

A Missing Peninsula?

The Military History of Italy A Call for Action by Jeremy Black

With a Foreword by Virgilio Ilari



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Why We Need A New Geostrategic History Of the Central Peninsula of the Mediterranean

Twenty-two years ago, in the introduction to his famous Twilight of a military tradition, Gregory Hanlon reported the irony with which his colleagues had accepted his plan to study the Italian military value¹. The topic of the Italian cowardice, however, predates the deeds of the Sienese nobility in the Thirty Years War that fascinated Hanlon to transform a social historian into one of the few foreign specialists in the military history of modern Italy. In fact, it dates back to the famous oxymoron of the Italum bellacem which appeared in the second edition of Erasmus' Adagia, five years after the famous Disfida of Barletta (1503) and was then fiercely debated after the Sack of Rome in 1527². Historiography, both Italian and foreign, has so far not investigated the reasons and contradictions of this longstanding stereotype. However, it seems to me a "spy", in Carlo Ginzburg's sense, of a more general question, which in my opinion explains very well why Italians excel in other people's wars and do not take their own seriously.

The question lies in the geostrategic fate of the Central Mediterranean Peninsula, at the same time Bridge and Front between West and East, between Oceàna and Eurasia, as it already appears in the Tabula Peutingeriana: the central and crucial segment between Thule and Taprobane. An Italy cut transversely by the Apennines extended 'Westwards' by the Ticino River, with two Italies – Adriatic and Tyrrhenian – marked by 'manifest destinies' that are different from each other and only at times brought together³. The Italian Society of Military History (SISM) has in recent years pioneered a profound rethinking of Italian military history in terms of géohistoire, longue durée and Global History, analyzing the impact on the geopolitical fate of Italy⁴ that have

¹ G. HANLON, *The Twilight of a Military Tradition*, (UCL Press, 1998), p. 1: «Hilarity erupts - "Short book!" - whenever I reveal that the subject of this book is Italian war heroes: an oxymoron, I am assured, by Italians or foreigners, in Italy and outside, since "Italians are anything but". Virtually everyone has an idea about the subject, inspired by superficial knowledge of battles since the Risorgimento, such as Novara (1848), Adowa (1896), Caporetto (1917) and the debacle of the Second World War».

² V. ILARI, «L'ossimoro di Erasmo», in Id., *Clausewitz in Italia e altri scritti m*ilitari (Aracne, Roma, 2019), pp. 227-240.

³ V. ILARI, «L'Italia come espressione geografica», (in corso di pubblicazione)

⁴ Italy on the Rimland. Storia militare di una Penisola Eurasiatica, Quaderno Sism 2019, T. I: Intermarium; T. II: Suez.

had the 1917 (the fateful year the United States entered Europe and Russia came out)⁵ and moreover the "Russia's clash with the Anglo-Saxon world, which spanned large stretches of the past 200 years"⁶ with the rivalry between the Maritime and Continental Powers over the partition of China (1839-1949)⁷.

We would like to continue and deepen this reflection, placing at the center not the security policies and military institutions of the transient internal political forms of the Central Mediterranean Peninsula (the Ancient States, the late unitary State) but the different strategic roles that it and its military resources and capabilities (including intellectual and ethical-political ones as well as Sea Power and Manpower) have had and continue to have today in the global history of war and collision of Empires. Italian military historiography, in its three components (academic, institutional and amateur) is, as a whole, still inadequate to understand, even before taking up, such a bold and innovative task. For this reason, as it is in the strategic tradition of our country, we too must also here resign ourselves to invoking an "external Prince" who embraces our cause and helps us to reintegrate Italy into the global military history.

Virgilio Ilari



⁵ Over There in Italy. L'Italia e l'intervento americano nella grande guerra, Quaderno Sism 2018, Roma, 2018.

⁶ D. SCHIMMELPENNINCK VAN DER OYE, «Russia, Napoleon and the Threat to the British India», in J. M. HARTLEY, P. KEENAN and D. LIEVEN (Eds.), *Russia and the Napoleonic Wars*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, p. 97.

⁷ V. ILARI, «L'Eurasia, incubo e creatura dell'Occidente», *Limes*, n. 11, 2019, pp. 113-121.

The Military History of Italy: A Call for Action

by Jeremy Black⁸

It is rare that a journal and an historian coincide so completely in purpose. That is an observation based on some experience as I edited a journal - *Archives*, the journal of the British Records Association, for over 15 years, a task I carried out without any assistance, and have also sat on many editorial boards, including, as a far from complete list, the *Journal of Military History*, the *RU-SI Journal*, the *International History Review*, *History Today*, the *Journal of Newspaper and Periodical History*, and *Media History*. All-too-often, there are the tiffs that reflect differing priorities (well, generally much more than that), and, as both an author and a peer-reviewer, I have also been both more widely.

So for me it is a matter of great pleasure that I am associated with the Nuova Antologia Militare (NAM) and that I have seen it develop rapidly and successfully. The NAM is at once both a tribute to the strength of Italian scholarship, more particularly a forward-facing intellectual engagements, and part of a more general efflorescence in military history to which I have devoted much of my last thirty years. It is not my purpose to review the latter, which I hope to do in a future piece, though the combination of ageing and health issues suggests that we should all move quickly if we want to publish our research and reflections. That, indeed, is one of the strengths of the NAM. It is able to evaluate pieces rapidly (readers are encouraged to report within days; a policy I have always encouraged), and then rapidly to proceed to publication. Increasingly, the standard processes of publication, which involve interminable delays – notably due to lengthy evaluation (three months to report on 10,000 words is all-too-standard), as well as keeping a large backlog of articles to enable the 'balancing' of issues – are made even more unacceptable, and the journals therefore to a degree irrelevant, because the flexibility of those that appear more rapidly and NAM is a star here. Indeed, I recently had the experience of submitting a piece to another European journal to be told that it was very good but too short: all pieces had to be 7,500-9,000 words, even though not all articles fit into that format.

⁸ I am grateful to David Parrott for his comments on an earlier draft.

So, to business. I mentioned to Virgilio, the extent to which the grand baton-passing narrative of modern military history generally passes Italy by, and to my shock he asked me to sketch out a few ideas in this piece by way of an introductory foray. Maybe a forlorn hope would be a more appropriate description; but I see my role here as contextualising the particular in terms of the general and, more specifically, asking how Italian military history would look in the context of global military history, a task I have once been asked to do for Chinese military history,⁹ and twice, in unpublished pieces for Indian military history. It is from that perspective that my following comments arise.

It may appear bizarre to suggest that Italian military history has been neglected given the attention devoted in particular to Ancient Rome, the *Condottieri*, and the *Risorgimento*, but the question of relative attention and significance plays a role, as, even more, does that of agency. Thus, the Italian Wars of 1494-1559 receive much attention, but the focus then is on France, Spain, the Swiss and the Emperor Maximilian I, rather than on the Italian states; leaving aside the point that 'Spain' was in part an Italian state, if we can employ that terminology. Despite some important work, there has also been a general failure to devote sufficient attention to the warfare after the Sack of Rome in 1527.¹⁰

So also with the *Risorgimento*, with the key battles presented as Franco-Austrian struggles at Solferino and Magenta in 1859. Again, in the two world wars, which for Italy were 1915-18 and 1940-5, the major Italian contributions are widely treated by outsiders as in-effect at best also-rans, even though Italy was the power that inflicted most damage on Austria in 1918 and played a crucial role in the widening out of World War Two in 1940.

The list can readily be extended, with important battles, such as Bitonto in 1734, underplayed, as part of a more practice of looking at European struggles such as, to take 1618-1848, the Thirty Years' War, the Dutch War, the Nine Years' War, the Wars of the Spanish, Polish and Austrian Successions,¹¹ the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, and the wars of the Years of Revolution (1830, 1848), and not giving due attention to those aspects of them fought in Italy. So also even more when a conflict, the War of the Quadruple Alliance (1718-20), was fought largely in Italy.

⁹ J. BLACK, 'Conclusion,' in H. van de Ven (ed.), Warfare in Chinese History (London, 2000), pp. 428-42.

¹⁰ For a valuable recent work, M. RABÀ, *Potere e poteri: 'stati,' 'privati' e communita nel conflitto per l'egemonia in Italia settentrionale, 1536-58* (Milan, 2016).

¹¹ V. ILARI and G. BOERI, Velletri 1744. La mancata riconquista austriaca delle due Sicilie (Rome, 2018).

None of this is to deny the undoubted significance and quality of the work produced by many Italian scholars, both past, such as Piero Pieri, and present, nor by foreign scholars working on Italy, and it is worth noting particularly important recent work by the Canadian specialist Gregory Hanlon.¹² Moreover, American scholars, led by Rick Schneid,¹³ and MacGregor Knox,¹⁴ and British counterparts, especially John Gooch¹⁵ and David Parrott,¹⁶ have recently helped revitalise an approach to which earlier specialists, such as Michael Mallett,¹⁷ made a major contribution.

So any comments of the type I am suggesting can readily be challenged, but it is difficult for me to see either Italy receiving due weight in general modern military history, or weight that corresponds with that devoted to Austria, France, Germany and Spain. This situation, moreover, is made more unstable by the (justifiable) rise in calls to integrate non-Western research, locations and perspectives into general military history; the latter a clear practice even if the definition of the current production of such history perforce can be debated, and notably so at the margins. Where will post-Roman Italy be in a general history of war that devotes more attention to China, India and Japan, let alone Iran, Ethiopia, Oceania or other areas? Will not this latter recentring, indeed, further encourage the diminution of attention to Italy, as the notion of one, 'Ur,' form of Western warfare in contrast with non-Western forms gains traction as a result, with, yet again, the emphasis of 'the leading European' power and/or model.

¹² G. HANLON, The Hero of Italy: Odoardo Farnese, Duke of Parma, His Soldiers and his Subjects in the Thirty Years War (Oxford, 2014) and Italy 1636: Cemetery of Armies (Oxford, 2015).

¹³ R. SCHNEID, *The French-Piedmontese Campaign of 1859* (Rome, 2014).

¹⁴ M. KNOX, Mussolini Unleashed, 1939-1941: Politics and Strategy in Fascist Italy's Last War (Cambridge, 1982), Hitler's Italian Allies: Royal Armed Forces, Fascist Regime, and the War of 1940-43 (Cambridge, 2000).

¹⁵ J. GOOCH, Mussolini and His Generals: The Armed Forces and Fascist Foreign Policy, 1922-1940 (Cambridge, 2007); Mussolini's War: Fascist Italy from Triumph to Collapse, 1935-1943 (London, 2020).

¹⁶ D. PARROTT, 'Interests, Corruption and Military Effectiveness: the French Army of Italy and the Campaign of 1657,' *Rivista di storia economica*, 19 (2016), pp. 51-75; 'The Utility of Fortifications in Early Modern Europe. Italian Princes and their Citadels, 1540-1640,' *War in History*, 7 (2000), pp. 127-53; 'The Mantuan Succession, 1627-1631: A Sovereignty dispute in early modern Europe,' *English Historical Review*, 112 (1997), pp. 20-65.

¹⁷ M. MALLETT, Mercenaries and their Masters: Warfare in Renaissance Italy (London, 1974), The Military Organisation of a Renaissance State: Venice c. 1400-1617 (Cambridge, 1984).

Italians may come into the equation, through serving this leading power, a process ably investigated by Hanlon¹⁸ but, again, that will be to downplay Italy as a separate and/or distinctive space. Hanlon interestingly argued that there was a demilitarisation of Italy stemming from a number of factors including the Thirty Years' War and economic strain, but that might not have seemed the case for much of the period 1648-1748. Instead, as in the Low Countries, it was the particular international circumstances of 1749-91, notably peace between France, Austria and Spain, a peace that encompassed Sardinia and the United Provinces, that seems crucial. Furthermore, an absence of conflict is not the same as demilitarisation.

Returning to the place of Italy, it is possibly the very process of decentering to which reference has already been made that offers an opportunity to reinsert its experience into the general account, because the growing need to reassess European military history on a global scale leads to asking questions about relative significance as well as encouraging a challenging of the existing academic situation. Thus, we can move forward in two ways. They may appear contradictory, but in fact overlap. We can argue that Italy is of significance because it was not the leading military power but rather a 'more typical one,' however both Italy and typicality are interpreted. Moreover, the thesis that it is the power(s) that are not at the forefront in terms of strength that have to pursue greater military effectiveness is worth pursuing, and obvious examples include Venice and Sardinia.

Separately, we can argue that the significance of Italian military history has been downplayed. A number of examples can be cited and reasons pursued, and, again, without any necessary incompatibility between them nor prioritisation amongst them. Indeed, as far as the last is concerned, any prioritisation is inherently questionable as it would be expected to depend on period or on the Italian state in question. Any re-examination of Italian significance has a geopolitical dimension because it is usually considered within a European and then Atlantic dimension in which Italy appears to a degree marginal after the advance of the Ottoman Turks. Ironically, Virgilio asked me to write on the period from the Peace of Lodi of 1454 to the present day, but it may be that the previous year was more significant. The fall of Constantinople to Mehmed II involved not only the capture of important Italian bases, but also the beginning of a more rapid development of Ottoman naval power and amphibious capability, and these were to be used to great effect to liquidate the Italian presence in the Eastern Mediterranean.

¹⁸ G. HANLON, The Twilight of a Military Tradition: Italian aristocrats, and European conflicts 1560-1800 (London, 1998).

That, indeed, was a key aspect of Italian military history, one not shared by France, England or the Dutch, namely the crucial role of the Italians in stabilising the Mediterranean by slowing and then stopping the Ottoman advance. The headline event in this respect for Europe in global military history is the Second (Ottoman) Siege of Vienna in 1683, with the first, that of 1529, also mentioned. As far as the Mediterranean is concerned, the key event is the battle of Lepanto (1571), which is usually presented as a Spanish victory, with, as the second ranker, the siege of Malta (1565), with the Knights of St John not generally seen as part of the Italian world. Each of those events can be debated, but what is certainly underplayed is the role of the Italian powers and of Italian resources in a struggle with the Ottomans that was a central part of Mediterranean history until 1718. Moreover, there was the linked, but also separate, struggle with the Barbary States of North Africa. Struggle involved naval operations, defensive preparations on the long Italian coastline, and the longstanding conflict in Dalmatia and, to a lesser extent, Friuli. The ease of Ottoman movements by water made the Mediterranean particularly important, and Italian vulnerability was shown, notably in the short-lived Ottoman capture of Otranto (1480-1) and in the two sieges of Venetian-held Corfu (1538 and 1716). The capture of Otranto was mounted by a fleet of 128 ships including 28 galleys. The Ottoman force was about 18,700 troops strong, and many of them had come from the unsuccessful siege of Rhodes, which indicated the sequential nature of Ottoman operations. The Ottomans pressed on to destroy the nearby monastery of San Nicholas di Casole and to attack Lecce, Taranto and Brindisi. After an unsuccessful Christian attempt to regain Otranto in 1480, a siege in 1481 was successful.

The episode caused fear in Italy, including in Rome. It is part of a history that is important not only for Italy, but also more generally as it raises the question of relative military effectiveness and of how and when Ottoman capabilities were matched and thwarted. This certainly is a topic that deserves more attention in European and global military history. It is also one that highlights the longstanding significance of Italian naval power and amphibious capability in the Mediterranean, one that links the Middle Ages and the Early-Modern period, to cite two terms that require careful usage. Geopolitically, going back to Antiquity, there is also the question of the linkage of Greece and Italy, so that their ready separation in military historical terms looks questionable. Whether Pyrrhus or Byzantium looking westward into Italy, or Rome, the Normans and Charles of Anjou looking eastward into Greece, there was no geopolitical boundary. That was significant in itself and also a reminder of the complexities involved in the concept of strategic geography, a concept which is most of value if its contingent character is noted. Mussolini's interest in Albania and the Balkans more generally can be seen in part in this context.

To focus on the geopolitics of the Eastern Mediterranean is to adopt a perspective that probes the strategic geography of Venice and the kingdom of Naples, rather than that of Sardinia; although, in practice, the struggle against Ottoman forces and Islamic raiders involved all of Italy. So also with the challenges separately posed by French, Austrian, and Aragonese (later Spanish) expansion: they were both specific in their impact and yet also more general in their consequence.

Before turning to that element, it is, however, worth considering a strand that generally receives insufficient attention: the counterpointing of insurrectionary and counter-insurgency warfare. Classic instances of the latter relate to foreign forces: those of Revolutionary and Napoleonic France in the 1790s and 1800s, notably in Lombardy and, then, Calabria, and those of Germany in 1943-5. Yet, albeit very different in their political positioning, there were also counter-insurgency operations by Italian states; some longstanding, notably by Genoa in Corsica, and others more specific. At the same time, there were generally three elements also seen in Corsica: the hostility of country to town, that of towns to rule by other towns, and opposition to tax demands. The history of counter-insurgency in Italy could fruitfully be integrated into the mainstream of European military history because the Italian examples are both so interesting and also far from 'pre-modern.' Indeed, 'modern' instances, successful or unsuccessful, include the drama of the Genoese resistance to Austrian control in 1746-8, an epic of Italian history, as well as the imposition of control by the new Italian state in southern Italy after 1860, civil war in Italy in 1943-5, and, very differently, the terrorist attempts to overthrow the state and civil society in the 1970s. The history can then be broadened out to include the violent assault on the state by organised criminal gangs in recent decades.

To turn from this theme to more conventional accounts of military history is to be reminded of the privileging of power and success so often seen in this subject. Thus, 'Spain' becomes more worthy of 'Italy' from the late fifteenth century, until it also is consigned to the label of failure or, at least, of the wider 'Decline of the Mediterranean' in the seventeenth century. France then takes the stage, but because Northern European historians regarded activity nearer to home as more crucial, it is the French advance into the Low Countries or the Rhineland that focuses attention. In turn, French successes in Mediterranean countries, notably in Spain during the War of Spanish Succession, and again in 1823, or in Italy, as in 1734-5, are underplayed. So also with Austrian counterparts, such as the conquest of Naples in 1707. In practice, all these campaigns are of significance when trying to evaluate capability and effectiveness; and they richly repay attention from those concerned with European military history.

At the global level, much of Italian military history is of less direct consequence, but that is also true of that of many European states and indeed episodes of European military history that generally attract its historians. So also with thinkers. What exactly is the global significance of Clausewitz?

Italian ideas in the field of military history were more directly significant on the global scale in the contribution of Italian engineers to the development and dissemination of what became the most common type of new European fortress in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. To use the term standard would be wrong, as the Russian norm was different, and Russia, a power that reached to the Pacific in the 1630s, was scarcely an add-on in European military history. In contrast, the significance of Italian military engineers was carried across the Western world in part by the power of example offered in particular by publications, but also thanks to the Italian role in the Spanish empire. In looking for Italy's military importance, there are many forts, whether in Cuba or the Danube valley, that indicate the strength of a model of excellence that the world of print disseminated, rather as it continued to put the example of Rome at the disposal of modern readers and commentators.

The writing of Caesar and others, published in book form from the late fifteenth century, were read more widely. Classical types of warfare were assessed by Marshal Saxe and others, and Cannae was the model for German warmaking in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Italy as a living source of the European military tradition, therefore, involved not only antiquarian interest, but also a continued sense of relevance. It is a pity that there has been scant echo of this process when looking at the modern resonances of the last five and a half millennia of Italian military challenge. Let that challenge be met.