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Arditi

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***Arditi* were elite assault troops in the Italian army. They also emerged on Italy's post-war political scene thanks to newly formed associations. Even though many of them had ties to fascism, *Arditi's* active involvement in politics varied.**

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1. Introduction

Arditi was the name given to the elite assault troops of the Royal Italian Army founded in 1917. The word "arditi" literally means daring or audacious. Their duty was to prepare the way for a broad [infantry](#) advance by attacking and infiltrating the enemy defences. They were intended for attempting to end the deadlock of trench warfare. The audacity their military role entailed helped to create a [myth](#) surrounding their endeavours. Italian wartime [propaganda](#) played its role in fashioning such a legend by circulating images of the *Arditi* holding [grenades](#) in their hands and daggers between their teeth while assaulting enemy lines. Moreover, the publication of a number of memoirs and accounts immediately following the end of the conflict helped to blur the distinction between history and myth about the *Arditi's* wartime undertakings. The recollection of their deeds was often conflated with a hagiography of their brave and risk-taking attitudes.

Once the war was over and [demobilization](#) was under way, ex-servicemen often organized

themselves into groups and [associations](#). These groups both called for the national community to acknowledge and reward their sacrifices and claimed their right to join actively in the socio-political transformation of the country. The *Arditi* became involved in the peculiarly Italian experience of *combattentismo* (veterans' movements), a post-war phenomenon that attracted the attention of diverse political parties. Instead of subscribing to the chief veterans association, the *Associazione nazionale combattenti* (National Association for War Veterans), the *Arditi* opted to establish their own group, *Associazione fra gli arditi d'Italia* (Association of the Italian *Arditi*), in January 1919. This establishment of a separate veterans group illustrates the elitist nature of the *Arditi's* experience both during and after the conflict.

Although the *Associazione fra gli arditi d'Italia* had ties to [nationalist](#) and right-wing groups, the *arditismo* movement was more diverse, as the complementary experience of the group *Arditi del popolo* (People's *Arditi*) demonstrates.

2. Historiography

Historians differ in their views on the political outlook of the *Arditi* movement. While Ferdinando Cordova emphasizes their revolutionary goals, Giorgio Rochat rejects this view. He instead minimizes the political significance of the *Arditi's* movement, which, monopolized by [fascist](#) sentiments soon after the war, lost its original qualities. Recent scholarship has predominantly highlighted the anti-fascist experience of the *Arditi del popolo*, thus emphasizing the diversity within the *Arditi* movement.

As Giorgio Rochat has pointed out, writing the history of the *Arditi* is complicated by the scarcity of trustworthy data sources and detailed documentation. Even the official records produced by military and political authorities are inconsistent when listing the number of assault units in the Italian army in 1917 and 1918. What is more, [historiography](#) has rarely tackled the *Arditi's* history and experience, probably because of their glorification during the fascist dictatorship and the politicization of sections of the *arditismo* movement in the interwar period. In recent years, historians such as Eros Francescangeli and Marco Rossi have chiefly turned their attention to the peculiar experience of the *Arditi del Popolo*, a left-wing [paramilitary](#) group created to oppose the violence of fascist squads.

3. Beginnings

The *Reparti d'assalto* (assault units) were created in the summer of 1917 within the 2nd Army (*Armata*) thanks to the initiative of three officers: Lieutenant-General [Luigi Capello \(1859-1941\)](#), commander of the 2nd Army; Major-General [Francesco Saverio Grazioli \(1869-1951\)](#); and Colonel [Giuseppe Bassi \(1884-?\)](#), head of an infantry battalion already implementing new assault techniques. The field training imparted by Bassi in Russig (near Gorizia) had gained the approval of the High Command, which then endorsed the creation of the first assault unit. In contrast to the Austrian and German *Sturmtruppen*, which played a role in motivating the creation of shock troops in the Italian

army, the *Arditi* were not regular infantry units, but rather a separate combat arm. According to some commentators, the “Explorers company” created by the *Alpini* lieutenant [Cristoforo Baseggio \(1869-1959\)](#) in 1915 were forerunners of the *Arditi*.

Sdricca di Manzano, near Udine, was chosen as the site where the new units would be instructed. The training programme consisted of physical exercises, hand-to-hand combat both with and without [weapons](#), grenade handling, and assaults on entrenched positions under [artillery](#) fire. Each *ardito* was armed with a [rifle](#), a dagger and many grenades, while the unit was equipped with [machine](#) and submachine guns. The shock units’ members differed from infantrymen not only in their training and weaponry, but also in the compensation they received. They received higher pay and better food, lived in nicer barracks, enjoyed a more relaxed discipline, and were granted leave more often.

The *Arditi* wore black or dark green collarless jerseys under open tunics and, instead of rucksacks, had lighter and more practical equipment. In 1918 the uniform was slightly modified, as a fez and gray-green shirts with black ties were both added. The recruitment of the *Arditi* was of a mixed nature: many were [volunteers](#), while others were designated by their superiors. Soldiers and officers joining these units enjoyed a unique esprit de corps, stimulated by the prestige and the special compensation they received. Their comradeship was fortified by rituals and songs (the tune *Giovinazza* became their hymn and was later appropriated by fascists), which in the post-war period helped to fuel the myth of the *Arditi*.

The *Arditi*’s baptism by fire occurred during the Eleventh [Battle of the Isonzo](#) (18-19 August 1917), during which they were successfully employed for the first time. After the early successes and the creation of further units, the crushing defeat encountered by Italians at [Caporetto](#) in October 1917 led to changes in the overall organization of the assault troops. Other variations of their distribution and composition within the army followed in 1918. In the final year of war, the *Arditi* contributed significantly to the battles fought between June and November 1918, when the armistice was signed. Nonetheless, as soon as the war was over, the High Command of the Royal Italian Army decided to dissolve the assault units.

4. Political Involvement

Although military authorities had criticized signs of politicization among the *Arditi* in 1918, they did not take any disciplinary action against the *Associazione fra gli arditi d’Italia*, established by the *Arditi* lieutenant (later captain) [Mario Carli \(1888-1935\)](#). It was most likely the *Arditi*’s fervent [interventionism](#) and patriotic commitment to victory that made them converge politically with other groups. In particular, the futurists and [Benito Mussolini’s \(1883-1945\)](#) newspaper, *Il Popolo d’Italia*, had cheered the *Arditi*’s audacity during the war and wanted them to play a role in the internal affairs of the country. It was from the pages of the periodical *Roma futurista* that Mario Carli urged his fellow comrades to safeguard Italy from her enemies, both external and internal. The political affinity between these groups grew stronger on two occasions: at the founding of the *Fasci di combattimento* on 23 March 1919 and during the assault on the editorial office of the socialist

newspaper *Avanti!* on 15 April 1919. Fascist groups even supported the founding of the Milanese's section of the *Associazione fra gli arditi d'Italia*.

In the following years, however, the partnership between the *Arditi* and the fascist movement was not always smooth. Some *arditi* had actively backed the poet and veteran [Gabriele D'Annunzio \(1863-1938\)](#) in his *Impresa di Fiume* and in the republican Italian Regency of Carnaro which followed. Mussolini, in contrast, did not enthusiastically embrace the regency. Divisions in the movement's official line and disagreement over the identification of either D'Annunzio or Mussolini as its honorary leader brought about the dissolution of the *Associazione fra gli arditi d'Italia* and the creation of the *Associazione nazionale fra gli Arditi d'Italia* (ANAI, National Association of Italian *Arditi*) in 1920. This latter organization, however, also fell into disgrace. This benefited the more fascist-oriented *Federazione nazionale fra gli Arditi d'Italia* (National Federation of Italian *Arditi*), which was created in 1922 and lasted through the fascist regime. In addition to these organisations, it is worth mentioning the brief experience of the *Arditi del popolo*, which, promoted by some components of the Roman section of ANAI in 1921, operated as a paramilitary group fighting the fascist squads. Piloted by the *ardito* [Argo Secondari \(1895-1942\)](#), this armed group tried to oppose the violence perpetrated by the fascists against socialist, anarchist and communist militants. However, after Benito Mussolini seized power in the country, the group was disbanded.

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