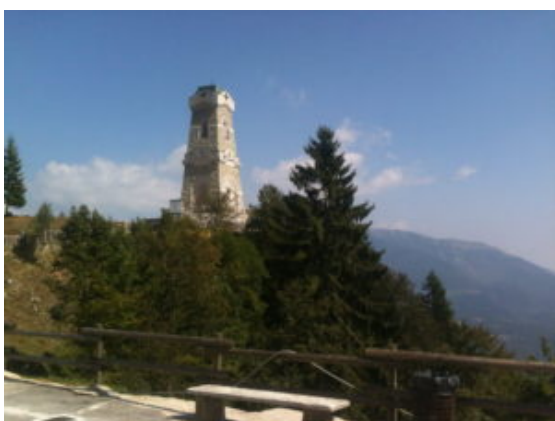


The Italian Front in WWI: Bad Tactics, Worse Leadership, and Pointless Sacrifice

During this ongoing centenary of the First World War, interest in “The War to End All Wars” has returned, especially in the form of articles and essays. In the English-speaking world, this is almost always focused on the Western Front and the battles featuring Britain or the USA (I contributed to this phenomenon with my essay discussing Robert Graves, [Goodbye to Christmas Truces](#)). The contributions of nations on other fronts are largely forgotten in this context. How many people even know which side Romania or Bulgaria fought on, or where Galicia is? The Italian Front is also largely unknown in the Anglosphere, except perhaps to note that it is the setting for Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*. After reading Mark Thompson’s *The White War: Life and Death on the Italian Front 1915-1919* (Basic Books, 2010), I learned a great deal about this important historical chapter, and strongly recommend this book to all readers of history.



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l-house of Pasubio,
towering over the Venetian
plain

I have lived in Italy for 10 years, during which time my passion for history and mountains has served me well. I have hiked up dozens of alpine peaks still crisscrossed with trenches, tunnels, and artillery positions. The World War I front is ubiquitous in northeast Italy, stretching over 400 miles across the Dolomites and Julian Alps from Lake Garda to the Isonzo River in Slovenia. When I was in the U.S. Army I participated in a battalion staff ride to the Asiago plateau north of Vicenza to study the battlefield. As an artillery officer myself I was responsible for researching and giving a presentation to the group about the nature of indirect fire during the war. There are many enormous, Fascist-era war memorials and charnel-houses along the front holding the mortal remains of tens of thousands or more of fallen soldiers. I have visited these monumental tombs at Asiago, Pasubio, Monte Grappa, and Caporetto several times each, and it is always a sobering experience. Every town in Italy displays a plaque in the public square with the names of those native sons who died in the wars, a dozen or less in the case of the smallest villages. Unlike America, which has not seen war on its own soil since the 1865, the memories of the two world wars live on in a much more profound way in Italy and all the [countries of Europe](#). In Italy's case, the ostensible "victory" of the First World War make it the source of a continuing myth of heroism. Here's the truth: Italy's participation and conduct in that war was a total disaster that led directly to its two decades of Fascist rule, and subsequent defeat in the next world war.

Bad Tactics

Alpini Italian



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rs still revered
today, climbing up
steep slopes to
their mountain-top
positions

One notable recent exception to the general lack of English-language recognition of the Italian front is this [fantastic journalism](#) by Brian Mockenhaupt in Smithsonian Magazine. In this article the author mainly discusses the extreme winter hardships of the high mountain fighting in the Dolomites and the feats of engineering by both the Italians and Austrians. Despite repeated offensives, almost all by the Italian side, the front throughout the war stayed remarkably stable in something resembling an even more inept version of the trench warfare of the Western Front. The two main sectors were the high mountainous border between the Trentino and Veneto, especially around the Asiago plateau down to Monte Grappa, and the line of the Isonzo (now Soča) River which nearly aligns with the current border of Italy and Slovenia and is characterized by a plateau called the Carso. The first sector is rightly famous for the unprecedented extremes I mentioned before. Indeed, Mark Thompson says in *The White War*: “The mountain units had to endure fantastically severe conditions. War had never been fought at such heights before, up to 3,500 metres. Fighting in the Sino-Indian war of 1962 and more

recently in Kashmir occurred at even greater altitudes, but the soldiers' experience on the Alpine front remains unmatched." As for the feats of engineering, this was probably the single strong point of the Italian war effort from 1915-1918, and one has left traces all over the mountains today from the 52 tunnels carved up into Mt. Pasubio, to the cable cars, *vie ferrate*, trenches, and explosive mining under enemy positions. Otherwise, both sectors of the front still suffered from the same massive errors of strategic and tactical planning and execution that doomed both belligerent sides to such a brutal and dismal struggle.



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reen waters of the Soča
(Isonzo) as it flows
peacefully today through a
verdant valley near Kobarid
(Caporetto)

For anyone who has never been in close proximity to artillery shells landing or machine-guns firing, it is hard to imagine the destruction these modern weapons can cause on unsuspecting or unprepared human beings. Imagine men moving up exposed and difficult terrain into unbreachable barbed wire entanglements, then you will have an idea of the fundamental tactical problem of World War One that led to the stalemate of trench warfare. On the Isonzo Front, the Italians fought 12 large battles along the exact same lines over the course of over two years, involving over a couple million soldiers, a million

casualties, and absolutely no change of tactics to face the artillery, machine-guns, and barbed wire. The Austro-Hungarians defended this front extremely well for over two years, very undermanned and under-equipped, giving up very little territory, and inflicting more casualties on their enemy than they received most of the time. In *The White War*, Thompson writes: "The Italians kept coming, wave after wave, across open ground in close-order formation, shoulder to shoulder, against field guns and machine guns. To one Austrian artillery officer, 'it looked like an attempt at mass suicide'. Those who reached the deserted Austrian line met flame-throwers, tear gas, and machine-gun and rifle fire emanating from hollows and outcrops on the crumpled Carso. When dusk fell, their only significant gain was a hilltop, wrested from the Polish infantry of the 16th Division."

The 12th Battle of the Isonzo of October 1917, often called the Battle of Caporetto, was the first and only offensive by the Austrians on this front during the war. It was also a massive and unexpected defeat for the Italians that took back a part of the territory ceded to Italy in 1866 and nearly succeeded in forcing Italy to sue for a separate peace treaty. Superior German forces participated and led the way in this victory, including a vanguard company led by a young Lieutenant Erwin Rommel whose initiative caught much larger Italian forces unawares and helped break the poorly defended Italian lines west of the Isonzo. Thompson writes: "Caporetto was the outcome when innovative tactics were expertly used against an army that was, in doctrine and organization, one of the most hidebound in Europe. The Twelfth Battle was a Blitzkrieg before the concept existed."

The disaster of Caporetto for the Italians led to the long overdue replacement of the inept Supreme Commander Luigi Cadorna, and the consolidation of Italian forces along a much more compact and well-defended line of the Piave River north of Venice. This allowed the Italians to bide their time and

build up forces for one last offensive against the by-then completely exhausted and hopeless Austrians. This last battle, with the auspicious name of Vittorio Veneto, supposedly washed away forever the stain of Caporetto and the Isonzo (which seem to have been traumatically erased from Italian memory immediately after the war).

Even for someone who spent two years in combat and is well-versed in military history, the stupidity and callousness of the Italian generals is enraging. Sending millions of courageous young men into uphill attacks without effective artillery backup, aerial support, intelligence, or even wire-cutters for the barbed wire is a way to earn the absolute contempt of your own soldiers, as well as the enemy, as well as posterity. Thompson described the front in this way: "Italian losses were increased by sheer carelessness, born of inexperience and also ideology. Many officers disdained to organize their defenses properly because they thought the Austrians did not deserve the compliment. Only tragic experience would expunge this prejudice."

And again here: "The troops were unprepared, in every sense, for the conditions they faced. Lacking weapons, ordered to attack barbed wire, struck down by typhoid and cholera, poorly clothed and fed, sleeping on wet hay or mud, the men began to realize that they were 'going to be massacred, not to fight'. Hardly Garibaldian warriors, rather cannon fodder in a new kind of war."

On the living conditions at the front that never improved in nearly three years: "Sweat, dust, mud, rain and sun turned the men's woolen uniforms into something like parchment. Their boots often had cardboard uppers and wooden soles. Lacking better remedies, the men rubbed tallow into their cracked feet. Helmets were in very short supply. The wooden water bottles were unhygienic. The tents – when they had them – leaked. The wire-cutters were almost useless, and unusable under fire: 'mere garden secateurs', as a Sardinian officer

wrote disgustedly in his diary. Ration parties were often delayed by enemy fire. The only hot meal was in the morning, and so poor that soldiers often rejected most of it. The pervasive stench could, anyway, make eating impossible. The effects of such poor nutrition were evident after three or four days in the trenches, and some units sent out raiding parties for food and clothing in trenches that the enemy had abandoned. The soldiers slept on straw pallets, but there were not enough to go around. Even in the rear, before proper hutments were built, the men lived in tents that quickly became waterlogged and filthy. Abysmal medical care led to 'a good number of avoidable deaths due to inhuman treatment'. Wounded men were routinely 'shipped on 20 or 30 km ambulance runs on vile roads and then kept waiting for hours outside hospital'."

Worse Leadership

How did things get so miserable for the Italian side? The answer is an utter lack of political and military leadership. The only person of leadership during this war who comes out well in reading *The White War* is General Armando Diaz, who replaced Luigi Cadorna after Caporetto and injected basic competence and caution into the war. I cannot recall in any historical period a supreme commander who combined such unchallenged authority and staying power with such complete incompetence. In any other situation, a leader such as Cadorna would have been quickly killed, replaced, or forced into surrender. The less said about this character, who somehow still has streets named after him in Italy, the better.

Luigi Cadorna



I'll leave him with two succinct descriptions from Thompson's book: "Worst of all, Cadorna had discovered a knack for abandoning offensives when Borojević [the very capable Croatian general of the Austrian Isonzo forces] had committed his last reserves. The steely exterior concealed a vacillating spirit."

"Cadorna's and Capello's [another inept general] actions in the Eleventh Battle were so careless and self-destructive that historians have struggled to account for them. In truth, the two men acted fully in character. Cadorna's battle plans always tended to incoherence, his command often slackened fatally in the course of offensives."

The other, more complex side of the leadership vacuum was political. Cadorna was only able to consolidate such unchallenged power for so long because he answered only to the monarch, still a position of great power in Italy at that time. The monarch was a figure known as Vittorio Emanuele III, the grandson of the first king of unified Italy, and a weak-willed and morally suspect character. This king nevertheless enjoyed a long reign from 1900, when his father Umberto was assassinated, to 1946, when he finally abdicated in a quixotic bid to save the institution of the monarchy for his son and for Italy. Fortunately, Italy voted in a referendum to abolish the monarchy and establish a republic, and finally vindicating the true fathers of Italy, Garibaldi

and Mazzini. Victor Emanuel was so short (4'11") that he could not wear a real sword, and so his nickname was "Little Sabre". Italy engaged in at least five foolish wars during his reign, and he was instrumental in allowing Mussolini's Fascist regime to violently take control of the government and hold it for 22 years.



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i and D'Annunzio in 1925: architects of the reactionary "anti-Risorgimento". Mussolini paid the poet a yearly stipend from 1922 to his death in 1938 for not interfering in politics.

Before Mussolini, there was the fascinating and nauseating character of Gabriele D'Annunzio, a Decadent poet, for a long time the most famous person in Italy, and a bloodthirsty proto-Fascist. Thompson spends an early chapter explaining the importance of D'Annunzio in making the blustery rhetorical case for Italy's involvement in a war most Italians did not care about. The poet at least backed up his words with actions, as he was given an army commission and entered himself into many battles on his own authority, seemingly getting a rise out of the abundant bloodshed falling for Italy's sake. This disturbing character does not come out well in Thompson's account, and rightfully so, I think.

The last aspect of failed political leadership that needs mentioning is the shameful way Italy's representatives behaved both before and after the war. The Prime Minister and Foreign Minister before and during most of the war, Salandra and Sonnino respectively, ensured that neither its allies nor its enemies respected Italy's shameful conduct. Italy was actually a member of a secret defensive alliance with Germany and Austria before the war. Italy did not support its allies at the outbreak of war because Austria's declaration of war against Serbia was not defensive in nature. The Italians stood on the sidelines for almost the first year of the war, playing both sides to get a better deal for its aggressive territorial claims. Everything about the beginning of World War One was tragically absurd, but Italy ended up being the most unnecessarily and nakedly opportunistic of all the belligerents. It wanted Austria to give up large parts of its territory in Trentino, South Tyrol, and Friuli (including Trieste) in return for Italy's honoring its alliance. When Austria (who was still Italy's historical nemesis despite this dubious alliance) balked, Italy obtained a secret deal with the England and France called the Treaty of London that guaranteed it would get all the territory it wanted after the war. In the end, Italy's disastrous human cost of participation in this war can be placed fully in the hands of just three people, according to Thompson—Salandra, Sonnino, and D'Annunzio.

Pointless Sacrifice

Italy's total number killed was 689,000, the total number of wounded was nearly 1,000,000, and prisoners and missing in action was also 600,000. A huge majority of them occurred on the 55-mile Isonzo front, and Italy, almost uniquely in this war, was only fighting one enemy. The total casualties of the Austro-Hungarian Empire were over three times higher than Italy's, but that includes the much larger front against Russia as well as Serbia and Romania. For further comparison,

Italy suffered more casualties during 3 1/2 years along its only front than *both* sides of the entire U.S. Civil War, which was the bloodiest in American history.



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remains of 55,000 soldiers

Again and again, the numbers of men slaughtered in each and every battle was much higher than it should have been given even modest improvements of tactics or basic respect for human life by the officers. At one hilltop near Gorizia, whose importance was only symbolic, Thompson writes: "The conquest of San Michele had cost at least 110,000 Italian casualties over 14 months, including 19,000 dead, on a sector only eight kilometers long." At one outcropping defended by the Austrians in the Dolomites, wave after wave of Italians were sent into machine-gun fire and "more than 6000 Italians had died on Col di Lana for precisely nothing." After one of the endless offensives on the Isonzo, Thompson writes of Cadorna: "As for his actual gains on the Carso, they amounted to several villages and a couple kilometers of limestone, won at a cost of 80,000 casualties." In another nameless struggle: "Five regiments were launched against the lone Habsburg battalion on Hill 383. Outnumbered by 15 to 1, the Austrians still inflicted 50% casualties on the attackers before succumbing." All of this bloodshed was obviously mind and soul-numbing, not only to the millions of soldiers who were called up, but also for the entire nation, most of whom did not want or care about

this war and did not even know why it was being fought.

After the war, Italian politicians once again played disgraceful diplomacy to the abhorrence of allies and enemies alike. Prime Minister Orlando and Foreign Minister Sonnino made absurd claims to places like Rijeka, the Dalmatian coast, Albania, and even Turkey, in order to justify their sacrifice, apparently forgetting that every other country "sacrificed" at least as much, and that Italy's position on the "winning" side of the war still did not exactly give it the moral high ground. As Thompson writes: "Orlando's and Sonnino's zero-sum strategy in Paris dealt a fatal wound to Italy's liberal system, already battered by the serial assaults of wartime. By stoking the appetite for unattainable demands, they encouraged Italians to despise their victory unless it led to the annexation of a small port on the other side of the Adriatic, with no historic connection to the motherland. Fiume [Rijeka in Croatian] became the first neuralgic point created by the Paris conference. Like the Sudetenland for Hitler's Germany and Transylvania for Hungary, it was a symbol of burning injustice. A sense of jeopardized identity and wounded pride fused with a toponym to produce an explosive compound."

D'Annunzio's thirst for violence and aggressive nationalism was not quenched at the end of the war, and he laid the blueprint for the next several decades of fascist dictators by seizing the port of Rijeka with a small militia and declaring it an independent Italian Regency. After he declared war on Italy itself the Italian navy placed a well-aimed shell in D'Annunzio's palace, which led to the poet's quick surrender and flight from the city. Furthermore, the combination of a destructive war and the economic hardships it imposed laid the foundation for future political upheaval. "This enduring sense of bitterness, betrayal, and loss was an essential ingredient in the rise of Mussolini and his Blackshirts." Thompson further comments: "For many veterans, Mussolini's myth gave a positive meaning to terrible experience. This is the story of

how the Italians began to lose the peace when their laurels were still green.”

An outside observer such as Hemingway, barely 19 years old and on the front for only one month, was able to see the war as “the most colossal, murderous, mismanaged butchery.” Somewhat incredibly, from my experience and what I’ve read, the general opinion about the First World War in Italy is either of forgetfulness or buying into the heroic myth-making of the Fascist regime that wrote the history books in Italy for over a generation. Even if that regime is mostly discredited now (pictures of Il Duce still adorn the mantelpieces of at least a few rustic houses around the peninsula—I have even seen it with my own eyes twice!), the history involved before and during the world wars is too tragic to be accepted. The heroism of the Alpini, rugged mountain soldiers, lingers in the national consciousness more than anything else. Thompson comments that, for all the destruction, World War One was Italy’s “first true collective national experience”, one whose exorbitant cost only led its victims to embrace it even further. It may be that every symbolic “birth of a nation” always only truly comes about through a horrific spasm of violence.

I think this is where the history of one front of one particular war becomes something more universal in the human experience. War is the worst thing humans do. Based on our biological and social development, it is also one of the most complex and psychologically conflicted. The lessons of history always point to the folly of war, but that has rarely stopped opportunistic politicians and greedy businessmen from precipitating the next one, even against the wishes of the majority. In Italy, as Thompson meditates: “The Risorgimento [the national unification movement led by Garibaldi and Mazzini] was libertarian, patriotic, democratic, enlightened, and still unfinished, forever wrestling with its antithetical twin: authoritarian, manipulative, nationalistic,

conspiratorial, and aggressive. From 1915-1944, the anti-Risorgimento had the upper hand. Perhaps the two still contend for mastery of Italy's dark heart." I would venture to say that in all countries at all times, these two antithetical notions always vie for control of political power, using emotional calls to arms, for the purpose of either the enlightened betterment of all, or the greedy enrichment of a few. We must always heed these two irreconcilable ideas, and always come out on the side that seeks to end whatever war we are in, and oppose the next war.