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Fascicolo 24. Novembre 2025
Storia Militare Contemporanea (6)



Società Italiana di Storia Militare

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Estandart Reyau d'a Cheneralísma, prencipal bandera carlista d'a primera guerra bordada por María Francisca de Braganza em 1833 Royal Standard of the General in Chief, main Carlist flag of the First War embroidered by Maria Francisca de Braganza in 1833). Wikimedia Commons

STEFANO MARCUZZI,

*Britain and Italy in the Era of the Great War.
Defending and Forging Empires.*

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. 383 pp. ISBN 978-1-108-83129-1.



Stefano Marcuzzi's meticulous examination of the warp and weft of Anglo-Italian relations before, during and immediately after the Great War begins by analysing how the pair engineered an alliance. The process was a contested one. Before the war, London had no strong interest in close diplomatic ties with Italy, try though the British ambassador to Rome, Sir James Rennell Rodd, might to generate one. As the outgoing Italian ambassador in London, Antonino di San Giuliano, told his successor Guglielmo Imperiali in May 1910, Italy's reputation as a trustworthy partner was not very high. Before the war Rome, always in need of allies, was in a continuing search for a productive

relationship with the world's strongest power, but Italy 'wavered' between London and Berlin/Vienna (p.32). Rome's decision to launch a war in Libya did her no favours in London. It irritated the foreign secretary, Sir Edward Grey; British public opinion was up in arms over reports of Italian atrocities; and the Royal Navy looked askance at Italy's occupation of the Dodecanese islands. As the prospect of war began to loom in the distance Italy looked for an alliance while London, looking to preserve the status quo, struck working agreements with France, Russia and Japan..

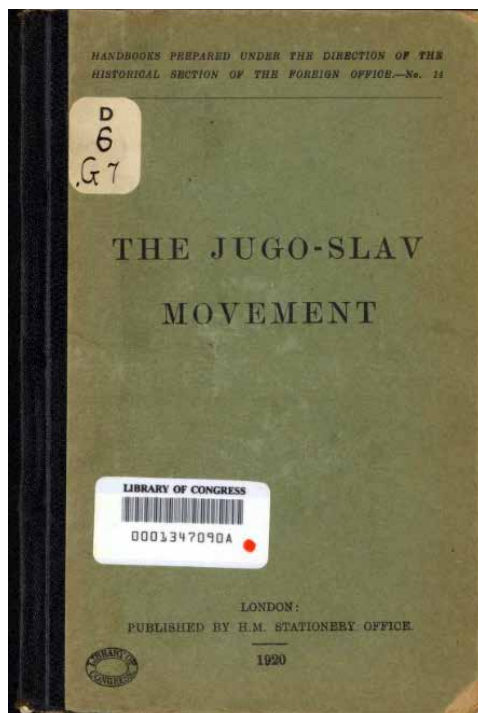
The outbreak of war in August 1914 shocked both Britain and Italy. Their joint efforts to prevent war, Marcuzzi suggests, formed the basis for the negotiations which followed. Here Marcuzzi reverses an all too common perception that Italy was 'for sale to the highest bidder'; on the contrary, the first approaches were made to Italy by France and Russia. This, Marcuzzi suggests, 'unleashed the starving dogs of Italian imperialism' (p.53) Once Italian neutrality had been declared, it was clear that war with Britain must be avoided. Forging a partnership meant resolving an impasse: London wanted Italy to agree to join the war before terms were finalized, while Rome wanted terms agreed before she undertook to join the Entente and fight. In the diplomatic bargaining that led up to the Treaty of London, Rome used time and the threat of a deal with Austria as diplomatic weapons. Britain and France in turn put pressure on Italy, funding interventionist newspapers, encouraging interventionist socialists, and cutting off supplies of some imported goods. This exercise in leverage is presented as evidence of the extent to which Great Britain forced Italy's hand. On 4 March 1915, Grey got what he wanted: Imperiali delivered a list of Italy's desiderata and a commitment that she would enter the war. The Treaty of London, signed on 26 April, was 'a triumph of Grey's tenacious diplomacy, of Sonnino's pragmatism, and of the conciliatory skills of Rodd and Imperiali' (p.66). It did, though, as is well known, leave a wide open hole in the shape of Italy's 'equitable compensation' if Great Britain and France partitioned the Ottoman empire and the German colonies. Closing this section, Marcuzzi suggests that the Italians over-rated their partnership with England, regarding the relationship as 'special' when in fact Great Britain's priority, for obvious strategic reasons, was France.

In the second part of his study, Marcuzzi examines the ways in which It-

aly was integrated into the Triple Alliance between spring 1915 and summer 1917. Her failure to declare war on Germany and Turkey revived old anti-Italian sentiment. Traditional stereotypes reappeared and mutual recriminations began, neither party believing the other was pulling its weight. On land, Cadorna's early battles did not go well. At sea, naval co-operation proved hard to achieve, leading to complaints that Italians were over-defensive and lacked offensive spirit. Conflicts over strategic and diplomatic priorities separated Italy from her western allies, and by the second year of her war she appeared domestically fragile and politically recalcitrant. The problem, Marcuzzi

suggests, was in large part due to Italy's failure to promote her cause. Neither Rennell Rodd in Rome - possibly the only person in the entire British hierarchy, he suggests, who actually admired the Italian people - nor Imperiali in London spared any effort to advance Italy's case, Imperiali assuring Sidney Sonnino at one point that 'here the intention to support us is really genuine' (p.103). Their efforts notwithstanding, Italy's relations with London and Paris were hampered by inefficient communication and by a failure to understand the value of overseas propaganda. While propaganda poured out of multiple British agencies, a secretive Sonnino held his cards close to his chest, as did Cadorna.

The arrival of a new British administration in December 1916 meant the departure of the foreign secretary, Sir Edward Grey - a man who, if not perhaps as pro-Italian as Imperiali believed, was at least willing to listen and to talk. Lloyd George brought with him a group of ardent imperialists, determined to preserve British supremacy by pitting rivals against one another. Again, as so often, there was a collision: Lloyd George wanted to postpone discussions on the peace until the war was won, Sonnino wanted Italian claims recognised in detail before



any peace conference. Tensions were ever present – in the discussions over the defence of Mediterranean trade routes, over the implementation of the economic blockade of Germany, over the division of Turkish territory in the Near and Middle East. To diminish Italian claims, an intensive British propaganda campaign began in Italy in spring 1917. Treaties were signed along the way, but the horse-trading went on. London held that every question might be reconsidered, Rome thought otherwise. Where Lloyd George was prepared to revise agreements, Sonnino wanted them hard and fast. Strategic differences arose too, often through a combination of prejudice on both sides and a failure to fully appreciate the other's material circumstances. Italy was – as she had been from the beginning – an arm's length ally.

The third and final part of the book charts the decline in Anglo-Italian relationship during the final year of war and at the Paris Peace Conference. Revived ideas of entente, the result of the treaty of St. Jean de Maurienne, reinforced by what were trumpeted in Britain as Italian successes in the tenth and eleventh battles of the Isonzo, came crashing down at Caporetto on 24 October 1917. The battle, and Cadorna's infamous bulletin on 28 October, ended Italy's military autonomy, weakened her international position, and revived the age-old prejudice that *italiani sunt imbelles*. While the Italians rebuilt their armies with British and French aid, revitalised national morale with the aid of a revived propaganda machine, and reorganised their anti-submarine defences, allied co-operation produced wheat, coal and American loans. Greater co-operation in fighting the war was not matched by closer proximity in diplomacy, where increasing tension 'irreparably' damaged Anglo-Italian relations (p.240). Lining up behind President Wilson's 'Fourteen Points', London was ready to renege on its agreements with Italy while giving Italian diplomats evasive reassurances. The German attack on 21 March 1918 was the second shock to the western alliance – worse, Clemenceau remarked, than Caporetto. Military emergency cried out for unity and produced an Allied commander-in-chief. It also drew forces away from Italian front. The battle of the Solstice stemmed Allied fears of an Italian collapse, but for Britain and France the western front remained the over-riding priority. At this late stage Italy invested in propaganda, focused especially on Great Britain, where pro-Austro-Hungarian sympathy was strong, but also on the Austro-Hungarian army, where propaganda scored an outstanding success. However, propaganda could not disguise ambiguities in Italian policy, especially over the degree

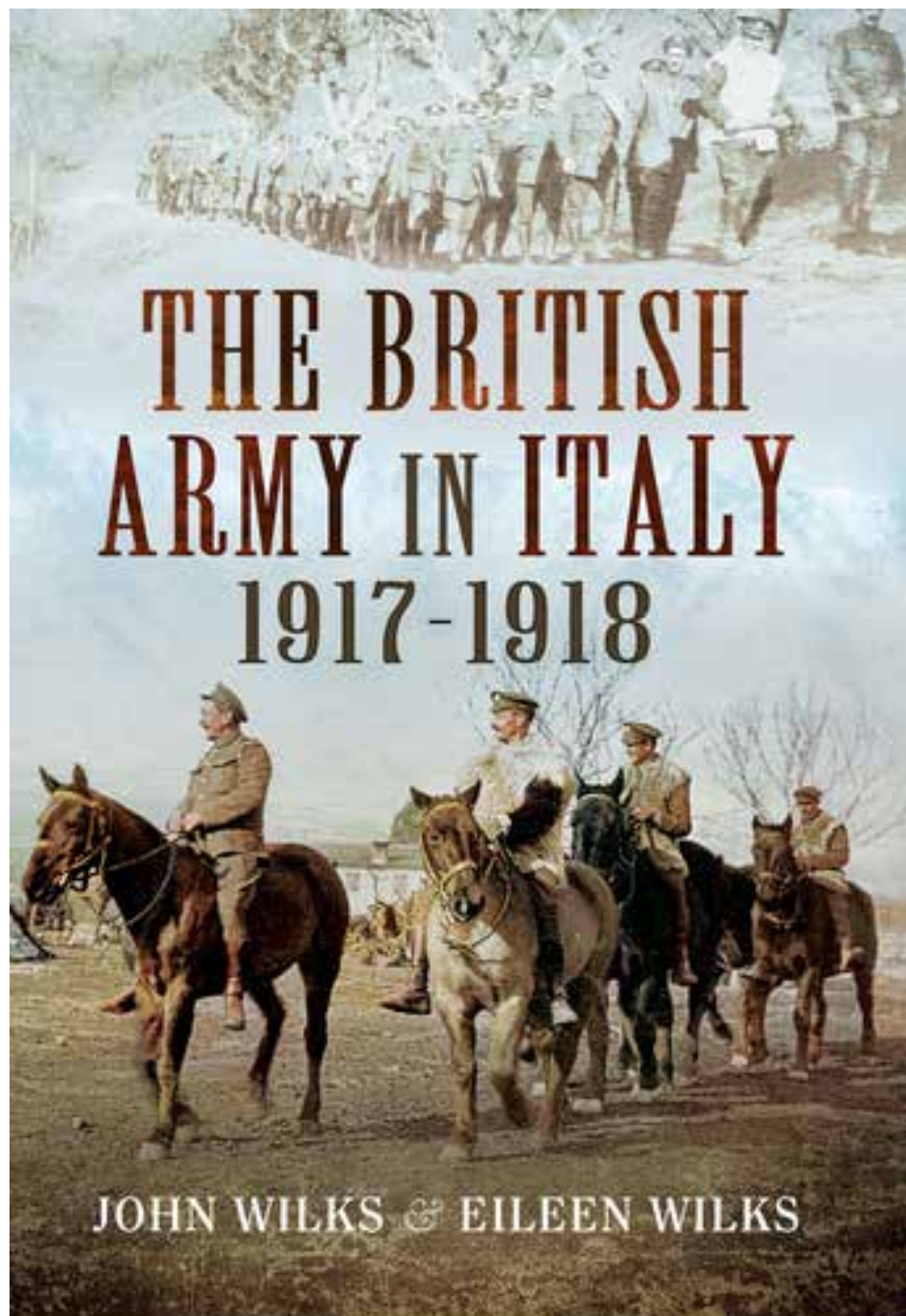
of support for an independent Yugoslavia.

Italy came to the peace-making table at Versailles in need of what she still hoped were 'special' bi-lateral relations. She did not find them. Her failure to secure the gains she sought was partly not her fault: London deployed a revisionist strategy intended to allow England to escape from war-time colonial agreements, and Britain and France joined hands to reduce Italian claims. However, Italian short-comings weakened Rome's position. Italy's claims had expanded, as her allies were not slow to point out, but so too, Marcuzzi reminds us, had everyone else's. Imperiali seriously misread British attitudes and intentions - 'the British Government will use ... all of its influence to ensure the [Treaty's] integral application,' he assured Sonnino - and the Italian ambassador in Washington, Macchi di Cellere, left the *Consulta* 'in complete ignorance of Wilson's real sentiments' (pp.303, 310). Inaction magnified Italy's problems. London had been examining policy options in multiple committees for almost two years; Rome had done nothing of the kind so that Sonnino walked into the conference more or less alone and without a range of options to call on. Domestic politics played their part. An undecided Orlando dared not challenge Sonnino's rigidity, popular as the foreign minister was with the press and in the *piazza*. Lack of preparation hampered Italian diplomacy, but Italy's true weakness, Marcuzzi suggests, was never clearly to define her core goals. Her negotiating strategy was equally at fault. Basing her claims on any or all of multiple grounds - self-determination, strategic exigencies, economic necessity, war-time needs and reparations - risked de-legitimising the treaties. In the conversations that then took place, where stereotypical prejudices went hand-in-hand with egregious denigration of Italy's military effort, political geography proved much more plastic than the Italians had expected or planned for.

Digging deeply into the archival sources, and handling them with balance and assurance, Stefano Marcuzzi's thorough and absorbing study has filled a considerable historical gap. His book will be essential reading for all historians interested in Italy's Great War.

JOHN GOOCH

University of Leeds





William Balfour Ker (1877-1918), *Knights of Columbus*, 1917 / Poster showing a priest looking heavenward and raising a crucifix, blessing kneeling soldiers. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20540 USA. Reproduction Number: LC-USZC4-10131
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