

# Civilian and Military Power (Italy)

By [Marco Mondini](#)

## Summary

In Italy, as in the other European states involved in the First World War, the outbreak of hostilities saw extraordinary powers conferred upon the armed forces, so as to free them from the supervision of government and parliament. War legislation guaranteed the supreme command complete control within the combat zone, which also covered large tracts of the national territory, a fact that General Cadorna profited by when excluding civilians from the management of the conflict. Even after Caporetto, his successor, General Diaz, though maintaining more cordial relations with both the government and the allies, nonetheless retained his autonomy in the management of the war.

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## Introduction

For all the countries involved in the first global conflict, total mobilization entailed a substantial transfer of powers from civilian [governments](#) to military authorities. The novel requirements of a mass, industrial war, and a protracted one at that, rendered necessary, though the phases and manner of it might differ, a radical and hitherto unprecedented militarization of civil society and of the productive apparatuses.<sup>1</sup> Not only were the military authorities given a free hand in the conduct of field operations, such as the general staffs traditionally enjoyed, but they also gradually arrogated responsibilities and competences in various other spheres. In the “combat zones”, and in some cases across the whole of the national territory also, the military high command of all the armies claimed and obtained wide-ranging and general powers in the field of policing, the administration of justice, the management of production and trade, the suppression of dissent and the disciplining of public opinion.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, the extent to which power was, more or less consensually,

withdrawn from the civilian governments, and then reconfigured, was largely determined by specific factors, namely, the existence and solidity of a parliamentary democracy, the authority of the ruling class, the fact of the combat zone overlapping with a part of the national territory or lying wholly outside of it, and, last but not least, the social and political prestige of the armed forces within the various national societies.<sup>3</sup>

Through the French historian [Pierre Renouvin's \(1893-1874\)](#) study from 1927, devoted to [France](#) in the war years, scholars have come to acknowledge that the various “war governments”, as he termed them, were to a great extent indebted to the diverse degrees of cultural and social militarization evident in Europe between 1870 and 1914. “Militarization” was understood as the capacity of military societies – and more specifically of officer corps – to obtain recognition as a ruling aristocracy, able to exercise a leadership that appeared natural and superior to the civilian authorities.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, the introduction of emergency legislation with a view to transferring competences from the political authorities to the armed forces, had a wide range of different consequences: from the persistence of strict supervision of the army high command by the executive arm, as in the British case, to the government and parliament’s abdication in face of the general staff in [Germany](#), to the more transitory (but no less absolute) “Chantilly dictatorship” and “Udine dictatorship” in France and [Italy](#) respectively.<sup>5</sup> We are thus concerned here with very different outcomes, which may be interpreted in terms of the impact of (but at the same time as a symptom of) the various national models upon the power relations forged in the course of the previous decades. The Great War was a turning-point in the history of [civilian-military relations](#), but not invariably with the same intensity nor with the same results, and this either by virtue of the previously consolidated balances or on account of the capacity and also of the determination of the various commanders to impose their will on their respective governments, even with regard to major strategic decisions on the battlefield and on the home front.<sup>6</sup>

## The shape of wartime government in Italy

In Italy a “war government” was instituted through the passing of two laws: on 21 March 1915 (law no. 273) parliament delegated wide-ranging legislative powers to [Antonio Salandra's \(1853-1931\)](#) government, whereby he might oversee, by means of decrees, specific matters “regarding the economic and military defense of the State”. On 22 May 1915, in the immediate aftermath of intervention, law no. 671 conferred “emergency powers upon the King’s government in case of war”. The first measure provided the scaffolding for emergency legislation, confirmed by the subordination of Parliament to the executive. Amongst other things, it guaranteed the government sweeping powers over the [press](#) and public opinion, and entrusted the relevant ministers, exempt from parliamentary scrutiny,

with the task of introducing whatever measures were deemed necessary to ensure domestic security and the prosecution of a (still merely potential) conflict.<sup>7</sup> The law of 22 May, consisting of just a single article, stipulated that in case of war and *for the duration of the conflict* the government had the right to issue instructions with the status of laws concerning whatever pertained to the defense of the state, the safeguarding of public order and the urgent needs of the national economy.<sup>8</sup>

The abdication of legislative power put into effect through this sweeping, vague and irrevocable<sup>9</sup> delegation was followed by the transfer of a wide range of equally far-reaching powers to the Supreme Command, powers that could not readily be scrutinized. In essence, this consensual expropriation was already implicit in the wording of the law of full powers, where it was stated that “the provisions laid down in articles 243 and 251 of the penal code respecting the army [remained] in force”. These two articles in fact served to discipline the transition from peacetime to a state of war and the assumption of emergency powers on the part of the military authorities, with the capacity to legislate in the territories declared to be “war zones” (or occupied territories) by means of decrees and ordinances, being exempt from any oversight by the executive and the judiciary. Indeed, the identification between war zones and the almost complete legislative autonomy of the army (from the Supreme Command to the territorial commands) represented the specific defining feature of the civilian-military dyarchy in Italy between 1915 and 1918.<sup>10</sup>

In actual fact, the entrusting of emergency powers to the armed forces was not an altogether unprecedented event in the history of liberal Italy. Resort to a state of siege in the liberal epoch (at the time of the Sicilian *fasci*, in 1893-1894, and the Milanese events of 1898) had already given rise to emergencies in which the army had been asked to assume full and independent responsibility for maintaining public order. In 1915, however, the zone declared to be a “war” zone covered a very broad swathe of the national territory, encompassing many of the provinces on the north-eastern frontier (Brescia, Verona, Vicenza, Belluno, Udine, Venice, Treviso, Padua, Mantua, Ferrara, Bologna, Ravenna, Forlì), together with the maritime strongholds and a few coastal communes, and in the succeeding years it was gradually extended until, after the [crisis of Caporetto](#), it covered almost the whole of northern Italy along with the territories of Messina and Reggio Calabria. It was thus the case that by the end of the conflict, over 10 million Italians, not far short of 30 percent of the entire population of the Kingdom, were living in a territory subject to military jurisdiction.<sup>11</sup> Only a relatively narrow strip of land from within these regions (the so-called “zone of operations”) was really and constantly caught up in the fighting, but the authority of the Supreme Command (and by delegation, that of the subordinate commands) was almost absolute

everywhere. In addition, by contrast with the states of siege periodically declared in the past in order to deal with insurrectionary episodes that were localized and short-lived, the militarization of the administration and of society during the war had no time limit. From this point of view, the situation was above all reminiscent of the state of emergency imposed during the struggle against brigandage, when the Pica law of 1863 had placed the greater part of the South under army control and with no end point specified. Yet between 1915 and 1918 there were incomparably more areas of life removed from civilian control than had been the case during the years of brigandage. Apart from problems relating to public order and security (taking on policing and judicial responsibilities), the military commands were vested with the power to run independently or nearly so vast sectors of the industrial mobilization (both in the war zone and in the country at large) and to oversee a substantial part of the cultural mobilization (from the organization of [propaganda at home](#) and abroad to press [censorship](#)). The most characteristic forms taken by these new competences were the militarization of the [war economy](#), the encroachment upon civilian society of [military tribunals](#) (which through special decrees were accorded the right to try even civilians for crimes of opinion) and a very broad interpretation of their prerogatives, and, finally, a monopoly over the flow of information.

So far as industrial mobilization was concerned, the Kingdom of Italy, unlike the other powers, launched early on, from the opening weeks of the war, a systematic program for the regimentation of industrial enterprises. By contrast with the other belligerent countries (Germany excepted), it entrusted the armed forces with the running of the war economy, placing General [Alfredo Dallolio \(1853-1952\)](#) in charge of the Sub-secretariat (subsequently an autonomous ministry) for Armaments and Munitions, the control room for industrial mobilization.<sup>12</sup> The [occupied territories](#) for their part were under the General Secretariat for Civilian Affairs (SCGA), a body whose responsibilities covered various sectors but whose principal purpose was to ensure the smooth running of the army in the field, through the management, among other things, of a vast mobilization of militarized manpower. Although directed by a civilian, the SGCA was in fact an emanation of the authority of the Supreme Command and of its capacity to exercise an almost absolute *de facto* and *de jure* sovereignty in the war zone.

The encroachments of the military commands upon the civilian structures still functioning in the war zone – prefectures, police stations and courts were not evacuated, save in a limited number of territories and after the crisis of 1917 – would very probably have had less impact had [Luigi Cadorna \(1850-1928\)](#) not headed the High Command. The scion of a Piedmontese military family, stiff and unbending in character and a fervent advocate of the radical separation of the political from the military sphere, Cadorna was the first person to advocate the prosecution of the war unhampered by the control of the executive (and a *fortiori* by

parliamentary representatives). In 1908, when his name was first put forward for the post of chief of the army general staff, he had stipulated that his conditions for accepting the position would include being given a completely free rein in the planning and prosecution of the campaign, the right to appoint and to exonerate any officer (including the army commanders) according to his own unquestioned judgement, and an understanding that the command of the armed forces, constitutionally vested as it was in the monarch, would in essence be in his hands and subject to no interference whatsoever.<sup>13</sup> When, in 1914, at the death of General [Alberto Pollio \(1852-1914\)](#), Cadorna was at last appointed, his stance had not altered. The headquarters of his relatively small general staff at Udine very soon took on the guise of a “court”, isolated even from subordinate commands, which received orders to be carried out but rarely had any opportunity to discuss them. Cadorna’s rigorously centralizing policy, his reluctance to delegate responsibilities and aversion to anything resembling the modern organization of a staff, was immediately reflected in his handling of certain matters. The initial deficit in the organization of propaganda was in large part due to the shortage (and limited competence) of close collaborators with the Supreme Command, a problem which was only ever partly remedied.<sup>14</sup>

Still more in evidence, however, was the “*generalissimo’s*” irritation at any interference from the civilian sphere. This meant, on the one hand, Cadorna’s firm opposition to mediation on the part of government representatives, barely tolerated during their rare visits to the war zone, even in the case of the Minister of War. In liberal Italy the latter had by tradition been a general: in 1914 the part was entrusted to General [Vittorio Zuppelli \(1859-1945\)](#), formerly Vice Chief of the General Staff. Relations between Zuppelli and Cadorna were far from cordial: at government meetings Zuppelli several times served as the spokesman of those objecting to the intransigent strategy of conducting frontal offensives on the Carso and bewailing the inflexible handling of the men. In early 1916, he promoted a more collegiate running of the war along with [Sidney Sonnino \(1847-1922\)](#), with the creation of a Council of Defence composed both of generals and of civilian ministers. Meeting with a curt refusal from Cadorna, and faced with his threat of resignations, the government yielded. In March 1916 Zuppelli resigned his post and was replaced, at Cadorna’s own request, by General [Paolo Morrone \(1854-1937\)](#), a close colleague.

The undermining of the executive by the Supreme Command culminated, in June 1916, in resignations from the Salandra government. The trauma of the initial and ostensibly overwhelming success of the Austrian *Strafexpedition* in [Trentino](#) laid bare the failure of the Salandran political strategy, which was based upon the conviction that the war would be brief, but for various reasons it did not even graze Cadorna who deflected the blame on to the commander of the First Army, [Roberto Brusati \(1850-1935\)](#). Conversely, the appointment

of the “ministry of national unity” led by [Paolo Boselli \(1838-1932\)](#) reinforced the autonomy of the “Udine government”.<sup>15</sup> Boselli was a second-rank politician, a weak character who lacked a real political base; with Cadorna he tended always to be submissive. Even the appointment of [Leonida Bissolati \(1857-1920\)](#) as minister without portfolio but with the official responsibility for liaising between government and the Supreme Command failed, having no practical consequences.<sup>16</sup> Disdaining to recognize the post, Cadorna wrote drily to the President of the Council informing him that such responsibilities were in his view vested only in the Minister of War, an office which he in fact controlled directly and to which he secured the appointment of [Gaetano Giardino \(1864-1935\)](#), another member of his immediate entourage, in April 1917.<sup>17</sup> “Let them send me away if and when they wish”, wrote Cadorna in a private letter from the period, “but so long as I’m here it’s I who give the orders.”<sup>18</sup> This sentiment epitomizes the public stance of the Chief of the General Staff, though it obscures his use of subtler sorts of pressure upon government milieu. Cadorna was well aware of having provoked the ire of many influential politicians, and he did not hesitate to have recourse to highly orchestrated press campaigns, using for this purpose his own personal contacts with the journalistic world of the capital and in particular with the periodicals in the [nationalist](#) camp. Thus [Ugo Ojetti \(1871-1946\)](#), an influential commentator in the *Corriere della Sera* and one of the directors of the propaganda system, and “*L’Idea Nazionale*”, were both instrumental in building up Cadorna’s public profile, championing him as the country’s best hope, and therefore in fact as irreplaceable.<sup>19</sup>

## Diaz in Charge: Continuity and Discontinuity

Even if in many aspects (for example, the handling of discipline) the substitution of [Armando Diaz \(1861-1928\)](#) for Cadorna entailed a discontinuity that was more apparent than real, in his style of command and above all in his relations with the political world the new Chief proved to be far more adroit.<sup>20</sup> The defeat of Caporetto was more the pretext than the cause of Cadorna being released: his responsibility for the reverse was clear and conclusive, but the truth is that his replacement had already been requested by [Vittorio Emanuele Orlando \(1860-1952\)](#), who had been contacted by the king in the previous weeks, as a prerequisite for a new and stronger executive. Diaz was thus appointed not only in recognition of his organizational skills, but on account of his widely acknowledged tact and of his excellent personal relations with the monarch. In a war requiring ever more coordination and collaboration – even internationally, given the alliance’s structure of joint command – the centralizing and autocratic style of the old commander was now altogether outmoded.

Diaz invested a great deal of energy in creating a command that was collective, or was

apparently so, chose to be flanked by Giardino and [Pietro Badoglio \(1871-1956\)](#), two figures with real knowledge and experience of political networks, and was prepared to engage in frequent discussions with ministers and particularly with the head of government. This did not impinge in the slightest, however, upon the intrinsic militarization under way in Italy. Quite the reverse, since after Caporetto the grip of the armed forces upon the life of the country tightened, not only because the war zone was greatly enlarged, but also because the exclusively military or joint civilian-military management structures concerned with the productive apparatuses, trade and domestic propaganda loomed ever larger. Obsessed by [espionage](#) and the “enemy within”, Cadorna had extended the network of police surveillance against military personnel and their families, entrusting it to *carabinieri* in particular and to special offices within the territorial commands, some of which lay outside the war zone. Diaz did not hesitate to reinforce this network of domestic surveillance still further, exploiting for this purpose improvements in military information services, conducting ever more investigations, in particular into [soldiers on leave](#), [work milieu](#), the company that people kept, and voting preferences: in 1918 the network of military oversight of the country was much tighter and more efficient than anything that could have been imagined at the outbreak of hostilities.<sup>21</sup>

The new chief’s diplomatic initiatives were anyway not translated in other domains into a real subordination to the government’s wishes, not even on the plane of strategic objectives. Military operations in the last year of the war were strictly defensive, and Diaz repeatedly turned down Orlando’s invitations to attack. The Supreme Command was aware that the [Austro-Hungarian Empire](#) was crumbling, and it also knew of the weakness of its army. Nonetheless, the general view was that a largescale offensive could at the most have won back the provinces lost in 1917, but not have led to the surrender of the enemy and an end to hostilities.<sup>22</sup> The delay up until almost the last moment in accepting the idea of preparing and launching a massive offensive across the whole of the front (what would then become the [battle of Vittorio Veneto](#)) amply demonstrates just how very limited an influence Rome exerted over the new “war government” in Padua.

## Conclusion: Post-war and failed Political Demobilization

The competences and responsibilities assumed in a more or less legitimate fashion by the armed forces during the conflict were not handed back to the civilian authorities at the end of the war. The inertia evinced by the military chiefs in surrendering the powers delegated to them and the inability of the executive to hasten the return to normality in civilian-military relations were especially indicative of the failure to effect a political and cultural

demobilization.

From a formal point of view, the militarization of society and the emergency legislation were perpetuated within specific territories for a limited period by the introduction of military governorships, which arose around the time of the armistice in Trento, Trieste and Dalmazia.<sup>23</sup> The governorships owed their existence to the recognition that there was indeed an emergency, and to the realization that there was a power vacuum in the “unredeemed” regions, occupied in a still provisional manner but destined to become an integral part of the national territory (New Provinces). With the old Habsburg authorities discredited, having fled or lacking in legitimacy, the commands of the occupying forces functioned as a temporary administration. In official terms, however, the military structures within the national territory did themselves continue to perform functions typical of wartime. Territorial commands of particular importance, such as those in Bologna and Florence, retained offices involved in clandestine surveillance and propaganda long after the armistice, extra-legal operations that caused the armed forces to be a political actor of the first importance in the long post-war period and then in the affirmation of [fascism](#).<sup>24</sup>

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## Notes

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18. Cadorna, Luigi: *Lettere famigliari*, edited by Raffaele Cadorna, Verona 1967, p. 105. ↑
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22. Mondini, *La guerra italiana 2014* especially pp. 271-280. ↑
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## External Links

- [Fedele, Pietro / Redfern, Joan: \*\*Why Italy is at war, Rome 1915\*\* \(Internet Archive\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Wilcox, Vanda: \*\*Encountering Italy. Military service and national identity during the First World War\*\*, in: Bulletin of Italian Politics 3/2, 2011, pp. 283-302 \(University of Glasgow\) \(Article\)](#)

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