

# War Losses (Italy)

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## Summary

The article examines the Italian losses in the Great War 1914-1918. Regarding the military, indications are given about the losses in relation to the population and the number of men mobilized, the distribution per year, the causes, the different war fronts and the various units and special forces, as well as the geographical origin. As regards the civilians, consideration has been given to the victims of air and naval bombing, maritime war, the population of the territories occupied by the enemy, and, finally, the mortality caused by the "Spanish" influenza during the last months of the conflict, which produced more victims in the population and troops than the instruments of war had done in the preceding years.

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## The Italian Dead in the Great War

The number of Italian soldiers killed during the 1914-1918 war remains unjustifiably vague, even though the accuracy of some data might lead one to believe the opposite. In fact, the century which has passed since the war has not been sufficient to permit one to determine the exact number of the victims caused by the bloodiest conflict in Italian history. The rhetoric of the first post-war period – which resulted in the volumes containing the names of the fallen beginning to be published, without the ability to guarantee their accuracy and

completeness<sup>1</sup> – was gradually replaced by oblivion. This has only recently begun to be remedied with the, for the time being partial, recovery of the existing data, which would however need to be followed by the colossal, but not impossible, work of reviewing and filling the many lacunae.<sup>2</sup> At the census in June 1911, the last before the outbreak of the world war, the Italian population amounted to 35,845,048 residents legally present and 34,671,377 actually present (the emigrants who had retained residence in [Italy](#) made up the difference).<sup>3</sup> In the three following years, there was an increase of 1,467,000 people, so as to bring the total residents in 1915 to over 37,000,000 inhabitants, of whom approximately 7,000,000 were males of military age.<sup>4</sup> Between 1915 and 1918, 5,903,140 Italians were called to arms, including the conscript classes from 1874 to 1900, of which 5,038,809 were enlisted in the army (4,199,542 went to the operating army, 839,267 remained within the country) and 144,863 in the navy. There were also 205,209 officers (however some doubts remain as to the exact number), 52,000 permanent non-commissioned officers and 8,000 volunteers; another 437,389 Italians were exempted from military service and 282,079 were excused as they were involved in agricultural, industrial, military production and essential state services. The losses were among the 5,448,781 men enlisted (303,919 of them came from abroad).<sup>5</sup> How high were the losses? In the years before the world war, mortality in Italy had gradually and steadily declined, reaching an annual average of 648,000 deaths in the three years 1912-1914, amounting to 17.94 deaths per 1,000 people in 1914. But during the war these numbers underwent a sharp and progressive increase: 811,000 Italians died in 1915 (30,000 of them victims of the earthquake in Abruzzo), equal to 2.228 percent of the inhabitants; 856,000 in 1916 (2.332 percent); 929,000 in 1917 (2.615 percent), and 1,276,000 in 1918 (3.608 percent), causing an excess mortality. It seems reasonable to impute this mortality to the war and its direct consequences of approximately 1,250,000 people, but how many losses exactly were military and how many civilian remains in the realm of hypotheses. Moreover, the dead constitute only a small part of the total losses that affect a population at war.

## The Losses among the Military

Despite the almost hundred years which have elapsed since these events, the exact determination of the losses is difficult, above all, the number of soldiers killed during the conflict and in the following years for reasons directly related to the war is uncertain. Estimates range from 517,000 to 564,000 dead or missing during the war, 680,000 to 709,000 in total, considering the dead in the following years due to the war; 950,000 to 1,050,000 wounded, 463,000 of whom reported permanent disabilities; 580,000 to 600,000 prisoners; and 2,500,000 sick. The number of invalidity pensions paid was 675,000, 14,114 of

which were for serious illnesses (9,040 for tuberculosis, 2,632 for insanity, 1,466 for blindness, 619 for injuries to the nervous system, and 327 for multiple amputations). Deducting the number of those maimed and disabled by wounds, one finds 212,000 among the sick and [prisoners of war](#) who had a permanent disability. To determine the total number of losses, it is not sufficient to add up the individual categories, it is necessary to deduct the number of those who died in captivity or as a result of injuries and illnesses. As also in considering the number of victims in relation to the men mobilized, it should be noted that a significant proportion of the wounded, the sick and prisoners were counted several times among the losses (bearing in mind that the wounded and the sick were repeatedly hospitalized).

Figures of 1921, underestimates, but with the merit of subdividing, by type and monthly, the losses recorded between 24 May 1915 and 11 November 1918, indicate 378,010 deaths from injuries (in the field or in hospital); 946,640 wounded; 569,210 prisoners and 2,458,410 sick, divided as follows:

	1915	1916	1917	1918	Total
<b>Dead</b>	66,090	118,880	152,790	40,250	378,010
<b>Wounded</b>	190,400	285,620	367,200	103,420	946,640
<b>Prisoners</b>	25,100	79,520	398,370	66,220	569,210
<b>Sick</b>	306,530	586,170	795,950	769,760	2,458,410

Table 1: Military Losses, 24 May 1915 to 11 November 1918<sup>6</sup>

The greatest losses in combat were recorded in the main [theatre of war](#) where, in the eleven offensive battles fought between 1915 and September 1917 on about ninety kilometers across the Isonzo and the Carso, the Italian army lost, according to these underestimated figures, at least 800,000 men (191,000 dead, 498,000 wounded and 87,000 prisoners). The Austro-Hungarian offensive and the Italian counter-offensive between May and July 1916 on the Asiago Plateau produced more than 150,000 losses (35,000 dead, 75,000 wounded and 45,000 prisoners). The Austro-German offensive of [Caporetto](#), the subsequent retreat and the defensive battle fought on the Asiago Plateau, the Grappa and the Piave between 24 October and 31 December 1917 cost more than 460,000 men (37,000 dead, 91,000 injured and 335,000 prisoners). The two battles of 1918 on the Grappa and the Piave added 120,000 losses (18,000 dead, 52,000 wounded and 55,000 prisoners). Italian losses outside Italy

amounted to 14,874 in France in 1918: 4,500 dead, 7,000 wounded and 3,500 missing and taken prisoner, to which should be added 1,000 deaths due to disease for a total of about 5,800 deaths (5,418 are buried in France, while the bodies of 350 others were repatriated). Before Italy's entry into the war there had already been, in [France](#) between November 1914 and March 1915, more than 700 losses (300 of whom were dead or missing) sustained by Garibaldi volunteers.<sup>7</sup> There were 2,214 losses in [Albania](#) between 1916 and 1918 (298 dead, including thirty-six officers, 1,069 wounded, fifty-five officers and 847 missing in action not prisoners, twenty-five of whom were officers). But other sources refer to approximately 6,000 losses (of which 3,010 were deaths) probably also including the many who died from disease, while 765 more men (nineteen officers and 192 enlisted men were killed, thirty-six officers and 390 enlisted men wounded, twenty officers and 108 enlisted men missing in action not prisoners) were lost in 1919-1920 during the occupation of Albania, so as to fall officially in the calculation of the losses of the First World War.<sup>8</sup> There were also 8,324 losses in Macedonia between 1916 and 1918 (2,971 dead or missing and 5,353 injured). It is more difficult to determine the losses incurred in Libya during the Great War, since the available data does not separate the period December 1914 to April 1915 from the subsequent months: the total came to about 10,000 (excluding colonial troops), with approximately 1,500 prisoners and perhaps 6,000 deaths, including those who died of disease.<sup>9</sup> Over 64 percent of the losses came from the infantry and its special units, which comprised a total of 103,432 officers<sup>10</sup> and 2,922,246 enlisted men.<sup>11</sup> There were at least 314,300 deaths, which also include those who died in health facilities, and 896,700 wounded, that is to say, 41 percent of those who passed through its ranks, with percentages that can reasonably be considered to be lower than the reality. The [artillery](#) suffered 9,200 dead and 28,800 wounded; the engineer corps 3,900 dead and 4,600 wounded; and the [cavalry](#) 1,000 dead and 3,400 wounded. The rest of the special army units lost 1,600 dead and 4,600 wounded.<sup>12</sup> In the [infantry](#) and its special units, undoubtedly the most affected, some sections reached astonishing figures of losses in individual operating cycles: on the Carso Plateau, between 20 and 26 May 1917, the 26<sup>th</sup> Infantry lost 74 percent of its fighting force among the dead / missing, wounded and prisoners; the 138<sup>th</sup> Infantry lost 69 percent; and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Grenadiers lost 68 percent, while eleven other regiments endured losses equal to or greater than 50 percent.<sup>13</sup> Always with regard to the losses in combat, for every 1,000 combatants under arms, there would have been:

Year	Dead	Wounded	Prisoners	Total
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<b>1915</b>	67	192	25	<b>284</b>
<b>1916</b>	84	201	56	<b>341</b>
<b>1917</b>	74	178	193	<b>445</b>
<b>1918</b>	19	48	31	<b>98</b>

Table 2: Losses per year per 1,000 combatants<sup>14</sup>

### The Dead and those Missing in Action

Of the 378,000 deaths from injuries estimated in 1921, 317,000 died on the field or appeared to be missing in action, 51,000 died in hospital and 10,000 in captivity. Another 186,000 soldiers are thought to have died of disease: 59,000 belonged to the operating army, 47,000 to the territorial army and 80,000 were prisoners, for a total of 564,000 deaths in the army (16,864 of which were officers), from Italy's entry into the war on 24 May 1915 until the cessation of hostilities on all the fronts on 11 November 1918. In the same period, the navy dead amounted to more than 6,000: 3,169 died in combat or from wounds sustained (167 were officers), the rest died from disease, thus bringing the total to 570,000 deaths. That is 40,000 more than in the following census of the Italian fallen in the Great War, covering, moreover, a longer time period from November 1914 (the presence of Garibaldi volunteers in France) until 20 October 1920, the date of the "publication of peace in Italy",<sup>15</sup> from which, at first, there emerged 529,025 names, published between 1926 and 1964 in 28 volumes.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the limitations and the many lacunae found,<sup>17</sup> it is the only source of information which permits a precise categorization of the dead on the basis of causes, years, age, geographical origin, and corps or special units to which they belonged. From the causes of death, divided by year, one can see that the largest number of deaths occurred in 1918, the year with the lowest combat losses, but in which the Spanish influenza and, above all, the high mortality among the prisoners of war had a significant impact.

Cause	1914	1915	1916	1917	1918	1919	1920	No date	Total
Wounds	17	51,291	83,435	78,682	32,725	833	343	27	<b>247,353</b>
Missing in action	2	16,967	18,952	28,095	6,642	-	-	62	<b>70,758</b>
Disappearance	1	722	3,105	1,635	2,008	-	-	2,984	<b>10,672</b>

Accidental	-	655	2,562	3,412	3,818	-	-	-	<b>12,036</b>
Disease	-	11,958	14,259	24,445	113,560	17,475	6,212	14	<b>187,923</b>
Not indicated	-	13	27	48	156	23	7	9	<b>283</b>
Total	20	81,606	122,336	136,317	158,914	19,926	6,811	3,096	<b>529,025</b>

Table 3: Causes of Death by Year<sup>18</sup>

Turning to the categorization in terms of corps and special units, we find that 84 percent of the total deaths were in the infantry and its special units (grenadiers, *bersaglieri*, Alpine troops, machine gunners, assault troops), followed, with 7 percent, by the artillery (including the special bombardier unit), the engineer corps with 3 percent, and, with percentages of less than 1, the cavalry, health, various other services, and aviation (at that time part of the army). Navy losses (6,855, with 293 officers) accounted for 1.3 percent of the overall total. The figure rose to 531,149 after the addition of 2,124 more dead, from Veneto and Friuli, not published in the press, but only on the internet,<sup>19</sup> which however does not seem to change the percentages given above significantly. There were 834 senior officers and generals, 16,872 junior officers, 16,302 non-commissioned officers, 497,103 rank and file, and thirty-eight of unknown rank, broken down by major geographic areas:

Geographical areas	Officers	NCOs	Rank and file	Total	% of 1911 resident population
NORTHERN ITALY (Piedmont, Liguria, Lombardy, Veneto and Friuli, Emilia-Romagna)	8,069	9,135	240,214	257,418	1.60
CENTRAL ITALY (Tuscany, the Marches, Umbria, Latium, Abruzzi and Molise)	3,824	3,382	110,274	117,480	1.57
SOUTHERN ITALY AND THE ISLANDS (Campania, Apulia, Basilicata, Calabria, Sicily, Sardinia)	5,813	3,785	146,653	156,251	1.27

Table 4: Deaths by Geographic Area<sup>20</sup>

It is noteworthy that a fifth of the senior officers (from the rank of major to general), 171, came from a single region: Piedmont. As with earlier estimates, the figure of 531,149 deaths cannot, however, be considered definitive: it includes approximately 30,000 soldiers who died before 24 May 1915 or after 11 November 1918, effectively reducing the number of dead during the war to 500,000. To which should be added a few tens of thousands of deaths omitted from publication, some by mistake (estimated at 20,000 to 25,000), others deliberately excluded because of unworthiness (perhaps a few thousand). But death did not stop with the cessation of hostilities: some of the most seriously injured and quite a few who were ill, above all those returning from imprisonment, continued to die in the following months and years: 11,000 deaths between 12 November and 31 December 1918; 40,000 between January 1919 and May 1920; and 37,000 from May 1920 to September 1925. A reliable figure is the 655,705 war pensions paid, in June 1926, to the families of those killed.<sup>21</sup> However, this does not take into account two types of deaths, for which a pension was not issued: those excluded for unworthiness, namely those executed by firing squad and the dead convicted of various crimes; the dead without relatives with the right to receive a pension. As, in both cases, it is a question of unknown data, one can only advance hypotheses. The number of those the [military condemned during the war](#) were 170,064:<sup>22</sup> 750 were executed by firing squad after due process of law, another 350, approximately, suffered the same fate as a result of verified summary executions. An unknown number, the victims of executions carried out without their names being recorded, were included among those killed in combat. The number of those executed should also include those who were convicted: the ones who died in prison (estimated at approximately 400, considering that only 2,384 prisoners of war were convicted); those in prison (in September 1919, 60,000 were in military prisons, 40,000 of whom were freed as a result of an amnesty);<sup>23</sup> and those in hiding. Overall, it is not a striking number, estimated at 2,500, perhaps 3,000, deaths. Certainly more numerous were the dead without relatives, estimated prudently as at least a few tens of thousands, considering the high number of bachelors and orphans, having lost both parents, as a result of an average age which, in Italy, was only 47.4 years in 1906-1912.<sup>24</sup> Another certain figure is the 643,160 death certificates of soldiers drawn up between 1915 and 1918: 560,820 by the military authorities for the deaths in the war zone, and 82,340 drafted by the civil authorities for the deaths that occurred within Italy. Nevertheless, one should also add, approximately, another 80,000, for the 77,000 soldiers who died in the following years for reasons directly related to the war and 2,984 who disappeared during imprisonment without a trace. In fact, years passed before an official statement on their fate was released. But it is also necessary to make some significant

deductions: 1) to subtract the number of retired military who died in old age (1,000 or more); 2) to subtract the number of foreign soldiers killed in Italy, both allies (502) and opponents (at least 4,999, but certainly a higher number), for whom death certificates were issued by the Italian authorities; 3) to subtract the indefinite number of soldiers whose death was not recognized as being "because of service"; 4) to subtract the equally unknown number of death certificates compiled by various bodies: suffice it to mention those who were seriously injured, for whom, not infrequently, their unit drew up the death certificate as the severity of the wound made death seem a certainty, while the health facility, in which the death actually occurred, drew up, in turn, another one. All things considered, the estimate of 680,000 to 709,000 Italian soldiers who died during or as a result of the 1915-1918 war does not seem rash, but it is obvious that it is in the realm of hypotheses. To these must be added, however, tens of thousands of Italians who died fighting in foreign armies: 24,366 Italians, who were Austrian subjects until 1918, and were in the ranks of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (11,318 of whom were from [Trentino](#)); approximately 300 Garibaldi volunteers, dead or missing in France with the [French Foreign Legion](#) before 24 May 1915; and an uncertain, but limited number (perhaps hundreds) of Italian citizens who died fighting in the Allied armies, mostly French and American, but also British, Canadian and even South African.

## The Wounded

Of the injured taken to health facilities, 51,000 died during the conflict. According to estimates published between the two world wars, for every 100 combatants lost, fifteen were killed and eighty-five wounded (twenty-eight of whom were destined to succumb). Twelve had such serious injuries as not to be able to be moved; ten had minor injuries which permitted a speedy recovery and were treated in the dressing stations; and seven were hospitalized in first level health facilities (health sections), while fifty-six were sent to hospitals.<sup>25</sup>

## The Prisoners

The prisoners amounted to just under 600,000, of whom 19,507 were officers: 340,000 were captured between 24 October and the end of December 1917, another 66,000 in 1918.<sup>26</sup> The number of prisoners who died during the war is striking: 90,000 to 100,000 (550 officers), representing over 16 percent of the prisoners, the same percentage found among the hardest hit among the combatants, namely the infantry and its special units. Deaths from injuries were put at about 10,000, with the remainder due to illness. For the moment, it is not possible to establish the number of prisoners who died after returning to Italy, both during the war and in the following years. Probably they amounted to a few thousand at least, if one considers that 16,142, who returned to Italy before the end of the conflict, were disabled

(1,169 were officers), 11,523 of whom were undermined by severe forms of tuberculosis, while among the survivors of imprisonment, there were another 10,000 with severe tuberculosis. Moreover, the mortality was not distributed evenly among the prisoners, nor did it have a greater impact on those who had remained longer in captivity. Rather, mortality focused on those who were captured in the two-month period from October to December 1917, when it reached peaks of 40 percent,<sup>27</sup> while among the prisoners of the previous period the percentages seem to have remained well below 10 percent. The high mortality rate among the Italian prisoners of war was, for a long time, attributed to the inhumane conditions to which they were subjected during their imprisonment, conditions aggravated in the last months of 1917 and early 1918 by the huge influx of new prisoners. But, in 1993, [Giovanna Procacci](#) imputed the responsibility for these deaths to the Italian civil and military authorities, who were guilty of having rigidly applied international conventions, and not consenting to the sending of state aid to the prisoners. The consequences of this foreclosure on the mortality of the Italian prisoners still have to be quantified, given that not even all the parcels which had, nevertheless, arrived from Italy in the form of private aid could be distributed due to the inability of the Austro-Hungarian authorities to trace the intended recipients, who were scattered throughout the immense empire in a myriad of micro-camps and work groups without a record being kept of their whereabouts.

## The Sick

The sick amounted to an estimated number of 2,500,000,<sup>28</sup> with a monthly average of hospitalizations of 3-4 percent of the force, a percentage that increased in November 1915 to 6.5 because of the cholera epidemic and reached a peak in October 1918, at the height of the "[Spanish](#)" influenza, with 7.8 percent.<sup>29</sup> The diseases that plagued the military included malaria, which occurred in more than 120,000 cases during the war (as resulted from a special census from 30 June 1921), present above all in Albania (33,623 patients were repatriated between 1916 and 1918), in [Macedonia](#) (16,017 were repatriated between 1916 and 1918), on the lower Isonzo and on the lower Piave (there were 85,032 cases in 1918 among the Italian troops in Italy); typhoid (65,358 were infected between 1915 and 1918); tuberculosis (at least 50,000 cases, excluding prisoners of war, during the entire conflict); mental disorders (40,000 were hospitalized); cholera (15,000-20,000 cases between July and December 1915, with about 5,000 deaths); and measles (14,708 cases).<sup>30</sup> The cases of meningitis (5,242 cases), scarlet fever (2,648 cases) and diphtheria (824 cases) were totally marginal in relation to the number of men mobilized, while the "Spanish" influenza had a significant impact. Having first presented itself in a bland form between May and early July 1918, it reappeared in a decidedly lethal form from the end of July, reaching a climax in October 1918, when it struck 4 percent of the armed forces, causing one death for every

eleven to twelve men with influenza. Diseases caused the deaths of over 100,000 Italian soldiers during the war, without counting the Italian prisoners of war.

## The Losses among the Civilians

### The Victims of Acts of War

The war on the seas led to the sinking of, or damage to, a large number of Italian merchant ships (263 steamships and 376 sailing ships were sunk, approximately another 150 ships were damaged), causing the confirmed deaths of 2,293 civilians, of whom 932 were passengers and 1,361 were members of the crew.<sup>31</sup> The twenty-nine naval bombardments conducted against twenty-four small towns on the Adriatic coast, in turn, produced, among Italian civilians, 142 dead and 159 wounded. The aerial bombardments produced more victims: conducted against eighty inhabited areas located in eight of the current Italian regions, they caused 965 civilian deaths and 1,158 wounded. Over 83 percent of these deaths occurred in Veneto-Friuli, the region immediately outside the war fronts, but there were also victims in the most remote places behind the front line, such as in the provinces of Milan, Livorno and Naples.

### The Dead in the Invaded Territories

Due to the fluctuation of the war front, a part of the Italian territory was, for a limited period of time, under enemy occupation. In May 1916, the Italian army had had to leave part of the Asiago Plateau, a mountainous area located near the old border between the provinces of Vicenza and [Trento](#), inhabited by about 30,000 people, who were all evacuated to other Italian provinces. There were more serious territorial losses following the defeat of Caporetto in October 1917 and the subsequent withdrawal on the line of the Grappa and the Piave, as a result of which the entire provinces of Udine and Belluno, and partly those of Treviso and Venice were lost. They were territories inhabited, before the conflict, by a population of over 1,200,000 people, only some of whom followed the retreating army, while 900,000 to 1,000,000 remained in the occupied territories until liberation in November 1918. The number of those who died during the year of Austrian occupation is estimated at 45,000, with an excess of deaths, compared to the pre-war period, estimated by Mortara as being approximately 27,000.<sup>32</sup>

Province	Population which remained	Deaths during the occupation	Deaths per 1000 inhabitants	
			Year of occupation	Annual average 1912-1914
Belluno	190,000	10,800	56.8	18.6
Udine	570,000	18,799	33.0	18.1
Treviso (partly invaded)	150,000	11,181	74.5	13.9
Venezia (partly invaded)	60,000	2,762	46.4	14.5
<b>Total for invaded regions</b>	<b>970,000</b>	<b>43,562</b>	<b>44.9</b>	<b>17.1</b>

Table 5: Civilian Deaths in Invaded Regions<sup>33</sup>

Even comparing the pre-war average, which was inevitably more limited, with the 1918 figures, when mortality in the rest of Italy had increased to 28 per thousand, the contrast remains stark and highlights the abnormal situation caused by the Austrian occupation.

### Civilian Losses

The excess deaths among civilians that were due, in some way, to the conflict, can be estimated at about 600,000.<sup>34</sup> Most of the diseases already present in Italy experienced a resurgence as a result of the war, others which had already been eradicated or controlled reappeared (for example, smallpox). However, the main cause of death among civilians was the “Spanish” influenza, which, having manifested itself in its most dangerous form in the summer of 1918, produced from August onwards a crescendo of deaths culminating in October with a mortality rate six times higher than normal, and then progressively diminished until March 1919. In that period of time, there were 532,457<sup>35</sup> more civilian deaths than the average for 1911-1913 (the figure does not include the deaths in the invaded regions, in which in any case the influenza produced victims), for the most part attributable directly or indirectly to the “Spanish” influenza.<sup>36</sup> It struck between 3,500,000 and 6,000,000 Italian civilians, and was directly responsible for the death of at least 300,000 of them, while another 200,000 or more were victims of diseases such as pneumonia and encephalitis, due to the influenza, with a mortality which, in each age group, had a greater impact on females

than on the males of the same age. There is no evidence of direct links between the virulence of the “Spanish” influenza and the war, but no one has been able to rule out that, without the conflict, the effects of the influenza would have been quite so devastating.

Month	Excess Civilian Deaths Compared to the Average Mortality for the Same Period in 1911-1913
August 1918	10,329
September 1918	77,999
October 1918	242,841
November 1918	118,142
December 1918	49,561
January 1919	25,461
February 1919	7,069
March 1919	1,055
<b>Total</b>	<b>532,457</b>

Table 6: Excess Civilian Deaths Compared to the Average Mortality for the Same Period in 1911-1913<sup>37</sup>

## Conclusion

The absence of detailed studies on Italian losses, based on the analysis of concrete data – instead of relying on estimates, albeit intelligent ones – prevents us from knowing the exact scale of these losses, and leaves a glaring lacuna in our knowledge of the Italian participation in the Great War. And yet, with regard to the dead, the existing documentation is such to permit us to eliminate at least some of the very many “maybes” that still remain concerning the number of Italian military dead. The computerization of the register of individuals in the Albo d’Oro Archives in Rome, by analogy with what has happened in other states, could, or should, be an indispensable first step in order to have a relatively reliable database from which to proceed to the inevitable checks, and have the necessary supplementary information. Albeit on the basis of the approximate information available, the very high impact of diseases in Italy on the overall mortality is obvious: despite the violence of the clashes, less than a third of the excess mortality recorded between 1915-1918 (400,000 out

of 1,250,000) was due to the fighting. Nor can it be forgotten that the “Spanish” influenza struck debilitated bodies and that health facilities were focused on military purposes, which left them unprepared for that civil emergency. Even leaving aside the civilians in order to concentrate solely on the military, the dead, those missing in combat and on account of their wounds were perhaps 70 percent of the deceased during the war, and constituted 55-60 percent of all deaths. These percentages are often neglected in the opinions expressed on this conflict, but should perhaps receive more careful consideration. The issues to be taken into account include: how war kills not only directly, but also indirectly, and how, despite the, in the opinion of many people, inadequate management of the war, the Italian deaths in combat and due to wounds proved to be lower than those sustained by its main allies and adversaries in terms of all the parameters.<sup>38</sup> This applies to the percentage of deaths among the men mobilized (10 percent in Italy, compared to 12 percent in Great Britain, 17 percent in France, 15 percent in Germany and 12 percent in Austria-Hungary), both as regards the total population (1.6 percent in Italy and Great Britain; 3.4 percent in France; 3 percent in Germany; and 1.9 percent in Austria-Hungary), and the male population between fifteen and forty-nine years of age (7.4 percent in Italy; 13.3 percent in France; 12.5 percent in Germany; 9 percent in Austria-Hungary; and 6.3 percent in Great Britain). The high number of prisoners should also be taken into account. They constituted 26 percent of the Italian losses, while the corresponding figure for France was only 12 percent, for Germany 9 percent, for Britain 7 percent, while for Austria-Hungary the percentage rose to 32 percent, but a quarter of these prisoners were captured in the last two days of the war.<sup>39</sup> Finally, consideration should be given to the reason for the high incidence of diseases on the mortality of the military: was it perhaps due to mismanagement on the part of the generals? Or rather did it depend upon the enlistment of those who were increasingly young or old and, therefore, not yet fully developed physically, or, on the contrary, already worn out? Or was it determined by the overall backwardness of Italy, where most of the population could not afford sufficient and adequate food and even the military structure was unable to remedy the situation?

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## Notes

1. They are twenty-eight large volumes known as the *Albo d'Oro* (Roll of Honour), published between 1926 and 1964 by the Ministry of War and later by the Ministry of Defence, containing a total of 529,025 names. [↑](#)
2. See the many computerized works about the fallen, on the web, indicated in the bibliography. [↑](#)
3. Ministero di Agricoltura, industria e commercio: Censimento della popolazione del

Regno al 10 giugno 1911, Rome 1912. ↑

4. See Zugaro, Fulvio: *Statistica dello sforzo militare italiano nella guerra mondiale. La forza dell'esercito*, Ministero della Guerra, Ufficio Statistico, Rome 1927, p. XX. ↑
5. The statistics about the Italian population and the men who were mobilized can be found in numerous sources, the main ones are: Mortara, Giorgio: *La salute pubblica in Italia durante e dopo la guerra*, Bari and New Haven 1925; Zugaro, Fulvio: *La forza dell'esercito* 1927, op. cit.; see also: Zugaro, Fulvio: "Sacrifici ed eroismi visti attraverso aride cifre", pp. 163-181, in *Associazione nazionale volontari di guerra* (ed.): *Il decennale. X Anniversario della Vittoria*, Florence 1929; Isnenghi, Mario/Rochat, Giorgio: *La Grande Guerra 1914-1918*, Milan 2000; Del Negro, Piero: "I caduti italiani della Grande Guerra: soldati e ufficiali", pp. 38-43, in *Rasera, Fabrizio/Zadra, Camillo* (eds.): *Volontari italiani nella Grande Guerra*, Rovereto 2008, in which there is a critical treatment of the information about officers already dealt with by Rochat, Giorgio: "Gli ufficiali italiani nella prima guerra mondiale", in: *L'esercito italiano in pace e in guerra. Studi di storia militare*, Milan 1981, pp. 112-130. ↑
6. Mortara, *La salute pubblica in Italia* 1925, pp. 33-34. ↑
7. Regarding the Italian losses in France see Ministero della Difesa: *L'Esercito italiano nella Grande Guerra (1915-1918)*, vol. VII: *Le operazioni fuori del territorio nazionale*, t. 2°: *Soldati d'Italia in terra di Francia*, Rome 1951, n. 2, p. 218; Saponi, Julien: *Les troupes italiennes en France pendant la première guerre mondiale*, Parçay sur Vienne 2008, p. 102 and pp. 109-113; Caracciolo, Mario: *Le truppe italiane in Francia (il II corpo d'armata - Le T.A.I.F.)*, Milan 1929, p. 260; Cadeddu, Lorenzo: "Il sacrario di Bligny", pp. 156-166, in *Bologna, Enzo/Pederzoli, Elvio*: *Guida ai sacrari della Grande Guerra da Redipuglia a Bligny*, Udine 2010; *Consociazione turistica italiana: Sui campi di battaglia*, vol. VI: *I soldati italiani in Francia. Guida storico-turistica*, Milan 1940, with an appendix dealing with the Garibaldi volunteers. ↑
8. Regarding the Italian losses in Albania and Macedonia see Ministero della Difesa: *L'Esercito italiano nella Grande Guerra (1915-1918)*, vol. VII: *Le operazioni fuori del territorio nazionale: Albania, Macedonia, Medio Oriente*, t. 3° bis: *documenti*, Rome 1981, *Parte Prima*, doc. 77, p. 173 and *Parte Seconda*, doc. 78, p. 351; Mortara, *La salute pubblica in Italia* 1925, p. 37. ↑
9. See Ministero della Difesa: *I governi militari della Libia*, t. 1°: *testo*, Rome 1994, p. 266-272, in which 1,508 prisoners are indicated among the military, of whom at least 103 died between 1917 and 1919; see also Del Boca, Angelo: *Gli italiani in Libia*, vol. 1: *Tripoli bel suol d'amore 1860-1922*, Milan 2010 (1st ed. 1986), p. 298, which refers, among other things, to 5,600 dead, a few thousand wounded and about 2,000 prisoners just for the period January-July 1915. ↑
10. See Zugaro, *La forza dell'esercito* 1927, p. XVII. ↑

11. See Zugaro, *La forza dell'esercito 1927*, p. 34; the figure was obtained from the sum of the individual categories of the special infantry units: grenadiers, line infantry, alpine troops and bersaglieri regiments, which also include the machine gunners and those belonging to the assault troops. [↑](#)
12. The figures of the losses are in Mortara, *La salute pubblica in Italia 1925*, p. 37. [↑](#)
13. See Mortara, *La salute pubblica in Italia 1925*, pp. 39-40. [↑](#)
14. See Mortara, *La salute pubblica in Italia 1925*, p. 37. [↑](#)
15. Zugaro, Fulvio: "L'Albo d'Oro dei Caduti dell'Italia nella Guerra mondiale", pp. 201-219, in *Bollettino dell'Ufficio storico*, anno I, n. 4, 1st July 1926, Stato Maggiore Regio Esercito, Rome 1926, p. 207. [↑](#)
16. Ministero della Guerra (later Defence): *Albo d'Oro dei militari italiani caduti nella guerra nazionale*, 28 vols., Rome 1926-1964. [↑](#)
17. Regarding some observations about the inadequacy of his work see: Del Negro, "I caduti italiani della Grande Guerra" in Rasera/Zadra (eds.): *Volontari italiani nella Grande Guerra 2008*, pp. 38-39 and Scolè, Pierluigi: "Andar soldato in Lombardia negli anni della Grande Guerra", a paper presented at the Conference "Una Rete di ricordi: la memoria digitale dei Caduti della Grande Guerra", Milan, 13 April 2012, due to be published. [↑](#)
18. Ministry of War and later Ministry of Defence: *Albo d'Oro [Roll of Honour]*, 28 vols., Rome 1926-1964. [↑](#)
19. The original documents are at the Ministry of Defence, Direzione Generale della Previdenza Militare, della Leva e del Collocamento al Lavoro dei Volontari Congedati, III Reparto - 10a Divisione Albo d'Oro, henceforth referred to as "Albo'Oro" Archives, where the documentation about the war dead is kept. [↑](#)
20. Ministry of War and later Ministry of Defence: *Albo d'Oro [Roll of Honour]*, 28 vols., Rome 1926-1964. [↑](#)
21. The first person to indicate this figure was Zugaro, *La forza dell'esercito 1927*, p. XIV, n. 1. [↑](#)
22. The earliest information about military discipline appeared in the *Relazione della Commissione d'inchiesta: Dall'Isonzo al Piave, 24 ottobre-9 novembre 1917*, vol II: *Le cause e le responsabilità degli avvenimenti*, Stabilimento poligrafico per l'amministrazione della guerra, Rome 1919; it was followed by Tagliacarne, Guglielmo: *Contributi e comportamenti delle regioni d'Italia in guerra*, Ferrara 1923, in which, albeit based on partial data, there was a subdivision of the deserters on a regional basis. After decades of silence, the first people who publicly tackled the data about military justice were Forcella-Alberto Monticone, Enzo: *Plotone di esecuzione. I processi della prima guerra mondiale*, Bari 1998 (1st ed. 1968). They had the merit of having taken up again the unknown data which had been presented by Mortara, Giorgio: *Statistica dello sforzo*

- militare italiano nella guerra mondiale. Dati sulla giustizia e disciplina militare, Ministero della Guerra, Ufficio Statistico, Rome 1927. The subject of discipline subsequently became a recurring theme in the studies by Pluviano, Marco/Guerrini, Irene: *Le fucilazioni sommarie nella prima guerra mondiale*. Prefazione di Giorgio Rochat, Udine 2004; *Fucilate i fanti della Catanzaro. La fine della leggenda sulle decimazioni della Grande Guerra*, Udine 2007; *Viazzi, Luciano (ed.): Fucilazioni di guerra. Testimonianze ed episodi di giustizia militare dal fronte italo-austriaco*, Chiari 1999. This subject was also dealt with in general histories about the First World War: *Faldella, Emilio: La Grande Guerra*, 2 vols., Milan 1965; *Melograni, Piero: Storia politica della Grande Guerra*, 2 vols., Bari 1977 (1st ed. 1969), *Ceva, Lucio: Storia delle forze armate in Italia*, Turin 1999 (1st ed. 1981); *Isnenghi/Rochat, La Grande Guerra* 2000. ↑
23. Rochat, Giorgio: *L'esercito italiano da Vittorio Veneto a Mussolini*, Bari 2006 (1st ed. 1967). ↑
24. Mortara, *La salute pubblica in Italia 1925*, p. 109. ↑
25. *Enciclopedia militare*, Milan 1927-1933, vol. V, the entry "Perdite", p. 906; see also the entry "Mortalità", p. 349; the general information about the wounded and those who died from their wounds is taken from the already cited Zugaro, *Sacrifici ed eroismi visti attraverso aride cifre* 1929 and Mortara, *La salute pubblica in Italia 1925*; about health in general *Boschi, Gaetano: La guerra e le arti sanitarie*, Milan 1931 and, above all, *Cosmacini, Giorgio: Storia della medicina e della sanità in Italia dalla peste nera ai nostri giorni*, Bari 2010, pp. 361-363. ↑
26. Regarding the Italian prisoners of war see: *Relazione della Reale Commissione d'inchiesta sulle violazioni del diritto delle genti commesse dal nemico (henceforth CIV)*, vol. III: *Trattamento dei prigionieri di guerra e degli internati civili*, Milan-Rome 1920, pp. 168 and 169 for the statistics about the prisoners, with hundreds of uncontested accounts about the conditions of imprisonment, this information was taken up again by Mortara, *La salute pubblica in Italia 1925*, pp. 49-56 and later by Procacci, Giovanna: *Soldati e prigionieri italiani nella Grande guerra*, Rome 1993, who overturned the responsibility for the many deaths which occurred during imprisonment. ↑
27. This information emerges from the careful analysis of the class of 1899 of the military district of Genoa carried out by Gemme, Cesare: *I ragazzi vanno alla guerra. La leva del 1899 nel distretto di Genova*, Genoa 2011. ↑
28. Lenci, Giuliano: "Caduti dimenticati. I morti per malattia", pp. 231-236, in Leoni, Diego/Zadra, Camillo (eds.): *La Grande Guerra. Esperienza, memoria, immagini*, Bologna 1986; *Malattie e medicina durante la Grande Guerra 1915-1919*, Udine 2009; regarding mental distress see in particular Bianchi, Bruna: *La follia e la fuga. Nevrosi di guerra, diserzione e disobbedienza nell'esercito italiano 1915-1918*, Rome 2001. ↑
29. Mortara, *La salute pubblica in Italia 1925*, pp. 400-401. ↑

30. Mortara, La salute pubblica in Italia 1925, pp. 374-375 for malaria; p. 369 for typhus; pp. 398-400 for tuberculosis; pp. 382-383 for cholera; pp. 379-381 and 400-401 for "Spanish" influenza; pp. 378-379 for measles, scarlet fever and diphtheria. ↑
31. Mortara, La salute pubblica in Italia 1925, p. 58; p. 66 regarding the victims of naval bombardaments; p. 62 regarding the victims of aerial bombardaments. ↑
32. Mortara, La salute pubblica in Italia 1925, pp. 78-80. ↑
33. Mortara, La salute pubblica in Italia 1925, pp. 79-80. ↑
34. Mortara, La salute pubblica in Italia 1925, p. 107. ↑
35. Mortara, La salute pubblica in Italia 1925, p. 120. ↑
36. Mortara, La salute pubblica in Italia 1925, p. 117, p. 516; regarding the mortality caused by the influenza pp. 319-327 and pp. 362-363. ↑
37. Mortara, La salute pubblica in Italia 1925, p. 120. ↑
38. Ferguson, Niall: Il grido dei morti, Milan 2014, tab. 35, p. 312. ↑
39. Ferguson, Il grido dei morti 2014, pp. 379-381. ↑

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## Citation

Pierluigi Scolè: War Losses (Italy), in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer D. Keene, and Alan Kramer, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2025-12-19. DOI: [10.15463/ie1418.11650/1.1](https://doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.11650/1.1). Translated by: Noor Giovanni Mazhar

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### Author Keywords

military losses; civilian losses; diseases; wounded; Spanish influenza

### GND Subject Headings

[Weltkrieg \[1914-1918\] ; Kriegsverlust ; Italien](#)

### LC Subject Headings

[Italy ; War casualties ; World War, 1914-1918](#)

### Rameau Subject Headings

[Pertes ; Italie ; Guerre mondiale \(1914-1918\)](#)

### Key Person(s)

### Key Location(s)

[Belluno](#); [Livorno](#); [Milan](#); [Naples](#); [Udine](#); [Trento](#); [Vicenza](#); [Venice](#); [Treviso](#)

### Title

War Losses (Italy)

### Author(s)

[Pierluigi Scolè](#)

### Article Type

Handbook Article

### Classification Group

Regional Thematic Article