures change over time and space. Nations might have a particular way of waging war for a certain time, and that can adjust as needed to adapt to internal demands and external pressures. Thus, Robert Citino argued that Germany's "Way of War" of operational maneuver to achieve decisive victories ended in December 1941. Adolf Hitler took direct control of the German war effort in the east in the aftermath of the failure to conquer Moscow and the Soviet winter counteroffensive.⁴ Citino's analysis sought to contextualize and connect 300 years of Prussian-German strategic culture. Citino thus tapped into a common Western interpretation of military history that viewed the Germans as masters of operational warfare. He also looked at the major issues inherent in this warlike culture so he could explain why the Prussians and the Germans did fail spectacularly on many occasions. In contrast, the Italians effectively manipulated stronger powers to achieve some limited aims. However, the Italians were succored in some way by the British in 1896 and by the Western Allies from 1917 to 1918. Therefore, no interpretation of the military history since the *Risorgimento* can honestly assess the Italian state as a military powerhouse capable of independent grand strategy. Nevertheless, the use of internal politics and external diplomacy did give the young country the ability to punch above its weight on the international sphere. The collective acceptance of Italy as a Great Power conveyed enormous prestige and influence. In contrast, as soon as the Great Powers stopped propping up the Ottoman Empire then Russia, Austria-Hungary, Italy, and the Balkan minors began carving

⁴ Citino, *The German Way of War*, 302-305.

chunks from the Sick Man of Europe. The perception of a nation as a useful ally or partner made all the difference in these calculations.

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.⁵ However, this narrative ignored 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, a vast empire, and failed to impose the partition on Anatolia despite financing much of the wartime coalition. If Italy could accuse its allies of abandonment after being a faithful partner, the Allies themselves could and did likewise blame each other for failing to achieve all their objectives. 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."⁶

⁵ Gabrielle D'Annunzio, *La Reggenza Italiana del Carnaro: Disegno di un Nuovo Ordinamento dello Stato Libero di Fiume* (Fiume, IT: 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.

⁶ Benito Mussolini, *My Rise and Fall* (New York, NY: Da Capo Press, 1998), 56, 62.

Yet there was 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 it 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 could not embrace large-scale mechanized forces capable of modern warfare.⁷ The failure of Italian mechanization went beyond industrial output or strategic incompetence. Italian society itself was not prepared to accept motorization, or the complete integration of motor vehicles as part of the fabric of everyday life. Thus, the Italian military lacked the cultural impetus to change to a radically new style of warfare, even though the Italians produced a sophisticated armored doctrine and even the first armored corps.⁸ The criticism of wartime armies ignored the reality that the debate of the mechanization of military forces had been the single most important consideration of the interwar period yet the least studied aspect of the postwar era.⁹ This theoretical approach put every Great Power – including Italy – on an equal footing because no one nation's ideas on armored warfare had been proved or disproved yet. The

⁷ John Sweet, *Iron Arm: The Mechanization of Mussolini's Army, 1920-1940* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1980), ix.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 3, 33-34.

⁹ *Ibid.*, ix.

brittleness of Italy's "Iron Arm" came not just from poor tank quality but also from a broader governmental and societal failure to adapt to the new sinews of modern total war.

The legacy of Fascist Italy's failures meant that historians underestimated its brutality, its ambitions, and particularly "the degree of domestic support its aims enjoyed until their final price became fully apparent."¹⁰ However, Mussolini, the Italian military, and the Italian people themselves were all complicit in the rise and fall of the fascist experiment. Any depiction of Italy as a bumbling and harmless auxiliary of Nazi Germany downplayed the bloodshed in the territories that Hitler *allowed* Mussolini to occupy.¹¹ A combination of Mussolini's "military dilettantism" combined with a tradition of martial disasters to prevent any significant success in the war.¹² The weight of Liberal Italy's defeats at Lissa, Adwa, and Caporetto prevented the development of a serious, professional officer corps willing to study and learn from its mistakes. Ultimately, these foundational institutional weaknesses prevented Italy from waging a modern war that its own people had supported from the very beginning.

Mussolini's inconsistent policy aims and erratic strategies resembled a man swept up in events rather than firmly in control of them. Italian generals and admirals were complicit in developing a haphazard foreign policy as well as the unrealistic strategies employed to achieve those objectives.¹³ Mussolini could direct his generals but not entirely control them. Thus, the military and political leadership of the country all failed as a collective group to prepare Italy for war and to wage a war that they chose to join. In that sense, Mussolini bore remarkable similarities to Crispi in 1895 and Sonnino in 1915 for their shortsighted approaches to the start of

¹⁰ Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed*, 1, 5.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹² *Ibid.*, 7, 16.

¹³ John Gooch, *Mussolini and his Generals* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 2-3, 519.

military conflict. Mussolini could not be studied as a policymaker in isolation from his upbringing and surroundings. Even if he was the leading figure in Italian politics for nearly two decades, he never wielded absolute power especially during his country's poor performance in the war. Because of this weakness, Mussolini never attempted to integrate the armed services through some type of joint staff that could develop Italian grand strategy and potentially threaten his increasingly-tenuous hold on power.¹⁴ Italy's declaration of war in June 1940 involved an abortive expedition into France and then months of waiting for supplies to build up in Egypt and Greece, even though Italy had chosen to declare war without being fully prepared to attack. Gooch and particularly Bosworth showed some empathy for Mussolini's plight as a weak strongman, but not without accurately portraying Italy's problems in the war as self-inflicted by both the dictator and commanders whom he appointed to their posts.

The efficacy of Mussolini, his generals, and Italian war planning remained a matter of much controversy. There was a significant lack of operational planning in the 1920s to back up Mussolini's increasingly bellicose rhetoric.¹⁵ Yes, the Italian military developed plenty of contingency plans for possible operations in Turkey, the Balkans, and elsewhere in the Mediterranean as political opportunities opened and closed. However, effective planning went beyond developing options.¹⁶ After all, plans could be easily made and cast aside just as quickly, especially in peacetime. Mussolini and his generals shared equal responsibility in developing improbable objectives based on Italy's military power. Mussolini's "absurd" dreams of a new Roman Empire launched his legions into one theater after another without ever pausing or trying

¹⁴ Bosworth, *Mussolini*, 372.

¹⁵ Gooch, *Mussolini and his Generals*, 520. H. James Burgwyn, *Italian Foreign Policy in the Interwar Period: 1918-1940* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997), 35.

¹⁶ Gooch, *Mussolini and his Generals*, 521.

to learn from his mistakes.¹⁷ The generals tacitly went along with Mussolini's decision to declare war on the Allies, but their foot dragging in the summer of 1940 seemed to indicate some reluctance to fully engage in Italian policy aims.

The Army's failure to impose effective administrations in the Balkans ensured the development of robust partisans to oppose the Italians, and nearly 850,000 soldiers served in occupation duties throughout the war.¹⁸ This number represented almost two-thirds of all Italian troops serving overseas in World War II, and was a clear indictment of the nation's priorities despite the seesaw campaign in North Africa from 1940 to 1943. Italian occupiers, while they were never as brutal as their German allies, they still established a brutal system of repression that rarely intimidated the well-equipped and motivated partisans.¹⁹ In addition, the Germans severely restricted Italian economic exploitation in occupied areas for the sake of political harmony, only to turn around and capture most of the deployed Italian soldiers in the fall of 1943 when Italy abandoned the Axis.²⁰ Although the Italians were the aggressors in many of these occupied areas, they also were one of the few peoples to be victimized by nearly every other European power on both sides during the war. Eventually, even the soldiers and committed nationalists turned against a regime fighting a seemingly meaningless and increasingly difficult war. The draining of Italian morale at home and in occupied areas must also be seen in concert with the serious issues in leadership, industrial capacity, and military strength to provide a clearer picture of how the country failed in World War II.

¹⁷ H. James Burgwyn, *Mussolini Warlord: Failed Dreams of Empire 1940-1943* (New York, NY: Enigma Books, 2012),

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 132.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 142-143.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 410.

Foundational military campaigns before unification demonstrated how powerful and important the Italian city-states were in the early modern period.²¹ “Italy” as a geographical area existed for thousands of years and had a more varied – and successful – military tradition than the nation founded in 1861. Italy possessed some state-of-the-art equipment and powerful economic interests that monopolized major arms contracts for their own benefits.²² Nevertheless, the nation lacked the raw materials to maintain production in the wake of heavy losses, and Mussolini had no coherent strategy but instead relied on “shortsighted political tricks” to move military forces into areas after the main battles were already done.²³ Thus, Mussolini operated on the style of the military bluff and could not successfully prosecute a real war without intense German assistance that cost him his independence. Therefore, no amount of manipulation could have made fascist Italy a more capable nation at war. The 1940s represented a significant shift in Italian power projection and effective strategic culture.

Italian industrial weaknesses and material deficiencies dramatically underwhelmed when compared to the massive production of the United States and the Soviet Union. The home front at least held together from 1940 to the summer of 1943 before the collapse of the first fascist regime.²⁴ By that point, Italy might have actually been more inclined to fight the Germans instead of the naval and economic strength of Britain and the United States.²⁵ Military

²¹ Ciro Paoletti, *A Military History of Italy* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2008), x-xi.

²² *Ibid.*, 167, 168-169.

²³ *Ibid.*, 170.

²⁴ Gerhard L. Weinberg, *A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 485.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 483, 484.

incompetence, poor planning, and the overreliance on German aid all doomed the Italian war effort.²⁶

American rearmament and Soviet survival in 1941 enabled their coalition to learn the hard lessons of coordinating strategy while improving their proficiency at the tactical and operational levels of war.²⁷ American and Soviet production vastly outmatched the combination of Germany and Japan. Italy, as the weakest of the Great Powers in the Axis coalition, did not bear much consideration. The nation could not stop British submarines in the Mediterranean nor the bombing of key cities. Even a sophisticated doctrine on armored warfare could do little on the battlefield because of inferior tank models and a severe shortage of motorized equipment for desert warfare.²⁸ Italy was simply not capable of waging modern war. After 1943, when the tide of the war turned decisively against the Axis powers, Adolf Hitler came to criticize Mussolini more and more as one of the principal men responsible for Germany's failures in the war.²⁹ In addition, all three of the main Axis powers went to war of their own accord to achieve independent objectives. The lack of Axis unity bore little resemblance to the cooperation the Italians could engender after Adwa and Caporetto. In World War II, Italian production and overcommitment to multiple fronts stretched out its forces too thinly. In addition, the nation lacked both the production capacity for war but also the space, time, and leadership to study and adapt to the lessons of the early stages of the war.

The Italian unwillingness to wage modern war and its inability to do so on a scale that could match their allies greatly aided the Allied powers. Italian institutional failures also

²⁶ Ibid., 211-212.

²⁷ Ibid., 5-6, 7.

²⁸ Ibid., 220-221.

²⁹ Ibid., 220.

explained Italy's poor performance in the war. No amount of economic superiority would have any benefit to the Allies unless they learned to use their industrial power on the battlefield. The Allied ability to adapt after poor performances early in the war greatly differed from the Italians. Italian ineptitude played a special part in this recovery because, while the French lost due to "military ineptitude" in 1940 and the Soviets suffered from "political ineptitude" in 1941, the Italians "displayed both military and political incompetence."³⁰ Ironically, the supposed brilliance and professionalism of German operational planning never brought them any closer to victory in the war, either. Regardless, when Marshal Pietro Badoglio replaced Mussolini and attempted to navigate Italy's exit from the war, he bungled it because he "was the last person capable of leading Italy out of the war without wrecking the country."³¹ Badoglio had worked hard to divest himself of any blame as a corps commander at Caporetto in 1917, he had failed to prepare the Italian military for war in the 1930s, and he had blundered in the opening stages of the war when Italy held a comparative numerical advantage. Badoglio's failures were not unique but instead representative of an entire military culture that could not get out from under its own legacy of defeat.

There has not been an increase in sympathy for the Italian military experience in World War II because Fascist Italy lost the war in 1943, and then a partially-liberated Italy did little to help the Allies in securing their own peninsula. Historians did not hesitate to criticize Italy's military performance. The Italians certainly deserved this harsh criticism because they chose to wage an aggressive war on the side of Nazi Germany. However, Italy's unique position made it

³⁰ Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millet, *A War to be Won: Fighting the Second World War* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000), 26.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 375.

the victim of every other major power throughout the war. The tragedy of this experience was perhaps more terrible because the Italians chose to enter the war and then immediately regretted their collective support for this decision. However, the suffering of the Italian people paled in comparison to the genocide in Poland, Russia, and China. In addition, the Italians fought very poorly in World War II thanks to the institutional legacies of failure inherent in the military itself.³² Nevertheless, societal weaknesses and experiences in the war turned the population and soldiers against the war effort.

Italy's defeats in the war challenged its relationship with the other Axis powers. Initially, Hitler had little interest in Mussolini's campaigns. Nevertheless, the disastrous Italian offensives in Egypt and Greece forced Germany to respond and save its foundering ally in early 1941. German forces occupied territories for the Italians, and significant German units were placed under the nominal command of the *Commando Supremo*. In *Hitler's Empire: How the Nazis Ruled Europe*, Mark Mazower pointed out that Italy might have been weaker than Germany and Japan, but it was significantly more powerful than Hungary, Bulgaria, or Romania. If Italian defeats forced the Germans to consider the Italians more closely out of fear of losing the war sooner, then Italian weaknesses actually had a significant impact at *increasing* Italy's influence within the European Axis. Future histories of Italian military history in World War II should not simply address the well-studied defeats in and around the Mediterranean, but instead look at the value of those defeats in shaping Axis coalition policy and strategies.

³² That is not to say that Italian *soldiers* fought poorly all the time (though they often did) or that there were no moments of individual bravery and competence. However, this justification can also be applied to every other country in World War II. Therefore, there is a general consensus borne out by the historiography that Italy simply did not fight very well.

The End of the System

The legend of Italian incompetence since unification in the 1860s runs deep in western histories. The country always had greater ambitions than its people could realistically achieve. This paradox between ends and means haunted Italian efforts to take their supposedly deserved place among the world's great powers and resulted in a series of disasters that were sometimes rescued by stronger allies. The weak liberal regime after the Risorgimento bumbled through a revolving-door of leaders selected largely for their connection to the unification. Disastrous experiences in Africa and during World War I finally brought an end to liberalism and the birth of fascism. Although Benito Mussolini offered a new vision of a youthful, energetic nation reclaiming the lost glories of Rome, he failed even more miserably than his predecessors. These generalizations of Italy's botched foreign policy also impacted how historians studied other elements of Italian society and culture.

Italian political revivals after catastrophic defeats enabled the achievement of specific foreign policy aims. After Adwa, political and military leaders stabilized a tenuous position on the Eritrean border. Prime Minister di Rudini and General Baldissera threatened a continuation of the war with Ethiopia at the same as they negotiated peace. In addition, seemingly meaningless border towns like Kassala gained importance as symbols of some semblance of power projection. Kitchener's campaign in the Sudan in particular marked a significant evolution of Anglo-Italian relations. Likewise, Italian negotiations with France eventually calmed the relatively hostile nature of their relationship since the Tunisian Slap and Rome's joining of the Triple Alliance in 1882. A long period of military reform also increased the capabilities of land, naval, and newfound aerial forces to resume offensive action in Africa by 1911. The recalibration of limited foreign policies thus gave way again to a misguided belief in the

capability of solitary imperial offensives. Thus, Italy went to war against the Ottoman Empire in Libya in 1911 and against Austria-Hungary in 1915.

Italian offensive actions on the Isonzo River in World War I bore remarkable similarities to the static trench warfare of the Western Front. Early Allied setbacks slowly gave the Italians some more importance in the war. This importance allowed the Italians to press for offensives in the Balkans and against Trieste in support of their territorial aims. However, major Allied setbacks in Serbia, Romania, and Russia slowly reduced the pressure on the Central Powers from the East. These issues provided a temporary primacy for the Italians by the fall of 1917 when the Battle of Caporetto spelled disaster. Nevertheless, a new Italian government and military structure stabilized the front lines and played a critical role in the creation of a new Supreme War Council. The Italians therefore solidified coalition grand strategy before the weight of American reinforcements decisively tipped the scales against the German offensives of 1918.

Caporetto, like most 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 Italy. 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 initial actions of the Supreme War Council. They preferred 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. However, 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.

Most historians take up the post-war acrimony and battle over memoirs to show the primacy of their particular subject matter. In this way, the historiography of a subject expands and provides for interpretations of the same event. My work is no different, but it is based on certain assumptions. First, the Italians did suffer humiliating defeats at places like Adwa and Caporetto. The stain of these legacies helped create a myth of the Italians as possessing a strategic culture of shifting alliances and militarily incompetence. However, The Italians were not alone in suffering defeats in colonial conflicts or during world wars. The nation was also never removed from the collective acceptance of “Great Power status” by its stronger neighbors until the end of World War II. Thus, the Italians could and did manipulate stronger powers by using the threat of their own defeat to achieve more limited foreign policy aims.

Future historians can use this framework to reevaluate the significance of temporary tactical defeats for weak powers that then adjust their policymaking and strategic planning. The reevaluation of decisive Italian defeats thus has a broader meaning to the study of history. More importantly, this argument challenges the largely accepted mythmaking inherent in commonly accepted perceptions of the militaries of different states. Our most important job as instructors and scholars is to expand the common understanding of history for the broader public to go beyond myths.³³ That weak states have an influence on stronger ones is not an inherently new argument. Likewise, weak states can struggle with the application of their more limited instruments of national power in terms of implementing national strategy to achieve policy aims. However, these states can appear stronger if battlefield defeats are placed in the larger context of

³³ Michael Howard, “The Use and Abuse of Military History,” *Parameters* 11, no. 1 (1981).

international relations. The need to rescue a weak ally or to prevent a dangerous power vacuum in the wake of a military disaster suddenly lends more importance to a previously ignorable power.

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