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**Legends, Lies, and Historiography: Italy, the Great War, and the Paris Peace Conference**

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If we look at the question of whether the Paris Peace Conference after ninety years remains the “peace to end all peace” with regard to Italy, we can easily answer the question with a yes. The main historiographical lines regarding Italy’s participation in the conference are still those proposed by my old professor Rene Albrecht-Carrie in his 1938 book *Italy at the Paris Peace Conference*. More detail has been added over the years, for example, by Jim Burgwyn in his 1993 work, *The Legend of the Mutilated Victory*. Both of these books are good on giving us details about the negotiations and less satisfactory in providing the big picture.

The real point about the negotiations is that they were preceded by a weaving of myths and misconceptions about Italy that still persist in the historiography and attitudes toward the subject. Ironically, we can say that some of these views exist even in the work and attitudes of Italian historians, although for different reasons.

The Legend of Military Failure

Following World War I in Germany, the army theorized the “stab in the back theory,” according to which the German army had not really lost the war but had been betrayed by the Socialists. As we know, historians love congruence, so the theory of the

“mutilated victory” has taken on a similar significance with regard to Italy. According to the “Mutilated Victory” theory, the Italians were convinced that they had won the war but lost the peace. Historians have debunked this view for several reasons. First, since Italy gained security in the Adriatic, it should have had no complaints; second, Italy’s demands in the area were excessive and “imperialistic”; third, the theory aided in the rise of fascism, therefore it is not true and served a similar purpose that the “stab in the back” idea served in Germany.

However, here we run into some typical attitudes that many times remain unstated, have a life of their own, and are untrue. The first attitude we might mention is the assumption that Italy’s military performance was poor; in fact, the country is frequently described as having been only “on the winning side.” I know that what I am about to say will seem heretical, but if we compare its military accomplishments to those of its Allies, can we say it was so inefficient? Here there is a case of damned-if-you-do-and-damned-it-you don’t. On the one hand, the Italians are criticized for not making as great an effort as their allies, and, when it is pointed out that they had the same casualty ratios as their allies if one considers the shorter period of time that they were in the war (although they were not in for as short a period as the Americans), then they are criticized for having had too many casualties and because of the propensity of their generals to favor the attack. Usually not taken into consideration is the tendency of all World War I armies to prefer the attack (after all, this idea was ingrained in the military academies, thanks to the *élan vitale* idea) and none of the military thinkers of the time had understood the lethality of the machine gun—although they should have. Something else that is almost never considered is that the Italian front was the most difficult of the war, not to

mention the ridicule to which the eleven offensives are subjected, despite John Keegan's assessment, which is as follows: "The incidence of an offensive every three months, between May 1915 and August 1917, was higher than that demanded of the British or French armies on the Western Front and the contingencies more wearing; shellfire in the rocky terrain caused 70 percent more casualties per rounds expended than on the soft ground in France and Belgium." That helps to explain the higher casualties.

Ah, but there is always Caporetto. Let's focus on yet another myth, that this was the kind of defeat the French, British, Russians, and Germans never knew. Lets also ignore some facts: that the Austrian army was exhausted by the Italian attacks and had to call on their German allies for help; that the real significance of the battle was that its objective failed and that the Italian line held; that the Italians went on the defensive, recovered, and defeated the Austrians at Vittorio Veneto a year later, destroying the enemy army (unlike the British and the French), ending the war a week before their allies and being the only Allied army to end it on foreign soil. What? This doesn't count because the Austrians didn't know how to fight either? By all means, let us also mention the Allied troops on the Italian front, even though they were in reserve for the battle that stopped the assault, and let's forget about the participation of the Italian troops in the fighting on the Western front.

The idea of a supposedly poor Italian military performance in World War I was utilized to weaken Italian demands after that conflict, and the sacrifices of those soldiers was discounted further by the poor Italian performance in World War II, but the legend

remains, supported by historians who do not bother to look seriously at the question but who express summary judgments without knowing the fact.

Let me throw out another heretical thought here that historians ignore: what if Italy had not entered the war and those millions of Austrian soldiers could have been employed on other fronts; what might have happened then?

### The Legend of the Betrayal

OK, let's pretend we are having a marital spat and change the subject.

Yes, but, Italy betrayed its Triple Alliance partners and entered the war against them just for crass gain, negotiating with both sides.

Let's take a look first at who betrayed who. Most people do not read the text of the Triple Alliance, especially Article 3. This article precisely states the conditions under which the *casus foederis* will come into play. It asserts that the allies will aid each other only if attacked "without direct provocation on their part." Can we say this was the case with the manner in which World War I broke out? Let's recall something historians as a rule do not: that is, the Albanian crisis of 1913, when the Austrians asked for Italian support because they wanted to send the Serbs an ultimatum to retreat from Albanian territory during the Second Balkan War so Serbia would not become too strong. Not only did the Italians object to this ultimatum, but clearly warned the Austrians and the Germans in August 1913 that in the case that they provoked a war the *casus foederis* would not come into effect. How did the Austrians react? By sending the Serbians an

ultimatum in October 1913, this time without informing the Italians. The Austrians thus violated another article of the Triple Alliance, Article 7, which also promised Italy compensation in case of changes in the Balkans. In 1914, the Triple Alliance was renewed, but Prime Minister Giolitti publicly stated that the only way the alliance would work was if its allies kept it fully informed of diplomatic negotiations, which the Austrians and the Germans did not do when they sent the ultimatum to Serbia that touched off the war.

When this happened the Italians immediately informed the Austrians that they would claim compensation under Article 7 of the Triple Alliance. The Austrians first refused, then, pressured by the Germans, accepted and stalled until it was too late. The British and the Russians, not being stupid, looked at the situation and tried to woo the Italians into the war on their side. They succeeded in doing so, not least because the Italians understood that no matter who won the war, if they did not participate their position in the Adriatic would be weakened either by a resurgent Austria or a Russian-supported, enlarged South Slav state (Yugoslavia). If the negotiations were crass, they were fully in the European tradition.

So what happened during the crisis within the Triple Alliance caused by the assassination of Franz Ferdinand and his wife? The Austro-Germans consulted on the ultimatum to Serbia, agreed to send it and kept Italy uninformed of their decision, thus violating the Treaty's terms—again. Then the Germans notified the Italians that they expected them to do their duty under the Triple Alliance.

Betrayal? If Italy had provoked a war with France under similar conditions, I wonder whether the Austrians and the Germans would have supported them. Actually, I think we all know the answer.

Let's also recall the history of the Triple Alliance and the constant urgings of Army Chief-of-Staff Conrad von Hotzendorff to attack Italy, especially when it was engaged in rescue operations in 1909 after the earthquake that destroyed the city of Messina and killed 100,000 people; and let's not forget the insults of the German Kaiser after the Algeciras Conference, when Italy did not join its ally in its disastrous Moroccan policy, not to mention other insulting statements by German leaders.

There are several points I would therefore emphasize here that historians of the war and the peace do not generally highlight: the Austro-Germans violated the Triple Alliance not once but several times; the *casus foederis* clearly never came into effect; the Italians had the right to request compensation under the terms of the Triple Alliance, which were based on national interest, and the Austrians had the same right; the Triple Alliance was always unpopular with Italian public opinion and it would never have joined Austria in an aggressive war for that country's own benefit that, if victorious, would have resulted in a disaster for Italy to boot; that the power relationships in Europe were shifting, and, normally enough, so was Italian policy; and that if the Italians had withdrawn from the Triple Alliance before the conflict, it would have made a war with Austria probable.

### The Legend of the "Loot"

Among the legends regarding Italy and its conduct at the Conference is the idea that the Italians—in the words of American territorial experts—were asking for Fiume and Dalmatia “in order to emerge from the conference with loot for their people.” The French and British representatives, presumably, were totally innocent of such impure thoughts. However, with regard to Italy the legend of its representatives wishing only to gain “loot” quickly took hold, with little or no rebuttal from mainstream historians even now.

Let’s take a look at this factor. The Italians officially entered the war on the grounds that they wanted the Irredenta, the Italian-speaking areas of the Austrian Empire that were not united with Italy during the Risorgimento. They were every bit as passionate on this issue as were the French who wanted to recover Alsace and Lorraine, but while the recovery of the French territories is generally considered legitimate because the Germans had taken it only recently, it was presumably ok for the Austrians to continue their centuries-long domination of the Italians in Trent and Trieste, because, in fact, English-language historians never place the same emphasis on the Irredenta or on the Austrian abuse of the Italian-speaking minority. Why is this? Presumably because the Italian desire to take the Irredenta is considered just an excuse for Italy to enter the war—neglecting the fact that Austrians finally offered them the Irredenta just before the Italians entered the conflict, also seldom mentioned. Why did they enter it anyway? Leaving out all the political details, longtime Premier Giovanni Giolitti, who advocated asking for the Irredenta in return for continued Italian neutrality and who was out of power when the war broke out, discovered that the Pact of London had been signed. So, even though he had been right, he refused to take power because Italy’s honor would have been

compromised if he had done what would have been perfectly legitimate. That is, because the Pact of London had not been ratified by Parliament and he had a majority in the Chamber of Deputies, he could have defeated turning the Pact into a treaty and prevented war while receiving the Irredenta. Instead, he withdrew from the political scene and allowed intervention to go forward so Italy could fulfill its obligations under the Pact.

Of course, the Italians led by Sidney Sonnino—who as one author wrote solidified his credentials as the worst foreign minister in Italian history during the period—had achieved wider gains under the Pact of London than were granted by Austria, but was it just a question of “loot”? Again, leaving out the complex negotiations and his terrible personality, Sonnino drove a hard bargain in 1915 (although he did not receive all he asked for). He did so because, if it had not been for the Russian revolutions of 1917, Russia would have emerged from the conflict as a major Mediterranean power closely allied with the Slavs on Italy’s borders. This is the primary reason why Sonnino believed it necessary to ensure Italian control of the Adriatic—security. It is true that Sonnino also obtained a promise of compensation for gains the British and the French might make in the colonies, but this pledge demonstrates Sonnino’s naiveté because the promise was vague and, ultimately, Italy got no compensation.

The diplomatic picture at the Conference, was, of course, grey instead of black and white. The Italians added Fiume to their demands even though it had been excluded from the Pact of London. This city represented an emotional issue rather than a significant territorial gain. The Italians had added Fiume to their demands during the war in order to gain more support from their people because of the unanticipated extreme



hardships of the war effort. They then made an easily-rebutted, illogical, case in favor of the gains reserved for them in the agreement, plus Fiume. This was not a nice thing to do, but at least they did not promise to squeeze anyone until the pips squeaked (Lloyd George) to reinforce the support of their population for the war effort and reducing the chances of a successful peace.

Related to this question was the inability of either Sonnino or Premier Antonio Salandra to understand that the nature of the war had changed. At the beginning of the conflict, negotiations and horse-trading was normal; but in 1917 the intervention of the United States and the Bolshevik Revolution transformed the dirty nature of the conflict into something resembling the pure white of newly-driven snow. For the United States, it became the “war to end all wars.” The Italians—or at least those Italians—were too cynical to accept that idea. In that view they managed to be simultaneously behind and ahead of their times—but the most serious aspect of this issue is the branding of Italians as cynical proponents of the “old” diplomacy that, presumably, had disappeared because of Wilson’s idealism. While the view of Foreign Minister Sonnino being stuck in the old, discredited diplomacy is always emphasized, historians routinely neglect the existence of an influential idealistic current of opinion in Italy, the one known as the “democratic interventionism.” I have called the leaders of this faction the “pre-Wilson Wilsonians,” but it is more accurate to say that Wilson was a “post-democratic-interventionist democratic interventionist.” This current argued for Italian intervention in World War I not on an expansionist note but to help save world democracy threatened by the authoritarian Central Powers. Gaetano Salvemini, in eerie anticipation of Wilson’s famous phrase, wrote that “It is necessary that this war kill war.” The “democratic

interventionists” expressed their opinions in July and August 1914, when Wilson was not ready yet to make the world safe for democracy and promised to keep the U.S. neutral, yet they hardly appear in the historical literature of English-speaking historians. Thus, after the conflict the Italians were branded as crass opportunists *tout court* even though the democratic interventionists called for agreement with the Yugoslavs.

In short, Italy’s allies were unaware of the complexities of the Italian political context that brought to the fore not the country’s longtime leader Giovanni Giolitti (who, incidentally, they did not like on the mistaken grounds that he allegedly was pro-German, preferring to deal with more politicians they could seduce or had seduced into joining in the war), and to interpret Italian events in a simplistic manner. To a certain extent, it is reasonable that leaders who had been on the outs of the political system, like Sonnino and Salandra, most affected the thinking of Allied leaders at the time, but that they continue to occupy center stage in the accounts of historians is less acceptable.

### Italy and the Paris Peace Conference

Those of you familiar with Rossini’s *Barber of Seville* know that calumny begins as a slight breeze, a *venticello*, before the crescendo; little things mean a lot, and they inexorably add up. Italy went into the Paris Peace Conference not only as the weakest of the major powers but woefully misinterpreted. Ironically, the Allies acted on prejudices held by Italy’s Triple Alliance partners. Woodrow Wilson, who went into the Conference with high ideals, slowly gave in to the major demands of the British and the French, after which he resolved to be firm against the only ally he could defeat—Italy.

Why give Italy what it wanted? It had “betrayed” its allies for territorial gains; it had driven a hard bargain that violated the Fourteen Points (although, unlike the Germans and contrary to what American experts said), those points were not the basis of the Italian armistice with Austria; it had not declared war on Germany (until 1916) but only on Austria (this is something one finds mentioned constantly, although no one emphasizes that the U.S. declared war only on Germany and not on Austria); Caporetto was the symbol of Italian military inefficiency. And yet Italy demanded unreasonable gains for crass reasons, while British and French demands are just the stuff of diplomacy and balance-of-power politics.

Judging from prevailing attitudes, in effect, historians agree. This is not to say that Italian representatives did not make mistakes like everyone else—which is really the point—but until historians are ready to re-examine the facts of the Italian case in a wider context and are ready to judge the Italians on the same terms they judge others the historiography of Italy in the Great War and at the Paris Peace Conference will remain dependent on legends, bias, and misinformation of the kind found in Margaret MacMillian’s chapter on Italy in her book *Paris 1919*.

Attitudes such as those represented in that book do not affect only historiography but, before historiography, affected history—witness the diplomatic instability and the rise of fascism to which they contributed. Italian leaders can be criticized, but not on the basis of baseless legends.

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## Notes to Myself

### From the Triple Alliance:

**ARTICLE 3.** If one, or two, of the High Contracting Parties, *without direct provocation on their part*, should chance to be attacked and to be engaged in a war with two or more Great Powers non-signatory to the present Treaty, the *casus foederis* will arise simultaneously for all the High Contracting Parties.

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### The MacMillan book:

First published in 2001, it remains dependent on Albrecht-Carrie's book and American documents from the period; while it lists Burgwyn's book in its bibliography, she does not use it in her text; in Italian, she relies on Roberto Vivarelli, a notoriously polemical historian, and, in addition, on his history of the origins of fascism to discuss the Paris Conference.

“Under the terms of the Triple Alliance..., Italy was only obliged to defend its allies if they were attacked first. **The Italians used the fact that Austria-Hungary had declared war on Serbia as a reason to remain neutral.**”

“Sacro egoismo”: attributed to “what another foreign minister had called ‘sacred egoism.’” (It was Salandra who used the term; he was foreign minister only for a brief time when San Giuliano died.)

MacMillan attributes rise of Orlando to murky Italian politics; I find British politics murkier.

“Italy's armies had delayed their attack on Austria-Hungary, then made a mess of it.” This when the Italian army made a conscious decision to initiate an attack on Austria early to give the impression that they were prepared for war.

“The Italian government had squeezed resources out of its hard-pressed allies which it had then refused to use in the war effort.”

First, the only aid that Italy asked in the Pact of London was a loan that turned out to cover only one month's operation for the war;

Second, since Italy was a much poorer country than the other allies, and used a tremendous amount of resources in the war, it needed help, just as Britain and France needed help from the US—but they did not, of course, “squeeze resources” out of a stronger ally, only Italy did.

Third, what does it mean that the Italians then refused to use the resources it “squeezed out” of its allies in the war effort? If she had been my student, I would immediately have sent her back to give evidence for that statement and also to read the books by Piero Pieri and Mario Silvestri in order to begin getting an understanding of the Italian war effort.

“When Italian armies moved rapidly **at the end of the war** to occupy all the territory, and more, that Italy had been promised around the Adriatic, Pichon, the French Foreign Minister, complained at length that the Italian troops were deliberately provoking trouble with the local Slav population.”

M. then goes on to ridicule Italian claims based on history, but when she discusses the case of Kosovo and the Albanians, her writing validates Serb claims on the basis of history, even though they did not hold on the basis of ethnicity.

M. also maintains that the Italians treated the locals badly, but is quiet as far as the Kosovars are concerned when they sent the Conference a letter begging for help and pleading not to be put under Greek control because they were being murdered.

M., like Wilson, favors the Slavs over the Italians and is unsympathetic to their argument that the Slavs fought in the Austro-Hungarian armies against the allies. Sure, neither Wilson nor M. fought against them, so why shouldn't they prefer the Slavs over a country that had been a major part of the war effort?

M. says that “**Sonnino inclined toward the Central Powers,**” assuming that they would win, but that, however, most Italians supported neutrality, but eventually decided that intervention on the allied side was Italy's “best option,” thus perpetuating the myth that Italians switched side because of greed.

However, if you read Sonnino's correspondence with Salandra, he urged the Prime Minister to remain loyal to the terms to do what it could to maintain peace and to “*scrupulously and loyally* fulfill its obligations toward its allies.” Thus the Italians are criticized both for being loyal and for being disloyal. Supporting its allies in an aggressive war clearly was not an Italian obligation. Later, when Italy declared its neutrality, he urged Salandra to make certain to ensure that the country was prepared militarily, but to “to support always, in the most *active and lively* manner, the necessity of remaining neutral.” When he changed his position to interventionism, he did so citing the best interests of the country and with the assurance that the Italians would understand this.

M. contradicts herself when she writes of Sonnino's idea of vast gains for Italy in Africa. Actually, he was not much interested in Africa. Later M. agrees with this view, thus contradicting herself, but states that the Italians who wanted gains in Africa did not want to gain them through diplomacy but by settling scores with the Ethiopians because of the Adowa defeat. You can't win.