

The Boundaries of Discord: Italy's Secret War Aims and the Treaty of London (1914-15)

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Italy's intervention in the First World War on the side of Britain, France, and Russia in May 1915 was a major achievement for the Entente's diplomacy. As John Gooch stressed in his book *The Italian Army and the First World War*, this proved to be one of the decisive factors for the Allied victory.¹ On his part, the German historian Holger Afflerbach claimed that, had Italy supported its former allies, Germany and Austria-Hungary, or had it at least remained neutral, the conflict would have been likely to finish in a partial, if not complete, victory of the Central Powers.²

Despite its importance, Italy's involvement in the conflict has been commonly underestimated and misunderstood. The Italian intervention has too often been described as a trivial *Giro di Valzer* ("Waltz turn"). Both in Western and Austro-German scholarships, Italy has usually been seen as the country which, in true Machiavellian fashion, betrayed its allies to find itself on the winners' side. Italian historiography, on the contrary, has rarely looked at other schools, and has simply justified, almost exclusively in Italian eyes, the actions of its country with the need to complete national unification – the Great War is frequently called The Fourth War of Independence in Italy.³

Therefore, the real reasons behind Rome's shift in alliances have often been overlooked. It is impossible to trace here a new history of the secret talks that led to the Treaty of London and the 1915 Italian intervention. I will limit myself to analysing a specific aspect of Italy's foreign policy that played a major role in the final outcome of the war and influenced the disappointing aftermath – at least for Italy – at the Paris Peace Conference: the problem of the two conflicting principles behind Italian territorial claims, which lie at the heart of Rome's secret war aims.

On August 3rd, 1914, as the process that had started on July 28th with the Austro-Hungarian declaration of war on Serbia was escalating and dragging all the other great powers into a much wider war than expected, the Italian government declared its neutrality. Rome had always felt that it was treated more like a client than an ally by Germany and Austria-Hungary, and it was irritated that Vienna only consulted Berlin before deciding upon military action in Serbia, which had taken Italian statesmen by surprise. Italy's motivation for its neutrality was that the Triple Alliance, to which it adhered since 1882, was a defensive treaty, while Austria-Hungary in this case was the aggressor. But

the real issue behind Rome's official position was an often-neglected article of the Triple Alliance pact. Article VII stated Italy's right to "compensation" in the case of unilateral Austrian expansion in the Balkans. Despite the declaration of neutrality, Italy was still ready to support its allies if Austria-Hungary was willing to respect article VII. The obvious territorial compensation that Italy claimed was the so-called "unredeemed lands": Italian territories still under the Austro-Hungarian empire, in particular the provinces of Trento and Trieste.

The debate and diplomatic dispute over article VII dragged on for months. Berlin intervened to push Vienna towards reconciliation with Rome, by offering the Italians the Trentino while guaranteeing the status of "open city" to Trieste – but without success. For the Austro-Hungarian Empire it was a matter of both political prestige and concern; giving in to Italy would have meant sparking off a series of repercussions and potentially similar claims from other ethnical minorities in the empire. The reasons behind Austrian stubborn refusal to reach a compromise with Italy⁴ were solid. However, Vienna's adamant position allowed the Entente powers to make their own diplomatic move.

Already in early August Rome was contacted through the Italian ambassador in Petrograd, Andrea Carlotti with a joint offer from France and Russia that would grant Italy Trento, Trieste, and freedom of action in Albania, if it joined the Allies.⁵ Britain made an independent and unofficial offer as well, when on August 6th the Italian ambassador in London, Guglielmo Imperiali, received a surprising visit from Baron Alfred Rothschild who stressed the "invaluable advantages" Italy would bring the cause of peace, if it put itself on the side of the Allies, "as Austria and Germany certainly could not resist much longer against all the great powers". Rothschild concluded that, if Italy had "any concrete proposals to make", he would have them examined "by someone willing to take them with benevolence".⁶

Rome replied to the Allies in a friendly but cautious way on August 14th.⁷ The Italian Minister for Foreign Affairs, Antonino Di San Giuliano, who had been in charge of foreign policy for four years, set up the first talks with the Entente powers out of sheer prudence. It was not before October 4th that a telegram was sent from Rome to Imperiali with the first draft of the Italian proposal for the Entente. Italian territorial claims were largely inspired by the principle of nationality, including Trento and Trieste with a few adjustments to be made regarding northern Trentino and Istria.⁸

But Minister Di San Giuliano fell suddenly ill and died on October 16th, 1914. He was replaced by Sidney Sonnino, a more difficult personality and a less

experienced minister, who was also far more ambitious and impatient than his predecessor. On October 18th the Italian Prime Minister Antonio Salandra delivered a famous speech proclaiming the new principle of *sacro egoismo*, “sacred egoism” in Italian foreign policy, according to which Italy would now pursue its national interests with greater decisiveness and firmness. Considering his strong personality, Sonnino appeared to be the right man to implement such a policy.

It was at this stage of the talks with the Entente that an increasing imperialist ambition began to take shape within Italian claims. Salandra and Sonnino, both conservative politicians, meant to establish a new balance within the Italian Liberal party and shift the axis of power back to the right wing, opposing the previous tendency by former Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti, who had leaned more toward the left. Salandra and Sonnino sought the support of the Nationalists and worked to link the often sincere and spontaneous patriotic desire to complete national unification by the Centre-Left irredentists of the *Risorgimento* tradition, with the imperialist thrust of the extreme-Right interventionists like poet Gabriele D’Annunzio and former Socialist Benito Mussolini. Salandra and Sonnino’s political gamble was to unite a newly-born country – still fragmented internally – before the start of the war; and their final war aim was to make Italy a “real” great power by acquiring Italian and non-Italian territories in the Italian Peninsula, the Balkans and even the Ottoman Empire.

Of course, the official motivation for Italy’s intervention against its former allies remained the liberation of the “unredeemed lands”. The undeclared reasons behind it have only emerged in recent years, following the publication of Imperiali’s diaries, and the release of his personal papers that are still being catalogued in the Historical Archive of the Senate in Rome. The Italian imperialism that emerges from his writings – even though Italian historiography has long denied or minimised it – sets its aims primarily in the Balkans. Italian ambitions in that region was nothing new – it took shape most probably with the annexation of Venice in 1866, as Dalmatia had been a Venetian dominion – but for the first time it assumed a clearer and more determined profile.

In the talks with the Entente during the following months, between November 1914 and April 1915, Italian requests surprised Imperiali himself. On February 16th, 1915, when negotiations with the Entente entered a decisive phase, Imperiali received a memorandum in which Sonnino set out the final draft of Italian conditions for joining the Entente. The ambassador’s dismay was justified. The telegram of October 4th, 1914 requested to set the Italian frontier at Quarnaro, so as to include Trieste and Istria.⁹ The memorandum¹⁰ of

February 16th, on the other hand, included also a large part of Dalmatia.¹¹ Around 230,000 German-speaking Tyrol people, over 700,000 Slovenes and Croats and 650,000 Italians lived in the territories now claimed by Italy. Imperiali was also surprised that the Italian town of Fiume, on the Adriatic coast, was left out, because it was supposed to be the last port left to the Austro-Hungarian Empire after the war.

The new Italian claims were grounded on the principle of “strategic security”. For its national safety Italy needed strong and secured borders, namely an unchallenged hegemony over the Adriatic. Naturally, the concept of “national security” is relative and can be extended indiscriminately. Precisely for this reason, in the logic of “sacred egoism”, the fulfilment of national unification and an expansionist thrust co-existed without any evident contradiction, as others would later point out, especially American President Wilson.

The Treaty of London was finally signed on April 26th, 1915, after several amendments to Italian claims were made by the Allies, primarily to meet Russian objections. But still, the territories promised to Italy were significant: Trentino and South Tyrol, with the frontier at the Brenner; Trieste and Istria as far as Quarnaro; Dalmatia; a protectorate over Albania; and undefined compensations in the case of a break-up of the Ottoman empire followed by colonial acquisitions on the part of Britain and France.¹² Such an expansion would have really made Italy, “the least of the great powers”,¹³ a great power itself.

However, things went differently. The ambiguity of Italian claims was based on two very different principles and it emerged at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919. One was the unification of the “unredeemed lands” according to the principle of nationality, the other of pure imperialist expansion, albeit masked by the principle of “strategic security”. The collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire brought about a rough dispute between Italian diplomats and the representatives of the Yugoslav minorities of the empire, willing to establish their own new and independent state on the Adriatic coast of the Balkans. Rome faced the tenacious hostility of the promoters of the principle of nationality, Wilson in particular.

At the same time, domestic unrest was spreading in Italy. The Nationalists claimed Fiume, and D’Annunzio was even ready to march on the city with a legion of volunteers. To satisfy the Nationalist demands Sonnino gave up many of the territories that had been promised to Italy, in particular the colonial compensations, requesting Fiume as their replacement. Rome looked at London as the guarantor of the London Treaty, but even the British could do little, since now it was Washington that dominated international relations. In

the peace treaty, which was in many respects imposed on the Italian government by President Wilson, Italy was denied the largest part of Dalmatia, including Fiume.

The bitter outcome of the Peace Conference gave rise to the myth of the “mutilated victory” in Italy, which offered food to the political turmoil from which Fascism would later emerge. In the ultimate analysis, the ambitious – but ever ambiguous – foreign policy pursued by the Italian ruling class in 1915-1919 played an important part in bringing about the crisis of Liberal Italy in 1922.

References

¹ J. Gooch, *The Italian Army and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 2.

² H. Afflerbach, D. Stevenson, *An improbable war?: the outbreak of World War I and European political culture before 1914* (New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2012), p. 136.

³ E. Decleva, *L'Italia e la politica internazionale dal 1870 al 1914. L'ultima fra le grandi potenze* (Milano, Mursia, 1974), p. 167.

⁴ Vienna eventually came to offer Trentino to Italy, but only in February 1915, when Rome had already turned to the Entente, and it was too late.

⁵ C. Sabini, *Le fond d'une querelle (Documents inédits sur les relations franco-italiennes 1914-1915)* (Paris: Grasset ed., 1921), *Livre Noir*, II, pp. 299-230.

⁶ DDI, V Serie, 1914-1918, vol. I, Imperiali to Di San Giuliano, 7 August, 1914; *ivi.*, 10 August, 1914.

⁷ A. Salandra, *L'intervento dell'Italia*, (Milano: Mondadori, 1930), pp. 5-6, 23-24.

⁸ S. Sonnino, *Carteggio 1914-1916*, edited by P. Pastorelli (Roma-Bari, 1974), pp. 51-63.

⁹ DDI, V Serie, Vol. III, doc. 4, pp. 4-5.

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

¹¹ M. Thompson, *The White War: Life and Death on the Italian Front 1915-1918* (London: Faber, 2008), p. 31.

¹² ASSR, Fondo Imperiali, b. 2, f. 10, Patto di Londra, Telegrammi, Testo del Patto di Londra, Art. 16.

¹³ See: R. Bosworth, *Italy, the Least of the Great Powers: Italian Foreign Policy before the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).