

Governments, Parliaments and Parties (Italy)

By [Elena Papadia](#)

Summary

During the period of neutrality, Italian public opinion was divided into two camps: one interventionist, and the other, in the majority, opposed to Italy's entry into the war. Neutralism brought together the two most important political groupings in the country, namely, the Catholics and the Socialists. Nonetheless, the interventionist camp was able to win the public debate outside parliament, while this latter de facto abdicated its role, delegating foreign policy decisions to the government. This tendency persisted during the war years, when the management of the conflict was left to the government and to the military, thereby reinforcing the authoritarian tendencies present in Italian political life.

Table of contents

- [1 Introduction](#)
- [2 Intervention or Neutrality?](#)
- [3 The Interventionist Camp](#)
- [4 Entering the War](#)
- [5 Civilian and Military Relations](#)
- [6 Anti-War Sentiments](#)
- [7 Conclusion](#)
- [Notes](#)
- [Selected Bibliography](#)
- [Citation](#)

Introduction

[Italy](#) entered the war on 24 May 1915, about ten months after the outbreak of the conflict. During the initial period of [neutrality](#), public opinion divided into two camps, one in favour of, and the other, the majority, against entering the war. Among the neutralists, the most fervent were the militants of the Italian Socialist Party (*Partito Socialista Italiano*, or PSI), one of the few parties in the *II International* to remain loyal to its original internationalism and [pacifism](#). After all, the social groups to whom the socialists lent a voice – the landless agricultural workers (*braccianti*) and the industrial working class – were in their heart of hearts opposed to the idea of war. Further support for neutrality was to be found, albeit with some exceptions, in the catholic world, by virtue of the pacifist leanings of the new head of

the Catholic Church, [Pope Benedict XV \(1854-1922\)](#). Another factor was the idea of the transnational unity of all Catholics, which rendered the prospect of a war against Austria very problematic.¹

The two most important political cultures available to the Italian masses, Marxism and Catholicism, were thus against the war. The liberal camp, representing the various souls of the bourgeoisie, seemed for its part to be divided between a tendentially neutralist element and a so-called interventionist tendency, which remained however in a minority in parliament up until the eve of the conflict.

Intervention or Neutrality?

The parliamentary majority was in fact Giolittian in orientation – even though [Giovanni Giolitti \(1842-1928\)](#) had ceased to be president of the council from March 1914 – and agreed with its leader that Italy was not in a fit state either economically or militarily to wage a war on such a scale. This stance was lent still further credence, they argued, by virtue of the fact that Italy would be able to obtain “quite a lot” from the central [empires](#) in return for its neutrality.²

Liberals favouring intervention included the new president of the council, [Antonio Salandra \(1853-1931\)](#), a wealthy landowner from Apulia who represented the interests and outlook of the conservative right. In his view a victorious war (lasting, it was anticipated, a few months or a year at most) would offer a good opportunity to sideline Giolittian reformism once and for all. The Giolittian policy of appeasing trades unions and socialists in fact struck the liberal right as a disturbing symptom of democratic contamination. Salandra thus aspired to shift the liberal forces rightwards.

This was also the hope of [Sidney Sonnino \(1847-1922\)](#), a friend of Salandra and an old adversary of Giolitti. The latter, however, replaced [Antonino di San Giuliano \(1852-1914\)](#) as foreign minister in October 1914 and remained uninterruptedly in government for five years. Indeed, Giolitti shaped much of Italian politics in the war years and during the subsequent peace negotiations. Sonnino pitted against Giolitti’s elastic pragmatic approach and his readiness to placate democrats and socialists, the idea of a strong state, firmly directed by the liberal party. In the pre-war years his projected alternative had failed, since his two all too brief spells in office (1906 and 1909-1910) had done nothing to undermine the Giolittian hegemony.³ To Sonnino, by now in fact a defeated politician, the war offered a precious opportunity to at long last overturn a consolidated political structure.

However, Salandra and his foreign minister only arrived gradually at a definitive decision in favour of intervention. Indeed, for several months – and even as late as the beginning of

1915 – they were still weighing up the possibility of coming to terms with [Austria-Hungary](#). In short, even in those of its elements most predisposed to favour war, the liberal camp remained cautious, and was not in fact swayed by the [interventionist](#) mood that swept like wildfire through the governments of the other European states. Even those deputies who saw eye to eye with Salandra and Sonnino continued to bide their time, in fact delegating every choice to the government.⁴

This latter also had to contend with a fundamental feature of the political culture of the Italian liberals, namely, their abiding conviction that foreign affairs were properly the preserve of a select few: the king (according to the provisions of article 5 of the Albertine statute), the president of the council, the foreign minister.⁵ Their traditional outlook as men of law and order did not predispose them to place questions of such importance for the interests of the country before the court of public opinion, since to do so would simply lend credence to naive or harmful tendencies. In other words, only government could safely be entrusted with decisions of peace and war.

The Interventionist Camp

In reality, however, events took a different turn, and the interventionist camp won *outside* Parliament. In the longer term the project dear to Salandra and Sonnino for relaunching the liberal ruling class was consequently if not stillborn at any rate gravely compromised from the outset. This was not only because as a ruling class its divisions were all too evident when it kept its appointment with war, but also and above all because, in the spring of 1915, other protagonists were on the stage.

The different voices within the interventionist camp clamouring for recognition made of it a distinctly motley affair. It thus contained [Enrico Corradini \(1865-1931\)](#) nationalists, who had for some years past been fighting for an Italy that was truly “great”, militarily powerful, enjoying enhanced prestige abroad while being recast at home in an authoritarian and illiberal guise.⁶ It also featured the bulk of the republican party, inspired instead by the values of the *Risorgimento* (to complete the process of national unification by wresting the italophone cities of Trento and Trieste from Austria-Hungary) and by democratic principles (to fight alongside republican [France](#) against the authoritarian central empires). Here too were [Leonida Bissolati \(1857-1920\)](#) reformist socialists, whose decision to opt for patriotism at the time of the [Italo-Turkish war \(1911-1912\)](#) had led to their expulsion from the party. We ought also to mention a handful of residual elements from the revolutionary left, notably the revolutionary syndicalists led by [Alceste De Ambris \(1874-1934\)](#) and [Filippo Corridoni \(1887-1915\)](#), who were convinced that war would fling open the gates to [revolution](#).⁷ Their

cries were echoed by [Benito Mussolini \(1883-1945\)](#), the editor of the socialist newspaper *Avanti!* and hitherto one of the most prominent figures within the Italian Socialist Party (PSI). After a vigorous campaign in support of neutrality Mussolini had, however, switched sides, sensing the destructive impact that war might have upon domestic political balances and the liberal status quo. This decision led to Mussolini's expulsion from the PSI, whereupon he founded a new [newspaper](#), *Il popolo d'Italia*, in whose columns he vehemently championed the interventionist cause, remaining for the duration of the conflict one of the most aggressive purveyors of "anti-defeatist" propaganda.⁸

Though in the minority in parliament and in the country, as the months passed the interventionist camp acquired both visibility and vigour. Broad sectors of the industrial world were attracted by the prospect of war (and the relevant orders and contracts). [Victor Emanuel III, King of Italy \(1869-1947\)](#) began to cultivate dreams of glory; the educated bourgeoisie, the guardians of the memory of the Risorgimento, saw in the looming conflict an opportunity to relaunch the lofty ideals that had accompanied the battles for national unification, while the student youth of the Kingdom thrilled at the thought of the "moral regeneration" of the nation passing through the heroic trial of war.⁹ The fact remains that, in the spring of 1915, the interventionist minority had managed to hold the stage and to proclaim itself henceforth the true voice of the nation, emboldened by the conviction that, as the Risorgimento had taught, it was not the masses but rather virtuous elites that made history. Processions and committees, national hymns and tricolour banners began to fill the squares of the principal cities.¹⁰

Entering the War

Meanwhile in London, on 26 April 1915, the Italian government signed a secret pact, committing itself to going to war alongside France and [Great Britain](#). Parliament, however, had as yet not voted for any such thing. Taking into consideration the fact that the majority of deputies remained loyal to Giolitti, Salandra decided to tender his resignation (13 May 1915). This was a way of calling the king to account, but the latter in fact rejected the resignation, thereby adding pressure from the Crown to that exerted by the interventionists in the streets. Tension was at breaking point. Anti-parliamentary opinion, the conviction, in other words, that there existed a "real country" and one that not only was not represented by parliament but had indeed been stifled and betrayed by it (a point of view that had crystallised and become widespread before the war), fuelled an incendiary rhetoric that in those days gave rise to violent forms of sometimes even physical intimidation of Giolitti and the neutralist deputies. On 20 May the Chamber gave in and voted full powers to Salandra, with 407 votes in favour, one abstention and seventy-four against (of these latter, forty-one

were the votes cast by the socialist parliamentary group, the only one openly to reaffirm its opposition to the war). This did nothing to alter the wholly extra-parliamentary dynamic of Italian intervention, ratified on 23 May 1915 by the declaration of war upon Austria. It is nonetheless true, however, that from that moment on a huge patriotic majority was formed in the Chamber, so that from the 508 deputies only the socialists and a handful of republicans remained outside of it. Yet within the ruling class that had wished for intervention there was a lingering sense of being on hostile ground, caught between the merely “simulated” faith of the Chamber, as the Minister for the [Colonies](#), [Ferdinando Martini \(1841-1928\)](#), defined it,¹¹ and the revulsion of the majority in the country.

A particular concern was the stance of the Socialists, whose line, “neither support nor sabotage”, had been imposed upon party members in May 1915 by the national secretary, [Costantino Lazzari \(1857-1927\)](#). This deliberately ambiguous formula lent itself to a range of different interpretations. The reformist tendency, which prevailed in the parliamentary group, in the Confederation of Labour (*Confederazione del lavoro*) and in the local administrations of the major cities, thus placed the emphasis upon “not sabotaging”. The revolutionaries, however, who had a firm grip upon the party leadership and upon the editorial office of *Avanti!*, chose to stress the notion of “not supporting”. Even they, however, chose at first to bide their time, postponing their revolutionary plans until the post-war period. Prior to 1917, demonstrations protesting against the war, when they did occur, were short-lived. By contrast, the readiness of the socialist administrations in certain big cities, first and foremost Milan and Bologna, to collaborate with, and even to make up for the shortcomings of the government, was all too evident, notably in the assistance they gave to the recruits and their families.¹²

The government itself, nursing the sense referred to above of being in a minority, and assailed by a fear of “defeatist” [propaganda](#), was led from the outset to exaggerate the intentions and, indeed, the efficacy of the socialists. Concerned above all with the stifling of dissent, up until the last year of the war it neglected [welfare](#) and propaganda, placing instead the greatest emphasis upon the instruments of control and coercion that the delegation of full powers had placed in the executive’s hands. The government was in fact authorised to issue regulations with the status of laws in all contexts having to do with “the defence of the state, the safeguarding of public order and the pressing needs of the national economy” (such was the wording of the single act on this topic), without there even being the curbs provided by the state having to be accountable. This meant the promulgation of measures restricting freedom of information, assembly, association and movement, and, from September 1917, as we shall see, of opinion also. The power wielded by the prefects became almost unlimited, through their being exempted from any checks by the judiciary.

More generally, there was a gradual and oppressive undermining of the legislature, in favour of the executive. This may of course be discerned in all of the states involved in the conflict, which, given the emergency conditions imposed by the war, bolstered in the dialectic between “decision” and “representation”, the first pole to the detriment of the second. Yet the phenomenon was more glaringly evident in the Italian case than in those countries, such as France and Great Britain, in which representative institutions were more central. This contrast merely serves to confirm the fact that, more than fifty years after unification, the process of parliamentarisation was still partial and incomplete. Consider the simple fact that between 1915 and 1917 the Italian Chamber met 158 times, by contrast with the 433 sessions of the British House of Commons and the 371 of the French chamber. But the sheer extent of the marginalisation suffered by the Italian parliament is reflected above all in the generalised recourse to the issuing of decrees. These latter actually went beyond what was permitted by virtue of the attribution of full powers to the government, that is to say, the discretionary, unlimited use that the government made of the legislative power, even on matters not directly involving the conduct of the war. As a contemporary – the publication of whose essays was barred by the censor – wrote, “during the war, and particularly during the first three years, our parliament did not function and hardly acted at all”.¹³

Civilian and Military Relations

If the Italian parliament had ceded many of its prerogatives to the government, this latter found itself involved in its turn in a fierce competition with the military over the right to have the last word in the conduct of the war.¹⁴ This competition gave rise on various occasions to an outright disagreement, since the army’s commander in chief, General [Luigi Cadorna \(1850-1928\)](#) – who was backed moreover by a good number of politicians and opinion makers inclined to ascribe an almost divine power to him – judged any political supervision of his actions to be a form of undue meddling. In March 1916, Cadorna threatened to tender his resignation, thereby eliciting the replacement of the current minister of war – who had a delicate role to play, being the only *trait d’union* between the Supreme Command (*Comando supremo*) and the government. The new minister was of his own choosing and easily swayed by him (apart from anything else, the minister ousted and the one entering on his duties were both military men, by contrast once again with the state of affairs in France and in Britain). In the same year, by way of confirming Cadorna’s propensity to manage the war entirely on his own terms and independently of others, a decree was promulgated debarring all ministers from entering the war zone unless with the prior assent of the Supreme Command (*Comando supremo*). The [conflict between the military and the government](#) over their respective responsibilities was therefore open and undisguised, at a time when the power of the former was being extended to ever wider sectors of society. The competences

of the civil courts were gradually encroached upon by the military tribunals, which began to judge an ever larger number of cases. Crucially, the whole organisation of the war economy was entrusted to a general, [Alfredo Dallolio \(1853-1952\)](#), who was put at the head of the sub-secretariat – later the Ministry – for Arms and Munitions, with truly vast responsibilities.¹⁵

The first attempts to settle the sensitive question of relations between the civil and the military power ended in failure. Thus the request tabled in 1916 by a group of deputies to set up parliamentary commissions empowered to oversee military matters came to nothing, provoking in fact howls of outrage and fresh waves of anti-parliamentary resentment not only, as might have been expected, from the more radical interventionist press, but also from the more moderate and conservative wing, represented by the *Corriere della Sera*,¹⁶ the most widely distributed and authoritative Italian daily. Shortly afterwards, the appointment of a figure prominent in interventionist milieu, Leonida Bissolati, as minister without portfolio, who was entrusted with the task of establishing direct links between the government and the Supreme Command, did not meet with any greater success. At first bristling and hostile, then a crony and lackey to Cadorna, Bissolati proved in fact a bitter disappointment. Cadorna, for his part, continued to regard the representatives of the Italian government as political hacks who were hostage to the neutralist tendencies still operative in the country at large.

This happened to a still greater degree after the crisis of the Salandra ministry, which flared up in the dramatic context of a victorious Austrian offensive in Tyrol (May-June 1916). The eighty-year old [Paolo Boselli \(1838-1932\)](#) then took charge, with a politically broader version of the Salandra government. It was not a *union sacrée* in the French manner, given that the socialists remained in opposition. Yet it was no longer a deliberately “partisan” government either, such as that of Salandra had been, since it embraced all the patriotic forces of the nation, including those that were positioned on the left (radicals, republicans, reformist socialists).¹⁷

Faced with the now self-evident prospect of a long and exhausting war, the anti-democratic premise of the Salandra government lost its force. Yet the inclusion of the democratic parties was not wholly to the liking of Cadorna nor to that of the more radical representatives of the interventionist camp. They were still less delighted by the appointment as Minister of the Interior of [Vittorio Emanuele Orlando \(1860-1952\)](#), a jurist who avowed his respect for the statutory freedoms and prerogatives of parliament and who was reckoned to be close to Giolitti. Sidney Sonnino, however, remained at the Foreign Ministry, in league with the Cadornian and [nationalist](#) wing.

Anti-War Sentiments

The radicalism spurring on the party advocating war “*jusqu’au bout*” sowed confusion among those interventionists who had been inspired by a democratic faith. This mood exacerbated an anti-systemic reaction to the pacifist ferment, itself prompted by the ever deeper weariness of the popular masses.¹⁸ Fears of a possible re-emergence of the original neutralist spirit of the country were further heightened by two developments in particular. There was, first of all, Benedict XV’s papal note on 1 August 1917, which called upon the rulers of the countries at war to put an end to the “pointless slaughter” that was drenching Europe in blood. Second, there was the activism of the intransigent tendency within the Socialist Party, which culminated on 12 August 1917 in a circular in which the party secretary, Costantino Lazzari, suggested to the socialist mayors that they resign *en masse* in order to force the government to sue for peace. When a few days later in Turin a working-class protest at flour and coal shortages turned into a [popular revolt](#) for peace that was suppressed leaving dozens dead, many held the socialists to be directly or indirectly responsible, even though the facts pointed to the spontaneous nature of the mobilisation.

It was in this context that on 4 October 1917 the so-called decree against “defeatism”, also known as the Sacchi decree after the Keeper of the Seals in the Boselli government, was issued. This decree sanctioned punishments – as actual crimes – of acts that had up until then been regarded as lawful, such as demonstrations deploring the lack of basic [foodstuffs](#), pessimistic utterances regarding the outcome of military operations, or the declaring of hopes for the coming of peace. After the Turin events, fears of further unrest had then led the minister of the interior to tighten the existing repressive measures. This did not mean, however, that Orlando was prepared to align himself fully with those who called for the sacrifice of statutory freedoms and of the liberal tradition itself, in the name of an unrelenting struggle against the “enemy within”.

In the days immediately before the [defeat of Caporetto](#), tensions on the home front rose to such a pitch that the government led by Paolo Boselli went into crisis. To his interventionist critics Boselli was irresolute, too old and lacking in the moral authority needed to lead a country shattered by the long drawn-out conflict, and there was a general consensus that Orlando should succeed him. The tragic news of the break-through of the Austrian army on the eastern front served merely to confirm the public mood. At a time of emergency it was necessary once again to play the card of national concord, on condition that it be played by a more energetic personality than Boselli had proved to be. The Orlando government therefore welcomed outstanding representatives of every political tendency that was not actually opposed to the prosecution of the war.

The Austrians had made significant inroads into the national territory, Italy having lost Friuli and [half of the Veneto](#) in the aftermath of the defeat of Caporetto. The war now therefore being eminently defensive in character, circumstances seemed to favour, even in Italy, the emergence of the spirit of national solidarity abroad in August 1914 in the various countries involved in the conflict. The fervent patriotic *ralliement* discernible within the reformist wing of the Socialist party bore witness to this shift in mood. “The fatherland is on mount Grappa”, proclaimed [Filippo Turati \(1857-1932\)](#) in a speech in Parliament, thus laying down the line that the socialist parliamentary group would maintain up until the end of hostilities. The spread of Wilsonian ideals, greeted rapturously in Italy, prompted many to accept the justifications for a war that was not only necessary for the salvation of the fatherland but was also ennobled by the ideals of peace, liberty and democracy.¹⁹ Furthermore, the abandonment of the begrudging attitude implicit in the formula “neither support, nor sabotage” occurred just when the application of the exceptional measures laid down by the Sacchi decree had reduced the revolutionary fraction to silence. Several of its leaders and the party secretary himself were arrested, a circumstance enabling the parliamentary group to stand in for the whole party.

Yet the silence of the revolutionaries and the concord seemingly prevailing in the country at large in fact concealed deep wounds. Within the ranks of the PSI, during the same weeks in which the defeat of Caporetto led the reformists to endorse the justifications offered for a patriotic war, the deafening echo of red October inflamed the maximalists, boosting their revolutionary and internationalist prospects and guaranteeing their visibility and prestige. Fears of a reorganisation of the PSI led by the intransigents unleashed in the last year of the war a veritable anti-defeatist paranoia, against which the patriotic turn of the reformists could do little. Indeed, to the extremist fringe of the “war party” the socialists were still the “enemy within”. When Cadorna himself quit the stage, having been dismissed from office immediately after Caporetto, he laid the moral responsibility for the defeat at the socialists’ door, thereby recklessly relaunching the polemic between neutralists and interventionists.²⁰ The new commander in chief, [Armando Diaz \(1861-1928\)](#), did not persist with this contentious line of argument, and, in agreement with the Orlando government, tried rather to match coercion with persuasion while endorsing the patriotic justification for the war. Aid to veterans and to recruits’ families was boosted and the troops’ pay was increased. In addition, a propaganda service (known as “P service”) was organised, with dozens of intellectuals flooding the trenches with illustrated newspapers, pamphlets, postcards and lectures.²¹ But if the morale and overall grip of the army derived indubitable benefit from the new course, the push to radicalisation nevertheless prevailed in the country at large. On the one hand, the extra-parliamentary organisation of patriotism characteristic of the last year of the war led to the proliferation of committees, circles and leagues, whose operations in some cases took on

the appearance of a veritable witch-hunt, targeting the “enemy within” and enabling the voices of patriotic extremism to drown out all the others. On the other hand, the maximalists, although forced to act in the shadows, continued on their long march towards gaining complete control of the party. Thus, at the congress held in Rome in early September 1918, their motion, which called for an intensification of the propaganda against the war, received 14,015 votes, as against the reformists’ tally of 2,505 votes.

In parliament, too the consolidation of a government of national unity did not preclude the re-emergence of the divisions which already in 1915 had transected the liberal camp. With the aim of combatting so-called “parliamentary defeatism” and sustaining the home front, in December 1917 the “war party” set up a grouping called “Parliamentary alliance for national defence” (*Fascio parlamentare di difesa nazionale*), which mustered 158 deputies and ninety-two senators.²² A parliamentary projection of the processes of mobilisation and intimidation under way in the country at large, the *Fascio* was also a response to the feared return of Giolittism. After years of silence, and with Giolitti himself in voluntary exile in Dronero, several dozen deputies still loyal to their leader had emerged from the shadows, their common purpose being to defend the prerogatives of Parliament and to impede any further torsion of the Italian political system in an authoritarian direction.

Conclusion

The Italian victory over Austria-Hungary in October 1918 did not lead to any of the above fractures being mended. The disorientation afflicting the liberal world when it came face to face with the difficult trial of the post-war period also derived from the persistence of the old division between neutralists and interventionists. The clash between the revolutionary perspective of the socialists and the patriotic extremism of the “war party” was for its part reiterated, after years of terrible sacrifice and hundreds of thousands of [deaths](#), in a form that would prove to be more violent and explosive than ever.²³

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[Politics, law](#) > [Institutions](#) > [Governments](#)
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[Politics, law](#) > [Institutions](#) > [Parties, confessional](#)
[Politics, law](#) > [Institutions](#) > [Parties, socialist](#)
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[Politics, law](#) > [International relations](#) > [Entering the war](#)
[Politics, law](#) > [International relations](#) > [Neutrality](#)
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