

The Italian Army and the First World War

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In the introduction to his illuminating monograph *The Italian Army and the First World War*, John Gooch laments the state of the current historiography that has marginalised – and continues to marginalise – the so-called ‘minor’ theatres and ‘lesser’ armies of the Great War. Whilst not falling into the latter, Italy’s war has certainly been reduced to the former despite her participation on the Allied side proving to be a ‘factor of cardinal importance’ (p. 2). A combination of Great Power syndrome – which in the case of Britain, France and Germany at least, has seen a disproportionate focus on their respective experiences on the Western Front – coupled with a dearth of historians willing to cross the metaphorical and geographical borders of international research, has led to an intellectual void in key areas. In the case of the Italian army, only a few Anglophone scholars such as Gooch, John Whittam and Vanda Wilcox (whose work is curiously absent from the bibliography) have attempted to step into the breach.⁽¹⁾ Nevertheless, it remains an area of study in need of a seminal text that adds significantly to our understanding of the First World War, and in Gooch’s most recent work, we find an extensively researched and particularly apt candidate.

With the centenary of the First World War now well and truly upon us, it is unsurprising to see a plethora of works relating to the subject’s seemingly innumerable facets hit one’s ever-expanding bookshelves. Already, Jay Winter’s edited volumes of *The Cambridge History of the First World War* ⁽²⁾ have sought to bring a more transnational dimension to this field of study, drawing out commonalities between participants’ experiences of a shared war. Whilst such novelty is naturally to be applauded, it should not (and has not) spell the end of national narratives, which as Gooch’s example proves, retain significant value in their ability to contribute to this new wave of historiographical focus on the Great War. Indeed, it is for this very reason that Cambridge University Press have commissioned six such studies of belligerent forces (in the *Armies of the Great War* series) in the coming months, of which John Gooch’s *The Italian Army and the First World War* is among the first to hit the press at an accessibly priced £55 (Hardback) and £19.99 (Softcover).

The central aim of this work is to assess the combat capability and performance of the Italian army during the war, with reference to a variety of contextual factors that shaped this narrative. Gooch’s approach is by and large chronological with thematic sub-sections covering, in the first instance, the period from unification in 1861 until the armistice and the immediate years beyond, whilst simultaneously broaching issues of

economic and social mobilisation, discipline and morale and civil-military relations that, at times, draw striking resemblances to other belligerent forces. Whilst drawing out the importance of such themes to the progress of Italy's war itself, Gooch rightly attracts the reader's attention to the fact that it was not an isolated or 'minor' theatre – far from it. The complexities of coalition warfare, so often neglected outside studies of the main protagonists, form a centrality to this study that succeeds in framing the Italian front within the wider context of First World War strategy and operations. Having established Italy's place within the conflict, Gooch naturally reserves enough attention for the essential links that bind army and society, which informed much of his previous work. As stated in the introduction, Italy fought the first two and a half years of the war 'not as a people united but as a nation divided' (p. 3), setting her apart from the nationalistic fervour and jingoism often associated with other belligerents. The implication, and subsequent demonstration over the course of the work, is that Italy discovered a unity through the course of the war that had been sorely lacking previously. Perhaps only in the case of Belgium could a similar claim be made. In a conflict that saw the demise of four empires and their royal dynasties such a revelation, that drills down to the very core of nationality and identity, stands out as a point of interest and adds even further relevance to the study of an army that has traditionally been overlooked.

In the opening chapter of his chronological study that focuses on the years 1861 to 1914, Gooch establishes the foundations of Liberal Italy's social and military culture that would come to characterise the army's wartime conduct and performance from its entry in May 1915 onwards. It appears to draw heavily on his previous research into the pre-war Italian army and at times is perhaps over-developed for a study of the First World War. Nevertheless, such a contextual synthesis of the country's evident socio-economic divide between North and South, is clearly necessary when later exploring related themes in a wartime context. Indeed, an example of the relevance of this social schism, which translated broadly into conflicting socialist and Catholic convictions, can be seen in Gooch's analysis of destabilising and unifying factors of Italy's wartime forces. It established the basis for both the army's failures and subsequent impetus towards success. As noted throughout the study of the first 11 battles of the Isonzo and Caporetto (the 12th), the Italian *Comando supremo*, Luigi Cadorna, feared the destabilising effect of socialism in his fragile citizen army; a threat that he felt could only be dealt with by extreme repressive measures (p. 13). Yet, rather surprisingly, Italian culture afforded its own cure to this by providing soldiers with a means to find the will to carry on the fight. Whilst hard-line union members may have carried with them 'a hatred of the "arbitrary and paternalistic systems of individual reward and punishment"' which opposed the Catholic peasantry's overt deference to authority, both groups found in their junior officers the familiarity of a paternalistic figure to whom they could relate (p. 163). It was this sort of approach, encouraged by Cadorna's successor, Armando Diaz, which Gooch argues provided the foundations of a unity that allowed the army to recover after the defeat of Caporetto and launch successful offensives in the closing stages of the war.

Similarly, the shadow cast over Italy's poor showing in her pre-war colonial ventures weighed heavily on the army. The spectre of Adua was never far below the surface. Although possibly over detailed in the narrative description of these campaigns, particularly in Libya (1911–12), such context again provides the reader with a necessary understanding of the military, economic and diplomatic aspects of Italy's participation in the First World War. The incompetence of command in Africa was a portent of things to come, albeit possibly worsened by the fact that Cadorna, along with many other officers, had not even seen active service out there. It proved to be a lesson in the difficulties of maintaining healthy civil-military relations and showed above all that the army was in no fit state, in terms of organisation or equipment, to successfully contest a modern war. More than anything, however, the examination of Italy's colonial trials and tribulations informs the reader of the underpinnings of her diplomatic wants and needs from her eventual participation in the Great War. Africa, the Balkans, and expansion into the dissolving Turkish Empire were all targets for an economically weak Italy intent on reaffirming her place at the top-table of European affairs.

The decision to forego her alliance with Germany in favour of co-operation with the allied powers, which in the case of France had been a long-standing enemy, is an interesting examination of diplomacy that forms the basis of chapter two. Neutrality afforded Italy the time to pick her side wisely, and in promises of renewed influence in the Balkans at the expense of Austria-Hungary, Italian politicians decided to throw in

their lot with the Allies. Gooch's appreciation of the importance of civil military relations once again shines through as he begins to develop a theme that played a significant role in Italy's experience of war. The decision was taken by the politicians without proper consultation with the army who had been preparing for a war with the Central Powers – not against them (p. 88). This proved to be a turning point in civil-military relations as Cadorna, unhappy at being kept in the dark, began a process of seizing control of the army and its commitments from the politicians who were unable to rest it back until his dismissal in 1917. In keeping them at arms length, Gooch outlines the similarities between his rise as *generalissimo* to that of Joffre in the French army and latterly Haig in the British, albeit more forcefully in the introduction than during his analysis (p. 3). The increasing dislocation of civil-military relations provides Gooch with the opportunity to examine the power of individuals and the value there is in attempting to understand their personal complexities for the benefit of the wider story.

Undeniably Cadorna's influence was greater on Italy's war than anyone else. The ensuing chapters, which focus successively on the years 1915 to 1918, offer a broad analysis of the army's operational undertakings, principally under his command. Gooch progressively comes to complete a full characterisation of the *Comando supremo* through an examination of his tactical, operational and strategic outlook, his draconian disciplinary methods, as well as his relationship with politicians and coalition partners to ultimately conclude that his inflexibility and single-mindedness were significant contributing factors to the army's poor battlefield performances. Observing the opening salvos of the war from afar, Gooch demonstrates the curious reluctance to learn and implement tactical and operational lessons that had emerged prior to – and subsequently after – Italy's entry into the war. Hopes of a war of manoeuvre were quickly shattered and the first battle of the Isonzo proved that the army had a lot to learn in terms of artillery doctrine and infantry tactics (p. 109). It was a 'slow and uneven education' that saw mistakes such as densely packed front lines, for example, remain a feature on the Italian front through 1917 and beyond (p. 199). Failures to achieve success, despite claiming a somewhat dubious victory at the sixth battle of the Isonzo, led to questions being raised over the conduct of Allied strategy, which Cadorna felt was not relieving enough pressure off the Italian front. The first signs of discontent in Russia, coupled with French and home political pressure to open up a second front in Albania and Salonika only served to increase pressure on the Italian front and alienate Cadorna even further from the Government (p. 172). An obvious parallel would have been the British division of opinion between 'Easterners' and 'Westerners' and to the difficulties of coalition warfare experienced on the Western Front that have recently been brought to the fore.⁽³⁾ Nevertheless, Gooch manages to display such issues in the Italian context well and gives further evidence of the difficulties preventing Cadorna from achieving his desired breakthrough.

Naturally, Gooch is quick to acknowledge that for all the tactical, operational and strategic stalling, the Italian army was fighting an uphill battle with equipment and supplies that proved to be perhaps the most limiting factor of them all. Italy 'awoke late and slowly to the industrial dimensions of the conflict she had entered. Not only was she unprepared when the moment came, but she had relatively little with which to prepare' (p. 122). The equipment deficiencies experienced in her colonial campaigns before the war were exposed to even greater levels, particularly in the case of medium and heavy artillery. On the few occasions that a sufficient concentration of artillery could be amassed, i.e. the sixth battle of the Isonzo and Vittorio Veneto, Gooch shows that the Italian army was equal to the task (p. 297). Not only was the lack of guns restrictive, but also much like Britain's shell crisis, the army appeared to be constantly facing as great a struggle with its factories' production output as with the Austrians themselves. The transition to a wartime economy, as in many countries, proved problematic, with Italy's lack of raw materials and geographical position not helping matters at all. The mobilisation of labour on the home front added to the complexities of Italy's urban/rural divide as rising costs of living (above and beyond that of Britain, France and Germany) only exacerbated the social gulf, leading to a number of serious workers' strikes in the months preceding the disaster of Caporetto (pp. 216–21).

Following the appointment of Diaz, termed by Gooch as effectively being a 'revolution in military affairs' that ended a 29-month tenure of command by a Piedmontese general in favour of a southerner, widespread changes were instituted that brought the army back from the pits of despair ready to retake the offensive

within a few months. (p. 247). The most striking difference between Diaz and his predecessor was his approach to discipline and morale, a theme returned to on a number of occasions by Gooch. Although at times truncated, due to its spread over three chapters to fit with the chronology of operations, the progression of Cadorna's draconian methods are catalogued and help contextualise both the conditions of service faced by the rank and file and the lack of faith – borne out by poor performance – of the *Comando Supremo* in the forces under his command. Summary executions and decimation of troublesome units would come to characterise his time in command, possibly sustaining a certain degree of discipline but certainly not morale. Indeed, Gooch demonstrates that the average number of executions per month actually increased slightly under Diaz's command, but his removal of arbitrary discipline and sackings, a paternalistic tone to command, and a promulgation of propaganda designed to stir up emotions of *la patria* that was in danger, helped raise morale and unity to unprecedented levels (pp. 248–61).

Success at the battles of the Solstice and Vittorio Veneto were a culmination of many things finally coming to fruition. Materiél parity, civil-military and strategic co-operation, tactical improvements, and a new-found unity and morale were all elements that allowed Italy to capitalise on the one fundamental factor out of her control. Italy had proven a certain degree of staying power in adverse circumstances, but Gooch perceptively notes that it was Austria-Hungary's rapid decline as the war drew to a close that allowed the Italians to go on the offensive (p. 288). Nevertheless, it was a hard-fought battle and victory was only assured after the Austrian frontline was finally cracked, leaving the remnants of what had been resolute defenders fleeing the battlefield in an attempt to reach home as their leaders sued for peace. After the armistice Italy's diplomats failed to obtain what 'they had gone on record as determined to get her, largely as a consequence of their having played a weak hand badly' (p. 310). The ramifications of this, Gooch briefly outlines, were not a given precursor to the rise of Facism but certainly a contributing factor to the circumstances that eventually helped Mussolini to power.

Overall, Gooch succeeds admirably in not only bringing to light an interesting narrative of one of the war's least well-known theatres and armies, but in tackling a wide range of underlying themes that resonate with studies of other belligerent forces, he has managed to place the Italian army firmly within the necessary wider context of the First World War. Through an impressive array of primary and secondary sources, the Italian army's participation has been brought to the fore of Anglophone historiography and will almost certainly remain a seminal text for scholars of the period and anyone else interested in European military history and the First World War at large.

Notes

1. J. Gooch, *Army, State and Society in Italy, 1870–1915* (London, 1989); J. Whittam, *The Politics of the Italian Army, 1861–1918* (London, 1977); and V. Wilcox 'Discipline in the Italian army, 1915–1918' in *Warfare and Belligerence: Perspectives in First World War Studies*, ed. P. Purseigle (Leiden, 2005), pp. 73–100.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. *The Cambridge History of the First World War*, ed. Jay Winter (3 vols., Cambridge, 2014).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. E. Greenhalgh, 'Why the British were on the Somme in 1916', *War in History*, VI (1999), pp. 147–73; 'Flames over the Somme: a retort to William Philpott', *War in History*, X (2003), pp. 335–42; and W. Philpott, 'Why the British were really on the Somme: a reply to Elizabeth Greenhalgh', *War in History*, IX (2002), pp. 446–71.[Back to \(3\)](#)

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