

Nuova Rivista Storica

Anno CI, Settembre-Dicembre 2017, Fascicolo III

Abstracts

EUGENIO DI RIENZO, L'Italia e il primo conflitto «globale»

The extent of the First World War was tremendous because its affects reached out so far so fast that it affected every single civilization on the planet: from the western coasts of Alaska to the eastern coasts of Australia, from Africa to Melanesia and China. «The War to End All War» widened from Atlantic and Pacific to Mediterranean Sea and Dardanelles, from West to East Europe, from Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire to the border of British Raj, from Anatolia to Caucasus. While most of the important battles took place in Europe, as its name suggests the First World War was a truly «global conflict», with fighting in almost every corner of the globe.

On various parts of Asia and Africa, Germany's colonial possessions came under attack. The Japanese quickly overran German outposts in China. They also captured Germany's Pacific island colonies. English and French troops attacked Germany's African possessions. They seized control of the Deutsch-Ostafrika (Burundi, Ruanda, Tanganyika, and Zanzibar), Cameroon, Togo, and Namibia. Elsewhere in Asia and Africa, the British and French recruited subjects in their colonies for struggle. Fighting troops as well as labourers came from South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, British India, Senegal, Egypt, Algeria and Indochina. Many fought and died on the battlefield. Others worked in the war industries, to build fortifications and to keep the front lines provided.

Although member of the Triple Alliance, the Kingdom of Italy not join the Central Powers, when the war started in August 1914. Almost a year after the war's commencement, after secret parallel negotiations with both sides (with the Allies in which Italy negotiated for territory if victorious, and with the Central Powers to gain territory if neutral) Italy entered the war on the side of the France and Great Britain.

Italy fought mostly against Austria-Hungary along his northern border, including high up in the now-Italian Alps and along the Isonzo River. Some Italian divisions were also sent to support the Entente on the Western Front. In 1918 Italian troops saw intense combat during the German Spring Offensive (March – July 1918) Their most prominent engagement on this front was their role in the Second Battle of the Marne (15 July - 6 August).

Italian troops played a major role in the defense of Albania against Austria-Hungary. The Regio Esercito occupied the port of Vlorë on December 1914, but had to withdraw after the Austrian-Hungarian invasion in late 1915 - early 1916, and the fall of Durrës on 27 February 1916. In May 1916, the Italian XVI Corps, composed of 100.000 men, returned and occupied the region of southern Albania by the autumn 1916, while the French army occupied Korçë and its surrounding areas. The Italian (in Gjirokastër) and French forces (in Korçë), according mainly to the development of the Balkan Front, entered the area of Northern Epirus (controlled by the Greek minority) in autumn 1916, after approval of the Triple Entente.

Italian Armed Forces were also involved in the Western Front and in the Middle-Eastern theatre of Great War. From 1916, the Italian 35th Division fought on the

Salonika Front as part of the Allied Army of the Orient. The Italian XVI Corps (a separate entity independent from the Army of the Orient) took part in actions against Austro-Hungarian forces in Albania and, in June 23, 1917, Italy established the protectorate over this region. Italy played a token role in the Sinai and Palestine Campaign, sending a detachment of five hundred soldiers to assist the British there in 1917. The Senussi objective of expelling the Italians coincided with Ottoman war aims. In 1914, the British chose to appease the Senussi but the accession of Italy to the entente in May 1915 led to the British applying pressure to the Senussi to recognise the Italian occupation and stopping cross-border trade. The Senussi became more dependent on German and Ottoman imports and had to move to find food. Therefore, the British embargo pushed the Senussi towards war. The Ottoman Sultan supported the guerrilla warfare by the chief of the Senussi Order, Aḥmad al-Šarīf, and published the Caliphal decree of Gihād against the infidel British and their allies.

The Italian war effort was stronger in its colonial domains threatened by Islamist insurgency organized and backed by Istanbul and Berlin with the sending of officers and Special Corps, weapons, ammunitions, equipment, food supplies, and money. As Italy entered the war on 23 May 1915, the situation of her forces in the African colonies was critical. Italian Somaliland, in the east was far from being pacified, and in Cyrenaica, the Italian forces were confined to some separated points on the coast. In neighbouring Tripolitania and Fezzan, during the August 1914, the Italian forces reached Ghat, that is, conquered most of western Libya. But in November 1914, this advance turned into a general retreat, and on 7 April and 28 April, they suffered two reverses at Wadi Marsit (near Mizda) and al-Qurdabiya (near Sirte) respectively. By August 1915, the situation in Tripolitania was similar to that of Cyrenaica. The Chief of General Staff, Luigi Cadorna, chose to sacrifice the African front to concentrate the forces of the Regio Esercito on the Italian front. The recovery of Libya was not resumed until January 1922 and the pacification of the region ended only in 1932.

Lastly, Italian Expeditionary Forces were sent between 1918 and 1923 to Istanbul, in Anatolia, in Northern Russia. Furthermore, immediately after the war, Italian military missions reached Transcaucasia and Hungary to stabilize the difficult political situation that had been created in those regions.

The Italian military effort, which cost to our country 680,000 deaths, one million wounded, tens of thousands of missing persons, expenses amounted to 20.6 billion between 1917 and 1918, and a consequent, heavy depletion of national wealth, was not rewarded by the Allies. Italy won the war on the battlefields but lost it to the Versailles Peace Conference. The Vittoria mutilata («Mutilated Victory») was a term coined by Gabriele D'Annunzio to describe dissatisfaction with the aftermath of the Great War for Italy. The Treaty of London (April 26, 1915) signed by the United Kingdom, the French Third Republic, the Russian Empire, and Salandra government, before entering the conflict was, in effect, not fully carried out at the end of it.

In January 1917, British Foreign Secretary, Arthur James Balfour, wrote a letter to American President Thomas Woodrow Wilson expressing his disapproval of the promise to give Italy the Adriatic territories. In a later diplomatic mission to the United States in May, Balfour made it clear that Britain had no particular ill will against Austria-Hungary and that the planned transfer of the Slavic lands to Italy would only create more problems. While American-Italian diplomatic dialogue regarding the claims did not take place prior to the Peace Conference, Wilson's own stance on the matter was clear in his «Fourteen Points», which urged for the Italian border with Austria to be redrawn along «clearly recognizable lines of nationality». His first point urged for no international agreements to be negotiated in secret so he refused to recognise the arrangements made under the pact. The program of Italy's Foreign

Secretary, Sidney Sonnino, for securing the Adriatic were ignored, as were the war aims of Italy in Anatolia, Balkan Peninsula, Eastern Mediterranean, and East Africa.

Keywords:

Global War, 1914-1918

Italian War effort

«Mutilated Victory» (Paris Peace Conference)