

Giolitti, Giovanni

By [Spencer Di Scala](#)



Giovanni Giolitti (1842-1928)

Giovanni Giolitti was prime minister of Italy five times between 1892 and 1921. He was a member of the chamber of deputies from 1882 until his death in 1928. His political stance encouraged Italy's estrangement from the Triple Alliance. In 1914, his opposition to Italian entry into the First World War made him the symbol of "neutralism".

Agence Meurisse: M. Giolitti, ancien Président du Conseil italien, n.p., 1915; source: Gallica, Bibliothèque national de France, Meurisse, 56935, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b90436131>.

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Giolitti, *Giovanni*

Politician

Born 27 October 1842 in Mondovì, Italy

Died 17 July 1928 in Cavour, Italy

Summary

Giovanni Giolitti favored the increased liberalization of Italy, which encouraged its estrangement from the Triple Alliance. He consistently refused to recognize that Italy's partners' aggressive policies could trigger the casus foederis for war. In 1914, his opposition to Italian entry into the First World War made him the symbol of "neutralism".

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The “Giolittian Era” and the Great War

A member of the chamber of deputies from 1882 until his death in 1928, Giovanni Giolitti (1882-1928) dominated Italian politics between 1901 and 1914. He favored expanding suffrage, allowing workers to organize, and integrating socialists and Catholics into the liberal state. His policies have led some historians to consider this era “Italian democracy in the making”.¹

Giolitti’s long tenure exposed him to attacks on all sides. Conservatives felt that his inclusive and modernizing ideas threatened their prerogatives. Catholics who resented the destruction of the pope’s power only slowly renounced their boycott of national elections. Left-wing socialists denounced his opposition to their revolutionary objectives, while reformist socialists feared collaboration with him might split the party. Southerners accused him of electoral chicanery and labeled him “The minister of the underworld”. Nationalists excoriated him for Italy’s inability to resume its “rightful” role as a great power.

The Giolittian Era and Evolution of the Triple Alliance

On 20 May 1882, [Italy](#) joined [Germany](#) and [Austria-Hungary](#) in the Triple Alliance. A diplomatic defeat by [France](#) in a colonial dispute; [Otto von Bismarck \(1815-1898\)](#) successful policy of isolating France; [Umberto I, King of Italy \(1844-1900\)](#) belief that a conservative [alliance](#) would discourage revolution; and a conviction that war would not break out because [Russia](#) was still in Germany’s orbit were the primary reasons for the Italian decision, not shared foreign policy interests.

Over time, the diplomatic conditions and conservative domestic tendencies underpinning the alliance changed. The Triple Alliance had glossed over critical problems between Italy and its traditional Austrian enemy, and these worsened because of discriminatory legislation against Italians living in the irredenta (“unredeemed” lands). The pre-war crises during the period

Giolitti was in power in Italy encouraged the formation of the Triple Entente, which meant that rivalry between the two alliances might involve Italy in a war with England that the Italians wished to avoid.

Italy's increasing liberalization under Giolitti amplified domestic opposition to Austria and brought about a *rapprochement* with the French republic. In 1902, the Giolitti-dominated "Liberal Springtide" [government](#) brought about a *rapprochement* with the French Republic in which Italy and France both pledged [neutrality](#) if a third power attacked either. The agreement did not violate the Triple Alliance but signalled a friendlier attitude toward France.

An attack on one of the Triple Alliance signatories by a third power would trigger the *casus foederis*. In October 1908, the Austrian annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina produced a war scare and an Austrian request that the *casus foederis* come into effect in case a war broke out. The Italians refused and asked for compensation under Article 7 of the Triplice because Austria had altered the status quo in the Balkans. Estrangement between the two powers worsened in December when an earthquake and tsunami destroyed Messina and the Austrian head of the General Staff demanded a pre-emptive strike against Italy while it conducted rescue operations. On 24 October 1909, with Giolitti heading the government, the Racconigi Agreement with Russia brought Italy closer to that Entente power. When Italy fought the Ottomans in the Libyan War (1911-1912), the Austrian chief of staff renewed his call for an attack on the country. In 1912, Giolitti again renewed the the *Triplice*, but this touched off opposition in Italy and new [protests](#) against Austria broke out in the irredenta.

Giolitti and the First World War

Fought while Giolitti was premier, the Libyan War weakened [Turkey](#), leading to two [Balkan wars \(1912 and 1913\)](#) and contributing to the [1914 crisis](#) that set off the First World War. In 1913, Austria contemplated an attack on [Serbia](#) and requested implementation of the *casus foederis* in case of a conflict. On 10 July, Giolitti told his foreign minister that the *casus foederis* did not exist and instructed him "to communicate this to Austria in the most formal manner possible".² In 1914, the Austrians and Germans violated the treaty by not consulting with Italy before sending Serbia the ultimatum that triggered the Great War. When they asked for Italian support, the foreign minister responded: "Austria ... has clearly demonstrated that it wishes to provoke a war... [A]ny European war... will be the consequence of a provocative and aggressive act on the part of Austria."³

In 1914, Giolitti was not prime minister but still commanded a majority in parliament and supported neutrality. Believing that intervention would end the conflict and his influence, Italian [interventionists](#) united against him. In 1912, Giolitti had given in to nationalist

pressure for a colonial war in Libya because he considered it strategically necessary for Italy to possess the last part of the North African shore not controlled by a European power; in 1914 he believed that Italy was unprepared to join a conflict in which the great powers were already engaged, insisting that the war would last three more years. He advocated neutrality in return for Austrian cession of the irredenta. Giolitti could not return as prime minister because, as a neutralist, he lacked the credibility to threaten war against Austria if it refused to cede the irredenta. As he contemplated which leader could credibly bargain with Austria, Prime Minister [Antonio Salandra \(1853-1931\)](#) and other interventionists negotiated the "[Pact of London](#)" with the Entente and stimulated pro-war riots. Giolitti had a majority and could have instructed his supporters to defeat the agreement when it came before parliament for approval, but – believing that Italy had committed itself to intervention and that rejecting the pact would violate Italy's honor – refused to do so.

Reflections on the War and Fascism

After the war, Giolitti told an interviewer, referring to Germany and Austria: "Frankly, I'll confess to you that I would never have believed that there could have been two governments that were so far out of their minds as to undertake this monstrous war so lightheartedly."⁴

Giolitti's fear that intervention would cost Italy vast expenditures in blood and treasure was realised. The war destabilized the Italian [economy](#) and politics and led to the rise of [Benito Mussolini \(1883-1945\)](#). On 15 June 1920, Giolitti returned as premier. Unhappiness with Italy's failure to obtain [Fiume](#) at the war's end had led [Gabriele D'Annunzio \(1863-1938\)](#) to seize the city and establish a regime historians consider a precursor to [fascism](#). In December, Giolitti dislodged D'Annunzio by force, but to calm domestic opposition, he reached an informal accord with Mussolini for the local elections that year. Relying on his previous experience with the socialists, Giolitti mistakenly believed that, given a share of power, the fascists would become responsible. However, he never supported fascism and Mussolini feared him as the only statesman who could block his takeover in 1922.

Giolitti remained in parliament criticizing the fascists, but could do little more. Musing on his advanced age and long service to the country before he died, he quipped that he could never sing *Giovinetta* ("Youth," the fascist anthem).

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Notes

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2. D'Angiolini, Piero / Carocci, Gianpiero / Pavone, Claudio (eds.): *Dalle carte di Giovanni Giolitti. Quarant'anni di politica italiana*, volume 1, Milan 1962, pp. 90-91. ↑
3. Salandra, Antonio: *La neutralità italiana 1914-1915*, Milan 1928, pp. 76-78. ↑
4. Malagodi, Olindo: *Conversazioni della Guerra 1914-1918*, Milan et al. 1960, pp. 85-86. ↑

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- [1914. La dichiarazione di neutralità dell'Italia: la voce del Parlamento, in Bimestrale della Biblioteca 'Giovanni Spadolini', n. 19 \(Nuova Serie\), February 2014 \(Senato della Repubblica\) \(Article\)](#)
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- [Neutralismo e interventismo. Politico 3 agosto 1914 - 24 maggio 1915 \(Storia e memoria di Bologna\) \(Online Exhibition\)](#)

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