Chapter 1 Italy and the First World War

Key questions

• Why did Italy decide to remain neutral in 1914?
• Why did entry into the First World War cause divisions within Italy?
• What impact did the war have on the Italian economy?

On 28 June 1914, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, and his wife, were assassinated in Sarajevo by Bosnian Serbs. Within six weeks, their deaths had triggered the First World War. Italy initially remained neutral but eventually entered the war on the side of the Entente powers in May 1915, hoping for significant territorial rewards. Involvement in the conflict, however, proved to be deeply damaging. The war hardened the pre-1914 divisions within Italy, placed the economy under great strain and exposed the weaknesses of the Italian army. Criticism of the liberal political system mounted during these years and sharp differences between neutralists and interventionists emerged. Italy could claim victory in 1918 but, in reality, it had had a disappointing and divisive war.

Timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>March 1914</td>
<td>Antonio Salandra forms a new government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 1914</td>
<td>First World War begins; Italy declares its neutrality and negotiates with both sides</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 1914</td>
<td>Benito Mussolini is expelled from the Socialist Party after calling for Italian intervention in the war</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 1915</td>
<td>Italy signs the Treaty of London with the Entente powers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 1915</td>
<td>Intervention crisis; Italy declares war on Austria-Hungary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 1916</td>
<td>Italy declares war on Germany</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 1916</td>
<td>Italian army captures Gorizia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 1917</td>
<td>Italian defeat at Caporetto; Vittorio Orlando forms a new government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 1917</td>
<td>Parliamentary Union for National Defence established</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 1918</td>
<td>Italian victory at Vittorio Veneto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 1918</td>
<td>First World War ends with Italy on the winning side</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

From neutrality to intervention, August 1914–May 1915

Italy stays neutral

Unlike the Central Powers and the Entente powers, Italy did not enter the First World War in August 1914. Instead, it declared its neutrality.

Although Italy was still formally part of the Triple Alliance, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia in late July without consulting its southern ally in advance. This meant that Italy was under no formal obligation to offer support.
Section 2: Impact of the First World War

Take note

As you read through this section, consider why Italy remained neutral in August 1914 and then entered the First World War in May 1915. Make a list of the key factors influencing each decision. Was public opinion important in either case?

Biography

Antonio Salandra
(1853–1931)
A prominent moderate liberal and former university professor, Salandra served as Prime Minister from 1914 to 1916 but failed to impose political control over the Italian military campaign. After the war, he initially backed Fascist policies and was made a senator by Mussolini in 1928.

Antonio Salandra in 19XX

Glossary

Sacred egoism
A phrase used by Salandra which indicated that he would negotiate with the other powers purely to secure gains for Italy.

The Italian government also wanted to preserve friendly relations with Britain, not least because the latter supplied most of Italy’s coal and possessed a powerful navy. The population as a whole – including most Catholics and Socialists – appeared to favour neutrality. Giolitti and a majority of deputies in the Chamber endorsed the public mood. They were convinced that, after the recent invasion of Libya (1911), Italy lacked the economic strength required for a major war. Instead, Giolitti suggested, the nation could gain ‘a great deal’ by bargaining with both sides to stay out of the war.

Even so, the policy of neutrality posed a number of problems. If the Triple Entente were victorious, they would have little incentive to hand over the Austrian land Italy wanted (Trentino and Trieste); further, Russia would become a major rival in the Balkans and the Adriatic. If the Central Powers won the war, they might seek to punish Italy for its ‘betrayal’ of the Triple Alliance. Consequently, the Italian Prime Minister Antonio Salandra and the Foreign Minister Sidney Sonnino held secret negotiations with both sides to see what price Italy could secure for its active support.

Salandra’s approach to these talks was one of ‘sacred egoism’ and, in September 1914, he remarked that ‘if I thought I had had the opportunity to restore Trentino and Trieste to Italy and that I had let it slip, I would not have a moment’s peace for the rest of my life!’ He also concluded that the Italian monarchy and other national institutions would not survive a peace treaty which did not give Italy political and territorial rewards.

The intervention crisis, May 1915

Ultimately, Britain and France made the most attractive offer. On 26 April 1915, Italy agreed to enter the war on the side of the Entente by signing the Treaty of London. In return, Italy was to receive the South Tyrol, Trentino, Istria, Trieste and much of Dalmatia. Just two men – Salandra and Sonnino – committed Italy to this course of action. The king’s endorsement was required in the final weeks leading up to the agreement but both parliament and the public were kept completely in the dark. By this stage, though, a sizeable minority of Italians, including Nationalists, Futurists, Syndicalists and dissident Socialists, were pro-war.

One of the most prominent interventionists was Benito Mussolini (see profile on page X), a revolutionary socialist who edited the left-wing daily newspaper Avanti! (‘Forward!’). In October 1914, Mussolini publicly criticised outright neutrality and resigned from the newspaper. A month later, after calling for Italy to enter the war as an ally of the Entente, he was expelled from the Socialist Party.

The decision for war was driven by domestic political considerations as well. Salandra hoped that a successful military campaign would consolidate his position as national leader and enable him to outmanoeuvre his rival, Giolitti. Yet, when rumours of an agreement began to circulate in early May, more than 300 deputies left their visiting cards at the hotel in Rome where Giolitti was staying to show their continued support for neutrality. Without a parliamentary majority for intervention, Salandra resigned on 13 May 1915.
Giolitti was asked to form a new government but soon gave up once it became clear that Italy would be humiliated if it now rejected the Treaty of London having abandoned the Triple Alliance. He also feared that the king, who had sent telegrams endorsing the agreement with Britain and France, might be forced to abdicate. At the same time, interventionist demonstrations took place in major cities. Gabriele D’Annunzio delivered inflammatory pro-war speeches to large audiences in Rome and Mussolini attracted a crowd of 30,000 in Milan. These gatherings called for Italy’s immediate entry into the conflict, denounced Giolitti and the neutralists as traitors, and condemned the parliamentary system for ‘betraying’ the Risorgimento.

On 16 May, the king reinstated Salandra as Prime Minister. Giolitti accepted defeat and left the capital. Four days later, the Chamber shifted its position: by a majority of 407 to 74, it granted the government full emergency powers and finance. The Socialist Party, unlike its Western European counterparts, voted against and remained opposed to war. Then, on 24 May, Italy declared war on Austria-Hungary. Salandra called on the nation to put ‘internal discords’ aside and come together in ‘marvellous moral unity’ to secure victory and complete the work of the Risorgimento. Italy did not declare war on Germany until 19 July 1916.

The manner in which Italy entered the First World War fostered a myth of ‘interventionism’ which proved to be damaging and divisive. According to this myth, a handful of senior politicians, driven on by a vocal pro-war minority, had committed the nation to the conflict despite opposition from parliament and the Italian establishment. In fact, Italy joined the European war in the traditional diplomatic way (with the Prime Minister, Foreign Minister and king making policy) and for the usual reason – the promise of rewards. Parliament, although overwhelmingly in favour of neutrality, accepted the decision for war. Furthermore, the interventionists exerted little real influence over the events of May 1915. Nonetheless, the myth had two disastrous consequences for Italy. It helped to harden the attitudes of many interventionists against parliament and the ‘unpatriotic’, and strengthen their demands for more territory. More importantly, it exaggerated the significance of individuals such as D’Annunzio and Mussolini in the intervention crisis and allowed them to claim the credit for Italy’s entry into the war.

**Futurism**
A strongly nationalistic and imperialistic cultural movement of the early 20th century, Futurism valued action, speed and violence. It also embraced the virtues of modern technology. Filippo Marinetti, a writer, was the most famous Futurist.

**Syndicalism**
A radical form of socialism which argued that the trade unions would overthrow the capitalist system through strike action and then become the key political and economic organisations of the new society.

**Gabriele D’Annunzio**
(1863–1938)
A prominent nationalist and major literary figure, D’Annunzio was a powerful advocate of Italian intervention in 1914–1915 and volunteered to fight at the age of 52. In August 1918, as a publicity stunt, he flew over Vienna and dropped propaganda leaflets. He was effectively sidelined by Mussolini after the Fiume episode (1919–1920, see page X), but was appointed President of the Royal Academy of Arts in 1937.
Italian army
During the war, nearly five million Italian men were conscripted and the allocation of duties sharpened north-south and peasant-worker tensions. Most front-line soldiers were southern peasants and agricultural workers. Skilled northern workers were sent instead to ‘safer’ army engineering or artillery units or else assigned to armament factories away from the combat zone. Soldiers were badly paid (half a lira per day), poorly fed, subjected to harsh military discipline and entitled to just one 15 day period of leave each year. These conditions led to low morale – 55,000 deserted between early 1917 and early 1918.

By the late summer of 1917, Italy’s war appeared to be unravelling. The Russian army was disintegrating. American military intervention had yet to have an impact and, within the Italian ranks, morale was low. At home, public confidence in the war effort was fragile. Paolo Boselli’s government, which had replaced Salandra’s administration in June 1916, lacked energy, and Vittorio Orlando, the Interior Minister, was widely criticised by interventionists as ‘soft’ on defeatism. The Socialist Party remained opposed to the conflict and neutralist Giolittian deputies still held a majority in parliament.

Two events in August 1917 further soured the popular mood. Pope Benedict XV made a public appeal for the warring nations to stop ‘the useless slaughter’ which had a marked effect on Italian morale. Shortly afterwards, bread riots broke out in Turin, Italy’s chief armaments centre.
Disaster at Caporetto, October 1917
Worse was to come. On 24 October 1917, Austro-Hungarian forces, strengthened by seven German divisions, broke through the Italian lines at Caporetto and pushed down to the River Piave (25 miles inside Italy), which became the new war zone. Hundreds of thousands of Italian soldiers fled in confusion. Caporetto was a national humiliation. Within a few days, Italy suffered huge military losses (40,000 casualties, 280,000 prisoners of war and 350,000 deserters), relinquished its wartime territorial gains and a large part of Venetia too, and then had to fight the Central Powers inside its own borders. General Luigi Cadorna, the Italian Commander-in-Chief, refused to accept responsibility, blaming instead the Pope, Giolitti, the neutralist Italian Socialists (PSI) and his own troops, who ‘cravenly withdrew’. The Boselli government, however, resigned on 25 October.

Caporetto created a wave of nationalism which had not previously existed in wartime Italy. Until then, most Italians had reluctantly accepted involvement in a conflict fought at the border but now the country had been invaded by the Central Powers. In December 1917, more than 150 deputies and 90 senators established a Parliamentary Union for National Defence. Local vigilante bodies were also formed to dispense crude street justice to the ‘unpatriotic’. Many members of these grass roots nationalist groups became supporters of Fascism after the war.

A victory of sorts, October–November 1918
After Caporetto, the new Prime Minister, Vittorio Orlando, removed Cadorna and the Italian army regrouped under his successor, General Armando Diaz. With the help of six French and British divisions, the Italians repelled a massive Central Power assault on the Piave front in June 1918. Four months later, the Austrian military effort collapsed. On 25 October, Italian forces, again with British and French support, launched an offensive over the Piave and by 29 October had taken the strategic town of Vittorio Veneto. The Austrians retreated in disorder back across the border. On 3 November, Italian troops captured Trentino and entered Trieste. At Austria’s request, an armistice was signed the next day and Germany stopped fighting a week later. Caporetto had been avenged and Italy emerged as one of the victorious nations, but at a heavy cost: 600,000 Italian soldiers had been killed in the conflict.

The Italian war economy
The ‘industrial mobilisation’ system
In 1915, many feared the Italian economy would be unable to cope with the demands imposed by a drawn-out conflict. Indeed, the war brought severe financial pressures and led to serious social discontent. In August 1917, for example, bread shortages sparked a full-scale riot in Turin which claimed some 50 lives. Nevertheless, although there were persistent shortages of vital raw materials, such as coal and steel, Italy performed something of an ‘economic miracle’ when it came to the war effort.
Section 2: Impact of the First World War

The army possessed just 613 machine guns in 1915 but, three years later, the total had risen to nearly 20,000. By then, the military also had over 7,000 cannon in operation – more than the British. Between 1914 and 1918, annual vehicle production at Fiat increased from 4,500 to 25,000, making the company Europe's leading truck and lorry manufacturer. Furthermore, an aeronautical industry sprang up virtually from scratch and, in 1918 alone, 6,500 planes were built.

The driving force behind the Italian war effort was the ‘industrial mobilisation’ system of economic planning. To raise production, the government established an Under-Secretariat (later Ministry) of Arms and Munitions which was headed by General Alfredo Dallolio. Dallolio proved to be a dynamic organiser who ensured that, through his department, the state offered cheap loans, payment in advance and attractive contracts to favoured firms and industrialists. Companies central to the war effort (and there were 1,976 of them by November 1918) were placed under ‘industrial mobilisation’, which regulated hours of work and wages, prohibited strikes and subjected employees to military discipline.

Some 905,000 workers were organized in this way. Of these, over one-third (331,000) were men exempted, or on secondment, from military service. Women accounted for about a quarter of the armament labour force and the rest were recruited mainly from the peasantry. Most industrial workers resented this military-style supervision, partly because of the long hours. By 1916, a 75 hour week was the norm at Fiat. A 25 per cent fall in real wages during the war merely sharpened this sense of grievance. Frontline soldiers and interventionists, however, regarded urban workers, with their secure jobs away from the fighting, as spineless shirkers. This perception was to provide a potent source of division and bitterness in post-war Italy.

Only a handful of companies in the ‘industrial mobilisation' programme, such as Fiat (motor vehicles), Breda (engineering), Ansaldo and Ilva (steel), and Montecatini (chemicals), really benefited from the war. These firms expanded rapidly, made huge profits and absorbed many of their competitors. Fiat's workforce rose dramatically from 6,000 to 30,000 and its capital increased from 25 million to 125 million lire. Ansaldo and Ilva bought up iron mines, engineering plants and shipping lines. Towards the end of the war, these industrial giants were also competing with each other to buy leading Italian banks in order to guarantee themselves credit and deny it to their rivals. Both the workers and soldiers denounced these companies as 'sharks' and war profiteers.

The cost of the war

Most of this economic growth, of course, had been generated by massive state spending on war-related items. Consequently, the major firms faced the prospect of severe contraction when peacetime conditions returned and government orders dried up. The total sum paid out by the state during the conflict was around 41 billion lire (at pre-war prices) and, by the end of the war, Italy faced a serious budget deficit of 23.3 billion lire.

Take note

As you read through this section, identify (a) the strengths and weaknesses of the ‘industrial mobilisation’ system and (b) the main economic problems caused by the war. What condition was the Italian economy in by November 1918?
To help finance the war effort, the authorities took out foreign loans from Britain and the USA which contributed to a five-fold increase in the National Debt between 1914 and 1919. The government also printed more money to cover its wartime spending but this resulted in inflationary price rises.

The war deepened the north-south divide too. The war boom of 1915–1918 mainly benefited north-west Italy, where most of the arms firms were located. Industrial centres in this region, such as Milan and Turin, experienced population growth of over 20 per cent in the decade after 1911. These developments strengthened the perception that there were ‘two nations’ – a relatively affluent industrialised urban north and an economically backward rural south. More than two-and-a-half million peasants and labourers from the countryside served in the army between 1915 and 1918, leaving older men, women and youths to tend the crops. Nonetheless, food production was maintained at about 95 per cent of the pre-war level. This feat clearly revealed the extent of rural overpopulation and the size of the surplus agricultural labour force. Government propaganda, and official measures promoting agricultural cooperatives on uncultivated land, raised peasant expectations that smallholdings would be widely available after the war. During 1918, landowners became increasingly concerned as peasants vented their frustration by organising unofficial land occupations in Latium and Emilia. It seemed certain that, once the rural troops had returned to their villages, the peasant clamour for land would intensify.

Conclusion: did the war unite Italians?

In some ways, the First World War fostered a sense of Italian nationalism through shared domestic and military experience of the conflict. Having said this, it did more to divide Italians. By November 1918, the nation was badly split – soldiers against ‘shirkers’, peasants against workers, and interventionists against ‘defeatists’ (as Socialists, Catholics and the Giolittian majority in parliament were labelled). The war had also produced other potentially destabilising developments: a more industrialised northern economy, mounting peasant demands for land, and growing criticism of the liberal political system. Italy may have emerged victorious in 1918 but could it avoid a post-war crisis?

Activity: The impact of the First World War on Italy

- Create a grid on Italy 1915–1918 using the following headings: Strengths, Weaknesses, Political, Economic, Social, Military.
- Identify the major strength and major weakness of Italy during the First World War.
- What overall condition was Italy in by November 1918?