

Between Acceptance and Refusal - Soldiers' Attitudes Towards War (Italy)

By [Vanda Wilcox](#)

Summary

During the First World War, Italian soldiers' attitudes varied widely, from enthusiasm to outright rejection of military service thanks to diverse political opinions, socioeconomic backgrounds and conceptions of national identity. The majority were relatively unenthusiastic but obedient, owing not only to the army's use of harsh coercive techniques but also to soldiers' own sense of duty to family, nation and comrades. Despite many episodes of indiscipline, most Italians faced their military service with determination, making endurance the most common response to the war.

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Introduction

The morale of Italian soldiers in the Great War has been the subject of much scholarly and public debate ever since the early months of the conflict. The Italian [defeat at Caporetto](#), widely seen as a failure of morale, particularly brought the question of soldiers' conduct to the heart of a heated national discussion. Even before this, there was little consensus over the attitudes of the mass of Italian soldiers, who were variously characterised as loyal and enthusiastic patriots, passive models of ignorant endurance, or unreliable, radicalised anti-

war subversives. While wartime public narratives promoted a vision of ordinary soldiers characterised by humble dedication, both military and civil authorities were alarmed by signs of weak self-discipline, such as draft evasion or desertion. Historians too have achieved little consensus on Italian morale, but what is clear is that no mono-causal model can adequately explain soldiers' attitudes during Italy's participation in the conflict between 1915 and 1918. Military historian Giorgio Rochat has noted that despite the many studies of different aspects of the Italian soldier's experience, "it remains hard to find a suitable explanation for the cohesion and fighting spirit of the Italian army".¹ In fact, soldiers' attitudes display both significant change over time and considerable differences between different socioeconomic and regional groups; perspectives ranged along a spectrum including enthusiasm, acceptance, endurance, resignation and outright refusal.

Historiography

The debate over what Italians thought and felt about the war began almost immediately after it ended, with an initial patriotic consensus remaining largely unchallenged until after the Second World War. Both [fascist](#) and Liberal historians initially presented the war as a key stage in [Italy's](#) progress towards true national unity, focusing heavily on bourgeois views and experiences that perceive military service as something willingly embraced for a noble cause.² The first significant military studies, published after the Second World War by [Piero Pieri \(1893-1979\)](#), himself a veteran, rejected the triumphalist tones of fascist mythology, but did not seriously challenge the idea of the war as one of national unity based on consensual participation or at worst passive acceptance.³ Not until the late 1960s did major new approaches emerge. In 1968, [Enzo Forcella \(1921-1999\)](#) and Alberto Monticone published their revolutionary study, *Plotone d'esecuzione: i processi della prima guerra mondiale*, which revealed the true nature of the army's disciplinary regime and of the many forms of soldiers' dissent and rejection. Simultaneously, cultural history opened up new fields of enquiry, led by the pioneering work of Mario Isnenghi, to reveal the artful construction of the apparent patriotic consensus.⁴ Italian patriotism was shown to be underdeveloped, with local identities or class interests far more important. Beginning in the 1970s, a new dominant narrative placed coercion at the heart of Italian soldiers' war experience, with refusal or rejection their core characteristic (an implicitly anti-fascist argument). [Giovanna Procacci](#) revealed the brutal coercive mechanisms of state and army alike, while [Antonio Gibelli](#) used popular testimonies to reveal ordinary peasants' and workers' experiences and beliefs.⁵ More recently, new angles including [psychiatry](#), gender and disability have diversified the field, though many continue to present soldiers as at best uninterested, at worst openly opposed to the war. Military historians have increasingly emphasised the problematic structures of the

army itself, which did not support positive morale.⁶ Recently [Nicola Labanca](#) has made an important plea for transnational and comparative approaches to questions including that of troop morale and the soldier's experience, which should help to move beyond the somewhat inward-looking debates that have developed.⁷

Methodology

The study of soldiers' experiences and attitudes in Italy is difficult: literacy levels were lower than in some other armies and the systematic collection of diaries, [letters](#) and oral testimonies from ordinary servicemen began only long after the war, thanks to institutions such as the National Archive of Diaries in Pieve Santo Stefano and the Ligurian Archive for Popular Writing in Genova (both established in the 1980s). Consequently, earlier scholarship relied heavily on middle class writings, frequently from junior officers, which tended to emphasise consent or even enthusiasm for the war. The responses of Italian intellectuals were often wrongly assumed to be representative of society as a whole. The study of morale and of soldier's mentalities must also be undertaken via other sources such as trench journals, military tribunal judgements (as seen in the detailed studies of [Marco Pluviano](#) and [Irene Guerrini](#) on [military justice](#)), medical and psychiatric records and official army documentation.

1915: The Outbreak of War

Although Italy officially declared war on [Austria-Hungary](#) on 24 May 1915, the country's experience of the Great War began in August 1914 with a vast programme of recruitment for officers and men along a process of cultural mobilisation. Certain assumptions about soldiers' attitudes were already clear: [urban](#) workers were seen as "contaminated" with socialism while the peasantry were loyal, obedient and passive. Preparation for war focused on instilling discipline and unquestioning obedience, with little attention to inculcating patriotism or commitment to the state's war aims (difficult, when Italy was still officially neutral). A large majority of the population was either indifferent to the imminent conflict or else actively supported on-going [neutrality](#), as the [government's](#) own efforts to canvass public opinion revealed in February 1915.⁸ In fact, Italy's weak democratic traditions and underdeveloped civic culture meant that public opinion played little role in contemporary debates, so the attitudes of ordinary conscripts were largely irrelevant to the authorities.

When the class of 1895 was called up in January 1915, over 90 percent complied, reflecting not only the army's organisational and coercive functions but also the widespread acceptance of military service, whether or not men supported the idea of the war.⁹

Compliance with the draft could indicate a genuine sense of patriotic duty, inculcated through schooling or prior military service, as well as local peer group pressure or even the influence of families who urged men to comply. However, many peasants compared mobilisation to a natural disaster: an overwhelming and unavoidable catastrophe erupting into their lives.¹⁰ Obedience to conscription was perfectly compatible with support for continuing neutrality. Outright [interventionism](#) was more rare, found chiefly among the bourgeoisie and intelligentsia, with [war enthusiasm](#) widespread among many upper and middle-class young men who were more than willing to serve as junior officers. This sentiment found its clearest expression in the phenomenon of the “Garibaldian volunteers” who fought for [France](#) in 1914-15, organised and led by [Giuseppe Garibaldi's \(1807-1882\)](#) grandsons. Despite their initial hope of raising at least 30,000 men, they were actually able to form just three battalions (around 2,000 men), who served in the Argonne; the corps was dissolved in March 1915 as Italian intervention approached.¹¹

The campaign for intervention picked up in the opening months of 1915, focusing on the need to “redeem” the “occupied” cities of Trento and Trieste to complete the work of national unification, culminating in an unprecedented outpouring of pro-war activism in the major cities, known as “Radiant May”. However this feverish excitement had little resonance with the wider population; it was impossible to present [Italy's war aims](#) as defensive, and genuine interest in the territories to be claimed was limited even in border regions. Only 8,171 men came forward as volunteers; many were from Trento or Trieste themselves, along with enthusiastic bourgeois [nationalists](#) and a few Mazzinian republicans. By contrast, the essentially voluntary return of more than 200,000 Italians from overseas suggests that an on-going sense of Italian identity was strong with many emigrants, and that a considerable proportion were (at least initially) willing to serve in the war. In general, however, the mood of most soldiers upon the outbreak of war was primarily one of compliance, rather than enthusiasm or active consent.

1915-17: Enduring the War of Attrition

By the autumn of 1915, with stagnation setting in on both major fronts, signs of Italian soldiers' disaffection were beginning to emerge. Predictions of a short war had helped to generate initial optimism but as this hope was thwarted, lack of battlefield success combined with other problems, such as shortages of good quality [weaponry](#), munitions and [equipment](#), to depress morale. Little was done in the way of [propaganda](#) or patriotic education for the troops in this period, nor were morale-boosting measures such as leisure facilities provided. Insecurity in the army hierarchy due to the regular dismissal of senior officers discouraged them from innovating or exercising their initiative in this area.¹² Army authorities wrestled

continuously with more or less justified fears about the loyalty and conduct of the troops. Chief of General Staff [Luigi Cadorna \(1850-1928\)](#) was particularly concerned about political subversion within the army and repeatedly requested that the civilian government equip him with enhanced powers of coercion to fight what he saw as an epidemic of disobedience.¹³

Signs of Refusal

Signs of refusal did indeed begin to increase from late 1915 onward, taking both overt and covert forms; disciplinary offences, and the army's efforts to control them, began to proliferate. Charges issued by the disciplinary system reveal that men sought ways to escape military service either temporarily or permanently through individual actions including draft evasion, desertion, self-mutilation and malingering. Some 470,000 Italians were charged with draft evasion during the war, but at least 370,000 of were emigrants who, though liable to conscription under Italian law, could not be forcibly pursued abroad. Draft evasion within Italy revealed considerable regional variations, with rates significantly higher in the south and on the islands than in the north or centre, suggesting the importance of both socioeconomic factors and political attitudes.¹⁴ Among mobilised men, desertion was the most common offence, with 128,000 cases heard by tribunals during the war, while self-mutilation and malingering were also widespread, with some 10,000 convictions in total.¹⁵ The judicial record reveals only those charged and convicted; many more men may have acted "successfully", without identification. In many cases involving minor acts of self-mutilation or malingering, men escaped from service only briefly during treatment and convalescence, constituting temporary refusal, rather than permanent rejection of the war.

Italian military discipline operated on extremely brutal lines, particularly under Cadorna's leadership, with 750 capital sentences issued during the war and with both summary execution and decimation practiced on multiple occasions.¹⁶ However, the harshness of the system did not prevent symptoms of disaffection. The draconian response was widely assumed both at the time and by many later analysts to have played a critical role in keeping men in the field and preventing the whole-scale breakdown of discipline and order, and certainly the role of coercion in keeping Italians fighting cannot be overlooked. However, evidence from letters, diaries and other sources suggests that many internalised some sense of duty and obligation whether to the nation, the army or simply to their own comrades. For example, Bruna Bianchi has found that more than half of deserters returned spontaneously to their unit within a week – a sign that they had developed a sense of responsibility which kept them serving.¹⁷ Moreover, despite the authorities' fears, collective indiscipline was rare, with only one true mutiny (defined as a planned, armed insurrection against military authorities)

during the entire war. This was the revolt of the Catanzaro Brigade in July 1917, combining clear evidence of premeditation and lethal violence directed against officers, military police and loyal troops, with mutineers' grievances focused on poor quality leadership and perceptions of unfair treatment.¹⁸ Most collective indiscipline, however, took place in rear areas or while travelling, and was usually short-lived, involving drunkenness, insults and ritualised disobedience rather than genuine rebellion or violence against superiors.

Overt political opposition to the war was uncommon: most ordinary soldiers were more concerned with the effects of the war on their own life, family and livelihood than with its consequences for society as a whole. Despite the strength of pre-war socialism, the Italian Socialist Party was undermined by its failure to coherently oppose the war from May 1915 and most servicemen were uninterested in leftist anti-war activism (often seeing socialists as shirkers). A religiously inspired belief in peace could also lead men to reject the war, but for the most part the Church and military [chaplains](#) strongly endorsed traditional hierarchies and emphasised obedience to secular authorities, leaving few grounds to justify refusal of service through faith.¹⁹

Endurance

Endurance, rather than rejection, characterised most soldiers' attitude, and was rooted in a deep-seated culture of deference to social and political superiors, along with a Catholic tradition of obedience and acceptance of hierarchy. Military commentators tended to perceive the peasantry in particular as resigned, apolitical, ignorant and stoical, with an almost limitless capacity to endure suffering. Military psychologist and Franciscan friar [Agostino Gemelli \(1878-1959\)](#) took this even further in his wartime work, asserting that passivity and resignation were positive assets in the army, and that men without hope, education or ambition made the best infantrymen.²⁰ But while many peasant and working class soldiers' testimonies do refer to resignation, it was not a universal response to the war, nor were men without agency or critical capacities. Compliance was often to some extent conditional, requiring reasonably equitable treatment and acknowledgement in return. Soldiers' views varied depending on their socioeconomic and regional backgrounds: independent artisans and craftsmen had different assumptions about passive obedience than landless labourers dependent on a landlord's good will. Equally, men who had grown up in the Alpine border regions or who were more familiar with the "unredeemed" lands might understand their relationship to the nation and to Italy's war aims somewhat differently to the peoples of Sardinia or Sicily, who had little reason to hate the Austrians or to embrace territorial goals in the north.²¹ Attitudes also varied between units, depending on each unit's formation, training and wartime experiences; individual soldiers' attitudes were influenced

both by shared external factors and by personal or intrinsic characteristics.

Attitudes to wartime service were not only contingent on circumstance but varied over time; loyal patriots could grow disaffected as the war wore on or angry [pacifists](#) become wearily resigned to their duties. Political changes such as the American entry into the war or the [Russian Revolution](#) had relatively little impact on morale in the trenches: even the Papal Peace Note of August 1917 or the mass unrest in Turin in that same month did not significantly shape the mood of Italian troops.²² Events on the battlefield – victories, defeats, examples of excellent or disastrous leadership – had a much greater influence on how far men's endurance might be pushed. Quiet sectors which saw little real action induced great tedium but were generally easier to bear than the more active sectors along the lower [Isonzo](#) in particular; on the other hand, life in the [high mountains](#), such as the Cadore area, brought its own physical and psychological pressures and took a real toll on the men who served there.

Endurance did not necessarily entail passivity but could be a positive quality rooted in successful psychological coping mechanisms such as humour, grumbling, superstition, leisure and recreation or the anaesthetic effects of alcohol. Another source of psychological strength came from fellow combatants: a sense of comradeship or brotherhood in arms is certainly much celebrated in many of the accounts published during or after the war, though this mythologisation often bore little relation to the realities of ordinary working class soldiers' lived experience.²³ Nonetheless, small group cohesion (or the "primary group" model of military morale) did contribute to maintaining troops' compliance, as ties of mutual obligation could serve to limit acts of refusal – though group solidarity could also spread dissent under other circumstances. Above all, on-going contact with family and friends at home through letters and postcards and home leave was vital to upholding men's capacity to endure.

The Crisis of Caporetto

The Battle of Caporetto witnessed the disintegration of the 2nd Army and mass indiscipline of various sorts, with nearly 300,000 men taken [prisoner](#), while some 350,000 simply abandoned their units and headed back into the Italian interior.²⁴ These "disbanded" units reveal a widespread breakdown of military discipline and troop morale. While some had become isolated in the chaos of the retreat, many threw their weapons away, rejected officers' attempts to control them and headed for home in the belief that the war was lost. Scenes of defiance, disobedience and despair have often characterised the battle in popular memory and fiction.

Explanations of the defeat immediately focused on soldiers' conduct; Cadorna blamed "the inadequate resistance of units of 2nd Army, cowardly retreating without fighting or ignominiously surrendering to the enemy" for the defeat.²⁵ Other contemporary explanations included political subversion, the Papal Peace Initiative, a military strike, even the heralding of a Russian-style revolution. In reality, the Austro-German victory was rooted in operational and tactical excellence combined with numerous Italian errors in strategy and [logistics](#). Indeed, the chaotic and disorderly scenes of mass indiscipline were largely the result, not the cause, of the defeat.²⁶ After the initial breakthrough the attackers advanced into rear areas with a speed and purpose which shocked and demoralised the defending troops, leading to widespread panic. When it appeared that the war might be over, reluctant obedience ceased to serve a useful purpose and individual self-interest triumphed.

Nonetheless, while there was undoubtedly a total collapse of order and discipline within many units, others endured the long retreat stoically, maintaining good order. Outside the 2nd Army, troops to the north (in the Carnic Alps) and south (on the Carso), fought effectively and retreated calmly to avoid encirclement, continuing to accept military service as their duty. British and French troops were sent in support but they played no part in halting the retreat on the river Piave: it was Italian units that fought with great determination to stabilise the new defensive line and prevent further disaster.²⁷ Morale failure by no means affected the whole army, which, accepting its obligations, would live to fight another day – and ultimately to win the war. Paradoxically, the shock which Caporetto gave to both the army and to the civilian political authorities helped pave the way for major policy changes which would have a significant impact on troops' experiences of and attitudes towards on-going military service.

1918: A New Era?

Caporetto changed Italy's strategic and political position considerably, giving the country a much shorter front to defend and a new climate of unity. Just as important was the new psychological context, as Italians of all ages and classes could unite around the shared goal of expelling the invader from Italian soil. The experiences of Italian civilians under enemy occupation or fleeing it as refugees acted as a powerful source of motivation.²⁸ Even those who had no sympathy with [irredentism](#) could find new meaning in the idea of a defensive war to protecting the homes (and womenfolk) of fellow Italians, arguments which were much emphasised in the media and propaganda campaigns. The arrival of British, French and American units in 1917 and 1918 was also reassuring, emphasising the international and coalition dimensions of the conflict. Of course, these reactions were not universal: those who had hoped that Caporetto would end the war and allow them to go home at last were

disappointed. In fact, the changes in popular attitudes which took place within the army in 1918 would not rely principally on this new climate but instead be rooted in pragmatic reforms introduced by the army itself.

New Policies for Managing Morale

Even before the Battle of Caporetto ended, Cadorna had been replaced by a new chief of general staff, [Armando Diaz \(1861-1928\)](#), who proved to be an energetic reformer. He modified the system of discipline and military justice, not to make it less severe but to make it fairer, more rational and more consistent. He ended the more egregious of Cadorna's brutal practices, such as decimation and summary execution, instead insisting on a more scrupulous attention to questions of guilt and innocence.²⁹ Just as importantly, he undertook major reforms of troop rotation and the leave system, both of which had been a source of continual grievances owing to their unfairness and inefficiency. The civilian government was persuaded to improve soldiers' financial circumstances, with new life insurance and pension arrangements to reassure men of their families' wellbeing. Diaz also oversaw the creation of a wholly new system of propaganda and patriotic education, implementing a centralised strategy to replace earlier lower-level initiatives. The new "Ufficio P" (propaganda office) inaugurated a range of measures to explain and justify the war, recruiting young writers, artists and intellectuals to launch propaganda initiatives, including the creation of official [trench journals](#) which would inform, entertain and motivate the soldiers.³⁰ Finally, in 1918 leisure and recreation provision was increased, through "soldiers' homes" for reading, listening to music and socialising, while [cinema](#), [theatre](#) and inter-unit [sports](#) events were also organised. These measures collectively indicate an unprecedented awareness of the importance of morale for the effectiveness of the army – a harsh lesson of Caporetto. Diaz has been credited with effecting a complete policy transformation, though many of his innovations were ideas that had previously been implemented only sporadically. His most important contribution was to identify successful morale-boosting measures and introduce them centrally across the armed forces as a whole.

Italy's final offensive at [Vittorio Veneto](#) began exactly a year after the attack at Caporetto, and showed that these reforms had made a real difference. Although through most of 1918 the Italian army was reluctant to launch major offensives, it defended effectively on the [Piave](#) in June 1918, and when the army's attacking capacity was finally put to the test, it performed well. Army policies beyond simple coercion could make a real difference in shaping soldiers' attitudes to the war. Nonetheless capital sentences were still carried out during the final months of the war, suggesting that even Diaz's many positive reforms could not wholly transform soldiers' attitudes and behaviour.³¹

Conclusion

Often regarded as an example of particularly poor morale, the Italian army's performance in the First World War suggests that its problems in this area were not significantly worse than those of its contemporaries. Outright enthusiasm was a strictly limited phenomenon, found largely among the higher social classes, and one that could fade quite rapidly in the face of the war's brutal realities. Although many men rejected military service through draft evasion or desertion, or found alternative mechanisms to express their disaffection, such as malingering or self-mutilation, the vast majority of Italian soldiers fell between these extremes, enduring for as long as they could, complying with orders, and more or less willingly accepting the concept of wartime duty. Acceptance and refusal were the two extremes of soldiers' attitudes, between which the vast majority of soldiers found themselves. Endurance, whether willing or reluctant, conditional or resigned, was the most common response from the Italian soldier in the face of the many hardships of the war.

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