

The Libyan War 1911-1912

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Edited by

Luca Micheletta and Andrea Ungari

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P U B L I S H I N G

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INTRODUCTION

The essays presented in this volume aim to offer the reader the opportunity to reflect, one hundred years later, on a fundamental moment in the history of Italy and Italian foreign policy: the war for the conquest of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. It was a war that came after a long period, almost 45 years, in which Italy had not been involved in a conflict with another European state. After achieving the Unification of Italy in 1861, the Italians had fought a last 'European' war in 1866 against Austria-Hungary. The aim then had been to unite the Veneto to the Italian national state and to begin the completion of national unification with annexation of the territories inhabited by Italians still living under foreign rule. In 1911 Italians again took up arms against a European state, the Ottoman Empire, but with completely different objectives from those of national unification.

New aspirations, new patterns of thought, new myths had meanwhile emerged within Italian society with inevitable repercussions on its political system. It was, by then, a modern mass society that produced new forms of social aggregation and new political forces already able to strongly influence public opinion and the government, and ready to challenge the political hegemony of the liberal ruling class. The Libyan war showed, in every respect, just how far Italian society's values and ambitions had matured, but also their limitations and their contradictions. It would not be inaccurate to say that the Libyan conflict was in many ways a dress rehearsal for the First World War; at the political, propaganda and military levels. The 'education of the masses', the manipulation of public opinion by launching extensive propaganda campaigns in support of, or against the war now fully entered the picture as goals of political action; military technology developed, while the use of planes and bombing was tried out for the first time.

Italian foreign policy pursued the goal of extending its influence over Tripolitania and Cyrenaica for thirty years, independently of the governments and personalities that alternately led the country. Like the goal of completing the process of national unification, which was also pursued blindly from 1861 to the First World War, so control of the 'fourth shore' became one of the main leitmotifs of Italian diplomacy. So it was a design that ran parallel to that of the completion of national

unification and it was imposed initially for reasons quite different from those behind the expansion into east Africa.

The belief that it was essential to control a slice of the African coast on the Mediterranean grew, in the 1880s, among a small group of political leaders and diplomats based on the idea of the "Mediterranean balance of power", as it was then termed, with the other great European powers, but it spread gradually, over a period of thirty years to public opinion and to political actors, feeding on new and, at least in appearance, powerful motivations. The creation of a vast colonial empire as a requirement for the "status" of great power or as an outlet for emigration, or even as a panacea for all the ills of Italy, was added to the need to maintain the Mediterranean balance of power, in a crescendo of rhetoric and propaganda orchestrated around the myth of the "Grande Italia" or the "Grande proletaria".

In fact, the propaganda campaign for the occupation of Libya, even more than the military operations, had an important impact on the Italian political system, testing its stability and animating a violent debate between the parties but also inside the parties themselves. So, if on the one hand the Catholic movement, with its clear support for the occupation of African territory, drew significantly closer to the political objectives of the liberal ruling class, bridging the gap that had been created in the aftermath of the annexation of Rome and the creation of a unified Italian state, the socialist movement was not able to take a united position and ended up split between the interventionists and those who were against an imperialist conflict. These were positions that would soon reappear, albeit with different nuances, when the country was faced with the question of taking part in the Great War.

If this was the position of the Catholics and Socialists, the liberal politicians faced the Libyan enterprise initially with some hesitancy, a hesitation motivated essentially by the memories of the military failures in Africa that had characterized colonial expansionism under Crispi. Giolitti, however, both for well-known reasons of international politics, and also because of pressure from domestic propaganda, took action. A key role in determining the government's decision was played by the nationalist movement, the most recently formed political organization and one already determined to play an active role in the Italian political system. This movement, in fact, led a press campaign imbued with rhetoric and memories of the Roman Empire's domination of Africa, using slogans and literary themes that it would use again in the campaign for intervention in World War I and that would later characterize the propaganda of fascist ideology.

From the international point of view, it is well known that the support for Libya being in Italy's sphere of influence, which was gained from all the major European powers through thirty years of negotiations and agreements, never turned into support for war. Neither the allies of the Triple Alliance, nor the friends of the future Triple Entente looked favorably upon an initiative that endangered the international order, reopened the question of the future of the Ottoman Empire and posed the risk of a general conflict. But the European international system had become too unstable to find a common line of action to prevent the war. Unable to prevent it, the European powers were resigned to trying to end it as quickly as possible. What put an end to the war in Libya, however, was the great Balkan conflict which opened in 1912, another war even more dangerous and uncertain for the delicate balance of power in Europe, the conclusion of which in fact opened the way for the assassination in Sarajevo and to the Austrian ultimatum to Serbia in 1914.

The essays brought together here investigate some fundamental aspects of the history of the war in Libya, without taking any predetermined position. The editors have invited the authors to reflect on the war, in the light of new sources and rereading the sources with the insight gained from the passage of a hundred years. It is a reflection that comes as part of the attempt, led by many Italian historiographers, to recover the historical memory of Italian colonialism and which has seen, in recent years, a rapid growth in studies that have sought to bring to light the role played by "deep forces" and by the governments, but also the impact that the colonial experience in general had on Italian society. In this context, this book aims to illustrate the salient features of a major event in Italian and European history, an episode that had profound repercussions for Italian politics in the following decades and contributed to ending the Belle Époque, raising in the minds of both the Italian and European public the specter of a new war in Europe.

Luca Micheletta
Andrea Ungari

CHAPTER I

THE ITALIAN LIBERALS AND THE ITALO-TURKISH WAR

SANDRO ROGARI¹

In his *Memoirs* Giolitti writes:

The existing state of things could not last; given the conduct of the Young Turks, had we not gone to Libya, some other power politically involved or with economic interests there would certainly have done so. Italy, however, so profoundly moved by the French occupation of Tunis, would never have tolerated the repetition of an event of that nature in Libya; and thus we would not have run the risk of war with some European power, an event immeasurably more serious than a conflict with Turkey.²

These few words refer to a number of factors influencing Giolitti's decision to go to war, a decision taken on September 14 and approved by the king on September 17. 1911.³ Firstly, Giolitti indirectly affirms that Austria and Germany's interests were multiplying in Libya partly due to the fact that the Young Turks considered them favourably. Francesco Guicciardini, traditionally moderate and prudent on the Libyan issue, had explicitly said as much in the Chamber on June 7. 1911 during the debate on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' budget.⁴ Furthermore, the whole Moroccan issue that had reopened the French-German question tended to strengthen this view of German expansion in the region. Nor should the

¹ University of Florence.

² G. GIOLITTI, *Memorie della mia vita*, Garzanti, Milan, 1982, p. 217.

³ A. DEL BOCA, *Gli italiani in Libia. Tripoli bel suol d'amore 1860-1922*, Laterza, Rome-Bari, 1986, p. 65.

⁴ Parliamentary Acts, Chamber of Deputies, *Discussioni*, June 7 1911, p. 15349. Later in his *Memoirs*, Giolitti also states the Turkish government was negotiating with Austria and Germany to obtain some compensation for the 4.5% rise in customs duty.

second reason for the initiative raised by Giolitti be underestimated, connected with the still-vivid memory of the defeat at Adua of only fifteen years before. In political terms the most concise yet forceful term justifying war was used by Giolitti at the Turin Regio Theatre on October 7, 1911 when war had just broken out: “historical fatality”,⁵ he said.

If we accept the “fatality” thesis as the historical context seems to indicate, then we have to enquire if, in the prospect of Giolitti’s policy, this “fatality” was accepted willingly, that is, if it was perceived to clash with his planned policy. Judging from the facts, the government’s programme presented by Giolitti to the Chamber in April 1911 was, in the half-century of history since unification, the one farthest to the left and was structured in a three-point policy to consolidate the axis with the socialist left: universal vote for men, an allowance for deputies to enable even the less well-off to become candidates and undertake parliamentary activity, and the monopoly of life insurance to create funds for old age and workers’ disability.⁶ For reasons I need not go into here, Giolitti did not manage to bring the Socialists into the government, although it is evident that his aim was to create a solid political understanding with the Left.

However, in his *Memoirs* Giolitti writes that “as soon as the ministry was formed, Di San Giuliano and I were in agreement that the occupation of Libya was a question to be kept under consideration”⁷ and he adds that within the government the prudence of the prime minister contrasted with the haste of the foreign minister, a point shared by Italian ambassador Tittoni in Paris. The prime minister feared an outbreak of hostilities in Europe over the Moroccan issue and was therefore concerned that, should that happen, Italy would be involved in the Libyan undertaking.⁸ It seems that Giolitti is implying that, albeit with some differences of opinion, an undeclared point in the government programme was in fact the conquest of Libya. In this regard, it must not be forgotten that in the summer of 1911 Giolitti was adamant in not wanting to give rise to the impression that he had been forced to embark on the undertaking by nationalistic pressure; nor did he want anything written in his *Memoirs* to endorse such a theory. He had every interest, therefore, in backdating the planning of the undertaking – or, better, in making it appear backdated.

⁵ G. PERTICONE, *L'Italia in Africa. La politica coloniale dell'Italia negli atti, documenti e discussioni parlamentari*, Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, Rome, 1965, p. 86. See also S. ROMANO, *La quarta sponda*, Longanesi, Milan, 2005, p. 48.

⁶ S. ROGARI, *Alle origini del trasformismo. Partiti e sistema politico nell'Italia liberale*, Laterza, Rome-Bari, 1998, p. 199.

⁷ G. GIOLITTI, *op. cit.*, p. 217.

⁸ *IBID.*, pp.218-219.

It is, however, a fact that in April 1911 when the government was installed, the question was becoming pressing after lying low for so long. Meanwhile, on March 1. 1911 the first number of *L'Idea Nazionale* appeared; the date was a coincidence, being the anniversary of the Adua defeat.⁹ Moreover, it was during those very days that Enrico Corradini, back from his trip to Libya, published *L'ora di Tripoli*, supporting the theory that war would strengthen Italy, one reason being that Libya was a fertile country.¹⁰ This point was supposed to counteract the arguments and theories, increasingly submerged by the growing pro-intervention in Libya clamour, that dared to query the economic advantage of the undertaking. Again, in the parliamentary debate referred to above in which Guicciardini took part, the Orientalist Leone Cattani had dared to say that Libya "is one of the poorest countries in the world," adding that his colleagues in the Chamber had no idea of what the "African desert" was like.¹¹ Luigi Einaudi and Edoardo Giretti used similar arguments in the *Giornale degli economisti*, with no significant impact on pro-intervention enthusiasm.

In fact this was an old story; in the past it would have been handled with greater restraint. After the Tunis humiliation, the subject of the Italian presence in the Mediterranean surfaced from time to time, frequently together with that of our expansion in the Red Sea area. It came up, for instance, in 1885, at the time of the Berlin Congress called by Bismarck for the purpose of settling colonial issues according to a logic of portioning out and balancing, especially in favour of France, since Germany was very interested in distracting the latter from European interests.¹² After foreign minister Mancini had spoken during the debate in Parliament, De Renzis, Di Camporeale and Oliva took the floor in favour of Italy's presence in the Mediterranean. Sonnino had even attacked Mancini for refusing to intervene with Great Britain in Egypt.¹³ Bovio had also taken part in the debate, using the typical pedagogical argument shared by the Left, that Italy fulfilled a civilising mission against barbarity in the Mediterranean.¹⁴ In 1888 Ferdinando Martini, future governor of Eritrea from 1897 to 1907, criticised in anti-Crispi tones the obstinacy of making an issue of the Italian presence in the Red Sea.¹⁵ Also, the January

⁹ A. DEL BOCA, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

¹⁰ S. ROMANO, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

¹¹ A. DEL BOCA, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

¹² Cfr., S. ROGARI, *L'età della globalizzazione. Storia del mondo nell'età contemporanea*, UTET, Turin, 1997, pp. 132 et seq.

¹³ G. PERTICONE, *op. cit.*, cit., pp. 106-107.

¹⁴ *IBID.*, p. 106.

¹⁵ *IBID.*, p. 79.

1901 correspondence between Visconti Venosta and the French ambassador in Rome Barrère clearly showed Italy's aspirations to feel assured that the Anglo-French agreement of 1899 on Mediterranean issues should not harm Italian interests in Tripolitania. From then on the possibility of French support for the Italian conquest was on the cards, should France obtain Morocco.¹⁶ This exchange was consolidated in June 1902 by the agreement of reciprocal Franco-Italian neutrality undersigned by Prinetti, foreign minister in the Zanardelli government, and by Barrère himself. This French approach followed in the aftermath of the Fashoda Crisis with Great Britain and the realisation that the latter had no interest in the Mediterranean. Liberal political circles and public opinion thereafter were convinced that Cirenaica and Tripolitania were territories where the Italian presence was favoured, particularly in terms of emigration and a pre-eminent economic interest, without this implying a military occupation. On May 10 1905 in the Chamber, Tittoni declared that Italy should not occupy Tripoli "until circumstances make it absolutely unavoidable". In any case, he added:

In Tripolitania Italy has found the factor that determines the balance of power in the Mediterranean, and we would never allow this balance to be upset to our disadvantage.¹⁷

This expectation of economic control without resorting to the use of military force, however, was not fulfilled. The Hon. De Martino, ex general secretary at the Foreign Ministry, even then found it necessary to explain that the Ottoman Empire opposed Italian emigration. The clash between pro-interventionists and anti-interventionists on this subject continued throughout the first ten years of the century. The former, such as De Marinis, claimed the lands in the sun for Italian emigration. The latter, such as Lollini in the wake of De Viti de Marco, denied that Libya could be the Promised Land for Italian agricultural workers and also that the conquest would be easy.¹⁸ However, during the parliamentary session on May 14. 1904, Guicciardini himself admitted that no further steps ahead had been made in Libya, while France, from Tunis and Algeria, was expanding into the hinterland, seizing the caravan routes and building the Djibouti-Addis Ababa railroad.¹⁹

¹⁶ S. ROGARI, *L'età della globalizzazione*, cit. p. 140.

¹⁷ G. PERTICONE, *op. cit.*, cit., p. 115.

¹⁸ *IBID.*

¹⁹ *IBID.*, p. 85.

In May 1905, prime minister Fortis spoke of the right to economic and commercial occupation, but Di San Giuliano responded in the Senate on June 14, 1905 that peaceful penetration had been proclaimed but not put into practice.²⁰ Debate had continued therefore at length without achieving practical results and with Giolitti's entourage almost totally uninterested in dealing with the question in detail. On the other hand, this policy of effectively abstaining from any commitment on behalf of Italian interests in Libya had led both to the French expansion into the hinterland and – after the Algeiras conference in March-April 1906²¹ that brought the first Moroccan crisis to a close – to the growing economic and commercial presence of Germany within the Ottoman Empire territory, including Libya.

Germany had even tried to bring the Sublime Porte into the Triple Alliance as an anti-Russian move. Had the operation been successful, it would obviously have prevented at the outset any chance of Italian military intervention in the area. According to Giolitti in his *Memoirs*, this German interest and Berlin's consequent hostility towards Italy's military intervention account for the timely decree on November 4, 1911 in which the Italian government claimed Italian sovereignty over Tripolitania and Cirenaica,²² well before control over the territory had been effectively achieved. This step was criticised by the Socialists who considered it ill-timed and premature, but Giolitti intended it as a measure to block Berlin's diplomatic move, although this could not be officially declared.

To return to the point, therefore, and given that throughout 1910 the issue had not yet aroused any particular interest in public opinion and the political world, the whole question became the subject of attention when Giolitti returned to power. By March, when the Luzzatti government went into crisis over the extension of the franchise, the nationalist Right had become convinced that Giolitti was steering towards the Left in an attempt to consolidate relations with the Socialist Party, perhaps by including it in the government majority or even within the government itself. Furthermore, the nationalist movement had formed itself into an Association in the Florence meeting of December 1910 and therefore had a visibility issue, at least in its political position, albeit remaining for the time being within the area of the liberal Right.²³

The subject of any potential harm to Italian interests in Cirenaica and Tripolitania was therefore taken up and used mainly for reasons of internal

²⁰ *IBID.*, p. 116.

²¹ S. ROGARI, *L'età della globalizzazione*, cit. p. 139.

²² G. GIOLITTI, *op. cit.*, p. 244.

²³ S. ROGARI, *Alle origini del trasformismo*, cit., p. 206 et seq.

political dynamics well before the official outbreak of the new Morocco crisis which exploded between the French occupation in May and the appearance of the *Panther* in Agadir Bay at the beginning of July. Furthermore, 1911 was the fiftieth anniversary of national unity, a fact which encouraged a wide use of rhetoric, national as well as nationalist, in which the conquest of Libya was to become a kind of unavoidable corollary.

This leads me to believe that well before the Mediterranean crisis forced Giolitti to intervene, there was an attempt on the Right to bring forward a question that would cause difficulty for Giolitti's political strategy and divide liberal opinion. The nationalists were partially successful, since a new liberal Right appeared in the Chamber in June 1911.²⁴ Giolitti's reaction, in some ways inevitable, was to consolidate a political class that would otherwise have fallen apart. Guglielmo Ferrero may have exaggerated somewhat in affirming, after the Second World War, that

Giolitti realized that his power was in the balance and went to war to save it. He extinguished the immense jet of flames that threatened to destroy his system by dousing it with sand from the Marmarica desert²⁵

but it contains some truth. The problem was that to put out the fire and, without resorting to metaphor, to set the fractures within the liberal world which still included the nationalists, Giolitti was forced to steer towards a collision with the Socialists. The reform wing of the Socialist Party found itself in ever greater difficulty; the point of no return was the 1912 Socialist Congress in Reggio Emilia when the reforming Right under Bissolati was expelled.²⁶ In brief, Giolitti was successful in achieving two crucial points in the government programme, INA (the National Insurance Institute) and universal franchise for men, these being a bridge towards the Left, but if the intention of the nationalists and the liberal Right were to cause a crisis in his political strategy, then this objective was achieved.

However, I am not convinced that "Giolitti did not perceive to what extent that military operation would influence the whole political construction that had so far sustained his power system" as has been

²⁴ *IBID.*, p. 208.

²⁵ G. FERRERO, *Potere*, Milan, 1947, p. 238. Cfr. F. MALGERI, *L'impresa di Libia e la crisi degli equilibri giolittiani*, in *Il Parlamento italiano*, vol. VIII, *Da Giolitti a Salandra. La Libia e l'intervento*, Nuova Cei, Milan, 1990.

²⁶ F. MANZOTTI, *Il socialismo riformista in Italia*, Florence, Le Monnier, 1965, p. 16 et seq.

affirmed.²⁷ Giolitti was indeed fully aware of the possible outcome, and that explains his annoyance regarding the Libyan campaign that the nationalists had triggered in March.²⁸ He had not, perhaps, foreseen the aftermath, above all the aftermath of the 1913 universal franchise which laid the foundations for his departure from power. He intended his absence to be brief, but the outbreak of the First World War and the events connected to Italy's entry into war made it definitive. Giolitti was quite convinced of being able to retrieve support from the Left. This is shown by the determination with which he went ahead both with the law introducing universal franchise and with the creation of the INA, something that damaged the powerful interests involved with its prospect of a monopoly on life insurance. It was no coincidence that he feared the outburst of the crisis and that European war would upset not only the international situation but also the domestic scenario, preventing a political recovery of the Left.

He was so very much aware of all this that he even calculated the time necessary for the conquest of Cirenaica and Tripolitania in order to diminish the risk of war in the Balkans, lands where winter warfare is prohibitive. Here again, he was proved wrong. The conquest was more difficult than foreseen. The resistance of the five thousand Turks against the 1,732 Italian soldiers who landed in Tripoli on October 5 was stronger than had been estimated. In order to gain time and terminate operations quickly, Italy began to seek military diversions and came up against the hostility of Austria. It was only after the meeting between Victor Emmanuel II and the German emperor on March 25, 1912 that Italy obtained consent to its intervention in the Dodecanese in order to crush Turkish resistance. This happened in May 1912 and produced the desired effect; under the mediation of Volpi peace talks opened that finished on October 18 with the Peace treaty of Ouchy. Unfortunately, and contrary to Giolitti's intentions, it was too late. Eighteen days previously the first Balkan war had started, and it was due to Austria's dissatisfaction with the solution of these wars that the First World War broke out.

To sum up without invading the topics of other papers, it is certain that: Giolitti did not seek war but was forced into it; it was an outcome he did not want for the very reason that he had clearly foreseen that a colonial war would end the understanding with the Socialist Party and upset the political equilibrium holding it together. However mistakenly, he was convinced that what he was forced into doing would not hinder him from

²⁷ F. MALGERI, *op. cit.*

²⁸ S. ROMANO, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

recuperating suspended political alignments as long as the colonial war terminated rapidly without destabilising any equilibrium in Europe.

If we accept this theory, we still have to explain why Giolitti considered the war inevitable. I recall that it was declared with an ultimatum to Turkey on September 28, 1911. Giolitti himself sums up the international motivations in the passage of his *Memoirs* that I have placed at the beginning of this paper. If Italy had not gone into Libya, another power would have done so; and I may add that, had this happened, the relatively recent memory of Adua would in any case have led to the government being overthrown. Domestic motivations, although closely linked to the international reasons above, are inherent to the liberal world. Unlike the Sonnino's Right, which in any case seemed isolated, liberal opinion had remained cool and distant from the whole question until spring 1911, when it became rapidly excited and was overwhelmed by a collective passion that gave voice to the positions of the Right and revitalized them. This passage was well described by Salvemini:

Italy was bored in 1911. It was disgusted by everything. The democratic parties had hit rock bottom in public contempt. The Hon. Giolitti was... the Hon. Giolitti. The Hon. Sonnino was like an abandoned railway wagon on a dead-end track. No man in sight to inspire confidence in a better future. Anything was better than such universal stagnation. This "anything" was presented by the daily papers as the conquest of the "promised land": an easy conquest, nice and cheap, enormously productive, absolutely essential to Italy. So up with the war! Very soon the papers were overwhelmed by their readers' hysterical impatience: whoever told the biggest stories sold the greatest number of copies; as a result of such stories going from strength to strength, halfway through September there was no stopping the madness. Therefore it became imperative for the government to decide on war straight away.²⁹

Even taking into account Salvemini's intense dislike of Giolitti and therefore his colourful use of language, his picture of the general atmosphere seems to me to be correct. Luigi Albertini also acknowledged as much, in his *Vent'anni di vita politica italiana*, when he wrote in reference to the *Corriere della Sera* of which he was editor, that "we used ... rhetoric, as did all the most important newspapers".³⁰

²⁹ A. DEL BOCA, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

³⁰ V. CASTRONOVO, *La stampa dall'unità al fascismo*, Rome Bari, Laterza, 1973, p. 190.

However, although this was true as of the second half of September 1911, the *Corriere* was slower and later in taking the road to war. Ojetti stated clearly to Albertini on September 5:

I take the liberty of telling you that the silence of the *Corriere della Sera* terrifies me while the *Stampa* and the *Giornale d'Italia*, for example, are stoking up the boilers of public opinion for an immediate start.³¹

Ojetti spoke from his anti-war position, but it is a good description of the *Corriere*'s cautious policy in favour of the right yet different from that of the Sonnino and Salandra groups. His hope was the *Corriere* would deal with the issue and raise its voice against the initiative. This was unrealistic, although illustrious contributors to the Milan daily paper such as Luigi Einaudi and Gaetano Mosca, writing in the *Tribuna* which favoured Giolitti, had expressed all their concern. Andrea Torre, the foreign policy commentator voicing the interventionist line of the *Corriere*, had written to Albertini on August 24 before Ojetti, with an opposing viewpoint on the principle that intervention was inevitable if Italy did not want to lose her role as a European Mediterranean power. "I have studied the question from every angle," he wrote, "and I am utterly convinced that a passive attitude on the part of Italy would be an enormous disaster: I am not exaggerating. Italy would turn into a seaside Switzerland..."³²

On September 15 his newspaper was still sitting on the fence, the one voice out of line with almost all the others, but Albertini was probably convinced by what Torre wrote: "Giolitti is sniffing the wind; he has decided to go, but if he can find a reason for not going, he won't go. The Socialists' threats scare him! Poor Italy!"³³ Moreover, Albertini's paper had a strong adversary in the Milan area: the *Secolo*, which was, and was to remain, the only voice lifted against a colonial war, for reasons that were strictly political: as Pio Schinetti wrote, the death of the "long-awaited democratic policy".³⁴ There was the risk of appearing in the long run to be associated with such positions which, however, the *Corriere* opposed.

A fair interpretation of the *Corriere della Sera*'s caution, therefore, must make sense of this set of motivations: to avoid taking positions that in any way went against the paper's anti-Giolitti policy; to avoid running

³¹ L. ALBERTINI, *Epistolario*, edited by O. BARIÉ, I, *Dalla guerra di Libia alla grande guerra*, Mondadori, Milano, 1968, p. 8.

³² *IBID.*, p. 7.

³³ *IBID.*, p. 11.

³⁴ A. DEL BOCA, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

the risk of siding with Giolitti and then having to back down when the latter's position became clearly defined; to take into account the fact that important contributors to the *Corriere* were against the war; but also hold in mind that anti-colonialism would push the Milan daily into line with the *Secolo* whose policy the *Corriere* opposed and whose circulation the *Corriere* had to outdo as the most important national daily for the progressive middle class. On the horns of this dilemma, Albertini came out in support of the war but distanced himself from Giolitti whose handling of it he criticised. This was the line taken by Luigi Barzini in his articles from Tripoli, well summed up in Albertini's letter of November 4: "Giolitti is taking little care of the soldiers and great care of the Socialists."³⁵ All in all, Giolitti continued to be under attack for his negotiations with the Socialist Left since he could not be toppled by the one argument that would have led to his political downfall: his failure to launch the conquest. As to policy towards the Socialists, the results were clear: the break had taken place and nothing could be done about it, at least for the time being.

However, if this was the slow, careful approach of Albertini's *Corriere* towards a position supporting the war of colonial conquest, the other liberal daily papers were already up and running. Frassati's *La Stampa*, traditionally aligned with Giolitti and under pressure on the right from the *Gazzetta del Popolo* in Piedmont, had since July been publishing correspondence from the nationalist Bevione, beginning with an open letter to the prime minister.

For a strategy such as yours has a limit and a term. The limit comes when repugnance towards dealing with an external question, however much it should ensure peace, may bring about greater damage than facing it with decision. The term appears when the increase in production and savings, high standards of living, peace, freedom and the definitive achievement of domestic order, have made the country aware of stimuli coming from international life and therefore intolerant of unfair humiliations previously borne with a sigh; it is undergoing the need for expansion that is inseparable from any living, vital organism.³⁶

It has been suggested that the open letter was no more than a two-way game between Giolitti and Frassati and that the latter used Bevione's letter to accompany and justify a decision already taken by Giolitti. In my

³⁵ L. ALBERTINI, *Epistolario*, edited by O. BARIÉ, I, cit., p. 25.

³⁶ Bevione's open letter was published in the *Stampa* on July 30-31 1911. I quote from E. DECLEVA, *L'Italia e la politica internazionale dal 1870 al 1914. L'ultima fra le grandi potenze*, Mursia, Milan, 1975, pp. 136-137.

opinion this theory is unfounded, for two reasons. Firstly, because in July Giolitti had not yet taken the decision; he decided only after the Morocco issue was solved, when he began to fear that France felt herself to be freed from the commitments undertaken with Italy in 1902. Secondly, because Bevione's arguments are typically nationalist: the state of internal peace achieved imposes external expansion on the whole nation. Neither Giolitti nor Frassati would have been willing to undersign such theories themselves. But rather than these arguments, for the Italian publishing companies the principle held that if they wished to increase circulation, then they had to ride the pro-intervention wave. Not to do so would have been suicidal since circulation had been falling for some time. We must suppose the reader and above all the purchaser of the great opinion-leading dailies to be reasonably well educated and part of that bourgeoisie then considering itself the guardian of national values as well as part of the country's managerial class, and, of course, male; this reader/purchaser was particularly sensitive to the issue. The newspapers therefore played up the issue and rode the wave of editorial success.

Any interpretation of the contrast between internal and foreign policies in the pro-Giolitti newspapers, particularly *La Stampa* and *La Tribuna*, as reflecting the line of government policy would be misleading. The disparity was among the approaches of the publishing businesses³⁷ cited, due also to the commercial interests mentioned. At this distance in time it may seem, but is not, paradoxical that the newspapers in the Giolitti area should make use of foreign policy commentators or war correspondents who were nationalist. It is no surprise that someone like Federzoni should be in charge of articles for the *Giornale d'Italia* while it may seem strange that Olindo Malagodi's *La Tribuna* employed the nationalist Francesco Coppola³⁸. The rest of the important press was aligned: from the *Mattino* to the *Corriere d'Italia*, from the *Messaggero* to the *Resto del Carlino*, from the *Giornale di Sicilia* to the *Gazzetta di Venezia*.³⁹ The apparent paradox is explained by two factors: the nationalists were as yet still part of the liberal world and were not seen as opposing it, and the "policy" of the newspapers close to the liberal side should not be read through spectacles tinted by the conviction that editorial policy and interests were dictated from above.

Giolitti succeeded through war in removing arguments from the liberal Right while guaranteeing his government's survival, and in setting in

³⁷ For the disparity between foreign policy and domestic policy of *La Stampa* cf. E. DECLEVA, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

³⁸ V. CASTRONOVO, *La stampa dall'unità al fascismo*, cit., p. 194.

³⁹ *IBID.*, p. 193.

motion an appeasement policy with the Socialist Left for renewed collaboration, although this proved impossible after the split of Reggio Emilia in July 1912.⁴⁰ Nothing remained for the liberal Right but to attack Giolitti for his single-handed management of the war. And in fact the prime minister sent the ultimatum to the Grand Vizier at 2.30 p.m. on September 28th, and he did it when parliament was closed. He used Art. 10 of the law dated July 17. 1910 to finance the war; this law authorised the opening of credit in favour of the war minister on the proposal of the treasury minister following a decision by the Cabinet of Ministers.⁴¹ With the Royal Decree of November 25. 1911 he declared the annexation of Libya without consulting parliament. His reasons are known: European diplomacy, particularly the allies of the Triple Alliance, were scheming to find a compromise solution to the detriment of Italy. The decree of annexation placed them in front of an irreversible *fait accompli*.

It was only on February 22. 1912 that Giolitti asked the Chamber to ratify it, after a close-knit parliamentary commission had been set up containing both the liberal Right and the radical Left as well as Giolitti supporters, under the chairmanship of Ferdinando Martini as spokesman.⁴² In the debate, Martini had spoken of the unavoidability of the war due to Italy's need to "defend political and economic interests, safeguard her own position as a Mediterranean power".⁴³ However, prior to the report accompanying the decree he had written that:

We would have incurred serious responsibility towards our country and the whole of Europe, we would have exposed Italy's future and European peace to serious dangers, had we allowed the continuation of a situation that harmed our dignity and our vital interests, a situation so fraught as to present no other solution than a war, and had we not taken into account the danger that this might break out at a moment which would have entailed serious and dangerous international repercussions.⁴⁴

Sonnino had little else to say except to accuse Giolitti of having violated the Statute in declaring war without involving parliament and

⁴⁰ F. MANZOTTI, *op. cit.*, p. 19 et seq.

⁴¹ G. PERTICONE, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

⁴² Giolitti had had the foresight to appoint the following commission: Alessio, Baccelli, Barzilai, Bertolini, Bettolo, Boselli, Carcano, Cocco Ortu, Daneo, Ferri, Fusinato, Guicciardini, Lacava, Luzzatti, Luzzatto, Orlando, Pantano, Rocchetti, Salandra and Sonnino. Cfr., G. PERTICONE, *op. cit.*, pp. 117-118.

⁴³ Parliamentary Acts, Chamber of Deputies, *Discussioni*, February 25 1912, p. 17144

⁴⁴ G. PERTICONE, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

without asking for financing for the initiative.⁴⁵ The argument was weak given the July 17. 1910 law mentioned above, and more so in consideration of the fact that Sonnino was in favour of the initiative, while reserving his right to “any examination and decision regarding the methods and single acts of the Ministry, and whoever acts for the Ministry, in the diplomatic and military management of the campaign”.

Bissolati gave his support, adopting the argument that should another power occupy those lands Italy “could not have been peacefully sustained by Italy”. The reasoning behind the defence of “supreme interests”,⁴⁶ which his colleagues in the party did not accept – for the time being – had even become part of reformist language. Gaetano Mosca, overcoming his former doubts, said “united and compact, the people of Italy stand behind the Government”:⁴⁷ a well-founded consideration, at least if we understand “people” as meaning liberal and catholic public opinion. Giolitti’s dilemma was to find the right arguments to respond to his critics by calling upon reasonableness and keeping a hand outstretched in welcome. He therefore declared he had:

entered the undertaking not through enthusiasm but only through reason ... When I considered every aspect of the problem, if we wished to avoid very serious, very short-term trouble, I decided and I acted with energy as if I had been convinced right from the start.⁴⁸

This was not enough to restore calm, yet he tried in the hope of better things. Better things never came about, and we have seen why: because the split among the Socialists was irremediable and was worsened by the “ministerialisation” of Bissolati and his group; because in February 1912 the war was anything but over – the right military solutions were still being sought to bring it to a conclusion; because in the autumn of 1912 the first Balkan War was to break out: and the European war was an outcome of the Balkan wars. But at that time it appeared that the issue could be brought to a successful conclusion. The Carcano agenda was approved with 431 votes in favour, 38 against and 1 abstention. In the end only the Socialists opposed it.⁴⁹ In the Senate, where there were no Socialists, the

⁴⁵ *IBID.*, p. 91.

⁴⁶ *IBID.*, p. 92.

⁴⁷ *IBID.*, p. 91.

⁴⁸ *IBID.*, p. 93.

⁴⁹ For the whole question of the Socialists and the War in Libya see M. DEGL’INNOCENTI, *Il socialismo italiano e la guerra di Libia*, Editori Riuniti, Rome, 1976

Torrigiani agenda passed unanimously.⁵⁰ Had the demiurge performed a new miracle? He had succeeded in bringing everyone together and consolidating his own majority. Apparently he had. Yet only apparently. The divisions even within the liberal world alone were serious even though the liberal Right's attempt to topple Giolitti had failed. It was only a Fellini-style "orchestra rehearsal". When the repeat performance arrived, in the summer of 1914, the liberal Right under Salandra and Sonnino was to call in the account left in abeyance since 1912. And the Giolitti system would be overturned together with the "parecchio" doctrine.⁵¹

⁵⁰ G. PERTICONE, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

⁵¹ NdT: This refers to Giolitti having reportedly stated that neutrality would achieve "parecchio", i.e. a good deal.

CHAPTER II

THE ROLE OF THE ITALIAN MONARCHY IN THE WAR IN LIBYA

ANDREA UNGARI¹

Introduction

The analysis of the monarchy's role within the Italian political system is undoubtedly complex owing to the powers assigned to the institution of royalty and its representative by the Albertine Statute, the charter granted by Carlo Alberto in March 1848. Impelled by international and national events, the king of Sardinia decided to grant a Charter modelled on those of France, 1820, and Belgium, 1831; a charter which would guarantee the powers of the Monarchy on the one hand, and, on the other, ratify the new “liberal” course of the reign. Given the “concessionary” nature of the Statute that derived from a sort of pact between the Savoy monarchy and the national bourgeois class, it was naturally unlikely that relations between the monarchy and the political system would comply with the theoretical dictates of nineteenth-century European constitutionalism.

The picture given by Adolphe Thiers of the “king who reigns but does not rule”, a *super partes* organ to preside over national life and safeguard its ultimate values and interests, was valid as mentioned above only from the theoretical point of view:² in a nineteenth-century European scenario of many “crowned heads”, there was a constant, lively interchange between the monarchy and the political system to define the bounds of the reciprocal spheres of influence and – in particular – of reciprocal powers.³

¹ Guglielmo Marconi and Luiss Guido-Carli University, Rome.

² F. CAMMARANO, *Il ‘garante interessato’: monarchia e politica in Italia e Gran Bretagna dopo il 1848*, in *Sovrani a metà. Monarchia e legittimazione tra Otto e Novecento*, G. GUAZZALOCA (ed.), Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli, 2009, pp. 70-1.

³ “Among the many possible readings of the transformation of the monarchic institution after 1848, one of the most meaningful sees the sovereign, apart from

Italy came within this overall picture since the Statute granted the monarchy a central position within the system, assigning it wide powers in the executive, legislative and judiciary sectors. In the executive sector, indeed, royal power had been so confirmed that “there was no constitutional recognition of the prime minister who, quite simply, did not exist”.⁴

Only with the evolution in the Sardinian political system and interaction between the monarchy and the liberal governing class did the constitutional procedure start by which the prime minister was to obtain the confidence of the Chambers in order to be appointed head of the government. Camillo Benso Count of Cavour was the moving spirit behind this procedure; thanks to his control over parliament and his successes in foreign policy, he emerged as a statesman of international level, well able to limit the interference of Victor Emmanuel II. Due to the flexibility of the Albertine Statute, however, this procedure was never codified in the constitution; therefore the constraints placed on royal powers regarding intervention in domestic policy and, in particular, the appointment of prime ministers depended on the interaction between the institution and the political system. In fact in relations between the monarchy and the liberal political class, the general concept was that in a strong political system able to indicate prime ministers with a certain degree of power and charisma, the monarchy’s role was in fact compressed; while, should the political system be in crisis and unable to indicate an adequate prime minister, the Crown’s power of intervention regained importance in indicating the head of government. Such effective intrusion, however, should not be held to imply a negative attitude to the liberal regime that arose in Italy as of 1861. Unlike other older monarchies such as the Hapsburgs or the Tsars and more recent monarchies such as the “warrior” Hohenzollerns, not only did the country stay within the sphere of liberalism but there were not so many differences even compared to the constitutional English regime. As Cammarano recalled

the degree of apparent ‘neutralization’ of the role, not only as politically active ... but also, if not above all, as a vigilant ‘protagonist’ in regaining the prerogatives delegated to other powers according to constitutional pacts. ... The story of European constitutional monarchy therefore points to a conflict, more or less repressed yet always latent, between the monarchic principle and the principle of parliamentary representation to which the political forces referred, constantly committed to defending or advancing uncertain, changeable boundaries of its own legitimacy.”, *IBID.*, pp. 67-68.

⁴ C. FUSARO, *Il Presidente della Repubblica. Il tutore di cui non riusciamo a fare a meno*, il Mulino, Bologna, 2003, p. 44.

beyond appearances and the tribute to the spirit of the times, not only did Victoria and Umberto, as we have seen, never have any real intention of coming to terms with democratic demands, but they also showed a decided inclination to hinder the most consistent elements of liberalism, those least interested in carrying forward power policies.⁵

Although the monarchy's power to intervene in the appointment of prime ministers was influenced both by Cavour's procedure and by monarchy-political system interaction, there were two issues on which royal power was never questioned: the control of the armed forces and the drawing up of foreign policy.

The Army and Foreign policy

The idea that the handling of these issues was the "game reserve" of the sovereign was evident to the people of the time. Looking through the works of Domenico Farini⁶ or Alessandro Guiccioli,⁷ it is absolutely clear that the Savoy sovereigns would brook no interference in these fields. The connection between the army and the Crown had always been solid; apart from the Savoys' desire to be known as a warrior dynasty, there were practical reasons justifying the link between the two institutions. As Paolo Colombo recalls,

Crown and army are indispensable one to the other. The former guarantees a vital flow of financial resources, high status and political centre-stage to the latter; the latter is the essential instrument for the Crown in winning over the nation, ensuring public order, and is the primary means of socialization for the male population (and therefore for politically active citizens).⁸

The king's interference was not limited to the choice of the war and navy ministers, who were in any case career soldiers and "therefore bound by the oath of absolute loyalty to a monarch to whom they are also inferior in rank",⁹ but it extended from the war and navy budgets to plans for army

⁵ F. CAMMARANO, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

⁶ D. FARINI, *Diario di fine secolo*, vol. I-II, Bardi, Rome, 1961-62.

⁷ A. GUICCIOLI, *Diario di un conservatore*, Edizioni del Borghese, Milan, 1973.

⁸ P. COLOMBO, *Le prerogative militari e internazionali della monarchia costituzionale sabauda: alcuni spunti di riflessione*, in G. GUAZZALOCA (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 203.

⁹ P. COLOMBO, *Il re d'Italia. Prerogative costituzionali e potere politico della corona (1848-1922)*, Franco Angeli, Milan, 1999, p. 312.

reform, from military regulations to the formation of military bodies. Although it is naturally true that the governing class frequently took little interest in military questions¹⁰ thus favouring the king's actions, such actions had notable domestic repercussions. Giuseppe Zanardelli's failure to form a government after the fall of Giovanni Giolitti in 1893 was due more to his hopes of reducing military costs than to the appointment of Oreste Baratieri as war minister. Again, during the 1896 government led by the conservative Marquis Antonio Di Rudini who was favoured by Umberto I, the Ricotti reform project to scale down the royal army was openly opposed by the Crown, so much so that Cesare Francesco Ricotti was forced to withdraw it.¹¹ The monarchy, therefore, always maintained not only its own right to make appointments, imposing military personnel at least until 1907-09, it also defended the army from any measure for its reducing, whether financially or structurally.

Although the monopoly on military matters remained a Crown prerogative, the Savoy monarchy's control was no less strong over foreign policy and the appointment of foreign ministers, career diplomats and senior government officials. Federico Chabod is right in saying that in this field royal control, especially at the stage immediately after unification, outweighed even military "issues". In fact,

foreign policy remained in the hands of Piedmont diplomacy or came directly from the Piedmont school ... In short, a state of things found in no other sector of the Italian administration, not even in the army however closely linked to the Savoy dynasty and traditions.¹²

Evidently Victor Emmanuel II had firm control over this caste of diplomats of Piedmont origin, almost all from the aristocracy. What is more, alongside government diplomacy and the foreign minister Emilio Visconti Venosta, the king had no hesitation in favouring an independent foreign policy, what might be called a parallel policy to that carried forward by the government; this feature marked the whole decade after unification. Committed to the completion of the Risorgimento process, including attaining Veneto and Rome, Victor Emmanuel II favoured a series of diplomatic-military initiatives which impacted strongly on

¹⁰ F. MAZZONIS, *La Monarchia e il Risorgimento*, il Mulino, Bologna, 2002, p. 115.

¹¹ "6 June 1896 – It seems that Ricotti will have to withdraw his military reform project after the king's intervention", A. GUICCIOLI, *op. cit.*, p. 220. Cfr., D. BARTOLI, *La fine della monarchia*, Mondadori, Milan, 1966, p. 33.

¹² F. CHABOD, *Storia della politica estera italiana dal 1870 al 1896*, Laterza, Bari, 1965, p. 594.