The Italian army was an extension of the Piedmontese army that had overseen unification. From the 1870s, it was reorganized along German lines as a conscript force based on three years’ military service, but with 12 Army Corps and a quarter of a million men, it outstripped its resources in training and equipment. In an attempt to forge a truly national force, regiments were recruited across regions and often changed their urban headquarters, the elite Alpine units being the only exception to this rule. State expenditure on the armed forces was heavy for a country as poor as Italy – some 24 percent of the budget between unification and World War I – but this was still only half the total of French military expenditure and a third that of Germany. The officer corps was small (about 15,000 in 1910) but of good quality.

The prewar army had three essential roles. The first was to complete national unity by expelling the Austro-Hungarian occupant from the Trentino and the Veneto, in the north and northeast. This was the basis of the unsuccessful war fought for the Veneto in 1866 (whose incorporation was achieved by diplomatic, not military means) and of the successful seizure of Rome as the capital during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. The second role was counter-insurgency in the so-called “war on banditry,” against southern resistance to inclusion in the new state, and in other actions against domestic dissidence. Finally, the army pursued Italy’s colonial agenda, again unsuccessfully in the case of the humiliating defeat by Ethiopian forces at Adua in 1896, and more successfully (though against stiff opposition) in the war against Turkey for Libya in October 1911.

The Triple Alliance with Germany and Austria-Hungary, which Italy entered in 1882, ended the country’s international isolation and offered a counterweight to France, which had seized Tunisia as a colony from under Italy’s nose in 1881. However, Italy feared lest the alliance should be turned against Great Britain, soon to become Germany’s major rival, with whom Italy had no quarrel. When from the early 1900s it became preoccupied with Austria-Hungary’s predicament in the Balkans, Italy became even more uncomfortable. It was enjoying improved relations with France, had its own aspirations in the Balkans, and was under increasing domestic pressure from irredentist claims by Italian nationalists on Trentino and Trieste that were directed openly against Austria-Hungary. In effect, the alliance had entered a state of unspoken crisis. This did not affect military planning. In June 1913, Italy signed a naval convention with Austria and Germany.
Map 4  The Austro-Italian front, 1915–18
concerning future war in the Mediterranean, and in March 1914 renewed its commitment to send three army corps to the Rhine in case of a French attack on Germany. But such military agreements were subordinate to the political decisions that would be made following the outbreak of war in July 1914.5

**Italian Intervention and the First Offensives, May–December 1915**

Since the Triple Alliance was defensive and Austria-Hungary initiated the war by attacking Serbia, the Italian government was under no obligation to support the Central Powers. In the event it chose neutrality before eventually deciding that intervention on the side of the Entente offered the best chance pursuing irredentist claims against Austria and rather confused aims in the Balkans.6 In reality, Italy could not remain outside the conflagration without renouncing the role of a major European power that it had taken such pains to assert. The Pact of London, signed on April 26, 1915 with Britain, France, and Russia, was markedly imperialist in character. It promised major territorial gains, mostly at Austria-Hungary’s expense, in the South Tyrol (or Upper Adige), Trieste (predominantly Italian), Istria (with an Italian minority), and a large part of South Slav Dalmatia and Albania. The pact also conceded colonial compensation in North Africa if Britain and France also expanded in that region.7 This program is noteworthy for its shortsightedness. Italy demanded poor territories as a basis for expansion into the Balkans, for which in any case it did not have the economic resources. The army command was not consulted on the issue but its opposition on the grounds that the coast of Dalmatia was hard to defend was well known.

Thus on May 24, 1915 Italy entered the war without having been attacked and with the bulk of the country opposed to the venture (see chapter 31). This meant, first, that military operations had to be offensive and, secondly, that Italian soldiers lacked the main motivating belief of their German or French counterparts, namely that they were defending the fatherland against unprovoked attack. Despite this offensive imperative, the war plan of General Luigi Cadorna, commander of the Italian forces since July 1914, was constrained by geography. Mountains dominated much of the front, with peaks fortified by the Austrians rising to between 1,000 and 2,000 meters. An offensive breakthrough was impossible and all the attacks of the summer of 1915 were doomed to fail. Along the lower reaches of the Isonzo, between Tolmino and the sea, the country was less difficult, with a series of hills at low altitude. Here Cadorna placed 22 of his 35 divisions.

The battles in France in October–November 1914 and the Franco-British offensives of 1915 had demonstrated the enormous difficulties of advancing against modern defensive firepower. However, Cadorna paid no heed and was convinced that he could break through to Ljubljana, Trieste, and then Vienna itself.8 It was an over-optimistic vision for which he has been blamed by history and by historians. In his favor, however, it should be remembered that allied commanders were no closer to accepting the new realities of warfare in 1915, as Joffre’s costly offensives of that year showed (see chapter 4). The information that Cadorna received from his military observers with the French and German armies failed to undermine prewar certitudes. It was still believed that while the offensive was more costly than the defensive, it could be made to work if conducted with the necessary energy – and that Cadorna had in abundance.9 It should also be noted that for much of the war, there was nothing but the most rudimentary coordination with the French, British, and Russian allies.
After an initial, premature operation to the north in May 1915, Cadorna turned this mainly Alpine region into a defensive zone. It was here above all that the army’s Alpine battalions were deployed, elite units that fought a “white war” in the snow-clad upper reaches of the mountains, which had little strategic significance but were filled with heroic encounters. However, the bulk of the offensive strength of the army remained concentrated in the northeast, on the lower Isonzo and Carso, which was to remain the principal theater of Italian offensive operations down to the disaster at Caporetto in October 1917.

The Isonzo emerges from the mountains at Tolmino, a well-fortified Austrian position, and flows out to the sea 40 km away as the crow flies. The sector can be divided into three distinct zones from north to south. The first is from the watershed to Plava and is marked by high and steep riverbanks. The Italians crossed these in June 1915 but only managed to cling onto a small bridgehead at Plava at great cost. The second sector faced the city of Gorizia, where the Austrians had created a strong bridgehead on the west bank of the river which they defended from a series of surrounding hills with high peaks. The third sector of the Isonzo was where the river flows out onto the plain. Here the Austrians had pulled their front back by several kilometers as far as the Carso. The latter is an enormous flat and irregular plateau stretching from Gorizia into Slovenia with sparse vegetation, many ravines, and a craggy ridge some 200–300 m high that dominates the Isonzo plain. This ridge and the enemy bridgehead at Gorizia were the main Italian objectives in 1915.

It is impossible to draw up league tables for the many failed offensives of the Great War and the losses and suffering they caused. However, the Italian offensives between June and December 1915 certainly rank amongst the harshest. The army had a total of 300 machine guns, 1,800 light field cannon, 200 guns of medium caliber, and only 132 heavy guns. There was little artillery coordination with the infantry, so that the troops were launched against the Austrian barbed wire and machine guns without adequate support. Once halted, they had to hold onto any terrain gained, however small, from where the offensive was to be relaunched. In the summer, the battles were fought over scorching rock in asphyxiating heat and with unbearable thirst. Autumn brought rain, mud, and the bitter cold. Trenches were improvised and shallow, granting little possibility of rest or protection. To overcome enemy barbed wire, soldiers had little more than tubes of gelatin, which were of dubious efficacy. The High Command could only repeat its orders for hopeless offensives. No heed was paid to officers in the front line who called for a more rational management of the battle, and those who persisted were summarily removed.

By the winter of 1915 the Italian army counted over 200,000 dead and injured, to say nothing of the men who had fallen ill. Infantry regiments had lost up to two-thirds of their men, and all for insignificant gains. In December the troops were already on the verge of collapse, but the Austrians could not take advantage of their plight since their own rigid defense had cost them dearly, with an estimated 165,000 casualties.

The Strafexpedition and the Battle of Gorizia, May–August 1916
During the winter of 1915–16, the Italian army was expanded to 1.5 million men and adequately equipped with machine guns and trench mortars (simpler to manufacture than medium artillery, which only came on stream in 1917). Cadorna had prepared a great offensive against Gorizia, but he was preempted by the Austrian commander-in-chief,
Conrad von Hőtzendorf. Austria-Hungary had been through a dramatic crisis in the first months of 1915, but by the end of that year the situation had greatly improved. The Russian army had suffered a major defeat and been forced to retreat from Austrian Galicia, while the Serbian army had been driven from its homeland (see chapter 5). Only the Italian army remained intact, and Conrad intended to knock it out of the war with an offensive from the Trentino that would take the bulk of Italian forces massed on the Isonzo from the rear.

Conrad conceived of his ambitious plan as a Strafexpedition, or punitive expedition, that would visit due retribution on Italy for its betrayal of the Triple Alliance. However, he lacked sufficient troops and in December 1915 asked the German supreme commander, Erich von Falkenhayn, to contribute eight divisions. Falkenhayn demurred, since he was preparing his own offensive against Verdun and was also convinced that more than eight more divisions would be needed to beat Italy decisively. Unperturbed, Conrad proceeded with his own resources and gathered 14 divisions in the Trentino, some of which were taken from the Russian and Isonzo fronts. A great objective was worth the risk. The Strafexpedition was certainly well prepared, with 1,200 cannons, of which 600 were of medium and heavy caliber. Delayed because of the great snowfall that winter, the offensive was finally unleashed from the Altipiano di Asiago on May 15, 1916.

The Italian defense could scarcely have been worse organized. From the start of the war, the First Army had been assigned a strategically defensive role, facing the Trentino. But its troops had been sent forward to precarious positions right under the Austrian lines, and without any defense in depth should this be needed in case of retreat. Cadorna’s intelligence services were inefficient and only signaled the Austrian offensive at the last minute.

The Austrians enjoyed an overwhelming initial success but the attack then waned due to the difficulty of the terrain and the arrival of Italian reinforcements, and it was halted when it reached the edge of the plateau of the Asiago. In fact, it could be argued that it was doomed from the start. Conrad had not taken into consideration the expansion of the Italian army and hence the greater quantities of men at Cadorna’s disposal. In a brilliant maneuver, the latter used his internal lines to swiftly transport 179,000 men from the Isonzo to the Altipiano. Moreover, on June 4 the Russian army under General Brusilov launched its devastating offensive against the Austrian eastern front, which had been weakened by the removal of the divisions for the Strafexpedition. In the middle of June, Conrad took note of the failure of his offensive and withdrew his troops to a more defensive line. The Italian commanders, however, could not resist the temptation to use the numerous troops now stationed in the area to take back the positions that had been lost. With inadequate preparatory bombardments, a series of bloody but unsuccessful attacks dragged on until the end of July. In sum, the Italians won the battle but at a heavy price, with about 150,000 casualties (including 40,000 prisoners taken during the initial phase) against Austria’s 80,000 (plus the sick, who are usually forgotten in military casualties).

On August 6 Cadorna moved onto the offensive against Gorizia and on the Carso. At last this was a battle that was well prepared, with 1,200 artillery pieces (450 of them being medium and heavy guns), 800 trench mortars and careful preliminary study of the terrain, including aerial reconnaissance. The Austrian positions were overrun, the decisive factor here being their lack of reserves, since too many divisions had been sent to the Trentino. On August 9 Italian troops entered Gorizia and moved on toward the Carso.
before their advance was arrested by the arrival of Austrian reinforcements. Gorizia was the first real Italian success in the war (with around 50,000 losses compared to 40,000 for the Austrians). But then the war of attrition set in again. In the autumn, Cadorna launched three limited offensives on the Carso that achieved little but cost nearly 80,000 casualties to the two sides.\textsuperscript{15}

One further point should be mentioned about the warfare of 1916. On June 29, the Austrians employed gas in an attack on the Carso, and before long both sides were using the weapon, though in lesser quantities than in France. During the war the Italians produced some 6,000 tonnes of gas compared to 55,000 in Germany, 26,000 in France, and 8,000 in Austria, and suffered perhaps 5,000 deaths by gas, the quality of Italian gas-masks being mediocre.

The Watershed of 1917

In June 1916, Salandra’s ministry was replaced by a government of national unity under Boselli that included all the political forces supporting the war. Arms and munitions were now being produced on a vast scale with the full collaboration of industry (and its generous remuneration). All valid men liable for conscription had been called up, and the army on the front numbered 1.5 million soldiers, rising to 2 million in 1917.

Cadorna remained in sole charge of the military effort. There were bitter conflicts between the government and the high command, as in all the countries in the war, but Cadorna was more dominant than commanders in chief elsewhere. He was able to refuse any interference from the government, or even the king, and it is significant in this regard that he chose the name Supreme Command for his office instead of the traditional GHQ. Yet he himself never hesitated to criticize the government for what he saw as its weakness in dealing with internal dissent, to which he attributed the failings of the army. The government tried to remove him early in 1916 but he was able to muster sufficient support, including in the press, to outmaneuver them. Nor did the government have any realistic alternative to his grand offensives.\textsuperscript{16}

Trench warfare had its own terrible logic that was independent of Cadorna, as of other major commanders. Nor was he any more to blame for the failure of his offensives than were Joffre and Haig. Cadorna had an unshakeable faith in his own mission and was not without a sense of vision. Like the French and British commanders, he believed that with more men and munitions he would be able to achieve a breakthrough or at least bring about the enemy’s collapse by attrition. Two criticisms, however, can legitimately be leveled against him. The first is poor organization. Cadorna over-centralized decision-making and proved unable to incorporate his generals into an effective chain of command. He knew how to impose offensives but not how to direct them or call them off at the right moment. The cult of the offensive was such that Cadorna simply got rid of commanders who hesitated to follow orders, even when they had good reason to do so, but hesitated to stop those who continued attacks with no prospect other than further losses.

The second criticism is that he saw success more in terms of quantity (guns and battalions) than quality, with a better organization of the offensive. In 1917 the Italian troops were still attacking as they had in 1915, with better artillery fire but still in compact formations, with successive waves massacred by the Austrian cannons. Any improvements were due to local commanders in the trenches, and little had been done to disseminate them by training. Cadorna had little concern for his soldiers – a point to which we shall return.
In 1917 Cadorna launched two offensives on the Isonzo, in May and in August–September, which repeated the old story. Numerical superiority of the infantry was offset by a less marked difference in artillery. A prolonged bombardment was followed by an initial tactical success and then a protracted battle of attrition, the only fruits of which were trenches and terrain whose strategic significance was nil. In total, about 300,000 Italian soldiers were killed or wounded compared to Austria’s 160,000. In the battles of August–September about 400 of the 600 Italian infantry battalions employed in the assaults lost anything from one-half to two-thirds of their forces. Yet, ironically, there was a significant result. The Austrian army had now used up all its reserves and had to ask Germany for help, since it was no longer capable of holding off another Italian offensive—though Cadorna could not for the moment unleash it due to the exhaustion of his own troops. In fact, help from allies was not limited to the Austrians, since 100 British and French field artillery batteries participated in the second battle. But where Lloyd George, who felt it was time to finish off Austria, had wanted to send a much stronger force, the French and British high commands would only agree to this more limited aid.

Unlike in 1916 with the Strafexpedition, Germany now acceded to Austria’s request to replace Austrian troops on the eastern front and allow a strategic counterattack against Italy between the Plezzo and Tolmino. The Germans added seven special divisions of their own to the eight Austrian divisions, all of which would form the 14th Austro-German Army under the command of General Otto von Below (though it should be noted that it was Chief of Staff General Konrad Krafft von Dellmensingen who planned and conducted the battle). The Italians were still organized for the offensive and lacked a defense in depth and adequate reserves.

In late 1917, the German army was preparing an offensive battle of a new kind for the western front the following year in the hope of bringing the war to a decisive end (see chapter 9). Histories of the war note that the new tactic (especially the use of elite storm troops) was applied during the offensive against Riga in September 1917, but they often forget the crucial role it also played on the Austro-Italian front in October that same year. The key attack was to proceed through the Isonzo valley via a small provincial capital that played no part in the battle but which nonetheless gave the latter its name—Caporetto (today Kobarid in Slovenia). The Austro-German offensive began with a brief and violent bombardment of the communication lines and trenches from Tolmino at dawn on October 24, 1917. It rapidly overran the Italian lines and achieved deep penetration using agile columns that easily overcame the Italian back-line troops. In the space of two days the Austro-Germans had conquered all of the peaks that dominate the plain of Friulia.

Up to this point the success of the offensive can be compared to those that the Germans would enjoy in France in the spring of 1918, when the British Fifth Army collapsed much like the Italian divisions at Caporetto. But different factors then intervened. In the first place, in France there were no precise strategic objectives, whereas in Italy the progression of Austro-German troops brought them up behind the bulk of the Italian army stationed on the Isonzo. Then there is the question of reserves. In France, the German offensives were halted by the arrival of new troops, while in Italy there were no reserves. Finally, the high commands responded differently. The British and French generals did not lose their heads or blame their setbacks on the troops. But when the extent of the disaster became apparent to Cadorna, he immediately blamed it on the soldiers, stating on the evening of October 25: “About 10 regiments surrendered en masse without fighting. I see a disaster developing.” In a bulletin on October 27
he noted a “lack of resistance by units of the Second Army which have vilely retreated without fighting and ignominiously surrendered to the enemy,” and he sent a telegram to the government on the same day declaring that “The army falls under the blows not of the external enemy but of the enemy within.” There is no foundation for these accusations, as was shown by the commission of enquiry set up in 1919 to look into the causes of the rout. Abandoning the Isonzo was unavoidable owing to the lack of reserves with which to resist the Austro-German advance. But so convinced was Cadorna of his troops’ untrustworthiness, that he abandoned his post as commander without attempting to oversee the withdrawal.

About 1.5 million men (between troops and services) were forced to retreat from the Isonzo in disorder. A virtual torrent of soldiers, some still engaged in sporadic combat, made its chaotic way toward the bridges over the River Tagliamento and then the Piave, accompanied by 400,000 civilian refugees. Since Cadorna had separated the artillery (which suffered few losses) from the infantry, the latter was obliged to retreat without artillery cover while the artillery regiments proceeded without the protection of the infantry. Luckily for the retreating forces, the Austro-Germans were both too few and too tired to be able to block their retreat. On November 4 Cadorna issued the order to fall back on the Piave. The Third Army from the Carso and the Fourth Army from Cadore retreated in good order and secured the defense of the new front. The last units crossed the water on November 10.

The extent of the disaster was still enormous. Overall, the Italian army suffered 40,000 dead and wounded and an enormous 280,000 taken prisoner. The loss of arms and munitions was likewise extremely serious: 3,150 cannons, 1,700 trench mortars, 3,000 machine guns, and huge storehouses of munitions and food. Almost immediately the battle gave rise to potent myths. On the right, it was attributed to defeatism by the home front, with the socialists, Catholics, and liberal Italy bearing the brunt of the blame. This theme was later taken up by the fascist regime, which sought its own legitimization in a vision of the war in which a young Italy triumphed symbolically over old-style generals and the liberal regime. The left oscillated between different interpretations, none of which was entirely satisfactory – a “people’s war” versus the dictatorial Cadorna, denunciation of the horrors of the conflict, the defense of the soldiers’ disobedience, and Caporetto as a revolution manquée. Abroad, Caporetto became the symbol of Italy’s failure in the war.

The first victim of Caporetto was the Boselli government, which fell on October 25. The new prime minister, Vittorio Emanuele Orlando, accepted the post on condition that Cadorna be forced to step down. The king agreed, but the dismissal was to be put off until the end of the battle. Then, at the inter-allied conference of Rapallo on November 6, French Chief of General Staff Ferdinand Foch and British Prime Minister Lloyd George demanded Cadorna’s immediate removal as a condition for sending reinforcements to the Italian front. On November 8 Cadorna was replaced by Armando Diaz, a little known general nominated by the king himself (the only moment in the war when Victor Emanuel III had a decisive role). During November, six French and five British divisions arrived in Italy, totaling 240,000 men. Whereas some British and French commentators consider that they rescued Italy, Italian views have minimized the importance of their help. There is truth in both. The allied troops acted as reserve forces in case of an enemy breakthrough, allowing Diaz to send every last available battalion to the front. However, the battle to block the enemy advance was conducted exclusively by the Italians.
In the north, the new front remained as it had been before Caporetto as far as the Altipiano di Asiago. Then it ran along Mount Grappa, between the rivers Brenta and Piave and, finally, down the Piave to the sea. The Austrians and Germans attacked this front for almost two months, achieving some partial successes but without managing to break through. In a long and furious battle with little use of artillery by either side, the Italian troops held their own, proving (as if this were needed) just how unfounded Cadorna’s accusations actually were. The German and Austrian divisions were unable to repeat the success of Caporetto owing to the lack of surprise and adequate preparation. The battle came to a halt at the end of December with complete Italian success, although the final assault on Mount Tomba (on the slopes of Mount Grappa) was in fact conducted by French troops on the 30th of that month. The German divisions called it a day in Italy and left for the western front.

The Last Year: November 1917–November 1918

The new government and army command rose to the challenge. Orlando dealt with disension on the home front without using excessive force and, with the help of his finance minister, Francesco Saverio Nitti, oversaw an intensification of industrial production that in the space of a few months managed to make good the guns and other material lost at Caporetto. Unlike Cadorna, Diaz and his second-in-command, Pietro Badoglio, had direct combat experience and learned from previous failures. They reorganized the army in three ways. First, they paid attention to the soldiers’ well-being in the trenches in terms of food, home leave, and periods of rest. Sensible propaganda was finally promoted in the army with the creation of the Servizio P (Propaganda Service), and military intelligence also became more effective. Secondly, Diaz and Badoglio improved troop training and the soldiers’ armaments. They also made the unity of divisions sacrosanct, promoting the collaboration of infantry brigades with artillery regiments. Finally, the new commanders established a large reserve force of the kind that had been wholly lacking at Caporetto and also limited costly minor attacks. In the last year of the war the death rate of Italian soldiers fell by three-quarters from that under Cadorna.

The arditi, or elite assault troops who had been created in 1917, fitted well with this reform program. They had the best training and a strong esprit de corps and were known for their speed and agility, which made them excellent in surprise attacks, though they were not able to turn these into penetration in depth. The ardito was an enthusiastic and highly motivated combatant, different to the infantry bogged down for years in the trenches, and not surprisingly became the stuff of legend, to be exploited after the war by the fascist regime.

Diaz adopted a policy of prudence, with few but well-prepared attacks, because he knew that the Austrians were preparing one last great offensive. In June 1918 the Italian army consisted of 50 divisions (of 4 regiments each), about 700 battalions, 5,650 cannons, and 1,600 trench mortars. There were also three British and two French divisions (the others had been recalled to France, accompanied by two Italian divisions), and one Czechoslovak division made up of volunteer prisoners. The Austrians, for their part, numbered 58 divisions. The attack came on June 15 along the entire front, with partial successes on the Altipiano di Asiago (against the British and French divisions) and on Mount Grappa, though these were immediately pushed back by counterattacks. Austrian penetration was greater on the Piave, but here Diaz disposed of sufficient reserves to retake the lost terrain. The Austrians were back across the water by July 5, and the battle
closed with some 87,000 Italian and 118,000 Austrian casualties and the front exactly where it had been before the battle began.25

The Allies continued to call on Diaz to attack, but the latter demurred. Following the Austrian June offensive he was more than 85,000 men down, and his last reserves were the young men born in 1900, whom he could use only in 1919. He also noted that compared to the 2 million American soldiers in France, a single American regiment had been sent to Italy (plus some ambulance units in which served Ernest Hemingway and John Dos Passos). Events accelerated in the autumn, however, as the German forces retreated in France and the Dual Monarchy began to crumble. Diaz decided to attack along the entire front on October 24. The first days of the offensive were hard, as the Austrians repulsed the assaults on Mount Grappa, and it took the major Italian advance two days to cross the Piave in the direction of Vittorio Veneto. Here, too, the front-line Austrian troops fought well, but there was nothing behind them now except disorderly soldiers trying to get back to their homelands. From October 29, the Italians found they could advance with little difficulty as far as Trento and Trieste, the latter city being reached on November 3. On the 4th, the armistice took effect, consecrating Italian victory. As if to underline the allied role, Diaz had created two small armies on the eve of the offensive, the Twelfth Army under the French general Jean-César Graziani with one French and three Italian divisions, and the Tenth Army under the British general, Frederick Rudolph Lambert of Cavan, with two British and two Italian divisions. In reality, the victory of Vittorio Veneto was only a semi-victory, consisting as it did of a few days’ hard fighting followed by an easy advance. As in France, the victory was due to attrition and the internal collapse of the enemy.26

The Italian Soldier

Whether World War I demonstrated the backwardness of Italian civil society or whether it favored the nationalization of the masses and the growth of a unified Italian consciousness remains an open question. Despite nuances of interpretation, most scholars hold that progress was made in this latter sense. There is no doubt that the ruling class did overcome its internal divisions, identified fully with the war and knew how to impose this on the rest of the country with determination, even if it split again over the retrospective significance of the conflict in the postwar period. Nor can there be any doubt as to the conviction of the officers.

Where the question remains open is in relation to the men – though with one firm proviso. In three and a half years of frequently bitter warfare the Italian army demonstrated its solidarity and cohesiveness, with no serious breakdown or mutiny. If the army’s efficiency can be questioned, the obedience of its soldiers cannot. As we have seen, the idea that Caporetto can be understood in terms of mass indiscipline is a myth, albeit one with contemporary force. Yet we have also seen that the bulk of the infantry, which came from a peasant background, was called on to fight an offensive war in the name of an abstract idea of the fatherland that meant little to many of them.27 Trento and Trieste were mobilizing myths for the ruling elites and the officer corps, but ordinary soldiers fought in the name of values, such as patriotic honor and glory, that were alien to them, and which in reality meant only military discipline. Why, in these circumstances, they should have served with such resilience continues to attract analysis.28

One major factor shaping the soldiers’ obedience was the strength of the army as an institution. Military sociologists point to its cohesion, to the role of junior officers, and
to the importance of small group solidarity. Also significant was the lack of alternatives. Flight was difficult and costly while internal repression was very harsh. The latter was not the overriding factor that some maintain: no soldiers can be forced to fight at the point of a bayonet. But discipline had an important role.

Cadorna urged firm discipline (and was given a free rein in this regard by weak governments) while caring little for the physical and psychological well-being of the men under his command, who were treated far worse than their French or British counterparts. There was no organized propaganda or pastoral care (except for the reintroduction of chaplains, who had been ousted from the army between 1865 and 1878). Food was mediocre, periods of relief were insufficient, and only one leave period was granted per year – and it was not always guaranteed. Only in 1918, under Diaz, did the soldiers’ lot improve. Moreover, Cadorna never understood the need for serious training. Soldiers and junior officers were sent into the trenches with only rudimentary preparation and were called on to obey and to sacrifice themselves.

The harshness of Cadorna’s regime is borne out by the statistics. Out of every 12 men sent to the front, one was reported to a military tribunal, amounting to a total of 360,000. The same fate befell 60,000 civilians from the regions declared as war zones. The most striking figure concerns the 100,000 convictions for desertion. It should be remembered that in the Italian army failure to reply to two consecutive roll calls, or an absence of 12 hours, was considered desertion (hence the figures cannot be compared to French statistics). Most “deserters” were men returning from leave a few hours or a few days late, or who were absent for several days. These are “normal” practices in a mass army that has scarce and limited leave. Of course, there were real desertions resulting from a refusal of the war, which took the form of escape toward the rear (almost always blocked by the military police), though it is difficult to say how numerous these were. There were also those who deserted to the enemy – a few thousand, according to the records. But little if any credence should be placed in courts martial that took place in the absence of the accused, since it was hard to establish who surrendered voluntarily and who was taken prisoner by force. In short, it can be argued that the figure of 100,000 convictions for desertion says more about the disciplinary regime than about the soldier’s lack of discipline.

According to official figures, 750 soldiers were executed, compared to 600 in a much larger French army, 300 in Britain, and a few dozen in Germany. Unlike in France, condemned Italian soldiers could not plead for mercy from the head of state. Indeed, Cadorna insisted repeatedly that his officers shoot on the spot any man who pulled back during action, though we have little information on the prevalence of such incidents. He also introduced summary execution for acts of disobedience, disbandment, or revolt. This included resort to decimation – that is, the arbitrary extraction and shooting of a certain number of men from a unit in revolt, in particular when it was not possible to identify those responsible. According to recent research, the practice of this form of discipline (which included abuses of power exceeding even Cadorna’s ruthless orders) means that we can now add another 300 men to the death toll. Hence there were over 1,000 executions in an army where relatively few units revolted en masse (11 according to official documentation). This shows once more the harshness of the disciplinary regime rather than the lack of cohesion among the men.29

One further issue demonstrates the lack of trust in the men by Cadorna, his generals, and the government – prisoners of war. Before Caporetto these numbered about 260,000; another 280,000 were taken during the Caporetto offensive and a further
50,000 were captured in 1918. In comparison with this total of 600,000 Italian prisoners, the Italians took 180,000 Austro-Hungarian prisoners before the battle of Vittorio Veneto. For Cadorna, the figures were excessive and revealed the Italian soldier’s poor fighting spirit, cowardice, and tendency to desert. On account of their own increasingly short supplies of food, Austria and Germany had difficulty providing sufficient rations to Italian prisoners, who were engaged in forced labor. The British and French managed to supply their men via Switzerland. The Italian government and Cadorna refused to do likewise, or to facilitate the work of the Red Cross or the sending of food parcels (or even normal mail) to Italian POWs. The latter thus had to pay a high price for their “surrender,” and their sad conditions were duly publicized as a warning to the men in the trenches. About 100,000 of them died, effectively abandoned to their fate by the Italian government. By contrast, 20,000 of the 600,000 French prisoners died in captivity, though they were incarcerated on average for a longer period. This was in large part thanks to assistance provided by their government. Only in 1993 was this sad page in the history of the Italian war experience finally rediscovered.

Overall, it remains hard to find a suitable explanation for the cohesion and fighting spirit of the Italian army. The soldiers had different cultural levels and backgrounds; only a minority was patriotically motivated. The great majority had received the traditional education of the peasant and worker – to obey authority. Italian socialists never preached disobedience and revolt in the ranks, and military strikes and agitation were less evident than in Britain or Germany. The political and military elites (and not just Cadorna) were much more concerned with the men’s obedience than with their consent. The Italian soldiers deserved better treatment for the extraordinary sacrifices they made, and only received this in part under General Diaz in 1918.

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In the course of the war, 5,903,000 Italian men and 200,000 officers were mobilized. Of this total, 145,000 went into the navy and over 700,000 were employed in war production and essential administration and services. Just over 5 million men put on military uniform, and of these some 4,200,000 went to the front. This was less than the 8 million men mobilized in France, which had only a slightly larger population (39 million compared to 36 million), but the difference is probably accounted for by the size of Italian emigration (though some Italians returned from overseas to join up) and by lower levels of health in a less developed society. As we have seen, the size of the army at the front rose from about a million men in 1915 to two million in 1917–18, with some 186,000 officers in 1918 of whom 84,000 were at the front. By December 1918, the army had lost half a million dead, 80 percent of them to wounds, the remaining 20 percent to illness and disease (the latter figure was only 10 percent in the French case). If to this figure we add the few thousand sailors and 100,000 prisoners of war who died, as well as all those who succumbed to the effects of the war after it was over, it is reasonable to estimate the Italian military dead at 650,000.

The outcome of this effort and sacrifice, after the long peace conference in Paris and the Treaty of Saint-Germain (September 1919), included the main demands of the pre-war irredentists – Trentino and the Upper Adige with 200,000 German speakers; the eastern frontier of Venezia-Julia, which incorporated a mixed population of Italians, Slovenes, and Croats; and Trieste, which like the other coastal cities of Istria, had a clear Italian majority, though with a non-urban population of about 600,000 Slovenes and
Croats. Italian claims to Dalmatia were reduced to the annexation of the city of Zara, but the Dodecanese islands, which Italy had taken from Turkey during the 1911–12 Libyan war, were recognized as Italian territories. The city of Fiume (which was “Italian” only if one considered the historical center and ignored the Slovene and Croat suburbs) was not included. In September 1919 the poet Gabriele d’Annunzio, who wanted to stop Fiume becoming part of the new Yugoslavia, occupied the city with paramilitary forces. This remained a burning issue for Italian diplomacy and was only resolved between 1920 and 1924 with the concession of the town, but not its hinterland, to Italy (see chapter 37).

Italy’s war closed with the defeat of the democratic left which had seen the conflict as the liberation of Italian minorities under Austrian domination (in the context of respect for all minorities) and with the triumph of the nationalist right with a short-lived imperialism that left a legacy of discord with the new Austria and, above all, with Yugoslavia. The fascist regime exacerbated this disagreement by its brutal policy of forcible nationalization of the Austrian and Yugoslav minorities under Italian control. However, such violence was not the prerogative of the Italian ruling classes. The reorganization of Europe after 1919 presented many similar and indeed more serious cases.

Notes

1 Whittam, Politics of the Italian Army; Gooch, Army, State and Society.
5 Bosworth, Italy and the Approach of the First World War.
8 Pieri, Prima Guerra mondiale, pp. 60–3; Schindler, Isonzo, ch. 3.
11 Schindler, Isonzo, pp. 59, 80, 125.
13 Herwig, First World War, pp. 204–7.
14 Luigi Cadorna, La Guerra alla fronte italiana fino all’arresto sulla linea del Piave e del Grappa (24 May 1915–9 November 1917), Milan, Treves, 1921, vol. 1, ch. 5; Isnenghi and Rochat, Grande Guerra, pp. 176–83; Herwig, First World War, pp. 204–7; Schindler, Isonzo, pp. 144–9.
15 Pieri “La Battaglia di Gorizia,” in Rochat (ed.), Storiografia militare italiana, pp. 119–23; Pieropan, Grande Guerra sul fronte italiano, chs. 24, 27, 28, 30; Rocca, Cadorna, ch. 8; Isnenghi and Rochat, Grande Guerra, pp. 180–90; Schindler, Isonzo, chs. 8, 9.
16 Melograni, Storia politica, ch. 3; Rocca, Cadorna, ch. 6 and pp. 142–5.
19 Cadorna, La Guerra alla fronte italiana, vol., 2, chs. 10–13; Pieri, Prima Guerra mondiale, pp. 141–228; Monticone, Caporetto; Silvestri, Isonzo, 1917, ch. 7; Melograni, Storia politica, ch. 6; Pieropan, Grande Guerra sul fronte italiano, chs. 46–53; Rocca, Cadorna, chs. 13–14; Herwig, First World War, pp. 336–44; Isnenghi and Rochat, Grande Guerra, pp. 367–85 and 428–42; Labanca, Caporetto; Schindler, Isonzo, ch. 12; O’Brien, Mussolini, pp. 141–4; Morselli, Caporetto 1917; Thompson, White War, ch. 25.
21 Isnenghi and Rochat, Grande Guerra, p. 446.
23 Melograni, Storia politica, pp. 460–61; Pieri and Rochat, Grande Guerra, pp. 277–9; Isnenghi, Giornali di trincea; Gatti, Gli Ufficiali P.
24 Rochat, Gli Arditi.
27 Precise figures for the social make-up of the Italian army are not available and are still based on Serpieri, La Guerra e le classe rurali, pp. 41–2 and 48ff., who suggested that 46 percent of Italy’s army in World War I was formed by the peasantry.
29 Forcella and Monticone, Plotone di esecuzione; Pluviano and Guerrini, Le fusilazioni sommarie; Wilcox, “Discipline in the Italian Army.”
30 Procacci, Soldati e prigionieri.

References and Further Reading