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N. 6
2025

Fascicolo 24. Novembre 2025
Storia Militare Contemporanea (6)



Società Italiana di Storia Militare

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Estandart Reyat u 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

GIANCARLO FINIZIO,

L'intelligence italiana nell'anno di Caporetto.

*Organi informativi ed alti comandi
verso l'offensiva austro-tedesca dell'ottobre 1917*

Youcanprint, Lecce 2024



A few years ago, passengers passing through Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion airport could buy a T-shirt emblazoned with the logo of MOSSAD, the famous Israeli secret service (or rather its civilian espionage component), and the ironically statement: "My work is so secret that even I don't know what I'm doing". This would indeed have almost made the wearer an ideal spy! The characteristic and indispensable secrecy of the intelligence services has similarly meant that studies dedicated to this sector, especially in Italy and in relation to the First World War, are neither numerous (when compared to the rivers of ink



spent on other aspects of that war) nor particularly in-depth or satisfying from the point of view of historiographical investigation. Given Giancarlo Finizio's previous work in this field, presented in *Il giallo delle corazzate* (*The Mystery of the Battleships*) (2020) and *Il bollettino Cadorna su Caporetto* (*Cadorna's Report on Caporetto*) (2023), which addressed key themes and events of the Italian intelligence services, the author's latest work enters into the subject fully prepared.

It might be suggested that the title of this work is somewhat reductive. The examination and dissection of the structures, articulations, workings, contradictions and internal polemics of the more than complex articulation of the Italian intelligence services covers a period well beyond the limited time span in 1917 that preceded what Austrian General der Infanterie Alfred Krauss called the "Miracle of Caporetto" (*Das Wunder von Karfreit*). In fact, Finizio examines the pre-war origins of the Italian intelligence service and dutifully follows its evolution during the course of the conflict, with diversions into geographical ramifications, the development of internal organisations between Udine, Rome and Milan, and the succession at the top of the organisation of key protagonists from Garruccio to Odoardo Marchetti. It is worth emphasising the substantially positive overall assessment Finizio is able to make regarding these developments.

The documentary research that underpins this analysis is very impressive. In historiography, as in the history that originates it, it is always risky to resort to the term "definitive". Those who do so almost inevitably expose themselves to subsequent, resounding denials. It seems to us, however, that future scholars will face a very arduous task in seeking to surpass Finizio in his use of archival material. He

draws not only from the main Italian archives, but includes vital references to British records, and he delivers a richness and precision of supporting materials, especially the memoirs of key players, such as Pettorelli Finzi Lalatta, Odoardo and Tullio Marchetti. More generally, one cannot but admire the ease with which Finizio moves between sources, both general and specialised, from the different European historiographical schools, deploying French, Anglo-Saxon and German texts with dexterity. The very rich footnotes accurately document each thesis, while leaving the reader free to follow the unfolding of the narrative. If one

criticism can be levelled at the efforts of so many scholars and enthusiasts of this conflict, those whom Mario Isnenghi has aptly described as “grandoguerrologi” (Great War-logists), it is precisely that so many of them have lost sight of the wider European context within which the Italian military contribution must necessarily be contextualised. Finizio clearly avoids this error. Finally, the inclusion in the book of no less than 19 original documents bears witness to a historiographical generosity that we hope is not unique but will be imitated by others!

Precisely because of this important example of intellectual honesty, Finizio will forgive us if we point out that the wealth of references nonetheless omits certain important Italian contributions, both recent and from the 1930s, on themes that explore: the Brusilov offensive of 1916, the Niedermayer mission in Afghanistan, the events and problems of the Trentino front, the memoirs of Alfred Krauss and the generals of his ‘Gruppe’, and the technical-tactical developments on the Karst front in the summer of 1917 (from Flondar to San Gabriele), which greatly influenced Cadorna’s decision not to proceed with a twelfth offensive on the Isonzo. The most serious consequence of these omissions concerns a state-



ment that appears regarding the “Defensive in Hypothesis 1”, the offensive Cadorna wanted on the Altopiano dei Sette Comuni in June 1917. Finizio states: “the Italian Supreme Command unleashed - without actually having a real strategic objective at hand to achieve - another massive offensive...” (pp. 119-120). In reality, Cadorna did in fact have a very clear objective, which if not strategic was certainly operational! If the offensive had succeeded against the only line of defence that the Austro-Hungarians (unlike the Karst) could have at their disposal, the Italian 6th Army would have reached the Campolongo-Verena-Portule line. This, besides the coveted domination of altitude, would have allowed the Italian Supreme Command to reduce by as much as two-thirds the forces required to defend the Plateau front. By repeating the manoeuvre by internal lines that had earned him the conquest of Gorizia the year before, the Italian Chief of Staff would have been able to conduct the tenth and eleventh battles of the Isonzo with two extra army corps.

It was precisely the failure of the offensive led by Mambretti, and the persistent threat of another breakthrough from the Plateau, notoriously a mantra of the new Austrian commander of the Trentino front, General Conrad, that led Cadorna to Vicenza in September 1917 to check the defensive works that he had ordered from Colonel Dal Fabbro, both on the Plateau (from Scoglio del Cane to Melette) and on the Grappa. One of Finizio’s significant contributions is that he dispels the myth, promoted after the war by Dal Fabbro himself, who had unexpectedly rushed to Cadorna’s “rescue”, that the works on Grappa had been commissioned in view of a very unpredictable collapse of the Karst front, when in fact they were intended to parry the constant threat from the Plateau.

We understand Finizio’s reasons for choosing self-publication of his work. Nonetheless, we should express our regret that a work of this scope and firm documentary foundation is unlikely to achieve the circulation that a major publishing house would have ensured. Unfortunately, our publishing market is all too rich in genuine nonsense!

PAOLO POZZATO and MARTIN SAMUEL



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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