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War Aims and War Aims Discussions (Italy)

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At the outbreak of the First World War, Italian diplomacy did not have a clear vision of the goals to be achieved. Therefore, in negotiations with the countries already involved in the conflict, excessive territorial claims were made. The errors of diplomacy, however, were induced by domestic political considerations developed by the liberal ruling class, which took advantage of the patriotic mobilization processes to get rid of Giolittism and impose a political order clearly oriented to the right. The fragmentation of the political framework and the interventionist camp's lack of coordinated action would subsequently determine the complete victory of this political project.

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Introduction

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Since 1882, <u>Italy</u> had been allied with <u>Germany</u> and <u>Austria-Hungary</u>. This agreement - commonly called the "Triple Alliance" - had been periodically renewed. However, since the early years of the new century Italian diplomacy had initiated a policy of gradual rapprochement with France, expressing, with increasing determination, an exclusively defensive interpretation of the alliance with the Central Powers. However, Italy's wait-and-see attitude during the 1914 crisis was also due to the lack of a clear vision of the foreign policy objectives to be pursued.^[1] The war with the Ottoman Empire for the conquest of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica (1911-1912), consistently prepared for over the years, had in fact attained Italian diplomacy's main aspiration.^[2] On the contrary, until then little had been done to define Italian interests in relation to the Balkan Peninsula and the Danube area, apart from the hope to be able to make a stronger claim, in the case of a determined expansion by the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the Balkans, for the Italian-speaking territories of the Trentino and Venezia Giulia.^[3] No one really believed it possible that the difficulties of the Austro-Hungarian Empire could lead to its collapse as a state.

The Objectives of Italian Diplomacy

Territorial Demands

After the outbreak of World War I, the immediate objective of Italian diplomacy, supported by the views of the main liberal political leaders,^[4] was to avoid the country's automatic involvement in the conflict. It was not a difficult task, since the chancelleries of Germany and Austria-Hungary confined themselves to demanding the maintenance of Italian neutrality. The preparation of the general approach to be adopted in future negotiations was at that point very advanced. After a letter on 9 August 1914, which for the first time suggested the possibility of turning against former allies,^[5] the Foreign Minister Antonio di San Giuliano (1852-1914) only took a month to clarify what the Italian conditions on which to base future diplomatic negotiations would be: in the event of victory, Italy should receive Austria's Italian provinces as far as the first ridge of the Alps, while on the seaboard side the national border should, at least, reach Quarnaro. The question of recompense in Dalmatia and Albania appeared less well defined.^[6] With the first defeats by the Austrian army on the Eastern Front, the rapid fading of the illusion of a short conflict and the stiffening - through the enunciation of the principle of "sacred egoism" - of the policy conducted by the government of Antonio Salandra (1853-1931),^[7] Italian claims would increase. A memorandum dated 16 February 1915, sent to the Italian ambassador in London by the Foreign Minister Sidney Sonnino (1847-1922),^[8] authorized starting negotiations on the basis of the following requirements: the acquisition of Trentino and the Tirolo Cispadano (as far as the natural frontier of the Brenner Pass), Trieste and the counties of Gorizia and Gradisca, the whole of Istria as far as Quarnaro and a series of Istrian islands (including Cherso and Lussino), the province of Dalmatia, and the city of Valona. According to Sonnino, the new Italian demands were more than justified, because of the very serious risks that the country would run by entering the war and in the light of the probable uncertainty of the future international

order. Even in the event of a victorious war, Italy, without the fundamental instrument of the Triple Alliance, would in fact have run the serious risk of finding itself isolated; that was why it was necessary to gain control of the Adriatic, a necessary condition for protecting national borders. In short, without the international framework that had regulated Italian diplomatic activity for three decades, the only way remaining, in view of the difficulties of the post-war period, was action to obtain as much as possible.^[9]

Entering the War

If the objectives of territorial conquest were soon defined, it was much more difficult to decide on the timeliness of actually entering the war; and on the right moment to take this momentous step. One thing, however, seemed clear: the possibility of entering the war on the side of the old allies very soon emerged from the range of possible choices. The decision that the Italian Government found itself having to take was, therefore, whether to participate in the conflict on the side of the Triple Entente or to maintain the condition of neutrality. However, there were many reasons that favored the former. There was, first of all, the traditional hostility towards the secular Austrian enemy, guilty in recent years, moreover, of having practiced a policy of contempt towards its ally. In fact, Austria's attitude bordered on warlike, since the Austrian high command had seriously considered the possibility of attacking Italy in the days following the devastating earthquake of Messina (1908). Additionally, strong political influence was exercised, not only by the Masonic circles (important for the definition of the political identity of most of the liberal ruling class), but also by the multiple relationships woven by French financial capitalism. Above all, it was easy to see that Italy's structural economic weakness - given its heavy dependence on imported raw materials, both industrial and agricultural - made it very sensitive to the pressures, especially in this particular context, which would certainly have been exerted by France and Great Britain.^[10] Even if maintaining the status of neutrality was an option seriously evaluated for a long time by the Italian ruling class, its impracticality soon became clear.^[11] Moreover, the main proponents of maintaining the state of neutrality, including, above all, the liberal Giovanni Giolitti (1842-1928), appeared very weak. Compared to the strength of the patriotic arguments, able to arouse bourgeois public opinion, instigated by the most important newspapers, the "neutralists" relied on much weaker justifications: the political concern at the risk that the overall balance would slide to the right, the anti-rhetorical observation on the possibility of getting "a lot" even without facing the risk of a conflict,^[12] the fear of strikes promoted by the Socialist Party, and the violent reaction of the masses.^[13] However, the negotiations with Austria-Hungary, mediated by Germany's strong interest in the successful outcome of the meetings, continued even after the signing of the Treaty of London in April 1915; until just before Italy's entry into the war. It was at that juncture that Giovanni Giolitti, deeply irritated with Salandra for keeping him in the dark about the progress of negotiations with the Allies, decided to retire from the political scene.^[14] The caution with which the negotiations were conducted with the Entente was also prompted by the fear that the decidedly rapid move towards entering the war could lead to a violent reaction on the part of the masses, which only a few months earlier - in June 1914 -War Aims and War Aims Discussions (Italy) - 1914-1918-Online

had been involved in violent clashes with the forces of law and order in the insurrectional uprising of the "Red Week".^[15] This is also why the order was given to the prefects to conduct a comprehensive survey of the state of national public opinion and the public's attitude towards Italy's participation in the conflict. The results were encouraging. Even though the majority of the Italian population were, in general, opposed to the war, numerous indicators permitted one to assume that they would not, however, oppose the country's possible entry into the conflict.^[16] Any remaining possibility to state the reasons in favour of neutrality was, however, overwhelmed by Austria-Hungary's inconstant attitude, as also by the bellicose orientation of the circles close to the Crown.

On 26 April 1915, therefore, the Treaty of London was signed: it committed Italy to entering the war on the side of the Triple Entente within one month of signing the agreement. In return, Italy's future possession of the Trentino, the Cisalpine Tyrol with its natural border (the Brenner Pass), Trieste, the counties of Gorizia and Gradisca, and the whole of Istria as far as Quarnaro (including Volosca and the Istrian islands of Cherso and Lussino) was recognized. In Dalmatia, Italy would get an area that went from Lisarca and Tribania in the north to Capo Planka in the south. The valleys and watercourses descending towards Sebenico should remain Italian territory. The part of Dalmatia between Capo Planka and the peninsula of Sabioncello would be neutralized, as would the area immediately behind old Ragusa as far as Cattaro and Durazzo. Italy's complete sovereignty over Valona and the Dodecanese Islands and the Italian interest in the Ottoman Empire were recognized, and, in the case of partition between the European powers, the province of Antalya would be reserved for Italy. Finally, in the case of the carving up of the German colonies, Italy would be entitled to remuneration and to expand the frontiers of its colonies in Eritrea, Somalia and Libya.

Internal Objection to Territorial Claims

How can one assess all the Italian requests? It seems evident that the objective of Italian diplomacy had become, at a certain point, to transform the Adriatic into a sort of "inland sea". This project, however, did not seem to be very well thought out, and there was scarcely cognizance of the state of permanent conflict which, if realized, it would ultimately produce. Certainly, in 1915, it was difficult to predict the collapse of Tsarist Russia, whose leadership in the Balkans had frightened Italian diplomacy to such an extent that it asked for exaggerated strategic benefits in the Adriatic. Nevertheless, in 1915, it was certainly possible to understand how difficult it would have been for a defeated Austria-Hungary to maintain its role as a "bulwark" against the expansion of the Slav peoples in the Mediterranean. A push that, at that point, Italy would have had to face. Similar reasoning must be used for Italy's requests to extend its colonial power. Italian penetration in the Anatolian area was more an illogical illusion than an even scarcely credible expansionary project. To give some feasibility to this project, economic strength, internal stability and maritime power that Italy did not possess would, in fact, have been necessary.

During the conflict, there were opportunities to reorganize the objectives of war in order to prepare an international order that would be able to satisfy Italian ambitions while not imposing commitments

which would be too onerous for the country's strength. From this point of view, the discussion that arose after the important events of 1917 (the revolution in Russia, the United States' entry into the war and the serious Italian defeat at Caporetto) regarding the revision of the objectives of war was particularly important. In Italy it was Leonida Bissolati (1857-1920), more or less openly supported by the prime minister, Vittorio Emanuele Orlando (1860-1952), who forcefully raised the issue of adaptation to the new situation. In summary, this was the gist of his reasoning:

Even in general terms, the situation has profoundly changed. When imperial Russia's triumph was a possibility, with the immense influence it would have gained over the Slavs of Austria and the Balkans, which would have become one of its branches to the Adriatic and the Mediterranean, taking territorial precautions could be justified. Not today. Today the Slavs of Austria, the Serbs, the Yugoslavs are very disheartened; they feel they have lost their ancient and powerful protector, and look to us. If we know how to handle things and we offer them friendship, our prestige, in the alliance, as the main protectors of their cause, will increase, after the Russian protection has failed: we would, at the same time, be putting an enemy in the hearts of our enemies.^[17]

The intransigence of the Foreign Minister, Sonnino, paradoxically reinforced by the harsh press campaign waged against him by the "*Corriere della Sera*" (August 1918), prevailed. The Italian war objectives remained those established in the summer of 1914.

Modification of Domestic Policy through War

The Abolishment of Giolitti's Power System

Political considerations and the problem of the difficult consolidation of the heterogeneous majority that supported the Salandra government also played a decisive role in determining Italian requests to the Allies. From this point of view, the outbreak of the First World War ended up turning into a political opportunity, potentially able to bring the long parliamentary dominance of Giovanni Giolitti to an end. Although close to exhaustion for various reasons, Giolitti's power system in fact retained a significant force of interdiction. However, the person who had to face the international crisis generated by the assassination in Sarajevo, which quickly degenerated into conflict because of the intertwining of the general mobilization orders, was Antonio Salandra. Prime Minister since 21 March 1914, Salandra soon realized that the exceptional situation which had emerged on the international scene provided an opportunity to get rid of Giolittism. In a way the goal of Francesco Crispi (1818-1901) was revived; in other words, using patriotic fervour to consolidate the fragmented Italian bourgeoisie and make that movement a force that could affect the dynamics of parliament.^[18] In fact, in the excitement of that particular moment, an even more ambitious goal appeared to be within easy reach: the building, in the name of the patriotic duty of setting aside political differences, of a large moderate and conservative party. This was the same party of the Italian bourgeoisie for which Sidney Sonnino, in his short but intense experience of government a few years earlier, had provided an ambitious and comprehensive political platform.^[19] By examining the political dynamics that had developed a few years earlier, during the war in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, it was, for example, easy to foresee that a

new conflict would also act as a means of exerting influence against aggressive Catholic political elites. It was precisely the intensity of the patriotism of the Catholics, which the fervour shown just two years earlier during the colonial war of 1911-1912 had clearly demonstrated, that would eventually constrain their freedom of action. Catholic leaders would, in fact, have many difficulties rejecting the rallying cry and inclusion, in an inevitably subordinate position, in the variegated ranks of the patriots. Dragging the country into war would finally give the death blow to the already compromised understanding between Giolitti and the socialists. In case of war, the internationalist creed, less compromised in Italy than in other countries, would inevitably become the party's unifying feature and would impose a rigid distinction of responsibilities; the radical nature of this process would of course distance, permanently and irretrievably, the reformists of Filippo Turati (1857-1932) from Giolitti's liberal-democrats.^[20] After all, the timing could not have appeared more favourable. On the eve of the war, in fact, "Giolitti's system seemed devoid of supporters outside the parliamentary majority", subject to the concentric pressures of new movements - socialist, Catholic, nationalist and abandoned by a middle class by then determined "to win a leading role in a state organization that did not envisage having the characteristics of the old liberal state". In this sense, one can safely say that "the diverse, broad and heterogeneous interventionist front was also a revolt against Giolittism: a radical choice to destroy Giolitti's system of power and prevent his return to power".^[21]

Interventionism

All these considerations were very present in the actions of Salandra, who in those months of neutrality did not neglect to offer themes, means and opportunities to the increasingly aggressive interventionist movement. Even though the government took care to maintain a certain impartiality, by issuing circulars that insisted on the need to crack down on any violent demonstrations, there is no doubt that the presence of a strong interventionist movement in public opinion, able to prepare the country for the conflict (regardless of the choice of the side in the struggle with which in the end the agreement would be signed), ended up helping Salandra's political action. The first months of 1915 therefore witnessed an intensification of street demonstrations and the development of a heated public debate. The main protagonists of this agitated phase were the young,^[22] often organized by the more extreme parties, and the intellectuals.^[23] It was the latter who led the final phase of the interventionist mobilization, which, not by chance, found the most effective catalyst of energies in Gabriele d'Annunzio (1863-1938) – the creator of the very effective synesthesia of "radiant May".^[24] Beyond the simple schematizations, the scenario that was taking shape in those months seemed extraordinarily composite. But the complexity of the positions with respect to the choice of entering the war or not gradually decreased with the passage of weeks and the ranks of those opposed to intervention dwindled. The first to take sides were the republicans, irredentist and faithful devotees of the myth of revolutionary France; soon afterwards, despite their previously favourable attitude towards the Triple Alliance and proud claim of the superiority of the German model, it fell to the nationalists to proclaim loudly that it was the country's duty to declare war on Austria-Hungary. In the varied interventionist front, many people would gradually meet up again: the representatives of liberal War Aims and War Aims Discussions (Italy) - 1914-1918-Online

democracy, inevitably lured by the many Risorgimento references which were at the heart of the interventionist argument, and the conservative liberals close to the Salandra Government and particularly sensitive to nationalism's most aggressive ideas. The gamut of this heterogeneous grouping ranged from members of the extreme left, revolutionary trade unionists, fiercely hostile to socialist orthodoxy,^[25] to the most prominent figures among the ranks of the Catholics.

Conclusion

Despite being more numerous, both as deputies and in terms of organized masses, the neutralists were soon forced on to the defensive. Moreover, several factors contributed to the limitation of their influence on the course of events. Having mentioned the Catholics' total obedience to the institutions, it should, for example, be noted that the liberal neutralists did not have any ethically negative bias against the war. Like most of the ruling class of the time, the deputies close to Giovanni Giolitti were in fact steeped in the utilitarian spirit and would have followed their leader once he had accepted political defeat. In the end, the socialists, namely the political wing that should have offered more resistance to the hypothesis of the country's going to war, also showed a lack of consistency. The sense of responsibility demonstrated by many socialist administrations, which bordered on openly agreeing with the patriotic effort, therefore appears to be a clear signal of the influence, even within the socialist world, exercised by the political culture that had won the clash in the spring of 1915.

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Notes

- 1. † Salvemini, Gaetano: La politica estera italiana dal 1871 al 1915, in: Torre, Augusto (ed.): Scritti di politica estera Milan 1970, p. 413.
- Regarding the importance of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica for Italian diplomacy, see Salvemini, La politica estera italiana 1970, p. 348 ff.; Bosworth, Richard J. B.: La politica estera dell'Italia giolittiana, Rome 1985; Barbagallo, Francesco: Da Crispi a Giolitti. Lo Stato, la politica, i conflitti sociali, in: Sabbatucci, Giovanni / Vidotto, Vittorio: Storia d'Italia 3, Liberalismo e democrazia, 1887-1914 (1995), pp. 82-85, pp. 119-122.

- 3. 1 This approach was based on Cesare Balbo's Risorgimento considerations. The thematization of remuneration as a foreign policy topic would have important repercussions on the irredentist movement, gradually distancing it from the democratic and Mazzinian group in order to bring it into the nationalist one. Regarding the complex and sometimes contradictory relationship between irredentism and nationalism see Sabbatucci, Giovanni: II problema dell'irredentismo e le origini del movimento nazionalista in Italia, in: Storia contemporanea 2, parte seconda (1970-1971), pp. 53-106.
- The only disapproval was expressed by Sidney Sonnino, who was in favour of maintaining the commitments made and very reluctant to abandon an alliance which had permitted Italy to become an authoritative part of the international scene. Regarding Sonnino's position, see Vigezzi, Brunello: I problemi della neutralità e della guerra nel carteggio Salandra – Sonnino, 1914-1917, Milan et al. 1962, pp. 4-7.
- 5. 1 In the letter of 9 August 1914, sent by the foreign minister Antonino Paternò Castello, Marquis di San Giuliano, to Salandra, not only was the possibility raised, for the first time, of making war on Austria-Hungary, but there was a definition of the bases of the agreement which in that case would have had to be made with France, Great Britain and Russia. In: I documenti diplomatici italiani, Quinta serie 1914-1918, volume 1, documento 151, Istituto poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato, Rome 1954, pp. 83-84.
- 6. ↑ Ibid., telegram of 25 September 1914, documento 803, pp. 475-477.
- On Antonio Salandra's political career see Lucarini, Federico: La carriera di un gentiluomo. Antonio Salandra e la ricerca di un liberalismo nazionale (1875-1922), Bologna 2012.
- 8. ↑ After a great deal of insistence by Salandra, on 5 November 1914 Sidney Sonnino took up the post of foreign minister. On 16 October 1914 di San Giuliano had died.
- 9. † Vigezzi, Brunello: I problemi della neutralità e della guerra 1962, pp. 33-34.
- 10. ↑ In this regard, see the observations of Francesco Saverio Nitti (1868-1953), in Barbagallo, Francesco: Francesco S. Nitti, Turin 1984.
- 11. ↑ The negotiations with Austria-Hungary, mediated by Germany's strong interest in the successful outcome of the meetings, continued even after the signing of the Treaty of London in April 1915 until just before Italy's entry into the war. It was at that point that Giovanni Giolitti, having come to know of the commitments made with the Treaty of London, said that he was not prepared to lead a "neutralist" government or to continue the negotiations with Austria-Hungary. In this regard see Valiani, Leo: La dissoluzione dell'Austria-Ungheria, Milan 1966.
- 12. ↑ In the letter sent on 2 February 1915 to "La Tribuna", Giovanni Giolitti had expressed the opinion that a lot could be obtained through neutrality. From the letter to its publication, the word "molto" (a lot) changed to "parecchio" (quite a lot); this word was used in the violent interventionist campaign as a pretext to accuse Giolitti of being petty and insensitive with respect to high patriotic ideals. In this regard see Isnenghi, Mario / Rochat, Giorgio: La Grande Guerra. 1914-1918, Florence 2000, pp. 129-131.
- 13. † In this regard see Valiani, La dissoluzione dell'Austria-Ungheria 1966.
- 14. † In order to retrace the different phases of Giolitti's actions, in those frenetic weeks of the spring of 1915, see Malagodi, Olindo: Conversazioni della guerra. 1914-1919, volume I, Da Sarajevo a Caporetto, Milan et al. 1960.
- 15. † Lotti, Luigi: La settimana rossa, Florence 1965.
- 16. ↑ For an in.depth study of neutralism in Italy see Cammarano, Fulvio (ed.): Abbasso la guerra! Neutralisti in piazza alla vigilia della prima guerra mondiale in Italia, Florence 2015.

- 17. ↑ Malagodi, Olindo: Conversazioni della guerra, 1914-1919, volume II, Dal Piave a Versailles, Milan et al. 1960, p. 263.
- 18. ↑ In particular, see Adorni, Daniela: Francesco Crispi. Un progetto di governo, Florence 1999.
- 19.
 Regarding Sidney Sonnino's life and thought see: Gentiloni Silveri, Umberto: Conservatori senza partito Rome 1990; Ballini, Pier Luigi (ed.): Sidney Sonnino e il suo tempo, Florence 2000; and Nieri, Rolando: Costituzione e problemi sociali. Il pensiero politico di Sideny Sonnino, Pisa 2000.
- 20. † See Valiani, Leo: Il Partito socialista italiano nel periodo della neutralità 1914-1915, in: Annali della Fondazione Feltrinelli, Milan 1962; Il PSI e la grande guerra, "Rivista storica del socialismo" special issue 32 (1967).
- 21. † Gentile, Emilio: L'Italia giolittiana. 1899-1914, Bologna 1990, p. 235.
- 22. † On the protagonism and youthful impatience of those years see among others: Degl'Innocenti, Maurizio: L'epoca giovane. Generazioni, fascismo e antifascismo, Manduria 2002; Papadia, Elena: Di padre in figlio. La generazione del 1915, Bologna 2013.
- 23. ↑ On the Italian intellectuals' different positions see Isnenghi, Mario: Il mito della grande guerra. Da Marinetti a Malaparte, Bari 1973.
- 24. † Rainero, Romain H. / Galli, Stefano (eds.): L'Italia e la grande vigilia. Gabriele D'Annunzio nella politica italiana prima del fascismo, Milan 2007.
- 25. ↑ The most prominent figure in this political area was undoubtedly Benito Mussolini (1883-1945). Regarding the reasons for the interventionist choice made by Mussolini, up to that time a leading member of the Socialist Party, see De Felice, Renzo: Mussolini il rivoluzionario. 1983-1920, Turin 1965.

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