



*The Italian Army and the First World War* by John Gooch.

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This installment in the Cambridge series on the major armies of World War One assesses the performance of the Italian military, as well as political and economic aspects of the conflict as they pertain to one of the lesser powers on the Allied side. Historian John Gooch (Univ. of Leeds) has dedicated his distinguished academic career to the study of topics like Italian civil-military relations, the relationship between the military and fascism, and post-unification Italian military organization and capabilities.<sup>1</sup>

For this well written study, Gooch taps extensive archival sources, many of them uncited elsewhere or cited only in Italian-language scholarly literature.<sup>2</sup> As he indicates in his introduction, Anglophone historians, lacking familiarity with such primary source material, have produced very little on Italy's military contribution to the Great War. In his own view, Italy's role in the Allied cause was crucial for several reasons. Its entry into the war compelled the Austro-Hungarian Empire to redeploy forces from the Eastern to the Italian front, thus alleviating the pressure on Russia, and forced the Germans to lend more support to the overstretched Austro-Hungarians, especially in 1917. This in turn benefited the British and French allies in their titanic struggle with the German war machine on the Western Front. For example, Gooch argues that Italy's recovery from its defeat at Caporetto in 1917 spared the British and French an even more concentrated assault by the Central Powers during the Germans' massive offensive in 1918. "Italy's participation in the Great War on the Allied side was thus a factor of cardinal importance" (2), ultimately tilting the overall balance of power in favor of the Allies.

The first chapters concern Italy's political, economic, and social conditions prior to the war, stressing that its war effort was limited by an ineffective industrial base, socialist and Roman Catholic opposition to the war, and divisiveness between neutralists and interventionists within its political elites. Gooch astutely identifies the role of emotional and nationalistic considerations in, for example, the occupation of Trento and Trieste. He cites germane economic data showing that Italy's industrial capacity was much smaller than those of Germany, Britain, and France; this compelled the national state to fully mobilize both its manufacturing and agricultural sectors to try to make up ground on the Central Powers. Despite these measures, Italy's economic output lagged far behind Germany's throughout the war.

Gooch also convincingly demonstrates that, before Italy entered the war, its political and military elites were well aware of the bloody stalemate of trench warfare on the Western Front owing to machine gun and heavy artillery fire, yet failed to adapt or innovate their tactics accordingly to deal with Austrian fortifications and trenches. In 1915, the Italian army faced a less than full-strength Austro-Hungarian army. For example, many mountain passes in the Dolomites were held early on by the lightly armed Landeschützen territorial forces, rather than regular army units. Still, the Italians failed

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1. In 2011, he was awarded "Cavaliere" (knighthood) status by the president of the Italian Republic.

2. The book neatly complements Piero Pieri, *La Prima Guerra Mondiale* (Udine: Gaspari, 1988), and Giorgio Rochat, *Gli Arditi della Grande Guerra: Origini, battaglie, miti* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1981).

to break through Austrian lines, primarily because of Comando supremo's vague directives and Lt. Gen. Luigi Nava's overly cautious command of the Italian Fourth Army.

These failures prevented an early penetration of the Dolomites to invade Lienz and Innsbruck. A couple months after Italy's declaration of war, the Austrians fortified their positions on key mountain passes and peaks. Gooch stresses as well the poor quality of the officer corps and especially top leaders like Chief of Staff Gen. Luigi Cadorna, whose strict discipline, uninspiring leadership, and attack-at-all-costs policies drove the army to the edge of collapse in 1917. Like John Schindler,<sup>3</sup> he argues that Cadorna's commitment to outlasting the Austro-Hungarians in a war of attrition caused enormous casualties. Cadorna's strategy had not changed after two years of huge losses when he authorized the Battle of Monte Ortigara (1917), where countless Alpini units were gunned down by "hidden machine gun nests" (225). Unsurprisingly, Gooch observes, troop morale improved markedly when Cadorna was sacked and replaced by Gen. Armando Diaz who showed more concern for the diet, training, weaponry, and general well being of his troops.

Another major theme of the book is the woefully inferior training of the Italian infantryman, which vitiated Italy's first military maneuvers and offensive plans. Tactically, the Italians introduced no real innovations till 1917, when they began to emulate the defensive and offensive tactics of the German army on the Western Front. In that same year, the new, elite Arditi (Storm Troops), modeled on German and Austrian Sturmtruppen, broke the impasse of trench warfare. The Comando supremo deployed some of these men in dedicated flamethrower and machine gun units, like those on the Western Front. The Arditi went through a rigorous selection process, ensuring their superiority to standard infantry battalions—"The immediate goal was to professionalize the men by teaching them routines where run of the mill infantry doctrine still aimed to turn out automata. Beyond that, they were to serve as a model for the army at large as well as an instrument with which to overcome the tactical stalemate" (202).

The Arditi achieved tactical surprise against fortified Austrian defenses through their speed and such new weapons as grenades, smoke bombs, small machine guns, and flamethrowers. In addition, coordination of artillery and infantry assault units was improved through a comprehensive restructuring. These advances enabled the Italians to capture the Tre Monti in early 1918 and to seize vital peaks and passes in the spring, positions they would use as launch points during their major offensive in October of that year. Finally, the defenses were shored up along the Piave River and Monte Grappa, again by adopting the defensive tactics of the Germans on the Western Front, such as, for example, organizing staggered and in-depth defenses, positioning artillery units in more secure locations, and forming small infantry units for quick counterattacks. These adjustments enabled the Italian army to halt the enemy advance and inflict serious damage during the critical Battle of the Solstice in mid-1918.

The battle of the bridges cost the Italians 85,000 in dead, wounded, missing and prisoner of war. Austrian losses amounted to 143,000 men.... The Italians had achieved more than either they or their allies realized at the time. The Austrians dated the beginning of their collapse from the failure on the Piave, and Hindenburg too saw it as the end of any Austrian threat to Italy. (282)

The improved Italian artillery and infantry units at the battle thwarted Austrian frontal assaults with timely counterbattery fire and local counterattacks. On Mount Grappa, for instance, the Italians subjected Austrian and German forces to withering artillery fire just as they were organizing for an attack. In the battle's last stages, the Arditi cleared out positions that had been captured by the enemy.

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3. *Isonzo: The Forgotten Sacrifice* (NY: Praeger, 2001) 108: "The bloody Third Battle [of the Isonzo] had failed to achieve anything of note, but this naturally did not restrain Cadorna from another attempt to break the Austrians hold on the Isonzo."

Gooch accomplishes two things exceedingly well. First, he argues persuasively that the final battle of Vittorio Veneto was no preordained success for Italy. Rather, he writes, the evidence shows that it was a fiercely fought engagement against a determined enemy that contributed to the final collapse of the Central Powers. This contradicts some leading historians of the Great War, including B.H. Liddell Hart<sup>4</sup> and A.J.P. Taylor.<sup>5</sup> Gooch maintains that the Battle of Vittorio Veneto in conjunction with earlier defensive victories on the Piave River and at Mount Grappa during the Battle of the Solstice permanently crippled Austrian-Hungarian forces.

Ready at last, the Italian army began the climatic battle of Vittorio Veneto on 24 October 1918, a battle which the allies thought at the time and historians have since believed was a last minute attempt to cash in on a war that was already over. In fact, planning for the battle began several months before it happened and when it did the Italian army inflicted a decisive defeat in the field on its opponent, something its British and French partners were unable to do in the West. (247)

Secondly, the author also establishes that the Battle of Vittorio Veneto ensured the isolation of Germany in its two-front war. During the armistice negotiations with the Austrians, the French and Italians obtained a key concession—the stipulation that their troops could travel freely within Austria to strike Germany from the south. Under further threat of an attack against Bavaria, the Kaiser and his military reached a peace accord with Allied forces just ten days after Austria-Hungary surrendered.

Two minor omissions: though Gooch repeatedly mentions that Alpine warfare was complicated by extreme cold weather, snow, avalanches, and daunting logistical challenges, his book lacks a chapter or even subchapter on these critical aspects of the fighting. These conditions necessitated distinctive skill sets and organizational capabilities unlike those that prevailed on the Western Front. For example, a special unit of Alpine troops led by Italo Lunelli secured the Passo della Sentinella in 1916 by descending three thousand meters down a mountain during a snowstorm to assault enemy defenses. In 1918, one Lt. Carlo Sabatini led a handful of Arditi in a surprise attack on a well fortified enemy position on Monte Corno. The inclusion of a few such case studies would have clarified the types of challenges faced by both Austrian Kaiserjäger and Italian Alpini. The book also lacks any detailed treatment of the unique army units and armaments deployed on the Italian front.

Apart from these small gaps, John Gooch's book is a judicious and measured evaluation of the Italian army's successes and failures during the First World War. It definitively proves that the struggle on the Italian front shifted the balance of power toward France and Britain and helped make an Allied victory inevitable.

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4. *The Real War, 1914–1918* (Boston: Little, 1930).

5. Who falsifies history by arguing that “after the armistice had been signed, but before it came into force, the Italians emerged from behind the British and French troops, where they had been hiding, and captured hundreds of thousands of unharmed, unresisting Austro-Hungarian soldiers in the ‘great’ victory of Vittorio Veneto”—*The Habsburg Monarchy, 1809–1918: A History of the Austrian Empire and Austria-Hungary* (Chicago: U Chicago Pr, 1978) 251.