

Cadorna, Luigi

By [Anna Grillini](#)



Luigi Cadorna (1850-1928)

Luigi Cadorna, chief of staff of the Italian army during the first part of World War One, poses for a portrait in uniform.

Bain News Service: Gen. Count Luis Cadorna, black-and-white photograph, n.p., c.

1910-1915; source: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, LC-B2- 3548-5, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/ggb2005019541/>.

Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Cadorna, Luigi

Italian General

Born 04 September 1850 in Verbania, Italy

Died 21 December 1928 in Bordighera, Italy

Summary

Luigi Cadorna was a career military man, the son of a major general in the army of Piedmont. He quickly climbed the military hierarchy to become chief of staff of the Italian army from July 1914 until November 1917. Cadorna was known for imposing severe discipline among his troops.

Table of contents

1 Early Life and Career

2 The War

3 Final Years

Selected Bibliography

Citation

Early Life and Career

Luigi Cadorna (1850-1928) was born to General [Raffaele Cadorna \(1815-1897\)](#) in Verbania. At age ten he entered the military school Teuliè in Milan; five years later he was sent to the Turin Military Academy. Cadorna had his “baptism by fire” when, shortly after he became second lieutenant, he participated in military operations against Rome in 1870. When he was thirty-nine, he married [Maria Giovanni Balbi \(1860-1941\)](#), member of the family of Marquis Balbi of Genova. They had a son whom they named [Raffaele Cadorna, Jr. \(1889-1973\)](#) in honor of his grandfather. As colonel, Cadorna commanded the 10th Regiment of Bersaglieri from 1892. Cadorna became famous for his strict [discipline](#) and harsh punishment. He also wrote a manual on [infantry](#) tactics, which emphasized the doctrine of the offensive. This doctrine would become the basis of the tactics he adopted during the Great War. In 1898 he was promoted to lieutenant general.

Cadorna finally achieved success in 1907 when he obtained command of Naples’ military division. Three days after the [assassination](#) of [Franz Ferdinand, Archduke of Austria-Este \(1863-1914\)](#) in Sarajevo, the Italian army chief of staff, General [Alberto Pollio \(1852-1914\)](#) died suddenly of a heart attack.

On 27 July 1914, [Vittorio Emanuele III, King of Italy \(1869-1947\)](#) named Cadorna army chief of staff and supreme commander, just three days before the [Austro-Hungarian Empire](#) gave its ultimatum to [Serbia](#).

The War

Cadorna’s first challenge was to reorganize the army. In 1914 it was clear that the Italian military forces were unprepared for war, so the general dedicated the first few months of his assignment to strengthening and modernizing the army.

After the declaration of [neutrality](#), Cadorna requested to start a general mobilization in order to prepare a stronger army, but the [government](#) rejected his proposal, fearing that it would accelerate entry into the war. The general’s strategy was to engage Austro-Hungarian troops in combat as frequently as possible; he concentrated many of the forces available in Friuli and opted for one defensive line in the [Trentino](#) region. Cadorna’s faith in his tactics never

wavered, despite the lack of progress or the alarmingly high casualties.

Cadorna's leadership style was influenced by a sense of duty. He sacrificed everything to the cause of victory; soldiers' needs were absolutely secondary. This concept of duty was combined with his inability to understand the needs of a mass army composed of millions of men more or less prepared for war. The principles and application of a grueling discipline involved a serious neglect of the soldiers' emotional and material needs. Inevitable failures were promptly and severely punished. These mistakes made Cadorna increasingly paranoid about an alleged defeatist maneuver.

Another crucial aspect of Cadorna's leadership was his conviction concerning the "unity of command" – he placed great importance on a strict hierarchy. To the general, this dogma entailed his own absolute responsibility for the army; no one was allowed to contradict his authority. This led to his total isolation. These attitudes deeply influenced Cadorna's relationship with the government. According to the general, the civil authorities had to accommodate the army's every request without objection. If a clear separation of civil and military powers had been advocated and implemented before the war, the war's onset made this separation increasingly difficult to maintain. The slowness of Italian politics favored the broadening of the army's influence. Furthermore, Cadorna did not tolerate interference of any sort in war operations. The tense atmosphere and lack of mutual confidence led the government to decide to replace Cadorna, a decision which was finally confirmed by the defeat of October 1917.

The absence of direct contact with the troops as well as a lack of a truly efficient information service exacerbated the commander-in-chief's inability to ensure the prompt execution of his orders. This latter aspect was a crucial factor in the defeat in October 1917. Although Cadorna had been alerted several times about a possible Austrian attack on the Isonzo front, he was halfhearted in issuing orders and monitoring their execution. The army had to settle on defensive positions, but this order was only executed a few days before the Austrian offensive. On 24 October 1917, the Twelfth [Battle of the Isonzo](#) began, better known as the [Battle of Caporetto](#). It represented the worst defeat ever suffered by the Italian army.

Final Years

Cadorna never admitted his responsibility for the defeat, instead accusing his troops of cowardice. The government fired him from the post and replaced him with General [Armando Diaz \(1861-1928\)](#). Cadorna, however, was appointed a member of the Allied Supreme War Council of Versailles, only to be retired as a result of the investigation into the Battle of Caporetto.

Luigi Cadorna served as senator from 1913 to 1928 but never adhered to [fascism](#). He died on 21 December 1928 in Bordighera.

Anna Grillini, University of Trento and Italian-German Historical Institute

Selected Bibliography

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- [Labanca, Nicola: **Caporetto. Storia di una disfatta**, 2 ed., Florence, 2000: Giunti; Casterman.](#)
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External Links

- [Cadorna, Luigi: Il generale Raffaele Cadorna nel Risorgimento italiano, 1922 \(Internet Archive\) \(Book\)](#)
- [Cadorna, Luigi: La Guerra alla fronte Italiana, fino all'arresto sulla linea della Piave e del Grappa \(24 Maggio 1915-9 Novembre 1917\), Milan 1921 \(Internet Archive\) \(Book\)](#)
- [Lettera di Gabriele d'Annunzio a Luigi Cadorna del 18 settembre 1917 \(Europeana 1914-1918\) \(Primary Source\)](#)
- [The battle of Gorizia \(Italian recordings\), 1917 \(Europeana 1914-1918\) \(Video\)](#)
- [The Royal Italian Army on the Tagliamento River \(European Film Gateway\) \(Video\)](#)

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[Anna Grillini](#)

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