

# Truth and fake news about Caporetto

## Explaining the disaster in Italy and in Britain

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*for Paolo Pollanzi*

### Abstract

A lightning victory by combined Austro-German forces in October 1917 threatened to knock Italy out of the war. This was the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo, often called ‘Caporetto’. General Luigi Cadorna, the chief of general staff, branded army units as cowards and blamed them for the disaster. His accusation met with dismay at home and sympathy mixed with disdain abroad. Investigation quickly gave the lie to Cadorna, yet the stain has persisted. In Britain, the prime minister and the head of the armed forces disagreed about the causes of Caporetto, as did also the historian G.M. Trevelyan and the future politician Hugh Dalton. Analysis of the dissemination, reception and legacy of Cadorna’s message in Italy and Britain reveals something about military-political relations, class attitudes, media systems, and national prejudice.

### I. Introduction: the astounding disaster<sup>1</sup>

Two hours after midnight on 24 October 1917, German and Austrian batteries opened a bombardment along a 30-kilometre front in the Julian Alps, where Italy had six divisions in the line. The weight and accuracy of shelling were unprecedented; gun lines, observation posts and communications were shattered.

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<sup>1</sup> ‘This astounding disaster required immediate exertions by Britain and France.’ W.S. Churchill, *The World Crisis*. Vol. iii. 1916-1918 (London, 2015 [1927]), p. 243.

Using infiltration tactics unknown on the Italian front, and favoured by mist and freezing rain, a force of 15 divisions moved into the Plezzo (now Bovec) basin, where gas had silenced Italian positions, and out of the Tolmin bridgehead, respectively north and south of Caporetto (now Kobarid). Italian lines were swiftly breached. This sector lay in the operational area of Second Army, comprising almost half of Italy's battalions. Four divisions mounted little resistance, and collapse became a rout. Around noon on 26 October, General Luigi Cadorna, Italy's Chief of Staff, ordered a general retirement behind the Tagliamento river, some 60 kilometres to the west. The next day, he transferred his headquarters from Udine to Treviso, a hundred kilometres westwards. No deputy remained to oversee the retreat.

Surprise was caused not by the fact or location of the attack but by its tactics, force and efficiency. Cadorna was expecting the major thrust further south. In late September, he announced the end of campaigning for the year and ordered the adoption of defensive postures. Tactical orders followed on 10 October.<sup>2</sup> General Capello, commanding Second Army, only followed these orders on the afternoon of 23 October. One of his corps commanders, General Badoglio, failed to pull his forward forces back across the Isonzo.

Detailed accounts of the battle and retreat are available elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> Second Army, with some 670,000 men, retreated in disorder. Many units disintegrated en route. With reserves and services in the rear, over a million uniformed men joined the rout. Some 400,000 civilians also joined the flight. Further south, Third Army was forced to retreat with little

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<sup>2</sup> J.E. Edmonds and H.R. Davies, *Military Operations Italy 1915—1919* (London, 1949), p. 47.

<sup>3</sup> In English, see J. Gooch, *The Italian Army and the First World War* (Cambridge, 2014), pp. 226-46; J.R. Schindler, *Isonzo* (Westport, CT, 2001), pp. 243-66; D. Stevenson, *1917. War, Peace & Revolution* (Oxford, 2017), pp. 205-33. In Italian, the literature about Caporetto was 'vastissima' by 1969: see P. Melograni, *Storia politica della Grande Guerra 1915-1918* (Bari, 1969), p. 389.

warning. According to the commander of British forces in Italy, Third Army received ‘no definite orders of any sort regarding retirement’, and ‘any orders issued afterwards were constantly changed.’<sup>4</sup> Its 300,000 men reached the Tagliamento, mounting sporadic rearguard action. North of Second Army, the commanders of Carnia Corps hesitated until most of their 90,000 men were trapped. Farther west, the 230,000 men of Fourth Army abandoned their lines in the Dolomite mountains.<sup>5</sup>

‘Between the Isonzo and the Tagliamento’, two historians have written, ‘the retreat shattered into a thousand confused episodes.’<sup>6</sup> Cadorna balked at requesting help but France and Britain, assessing that Italy’s collapse would be ‘really disastrous to the Entente cause’, offered four and two divisions respectively, with artillery support.<sup>7</sup> By the end of October, Italy’s elite and middle class believed the country faced one of its worst crises since unification. If Italy was not forced to reach a separate peace with the Central Powers, the masses might refuse to fight any more. In Rome, ‘all internal political dissent’ was silenced. The coalition government of Paolo Boselli fell. Francesco Nitti, a minister in the new cabinet, wrote to Boselli’s successor in tones that caught the drama of the moment: ‘The one great matter is to limit the invasion and organise resistance. Attend to nothing else. ... Sacrifice all of us if necessary, but you must succeed. ... Sacrifice all of us and we will follow you.’ The

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<sup>4</sup> ‘Report by Gen. Hamilton on retirement of IIIrd Italian Army, 13 November 1917’: TNA WO 106/795.

<sup>5</sup> M. Isnenghi and G. Rochat, *La Grande Guerra 1914-1918* (Milan, 2004), p. 387.

<sup>6</sup> Isnenghi and Rochat, *Grande Guerra*, p. 388.

<sup>7</sup> Robertson to Haig, 28 Oct. 1917: Parliamentary Archives, LG/F/44/3/30. Delmé-Radcliffe reported to Robertson at 1600 on 26 Oct. that Cadorna was ‘very anxious for the offer of a contingent of French and British troops’: Parliamentary Archives, LG/F/44/3/27.

King hinted at abdication. The philosopher Benedetto Croce, usually slow to rouse, was electrified: ‘The fate of Italy is being decided for centuries to come.’<sup>8</sup>

By 2 November, it was clear the new line would not hold, and the retreat resumed towards the river Piave, 50 km further west. In the second week of November, as the Piave line began to stabilise, a balance of defeat could be drawn: Italy had lost nearly 11,000 dead and 29,000 wounded, 350,000 disbanded men, and around 290,000 prisoners. ‘Thirty-eight divisions out of sixty-five had been put out of action.’ Around half the artillery was in enemy hands, including two thirds of the heavy guns, and territory amounting to 14,000 square kilometres, including all the ground won during the previous 29 months along the Isonzo front at a cost of more than half a million Italian deaths. In total, some two million people were displaced.<sup>9</sup> Cadorna’s dismissal was agreed on 6 November.

## **II. The communiqué and Italian media**

The emergency was lent unique impetus and definition on 28 October by the daily communiqué from the war zone, signed by Cadorna. Its first sentence read:

Absent resistance by units of the Second Army, which retreated as cowards without fighting or surrendered ignominiously to the enemy, has permitted Austro-German forces to pierce our left wing on the Julian front.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> G. Procacci, ‘The disaster of Caporetto’, in J. Dickie et al. (eds), *Disastro! Disasters in Italy since 1860* (New York, 2002), pp. 151, 142; F. Minniti, *Il Piave* (Bologna, 2002), p. 106.

<sup>9</sup> Procacci, ‘Disaster’, p. 141; RCI, Vol II, p. 541.

<sup>10</sup> The remainder of the communiqué read as follows: ‘The valiant efforts of the other troops did not succeed in preventing the enemy from reaching the sacred soil of the Fatherland. Our line is falling back according to the pre-established plan. Magazines and supplies in evacuated villages have been destroyed. The valour shown by our soldiers in so many battles fought and won over two and a half years of war gives the Supreme Command

The communiqué was distributed as usual to foreign correspondents and Allied military missions at the Supreme Command (as Cadorna styled his general headquarters), and telegraphed to the government in Rome for domestic use. At the Ministry of the Interior, the incendiary sentence was revised: ‘The violence of the attack and deficient resistance by certain units of the Second Army has permitted...’ The government could not recall the original or prevent it from re-entering Italy. The newspaper editor Olindo Malagodi noted that public opinion was indignant about it. Italian diplomats told the Foreign Ministry that it created ‘a disastrous impression’ abroad; in London it had a ‘very depressing effect’. Ferdinando Martini, a writer and elder statesman, was appalled by the ‘perfidious’ message: instead of ‘giving people faith’, Cadorna had ‘let them believe that the soldiers wouldn’t fight’. Meanwhile Habsburg propagandists made instant use of the communiqué, quoting it in leaflets dropped on the retreating Italians: ‘It is your own generalissimo who dishonours and insults you, simply to excuse himself.’<sup>11</sup>

In Italy as elsewhere, war information was tightly controlled. Royal decrees in March and May 1915 forced newspapers to use only official sources about the military. Regional authorities could seize newspapers which disobeyed. Publishers were invited to submit their

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confidence that this time too the army, to which the honour and salvation of the Country have been entrusted, will do its duty.’ See S. Lucchini and A. Santagata (eds), *Narrare il conflitto. Propaganda e cultura nella Grande Guerra (1915-1918)* (Milan, 2015), p. 68. The communiqué was probably drafted by General Porro, Cadorna’s deputy, perhaps with two senior staff officers, Col. Foschini and Col. Siciliani. See S. Cilibrizzi, *Caporetto nella leggenda e nella storia* (Naples, 1947), p. 26; L. Falsini, *Processo a Caporetto* (Rome, 2017), pp. 42-4.

<sup>11</sup> Malagodi, *Conversazioni della guerra 1914-1919* (Milan, 1960), I, p. 171; L.A. Marescotti and S. Crespi, quoted by Cilibrizzi, *Caporetto*, p. 26; F. Martini, *Diario 1914-1918* (Verona, 1966), p. 1023; Lucchini, *Narrare il conflitto*, p. 67.

papers for preventive censorship, and many accepted. Journalists were initially banned from the war zone. The official communiqués were published without comment.

After several months, escorted visits to the front began to be permitted and a dozen correspondents (including three from Allied countries) were attached to the Supreme Command. While the communiqué remained the centrepiece of coverage, it was supplemented by reporters' stories approved by the Press Office.<sup>12</sup> Embedded journalists admired Cadorna inordinately, so self-censorship was rife.<sup>13</sup> The most significant support came from *Corriere della Sera*, the elite and middle-class newspaper of record; its editor, Luigi Albertini, was friendly with Cadorna and – as a member of parliament – well connected in Rome; his leading war correspondents, Luigi Barzini and Arnaldo Fraccaroli, were celebrities; other embedded *Corriere* journalists routinely helped with the communiqué.<sup>14</sup>

Italian newspapers published the communiqué and then fell silent about Caporetto. Cadorna and his staff used contacts with journalists, politicians, Allied attachés and visitors

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<sup>12</sup> N. Labanca, 'La stampa e il silenzio su Caporetto dopo Caporetto', in G. Berti and P. Del Negro (eds), *Al di qua e al di là del Piave* (Milan, 2001), p. 495.

<sup>13</sup> Labanca, 'La stampa', p. 492. The journalists' cult of Cadorna was attested by Rino Alessi of *Il Secolo* newspaper, writing home on 28 or 29 October: 'Here, naturally, nobody trusts anyone except Cadorna. ... He has done everything that is humanly possible. The foreign attachés rest their only hopes in him. They come away from meetings marvelling at his strength, his tenacity, his faith, his readiness to deliberate ...': R. Alessi, *Dall'Isonzo al Piave* (Milan, 1966), p. 146. An opposite impression was gained a day or two later by General Robertson, who found 'the greatest confusion': 'There is no real command anywhere. Much jabbering but no one is catching hold of things and getting them done. ... Whole question is one of organisation and energy and both these essentials are absent.' CIGS to Secretary of State for War, 31 Oct. 1917: Parliamentary Archives, LG/F/163/1/3.

<sup>14</sup> P. Murialdi, *Storia del giornalismo italiano* (Bologna, 1996), pp. 116-22; A. Santagata, 'La costruzione del "fronte interno"', in Lucchini, *Narrare il conflitto*, p. 61.

to reiterate that the defeat was caused by organised treachery of a political character. Prime Minister Orlando suppressed discussion of the crisis. Members of parliament criticised Cadorna's accusation, but in unreported committee meetings.<sup>15</sup> The veil of silence was not lifted until summer 1919, when an official inquiry published its report (see below). The silence seethed with rumours. Newspapers could be controlled but it was impossible to stop people expressing 'violent recriminations against the government and the Supreme Command'.<sup>16</sup>

If Cadorna's accusation struck the public from a clear sky, political circles were aware that he had been obsessed with the government's alleged failure to root out 'defeatism', represented by the 'neutralists' who had opposed Italy's intervention in 1915, meaning above all the Socialists and the Catholic Church, and enemy propaganda agents.<sup>17</sup> More generally, native indiscipline made Italians unsuitable warriors. As evidence of low morale accumulated in 1917, his accusations grew more strident.<sup>18</sup> In late October, his explanation and blame

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<sup>15</sup> G. Procacci, 'L'impatto di Caporetto nell'opinione pubblica italiana', in *Kobarid Caporetto Karfreit 1917-1997* (Kobarid, 1998), p. 256.

<sup>16</sup> Murialdi, *Giornalismo*, p. 120; Melograni, *Storia politica*, p. 439; G. Rochat, *L'Esercito italiano da Vittorio Veneto a Mussolini (1919-1925)* (Bari, 1967), p. 73; Labanca, 'La stampa', pp. 491, 515; Melograni, *Storia politica*, p. 440.

<sup>17</sup> Cadorna reacted furiously to Pope Benedict XV's open letter of 1 August 1917, which characterised the war as a 'useless slaughter' [*inutile strage*]. Attempts were made, in vain, to ban newspapers reporting the letter from the war zone.

<sup>18</sup> Findings of guilt on charges of desertion almost trebled to 28,000 during the second year of war, from June 1916 to May 1917. See J. Gooch, 'Morale and Discipline in the Italian Army, 1915-1918', in H. Cecil and P. Liddle (eds), *Facing Armageddon* (Barnsley, 2016 [1996]), p. 439. In June and August 1917, Cadorna addressed four letters to the government, alleging that defeatist influences and 'subversive propaganda' were penetrating the war zone and demoralising the army. He demanded 'the strongest measures of repression', matching his own 'extreme measures against every act of indiscipline'. See Cilibrizzi, *Caporetto*, pp. 23-4.

were ready. To his son on 25 October: ‘the troops aren’t fighting ... imminent disaster is obvious.’ To his daughter the following day: ‘we are suffering the consequences of subversion in our country which has gone unchecked for many years.’ Also on 26 October, he told Brigadier Charles Delmé-Radcliffe at the British Mission that troops had abandoned positions, due to ‘intrigues in the country.’ To Boselli: ‘If the contagion spreads in Third Army, the disaster will be complete. The army is yielding, beaten not by the enemy without but by the enemy within’.<sup>19</sup> On 31 October, he asked a confidant in his office: ‘Is it my fault if the Army is full of vermin?’<sup>20</sup>

His assessment was widely shared by senior officers. General Capello and at least two of his corps commanders, Badoglio and Caviglia, reported by 25 October that troops had abandoned positions, surrendered *en masse*, or responded inertly.<sup>21</sup> The communiqué expressed the Supreme Command’s collective wisdom and the collective dread of Italy’s political class, which had half expected another historic fiasco (after Custoza and Lissa in 1866 and Adwa in 1896). Cadorna’s message looked like the invoice for having dragged the country into a holocaust of choice, on grounds never sufficiently explained.

### **III. The Commission, fake news and Cadorna’s legacy**

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<sup>19</sup> M. Mondini, *Il Capo* (Bologna, 2017), p. 281; V. Wilcox, ‘Generalship and Mass Surrender during the Italian Defeat at Caporetto’, in I.F.W. Beckett (ed.), *1917: Beyond the Western Front* (Leiden, 2008), p. 31; ‘Summary of information as to General Cadorna’s views received by the British General Staff and action taken by them’, General Staff War Office, 29 Oct. 1917: TNA WO 106/788; Cadorna to Boselli, evening of 27 Oct. 1917: Mondini, *Capo*, p. 301.

<sup>20</sup> Malagodi, *Conversazioni*, p. 175; A. Gatti, *Caporetto* (Bologna, 1964), p. 284. Col. Gatti was attached to Cadorna’s staff as the historian.

<sup>21</sup> A. Monticone, *La Battaglia di Caporetto* (Rome, 1955), p. 191.



Early in 1918, the government appointed a Commission of Inquiry to investigate Caporetto. Over 18 months, its seven members interviewed witnesses, took depositions and weighed responsibilities.<sup>22</sup> Cadorna denounced, again, Italy's shortcomings as a military nation and the government's failures. Some other witnesses agreed. The commissioners, however, found no evidence that 'defeatism' had undermined the army or coordinated subversion occurred.<sup>23</sup>

A particular allegation concerned civilian protests in Turin. Bread shortages in August 1917 led to demonstrations demanding a stop to the war. Crushing the disturbance, soldiers killed 41 and wounded 193 protesters. In late September and early October, several hundred of the survivors were punished by transfer to the war zone. Cadorna told the Commission that these men then spread defeatism. General Tettoni, commanding VII Corps at Caporetto, agreed: 600 soldiers had contaminated one of his brigades.<sup>24</sup> But the Commission found that only some 300 workers were punished in this way; exempt from service under arms, they were assigned to fatigue duties away from combat units.<sup>25</sup> Yet, as we shall see, this allegation has proven remarkably tenacious.

As for the communiqué, the Commissioners called it 'an index of the soul' of Cadorna and the Supreme Command 'at that tragic moment.' While accepting that Cadorna

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<sup>22</sup> The Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Withdrawal from the Isonzo to the Piave interviewed more than 1,000 witnesses, including some 200 generals and 150 senior officers. (Isnenghi and Rochat, *Grande Guerra*, p. 399.)

<sup>23</sup> *Relazione della Commissione d'Inchiesta, 'Dall'Isonzo al Piave, 24 ottobre – 9 novembre 1917'* (Rome, 1919), II, pp. 519 ff. (Henceforth RCI.)

<sup>24</sup> Falsini, *Processo*, pp. 37-8.

<sup>25</sup> A. Monticone, 'Il socialismo torinese ed i fatti dell'agosto 1917', *Rassegna storica del Risorgimento*, XLV, n. 1 (Jan.-Mar. 1958), p. 96.

approved the text in good faith, they faulted him for not foreseeing the consequences.<sup>26</sup> They then moved to their clinching assessment: Caporetto ‘*had the character of a military defeat; and the decisive causes of a military nature ... certainly predominated over other factors*’.<sup>27</sup>

The report was marred by omissions; it said very little about how government decisions between 1915 and 1917 had contributed to weakening the military, for example by not accelerating the production of arms and equipment. It also spared Badoglio from criticism because he was backed by General Diaz and Orlando. Its headline conclusion, however, has been endorsed ever since. Research continues to support the Commissioners. Flawed dispositions, logistics and communications made the Caporetto sector vulnerable; the attack exposed multiple weaknesses of command. Most recently, Vanda Wilcox assessed that ‘tactical, operational and organisational factors’ were the ‘chief causes’ of Caporetto. Records about the ‘critical opening 48 hours’ show that ‘most incidents’ of apparent desertion were ‘involuntary surrender, when units were surrounded or officers ordered their men to lay down their weapons.’ According to military tribunal archives, Catholic and Socialist ideas were not responsible for significant indiscipline. There were cases of surrender without resistance and may have been isolated cases of treachery, but no evidence proves that these were organised, pre-planned, or occurred on a scale that could explain events. Defeat created the crisis of morale, not the other way around. Second Army collapsed from the top.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> RCI, vol. II, pp. 545-8. Cadorna told the Commission that he had ‘spoken of surrender and ignominy’ in the communiqué ‘because this was the least that could be said’; and he had selected Second Army units for condemnation to ‘give new heart to the cowards and multiply the heroes, which is what happened.’ He and Porro stood by every word and deplored the government’s redaction. Most other witnesses criticised the communiqué, however. See Falsini, *Processo*, pp. 40-4.

<sup>27</sup> RCI, II, p. 551.

<sup>28</sup> V. Wilcox, *Morale and the Italian Army during the First World War* (Cambridge, 2016), pp. 3, 177, 188, 194; Wilcox, ‘Generalship’, p. 32; Falsini, *Processo*, pp. 39-40; Wilcox, ‘Generalship’, p. 45, and ‘Morale and

The effects and legacy of the fateful communiqué have also been explored. Mario Isnenghi's verdict on Cadorna's 'evidenceless fabulation' is representative: 'Italy gratuitously duplicated the military collapse with a devastating collapse of its image on the international scene, which endures down to the present.'<sup>29</sup> Giovanna Procacci argued that Cadorna's allegations fostered 'a climate of fanatical division' between supporters and critics of the war, 'which helped to prevent a reformist and democratic solution to the crisis created by the war' and became the 'main element of propaganda behind the rise of fascism.'<sup>30</sup> This was the thread connecting 28 October 1917 with 29 October 1922, the day Mussolini was invited to form a coalition government and boarded an express train to Rome.

For his part, Cadorna never qualified his accusation despite admitting that he lacked evidence for it. A month after the breakthrough, when asked how it happened, he blustered:

What do you want me to say? [It was] absolutely unforeseeable. Only a psychological catastrophe could produce such a collapse. It was not a battle; there wasn't even a panic; it was a rebellion, or better to say a defection, a military strike unprecedented in history. Over 600,000 men suddenly refused to fight...<sup>31</sup>

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Battlefield Performance at Caporetto, 1917', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 37/6-7 (2014), pp. 847, 835; Isnenghi and Rochat, *Grande Guerra*, p. 384.

<sup>29</sup> M. Isnenghi, *La tragedia necessaria* (Bologna, 1999), pp. 27, 33. A rare outlier from the consensus is Antonio Sema, for whom the communiqué was 'almost certainly' calculated 'to clarify' Cadorna's 'obvious availability for preventive counter-revolution.' See A. Sema, *La Grande Guerra sul fronte dell'Isonzo* (Gorizia, 1997), II/ii, p. 57.

<sup>30</sup> G. Procacci, 'Italia 1915-18: Il Fronte Interno', in I. Bossi Fedrigotti et al. (eds), *La memoria della Grande Guerra nelle Dolomiti* (Udine, 2005), p. 139.

<sup>31</sup> O. Malagodi, *Conversazioni*, p. 210.

Every item of that statement was false. Asked then whether Second Army's collapse could have been plotted, given the difficulty of coordinating a surrender in the mountains, the reply was breathtaking: 'Your observation is fair, and I cannot account for it myself, but how else to explain the sudden rupture of those formidable lines, with no sign of resistance?' In a later conversation, he insisted naïvely: 'I was not present [at Plezzo or Tolmin] and I cannot say what happened there. *This is how I imagine it went*. There could not have been extensive treachery; but *there must have been* some partial treachery, which opened the gates.'<sup>32</sup>

He once appeared to regret privately the toxic first sentence of his communiqué. Luigi Albertini was alarmed to find that he featured in the Commission's report as an 'eminent publicist' who had, according to Cadorna, been in the group which approved the text on 28 October. He asked his friend to issue a correction. Complying, Cadorna evoked the crucial scene in his covering letter: 'It was Porro who introduced the incriminated phrases; indeed I objected to them, in your presence, at which he, with unwonted energy, exclaimed "But it has to tell the truth!" This impressed me, and I – with unwonted weakness – yielded to his opinion, which was very wrong.'<sup>33</sup> The last phrase may express contrition or a mix of disdain for his deputy, self-pity, and regret over making himself a target for the Commission's 'scandalous' report.<sup>34</sup> There was no contrition, anyway, in his memoir about the war, which voiced 'legitimate pride' that his career had not closed 'in a murky hour of temporary *moral collapse*', but on the Piave river, where 'the army, having *recovered* its inmost awareness of

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<sup>32</sup> Malagodi, *Conversazioni*, pp. 212, 285. Emphasis added.

<sup>33</sup> Cadorna to Albertini, 16 August 1919: see A. Guiso (ed.), *Il direttore e il generale* (Milan, 2014), p. 140.

<sup>34</sup> Guiso, *Il direttore*, p. 141.

its high task, initiated with an unbreakable resistance the Victory which came to fruition a year later'.<sup>35</sup>

Cadorna's allegation may be seen as fake news. In use since the late nineteenth century, this modish term has as yet no settled place in propaganda studies.<sup>36</sup> A typology of definitions has noted the term's relevance to 'fabrication', which in turn requires the weaving of 'pre-existing memes or partialities' into 'a narrative, often with a political bias, that the reader accepts as legitimate.' The authors observe: 'While news is constructed by journalists, it seems that *fake* news is co-constructed by the audience'.<sup>37</sup> Yet the same could be said for any disinformation; the essence of fake news surely lies elsewhere – in the seizure of attention. Whatever else it does, fake news bids to capture headlines and shape debate, often by pre-empting a more plausible explanation.

The bid, in this case, was to affix blame for the disaster before information was available. Indicting 'units of the Second Army', Cadorna exonerated himself and his commanders from suspicion of unreadiness. Whether or not he intended to deceive, he meant to convince policy-makers and opinion-shapers in Italy, London and Paris. His message was reprinted far and wide, endorsed as indubitable fact, indeed praised in Britain for 'noble candour', accepted despite prior misgivings about Cadorna and his commanders.

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<sup>35</sup> L. Cadorna, *La Guerra alla Fronte Italiana* (Milan, 1934 [1921]), p. 580. Emphasis added. The communiqué of 28 Oct. is not among those quoted in Cadorna's book.

<sup>36</sup> The first (?) dictionary definition says: 'false, often sensational, information disseminated under the guise of news reporting'. See <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/fake-news> [accessed 26 Dec. 2017]. See also 'The Real Story of "Fake News"', at <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/the-real-story-of-fake-news> [accessed 26 Dec. 2017].

<sup>37</sup> E.C. Tandoc Jr., Zheng Wei Lim and Richard Ling, 'Defining "Fake News"', *Digital Journalism* (2017), pp. 7, 12. DOI: 10.1080/21670811.2017.1360143.

This initial success was spectacular. Travelling the world before Truth had put her boots on, Cadorna's message framed thinking in Allied capitals about causes. But the triumph was brief. He himself left the Supreme Command on 9 November; several days later, the new Minister of War, General Vittorio Alfieri, told members of parliament that accusations of treachery were unfounded.<sup>38</sup> The Commission of Inquiry rebutted the accusation in 1919. Even under Fascism, when discussion of the Great War was controlled, the accusation was rejected in print.<sup>39</sup> When free scholarly examination of Caporetto began after 1945, it denounced the 'legend' of cowardice and betrayal.<sup>40</sup>

At the same time, Cadorna's smear proved to be enduring. It has been said that Caporetto is one of those problems in Italian history that every generation has to tackle anew.<sup>41</sup> If this has been true so far, the communiqué is the foremost reason why. Every account of Caporetto has to refute it, because it raised ghosts that cannot quite be exorcised.

#### **IV. British assessments**

Caporetto affected the turbulent relationship between the British prime minister and his military chiefs. Succeeding Herbert Asquith in December 1916, David Lloyd George lost no time in exploring what he called a 'fundamental reconstruction of Allied strategy on all fronts'. If the stalemate in France could not be broken, another way must be found to win the

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<sup>38</sup> Melograni, *Storia politica*, p. 436.

<sup>39</sup> For example, by G. Volpe and R. Bencivenga: see Isnenghi and Rochat, *Grande Guerra*, pp. 400-03.

<sup>40</sup> Cilibrizzi, *Caporetto*; P. Pieri, 'La leggenda di Caporetto', *Il Ponte* (1951), pp. 1443-56, 1581-92; Monticone, *Battaglia*.

<sup>41</sup> P. Pieri and G. Rochat, *Pietro Badoglio* (Milan, 2002), p. 153.

war. Italy was his chief hope.<sup>42</sup> General Robertson, Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS), and General Haig, commanding British forces in France, saw no merit in his argument that a big win by Italy would compel Germany to move forces away from the Western Front and might knock Austria-Hungary out of the war. Robertson limited Lloyd George's first attempt to swing substantial Allied resources behind Italy, in January 1917, thanks in part to Cadorna himself.<sup>43</sup> As a compromise, contingency plans were made to send French and British forces 'in case of a very heavy attack'. And ten British siege batteries – 40 howitzers – were sent in April: a tenth of the 400 guns that Lloyd George had hoped for.<sup>44</sup> Six more batteries followed in July.

Lloyd George took the chance to undermine the Robertson-Haig condominium by pressing for a new body to coordinate Allied operations. He claimed that events proved he had been right about Italy.<sup>45</sup> The French decision on 26 October to send four divisions to Italy gave him an opening to insist that Britain follow suit; he directed Robertson to transfer two divisions.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> See K. Jeffery, *Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson* (Oxford, 2006), pp. 205 ff.; A. Suttie, *Rewriting the First World War* (London, 2005), p. 101; J. Grigg, *Lloyd George: War Leader 1916-1918* (Harmondsworth, 2003), p. 25.

<sup>43</sup> He balked at the Allies' requirement for a major offensive in spring as the condition of lending batteries. (M. Thompson, *The White War* (London, 2008), p. 242.)

<sup>44</sup> F. Foch, *Memoirs* (1931), p. 254, quoted by J. Wilks and E. Wilks, *The British Army in Italy 1917-1918* (Barnsley, 2013), p. 20; Thompson, *White War*, p. 241.

<sup>45</sup> Hankey, diary, 27 Oct.: 'L.I.G. of course is furious. The Germans have struck at the weak link, just as he himself wanted to do on the very same spot; – a plan which the General Staff rejected with contempt.' (Churchill Archives Centre, Hankey Papers, HNKY 1/3.)

<sup>46</sup> Edmonds, *Military Operations*, 58.

Over the weekend of 27-28 October, Robertson accepted that momentum for intervention was unstoppable.<sup>47</sup> He wrote to Delmé-Radcliffe on the 27<sup>th</sup>: ‘It is not a matter of help being needed so much as more courage and less panic on the part of the Italians.’<sup>48</sup> This was a factitious distinction. ‘There is no military necessity to send troops’, he insisted to the prime minister, before conceding: ‘of course we must stop the rot if we can.’<sup>49</sup> The same day, he wrote to Haig: ‘Owing mainly to bad morale and peace propaganda, the Italian situation is very bad. . . . Cadorna ought not to require help but we may have to help in order to prevent the total collapse of Italy’.<sup>50</sup> Next day, apparently coaxing Haig to accept the inevitable, he went further, conceding the essential point: Italy’s collapse would be ‘really disastrous to the Entente cause.’<sup>51</sup> Robertson then left for Italy, to assess conditions.

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<sup>47</sup> According to Henry Wickham Steed of *The Times*, an expert on Central Europe and the Balkans, the War Office lobbied the press with ‘circulars’ on 26 or 27 October, ‘explaining that the Italian situation was by no means so critical as the Italians made out.’ Coverage on the Sunday duly ‘bore evident traces of anti-Italian inspiration.’ Repington told the indignant Steed that Gen. Macdonogh, Director of Military Intelligence, was responsible; Macdonogh denied this. (H. Wickham Steed, *Through Thirty Years 1892-1922* (London, 1924), pp. 146-7.) It is unlikely that Robertson was uninvolved with this spin.

<sup>48</sup> Robertson to Delmé-Radcliffe, 27 Oct. 1917: Parliamentary Archives, LG/F/163/1/3.

<sup>49</sup> Robertson to Lloyd George, 27 Oct. 1917: Parliamentary Archives, LG/F/44/3/27. Robertson’s metaphors (‘courage’, ‘rot’) suggest that he had read attentively the first reports on Caporetto from the British Mission in Italy (see below).

<sup>50</sup> Robertson to Haig, 27 Oct. 1917: Parliamentary Archives, LG/F/44/3/27.

<sup>51</sup> Robertson to Haig, 28 Oct. 1917: Parliamentary Archives, LG/F/44/3/30.



The War Cabinet was poorly informed during the first days of the attack. On 25 October, it was told: ‘a heavy bombardment by the enemy commenced at 2 AM. on the 24<sup>th</sup>’. The minutes from the 26<sup>th</sup> make no mention of Italy.<sup>52</sup> From 29 October, however, the crisis was discussed continually. As late as 21 November, Robertson wrote that ‘the restoration of the Italian situation takes first place at present in War Cabinet military policy.’<sup>53</sup>

On 29 October, Lloyd George began the meeting by reminding colleagues of his January proposal, which ‘had urged the importance of the preparation of Allied defensive schemes of co-operation on the Italian front’. According to Lord Derby, Secretary of State for War, the prime minister was ‘in a towering rage’, ‘most sarcastic and abusive and tried to attribute the whole of the Italian trouble’ to the general staff. This display was calculated; when War Cabinet secretary Maurice Hankey called on him the following evening, he found the prime minister ‘very gloomy owing to the loss of Udine by the Italians, but pleased at the hope of “dishing” the soldiers by establishing the allied council.’<sup>54</sup>

After this unminuted power-play, the Cabinet heard its first interpretation of Caporetto. General Maurice, Director of Military Operations,

stated that a communiqué had been received from General Cadorna accusing some of the Italian troops of cowardice, but that these words had been deleted by the Italian Embassy before the communiqué was issued to the press.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> This does not mean Italy went unmentioned; the minutes are selective. Hankey’s diary for 26 Oct. includes these sentences: ‘We are all worried at the serious Italian reverse. They ran like hares from sheer funk of a few Germans.’ (Hankey Papers, HNKY 1/3.) ‘Funk’ was one of Robertson’s characteristic words about Italy.

<sup>53</sup> Robertson to Gen. Plumer, 21 Nov. 1917: TNA WO 106/797.

<sup>54</sup> TNA CAB 23-4, War Cabinet 259, p. 2; Derby to Haig, unsent, 29 Oct. 1917: D.R. Woodward, *Lloyd George and the Generals* (Newark, 1983), p. 212.

<sup>55</sup> TNA CAB 23-4, War Cabinet 259, p. 2.

Wrapping up, ‘Maurice stated that the Italian army could roughly be divided’: ‘the Northern Italians, who fought well, and the Southern Italians, who were useless. It was the Southern Italians who showed cowardice’.<sup>56</sup> Next to speak was Lord Derby, who had visited the Italian front in September.<sup>57</sup> He conveyed the Italian ambassador’s view:

It was clear that the Italian defeat had been largely due to insidious enemy propaganda in the army, on the lines of the Russian Revolutionists. As to the results at the front, it was a question how far this enemy propaganda had been allowed to spread.<sup>58</sup>

Reference to German propaganda in Russia (which was established fact) lent credibility to allegations for which little hard evidence had surfaced. In its first discussion, the Cabinet accepted Cadorna’s defining terms.

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<sup>56</sup> Ethno-political speculation, much indulged, reflected the prejudice of the source. Piedmontese officers had traditionally belittled southern Italians. Yet it was not true that the latter were seen generically as inferior soldiers. Catanzaro Brigade had a high reputation (RCI, vol. II, p. 367). Sardinian infantry were a byword for stamina and courage. Hugh Dalton noted that ‘The Sicilians are said to be among the finest fighters in the Italian Army.’ (H. Dalton, diary, 17 July 1917.)

<sup>57</sup> When Lord Derby visited the Supreme Command on 11 September, he assured Cadorna that Britain would send all the British guns that could be spared on the Western Front, amounting perhaps to another 40 batteries, to support further Italian offensives.

<sup>58</sup> TNA CAB 23-4, War Cabinet 259, p. 2.

On 30 October, Robertson reached the Supreme Command, where he joined Foch. Before examining his messages from Italy, we should consider the assumptions he travelled with. Since becoming CIGS in 1915, Robertson had deprecated Italy's role and contribution in the war. In this, he saw eye to eye with Haig.<sup>59</sup> He believed Cadorna's ambition to capture Trieste was 'a wrong objective'; he should have neutralised the Trentino salient.<sup>60</sup> He seemed to consider Cadorna and his senior commanders as strategically illiterate, tactically primitive, and incapable of effective leadership. He also doubted Italian political and popular commitment to the war.

Sent to assess Italy's needs in March 1917, Robertson's impression of the troops was positive: 'splendid physique', 'cheerful, healthy, and likely to prove excellent fighters if properly led'. Observing that promotion went 'by age and service', he was scathing about the senior commanders. Cadorna was 'probably the best selection that could be made' for the top position. His deputy, General Porro, was 'weak in character'. As for the five army commanders, only the Duke of Aosta, leading Third Army, seemed 'adequately up to his work'. The remainder formed a dismal crew, 'much too old and worn out'. Among the generals, only Badoglio 'had done really good work'. In sum: 'It is a pity that such promising men should have senior leaders of the type I have described, in whom they can have no confidence.'

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<sup>59</sup> 'Haig had nothing but contempt for his Italian allies': J.P. Harris, *Douglas Haig and the First World War* (Cambridge, 2008), p. 385. On 26 October, Haig commented privately: 'The Italians seem a wretched people, useless as fighting men but greedy for money.' D. Winter, *Haig's Command: A Reassessment* (London, 2001), p. 26.

<sup>60</sup> 'Note by CIGS on his visit to Italian Headquarters 22<sup>nd</sup> to 24<sup>th</sup> March, 1917': Parliamentary Archives, LG/F/163/1/2. Robertson's opinion reflected a superficial knowledge of the theatre: Trentino was indeed relatively lightly manned by the Austrians, but this was possible because the territory was excellently fortified.

Disturbingly, these leaders were ‘full of dismal forebodings’ about a possible German attack; ‘some’ were ‘already half-beaten, although they have not yet seen a German.’ They were impervious to assurances that German performance in France had deteriorated while Allied effectiveness had improved. ‘My observations were received with much head-shaking and unmistakable incredulity.’ Consistent with this ‘miserable state of funk’, Cadorna ‘was not inclined to discuss offensive operations’.<sup>61</sup> He stonewalled, as he had done with Lloyd George in January. Robertson’s observations chime with the argument – made long ago by Alfred Krauss and now by Vanda Wilcox – that the rout was triggered by panic among senior officers; in other words, the operative crisis of morale at Caporetto affected not the troops but their commanders.<sup>62</sup>

Robertson’s first telegram from Italy was neutral:

I am informed by Cadorna that the breach was due to treason on the part of his troops who made no effort to oppose the attack. After that everyone apparently lost their heads and large numbers of 2nd Army laid down their arms and went to the rear.<sup>63</sup>

This message was minuted by the next War Cabinet.<sup>64</sup> In the early hours of 1 November, he wired a second report from Treviso. It opened with three statements:

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<sup>61</sup> ‘Note by CIGS’: Parliamentary Archives, LG/F/163/1/2.

<sup>62</sup> General Krauss, an Austrian corps commander at Caporetto, attributed the breakthrough to a crisis of Italian senior commanders, who left their troops leaderless. (Melograni, *Storia politica*, p. 417.) Wilcox, ‘Generalship’, p. 38.

<sup>63</sup> Robertson to Derby, 31 Oct. 1917: Parliamentary Archives, LG/F/163/1/3.

<sup>64</sup> TNA CAB 23-4, War Cabinet 262, 3.

General Foch and I have been most of today with Cadorna. The latter insists that recent events are not due to military reasons, his measures for defence having been complete and efficient. They are due, he asserts, to treasonable conduct and refusal to oppose enemy on the part of his troops.

When they urged him to ‘take hold of things with both hands’, Cadorna ‘said that if things depended on himself all would be well, but he is helpless if the ground gives way under his feet.’ Alone, Foch and Robertson discussed the desirability of replacing Cadorna, but knew of no better candidate.<sup>65</sup>

Robertson then moved to Rome, where meetings initially confirmed that Second Army’s condition reflected civilian opposition to the war. His first report from the capital tested a phrase he would have heard, which linked Caporetto with recent unrest in Turin: ‘Whole situation may be termed a military strike plus inefficiency of body of officers from top to bottom.’<sup>66</sup> He continued: ‘The chief point to bear in mind is that a great part of the people have always opposed the war’. German propaganda and money had bolstered anti-war feeling. Britain and France were increasingly unpopular because seen as keeping Italy in the war. The Cabinet should understand that pro-war statements by Italy’s leaders ‘do not truly reflect the spirit and intentions of the people.’<sup>67</sup> Robertson was alerting the Cabinet to an

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<sup>65</sup> Robertson to Derby, 1 Nov. 1917: Parliamentary Archives, LG/F/163/1/3.

<sup>66</sup> The phrase ‘military strike’ [*sciopero militare*] may have been coined by Leonida Bissolati, a government minister who supported Cadorna. (Cilibrizzi, *Caporetto*, p. 23 fn 71.) Bissolati was at the Supreme Command on 31 October and 1 November, during Robertson’s visit. See L. Bissolati, *Diario di guerra* (Turin, 1935), p. 96. The phrase was adopted by Cadorna on 23 Nov., as we saw above: see Malagodi, *Conversazioni*, p. 210.

<sup>67</sup> Robertson to Derby, Report No. 5, 1 Nov. 1917: Parliamentary Archives, LG/F/163/1/3. Lloyd George read out this telegram at the next day’s War Cabinet: TNA CAB 23-4, War Cabinet 264, p. 2.

important truth about Italy's war of choice; but it was not correct that opposition was widespread. Resigned acceptance, as of a natural calamity, was the standard attitude.

After this, the uncertainty in his next report is striking. Two government ministers had assured him that Italy was in better shape than many supposed; the country could 'be trusted'. Robertson was puzzled: 'My difficulty is to reconcile this view ... with hard fact of the disappearance of Second Army and both Ministers admitted feeling same difficulty.' Compounding his puzzlement, the British Ambassador, Sir Rennell Rodd, agreed that 'the country has behaved well'. What Robertson had heard in Treviso was not confirmed in Rome:

I cannot account for 2nd Army situation except by attributing it to the country and no one has been able yet to account for it otherwise.<sup>68</sup>

This quandary showed a limitation of Robertson's shrewd unspeculative mind. His opinion of Italy and its forces, underlined by the British Mission's reports (see below), had convinced him in London that the rout resulted from panic due to poor morale, bad leadership and hostile propaganda. When doubt was cast on this theory, the obvious alternative explanation did not occur: the enemy had launched an attack more effective than anything seen on the Italian front, and inflicted an overwhelming defeat which exposed structural weaknesses.

That Robertson ignored this alternative is more notable because, as we saw, he came so close in March 1917 to identifying those very weaknesses and anticipating a wholesale failure of command. Remarks dictated on 23 November to British generals in Salonika and the Middle East suggest that he had swallowed his distrust of Italy's 'senior leaders' in order to accept Cadorna's judgement. 'The Italian debacle is unpardonable and was brought about

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<sup>68</sup> Robertson to Derby, Report No. 6, 1 Dec. 1917: Parliamentary Archives, LG/F/163/1/3.

*purely* by the refusal of the troops to fight’, he said. ‘*In fact downright treason* started the business and the Italian Command and Staff were unable to handle the situation. But it was a very difficult one to deal with simply because *the troops and the country have generally been saturated* by a vigorous and invidious German propaganda.’<sup>69</sup> Annoyance with the Italians for forcing the transfer of men from France, thereby strengthening Lloyd George’s position, overcame his doubts in Rome and prior piercing assessment of Italy’s commanders.<sup>70</sup> We see Robertson in the act of ‘co-constructing’ Cadorna’s fake news.

The limitation was also institutional, reflecting prejudice about Italian soldiers and automatic deference to a national commander. The Englishman best placed to furnish a more independent account was Delmé-Radcliffe, who instead relayed Cadorna’s concern that ‘neutralists and revolutionaries’ would ‘take advantage’ of ‘the situation’, and his notice to the government ‘that if peace propaganda is allowed to continue in the country he will not be responsible for the Army’.<sup>71</sup> On 28 October, Delmé-Radcliffe wrote: ‘The refusal of the troops to fight is apparently an organized plot on Russian lines and probably put into operation in agreement with the enemy.’<sup>72</sup> The following day, fortified by Cadorna’s

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<sup>69</sup> Robertson to Milne, Monro and Allenby, 23 Nov. 1917, London. King’s College London Archives, Robertson papers 8/1/80 and 8/1/81. Emphasis added.

<sup>70</sup> On 6 December 1917, still rankling over the transfer of forces to Italy, Robertson fumed that ‘Italy counts for nothing & Cadorna is a nonentity’: see D.R. Woodward (ed.), *The Military Correspondence of Field-Marshal Sir William Robertson* (London, 1989), p. 261.

<sup>71</sup> Delmé-Radcliffe to CIGS, 26 Oct. 1917, 4 p.m. and 6.40 p.m.: Parliamentary Archives, LG/F/44/3/27.

<sup>72</sup> Delmé-Radcliffe to CIGS, 28 Oct. 1917, 2.10 p.m.: Parliamentary Archives, LG/F/163/1/. He added that the King was ‘expected ... to recall the nation to a sense of the gravity of the position ... pointing out that it is internal treachery and not the enemy that has defeated the army.’ Despite his propensity for abysmal political judgement at key junctures of national life, Vittorio Emanuele III at least avoided telling his people, as they grappled with the scale of disaster in October 1917, that their army had been beaten by Italian traitors.

communiqué on the 28<sup>th</sup>, he dropped qualifying adverbs: ‘The real cause of the trouble was the determination of a portion of the troops to leave the field’. He added that Caporetto was not due to ‘panic’ (a word Robertson favoured) but rather to

the premeditated and deliberate misconduct of a section of the troops which had been contaminated by the demoralising influences emanating from the Vatican, the Socialists, Pacifists and Pro-German agents.

This interpretation was minuted by the War Cabinet.<sup>73</sup>

Delmé-Radcliffe’s reports make no reference to his own recent assessment of Italian frailty around Caporetto. On 21 October, he had sketched the vulnerability north of Tolmin in men and artillery, readiness and communications. This mattered because of indications that Germany was preparing an attack here. He acknowledged Germany’s dangerous ‘prestige’ among Italian soldiers: ‘It remains to be seen how [they] will stand up to a serious German attack.’ Yet Delmé-Radcliffe also underlined ‘the great efforts’ by ‘German agents and sympathisers ... to corrupt the patriotism of Italy.’ Moreover, ‘there appears reason to believe’ (he did not say on what basis) that ‘the revolutionary organisation in Italy’ (he gave no details) has ‘been considerably developed of late’, so that it possessed weapons ‘to a great extent’.<sup>74</sup> This portentous warning bore the stamp of Supreme Command briefings.

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<sup>73</sup> Delmé-Radcliffe to CIGS, 29 Oct. 1917: Parliamentary Archives, LG/F/163/1/3; TNA CAB 23-4, War Cabinet 260, p. 2.

<sup>74</sup> Delmé-Radcliffe, Memorandum to the Director of Military Operations, War Cabinet, 21 Oct. 1917: TNA CAB 24/30/49.



The first break with Cadorna's message, in War Cabinet minutes, was made by Lloyd George on 13 November. After his return from Italy and France (where he announced the Supreme War Council), he said that the 'chief contributory cause' of Caporetto was the 'inefficiency' of the Supreme Command. 'Headquarters Staff had been quite unable to grip hold of the situation and to keep in touch with and control the movements of the Italian forces. The dispositions were bad, the Staffs generally inefficient, and no communications had been maintained.' He added that Italy's King had 'placed little credence in the stories of pacifist propaganda having undermined the soldierly spirit of the officers and men.'<sup>75</sup>

By this time, Cadorna had made way for Diaz, the Piave line was largely secure and British regiments were arriving, under the Earl of Cavan. When Cavan reached the Supreme Command on 6 November, he met the King, Delmé-Radcliffe and Cadorna; it seemed to him that 'the Italian debacle, although it may to some extent have been due to treachery and disinclination to fight, was largely the result of faulty dispositions and bad orders.'<sup>76</sup> Several days later, Cavan reported that he knew 'little or nothing of the political side of the recent defeat', but he was 'quite sure that the dispositions for defence were extremely faulty'.<sup>77</sup>

Yet Cadorna's thesis was not now lacking for British support. Rennell Rodd's opinion that 'the country has behaved well' had perplexed Robertson on 1 November. Typically, however, the ambassador concurred with Cadorna, writing to Lloyd George: 'What has

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<sup>75</sup> TNA CAB 23-4, War Cabinet 272, p. 3.

<sup>76</sup> Edmonds, *Military Operations*, p. 90. Many years later, Cavan recalled that he had become convinced 'of the real fighting worth of the Italian soldier if properly led and encouraged, but I am equally sure that incompetent Commanders were allowed to remain too long in high positions, from which they should have been dismissed.' (Churchill Centre Archives, Cavan Papers, 'ITALY'.)

<sup>77</sup> Cavan to Robertson, 10 Nov. 1917, Mantua: Cavan Private Papers, TNA WO 79/67.

happened was not so much a military defeat as a refusal to fight – *something like a strike* on the part of the 4<sup>th</sup> army corps of the 2<sup>nd</sup> army ... they had been undermined by the socialist and clerical peace propaganda. They had also *no doubt* received communications and promises from the enemy.’<sup>78</sup> In a telegram to the Foreign Secretary, discussed by the War Cabinet, he warned that Italy needed ‘to put a stop to the licence accorded to enemy agents’: ‘we could not afford to send our troops to a country honeycombed with spies.’ In fact these troops were already arriving.<sup>79</sup>

Time (and publication of the Commission’s report in 1919) did not erode Rennell Rodd’s certainty. Lecturing in 1920, he mused on ‘the curious psychological problem of Caporetto, where a limited number of peasant regiments, misled by a sinister propaganda, failed in their duty, and ... compromised the position of the whole army’.<sup>80</sup> In his memoirs, he granted that military failings ‘seemed to the layman to justify much of the criticism they encountered’;<sup>81</sup> the onus of ‘grave responsibility’ lay, however, on ‘those who deliberately created the moral atmosphere which made defeat possible and probably inevitable.’ He elaborated: ‘for many months a persistent anti-military propaganda had undermined the morale of peasant soldiers’. Moreover, men who had been ‘strongly impregnated’ with

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<sup>78</sup> Rennell Rodd to Lloyd George, 4 Nov. 1917: Parliamentary Archives, LG/F/56/1/56. Quoted by M. Cornwall, *The Undermining of Austria-Hungary* (London, 2000), p. 105. Emphasis added.

<sup>79</sup> TNA CAB 23/4, War Cabinet 276, 16 Nov. 1917, p. 3.

<sup>80</sup> Sir J. Rennell Rodd, ‘The Italian People’, *Proceedings of the British Academy: 1919-1920* (London, 1920), p. 405.

<sup>81</sup> Namely, ‘the presence of only two weak corps without any adequate support to hold a vulnerable section of the line, and a very questionable disposition of the artillery’. Sir J. Rennell Rodd, *Social and Diplomatic Memories. Third series: 1902-1919* (London, 1925), p. 344. Emphasis added.

‘extreme’ socialist ideas had been sent – as punishment for rioting in Turin – to the front, where they ‘became centres of infection’.<sup>82</sup>

The claim to superior knowledge – decisive yet never clarified – is familiar from Delmé-Radcliffe and Robertson; we shall see it in the journalism of Repington, Jeffries and Ward Price, and most obdurately in G.M. Trevelyan’s book about the Italian front. Their plangent certainties about ‘the real causes’ emit the authentic ring of fake news. What Rennell Rodd also suggests, by his lofty inculcation of ‘peasant soldiers’, is that elites in Allied capitals experienced Caporetto as a political scandal: a sketch of insurrection by the lower orders, the sweepings of society taking fate into their own hands.<sup>83</sup> Cadorna’s message fed this anxiety. On 28 October, General Henry Wilson, then advising Lloyd George (and shortly to replace Robertson as CIGS), pithily expressed the amalgam of national and class prejudice with fear of a Russian scenario in Italy: ‘This is the devil! Pigs of organ grinders. This will probably be followed by internal Revolution.’<sup>84</sup>

## **V. British journalists explain Caporetto**

The most important news media in Britain were both owned by Lord Northcliffe: *The Daily Mail* and *The Times*, respectively ‘the true titan of the daily press’ and the national newspaper

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<sup>82</sup> Rennell Rodd, *Memories*, p. 344. Emphasis added.

<sup>83</sup> On Caporetto as political scandal, see Isnenghi and Rochat, *Grande Guerra*, p. 395. On Caporetto as carnival, ‘suspending and overturning the order of the world’, see A. Gibelli, *La Grande Guerra degli Italiani 1915-1918* (Milan, 2007), p. 273.

<sup>84</sup> Wilson’s diary: Jeffery, *Wilson*, p. 206.

of record.<sup>85</sup> These papers' chief reporters in Italy were G. Ward Price and J.M.N. Jeffries, embedded at the Supreme Command. Their reports about Caporetto reached a bigger and broader public in Britain than any others.<sup>86</sup>

Coverage in the *Daily Mail* began on 24 October: the 'much-talked-about Austro-German offensive' had 'at last begun'. Next day, the paper noted: 'a big blow is preparing ... anywhere or everywhere' from the Vipacco river to Plezzo. Ward Price furnished anecdotes about British gunners enjoying local food. On 26 October, the paper reported that the 'Huns' had crossed the Isonzo river. On the 27<sup>th</sup>, after briefing by an imaginative press officer or an eye-witness, Jeffries conveyed Italian awe of the mythical German zest for combat:

They came pouring through the pass upon Caporetto at a terrific speed, the men almost leaping rather than running along the valley.

Discussion of causes began on Monday, 29 October (there was no Sunday edition). The lead editorial began by quoting Cadorna on the 'lack of resistance of some detachments'. Sympathising with Italy 'in her hour of sorrow and misfortune', the paper stated: 'Our confidence ... will not be shaken because some of her sons have turned from honour and from death.' Ward Price alleged (SECRET HUN PROPAGANDA) that 'The German preparation ... has been carried on by an insidious propaganda ... almost as secret as their stealthy

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<sup>85</sup> A. Gregory, 'A Clash of Cultures: The British Press and the Opening of the Great War', in T.R.E. Paddock, *Call to Arms* (Westport, CT, 2004), p. 16. See also J. Lee Thompson, *Politicians, the Press, & Propaganda: Lord Northcliffe & the Great War* (Kent, OH, 1999), p. 2.

<sup>86</sup> Ward Price was sent to Italy by the Newspaper Proprietors' Association; several of his reports also ran in the *Daily Telegraph*. See J.M.N. Jeffries, *Front Everywhere* (London, 1935), p. 270, and G. Ward Price, *Extra-Special Correspondent* (London, 1957), p. 90.

movement of these fresh masses of troops'. This piece also ran in the *Daily Telegraph* (A SUDDEN ONSLAUGHT).

The paper returned to subversion on 31 October (HALF-HEARTED CATHOLICS and GERMAN PROPAGANDA METHODS IN ITALY), again without providing details. On 1 November, Ward Price admonished: 'None of the Allies has hitherto taken seriously enough the deadly and insidious propaganda' of the enemy 'in our midst'. The following day, Jeffries praised the 'noble candour rarely equalled' of Cadorna's communiqué, which gave 'the clue to the real causes of the enemy's advance'.<sup>87</sup> On 3 November, Ward Price wrote – under the cross-heading THE MEN WHO FAILED – that 'German peace propaganda ... had corrupted the loyalty of certain detachments'.

The newspaper addressed causes again on 5 November, when Ward Price intoned ('it must be remembered') that 'German propaganda has long been working hard in Italy ... urging the soldiers to refuse to go on fighting and assuring them that the quickest way to peace was by surrendering.' A week later, the paper lavished space on Lloyd George's 'remarkable' speech in Paris about the Supreme War Council. By this date (13 November), Cadorna had been removed: a development which the *Daily Mail* omitted to mention before Ward Price paid tribute to his successor:

An impression of detachment, gravity, and the strength of chilled steel are what one brought away from the house of General Diaz ... neither in play of feature nor in gesture does he show any of the vivacity of the Latin.

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<sup>87</sup> Jeffries reported that the initial bombardment 'was almost entirely carried on with gas and tear shells'. This was untrue; gas was only used at Plezzo.

(Diaz was promising because un-Italian.) Proper coverage in *The Times* likewise commenced on 29 October. An editorial (THE INVASION OF ITALY) stated: ‘The cause of the disaster is not yet fully explained.’ More cautious than the *Mail*, it mentioned the ‘terrific bombardment’ from ‘unsuspected’ batteries and the adverse weather before concluding – as if to reproach critics – that ‘the gallant Italian Army has proved its courage and devotion so often in this war that there is no stain upon its honour.’ A news report (GRAVE ITALIAN REVERSE) praised the ‘courageous frankness’ of Cadorna’s communiqué. Ward Price’s story in the *Mail* about ‘insidious propaganda’ was carried (THE GERMAN IRRUPTION). On 30 October, an unnamed correspondent in Milan ‘ascribed’ Caporetto ‘to the overwhelming forces, artillery and troops’, and added correctly: ‘Absolutely unfamiliar methods of warfare ... were employed’.

On 31 October, a story from Rome (SIGNOR ORLANDO’S MINISTRY) noted misgivings about the communiqué: ‘Some people think that Cadorna’s frank statement may give a wrong impression both at home and abroad.’ The edition of 1 November carried an analysis (THE INVASION OF ITALY) ‘by our Military Correspondent’, presumably Charles à Court Repington, an expert on Italy, who found it ‘impossible to suppose’ that the Italian lines could have broken ‘unless some maleficent propagandism had been at work’.<sup>88</sup> After this inference, Repington drawled a claim to superior knowledge: ‘Such propaganda we know there has been, and we know the German and other sources whence it springs.’ Another story (ENEMY WILES ON THE ITALIAN FRONT) drew attention to ‘anti-British propaganda’. An editorial (OUR ITALIAN ALLIES) plumped for Cadorna’s thesis: granting that ‘much about the disaster’ was ‘still unexplained’, it affirmed that the ‘enemy thrust’ had succeeded

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<sup>88</sup> On 26 October, Repington had reacted complacently to the first news of the Austro-German attack: ‘It is probable that General Cadorna and the Italians will welcome this offensive ... The Italian lines are solid and well defended’, etc. Repington enjoyed a reputation as ‘the generals’ favourite military correspondent’ (Woodward, *Lloyd George*, p. 226).

because the Italian troops against whom it was directed failed to do their duty. That this is the real explanation of what happened is established by the fact that some of the ground abandoned was practically impregnable. It was lost because it was not defended ...

The 'poisonous seed' of German propaganda had 'sprung up' in Italy. The following day, Jeffries' story in the *Mail* about Cadorna's 'noble candour' appeared in *The Times* without his by-line ('From a Special Correspondent, ITALIAN HQ'). Discussion of causes then dwindled until a story on 5 November cited 'one of the foremost men in the Government' as expressing 'every hope' that 'the rot would be stopped.'<sup>89</sup> Readers would know what 'the rot' meant.

Weekly news magazines chorused the consensus, without the spice of reporting from the field. *The Spectator* knew where to point the finger: 'the misfortune ... was brought about, as we have the authority of General Cadorna for saying, by the feeble resistance shown by some of the Italian troops ... . Messages from Italy suggest that the troops which failed had had their minds saturated with enervating political doctrines'. The next edition resumed complacently: 'Further information has only confirmed what we said last week as to the causes of the Italian disaster. They were, as we supposed, political and psychological rather than military.'<sup>90</sup>

*The New Statesman* was hardly less assured: the battle 'was not lost for want of men, nor for want of guns, nor (so far as can be judged) from any material defect in General Cadorna's dispositions.' The key to the defeat was that 'the *moral* of the troops engaged had

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<sup>89</sup> The source may have been Bissolati, who had briefed a *Times* correspondent on 2 Nov. (Bissolati, *Diario*, p. 96.)

<sup>90</sup> 'The Italian Reverse', *The Spectator*, 3 Nov. 1917, p. 17; 'Help for Italy', *The Spectator*, 10 Nov. 1917, p. 5.

... been previously sapped by political and pacifist influences'. In sum, 'the root of the Italian weakness has been political rather than military.'<sup>91</sup> The magazine developed its explanation of 'disastrous misconduct': the 'failure of military resistance ... reflected the weakness of this [civilian] moral and the success of enemy propaganda'. A little comfort was procured from stereotypes:

Neither the disorganisation nor the panic would have been the same in a French, a German or a British force; but the temperament which renders Italian soldiers a prey to such sudden weaknesses also enables them to recover quickly.<sup>92</sup>

## **VI. Eye-witnesses disagree**

Looking back in a much later year, Jeffries remarked that no correspondent had seen 'the actual break at Caporetto': 'There was never an account of it from anyone on the spot, a point which has remained unnoticed.'<sup>93</sup> Naturally so, when noticing this point would have undercut the journalists' instant omniscience. There were, however, British witnesses of the retreat. By September 1917, some 64 British siege guns were deployed along the Isonzo front. Three of the four heavy artillery groups were withdrawn in late September and early October, following Cadorna's announcement about no further offensives in 1917. Robertson considered that Cadorna had broken the terms on which British guns were lent. He resented the decision to transfer the guns and might have withdrawn them all if Delmé-Radcliffe had not appealed for four to six batteries 'to carry on instruction of Italian artillerymen'.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> 'The Italian Military Crisis', *The New Statesman*, 3 Nov. 1917, p. 100.

<sup>92</sup> 'Italy and the Strategy of the Allies', *The New Statesman*, 10 Nov. 1917, pp. 124-5.

<sup>93</sup> Jeffries, *Front Everywhere*, p. 274.

<sup>94</sup> TNA WO 106/784; Delmé-Radcliffe to Robertson, 26 Sept. 1917: TNA WO/106/784.



The 94<sup>th</sup> Heavy Artillery Group (Royal Garrison Artillery) stayed in Italy. Exceptionally, it comprised five batteries, not the usual four: 302, 307, 315, 316 and 317. They supported Third Army near its northern limit, abutting on Second Army. The gun crews, service corps and transport personnel amounted to some 750 soldiers. One was Hugh Dalton, a thirty year-old lieutenant, second in command of 302 battery. Transferred from France in July 1917, he saw action in the Eleventh and Twelfth Battles, retreated to the Piave line, fought in the Battle of the Solstice in June 1918 and hailed victory on 4 November, that ‘hour of perfection, and of accomplishment’.<sup>95</sup>

Dalton went on to a political career of great distinction; he was the first Chancellor of the Exchequer in the Labour government after the Second World War. He authored works on governance, economics and foreign affairs, and memoirs. His first publication, however, was unlike anything that followed. *With British Guns in Italy* (1919) was the first book by a British veteran of the Italian front, and the only one by a soldier who took part in the retreat. Drawing heavily on diaries, Dalton wrote it ‘in two months’ and published it in May 1919. While the book shows signs of haste, it carries conviction as the record of a thoughtful romance with a place and its people. For Italy embodied Dalton’s vision of democratic freedom, equality and a world without war. And it was very beautiful: ‘After the Somme and Arras, I fell in love with the Italian front at first sight.’<sup>96</sup>

He also offered a clear appraisal of Caporetto. He was perhaps the first commentator in Britain to reject the thesis that propaganda and shameful cession were responsible.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Dalton, *With British Guns in Italy* (London, 1919), p. 259.

<sup>96</sup> Dalton, *Call Back Yesterday. Memoirs 1887-1931* (London, 1953), pp. 87-8.

<sup>97</sup> This was noted by *The Spectator*: ‘he feels bound to dismiss the influence of German propaganda as a comparatively negligible quantity, assigning a heavy share of responsibility to the dispositions of the High Command.’ (‘Some books of the week’, *The Spectator*, 21 June 1919, p. 801.)

Instead he identified four causes: the soldiers had lacked ‘amusement and relaxation’ out of the line; their rations had been poor; their equipment (especially gas masks) was inadequate; and the Supreme Command had applied ‘some of the worst and most brutal traditions of German discipline.’<sup>98</sup>

This assessment proved Dalton’s independence of mind. Yet his book supplies little evidence for these observations. It turns out that more is contained in passages from his diaries which Dalton omitted from the book. The first such passage was written on 11 July, a few days after his arrival:

Italian tactics are to do nothing for a long while, & then simply to fling innumerable infantry at the desired objectives. They count to have the same number of killed & wounded.<sup>99</sup>

This remark would reflect conversations that Dalton was having (he spoke Italian). The Tenth Battle had ended in June and the Eleventh would not start until August.

A week later, he noted an incident not mentioned in the book:

Nearby there was a mutiny a week ago. A Sicilian B<sup>de</sup>, thinking it was ordered back to the trenches out of its turn. The Sicilians are said to be among the finest fighters in the Italian

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<sup>98</sup> Dalton, *British Guns*, p. 142 fn 1.

<sup>99</sup> Dalton, diary, 11 July 1917. Aside from Cadorna’s primitive tactics, casualties on the Isonzo front were increased by the exposed rocky terrain, which fragmented under shell impact, often with deadly effect. Dalton’s commanding officer reported: ‘Every shell on the rocky soil counted double, owing to the rock splinters.’ (Lt. Col. C.N. Buzzard, ‘Some impressions of the Italian Army, gathered during service with the British Batteries on the Carso Front, April to October 1917, and after the retreat to the Piave, October to December 1917’. January 1918: TNA WO 106/773.) Much of the terrain was also difficult of access by medical teams. In France, the usual ratio of killed to wounded soldiers was approximately 1:6. (With thanks to Sir Hew Strachan.)

Army. But, furthest from Italia Irredenta, [they are also] the most fed up with the war. They refused to march. Their officers addressed them & were done in. So too were several Carabinieri, & then a machine gun persuaded them.<sup>100</sup>

He had picked up a garbled account of the mutiny in Catanzaro Brigade on the night of 15/16 July, which led, infamously, to the execution of 28 soldiers: the worst miscarriage of Italian military justice in the war. On 15 August, Dalton had another experience of those ‘brutal traditions’, likewise omitted from his book:

Italian deserters being shot in Savogna & all traffic held up as I pass. A crowd of idle soldiery looks on. A mess of blood & flesh on the ground & wall, after the remains of them carried off on stretchers.

On 22 August, he talked with Italian infantrymen: ‘They are very delighted that I make myself understood in Italian, & that I fraternise with them. Their officers, they say, never do this, but are very standoffish.’ As a foreign officer, his sensitivity to what these men thought was doubly unusual.<sup>101</sup>

On 9 October, he was presented to the commander of Parma Brigade.

Petracchi is a most unpleasant man (though very agreeable to me), known to his officers as “Testa di morte” [Death’s Head]. He shrieks at them in public. I have two meals with him,

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<sup>100</sup> Dalton, diary, 17 July 1917.

<sup>101</sup> The reviewer in *The Athenæum* sneered, indicatively, at Dalton’s ‘unpretentious little book’, above all at his attitude to the Allied nation: ‘His narrative may drag at times, and his reflections may not always rise above the commonplace [*sic*], but it is obvious that he knows how to get on with Italians.’ (‘Bibliographical Notes’, *The Athenæum*, 30 May 1919, p. 401.)

Colazione at 11.30 & Pranzo at 7.30. We feed well. He has several extra courses. He gives me a cigar, carefully selecting the best, & brings the end over his own special candle. ...

Manfredi [a liaison officer] says his general is a “tipo militare... brutale”.

Instead of this vibrant sketch, Dalton’s book blandly reports that ‘Parma Brigade were holding the line and the British officer in the O.P. [Observation Post] used to take his meals at Brigade Headquarters.’ Nevertheless, such experiences would shape Dalton’s published analysis of Caporetto:

When, owing to the omissions of the High Command, the break in the line was swiftly widened and the whole defensive scheme of the Second Army collapsed, it is true that confusion and panic began to spread ... like fire through dry grass. But it is not within the power of common soldiers, and especially of simple unlettered peasantry, such as most of these soldiers were, to repair the blunders of bad Staff work, and to make for themselves, on the spur of the moment and in face of deadly peril, plans which trained brains should have elaborated long before, at leisure and in safe secluded places. When leadership fails, the best troops fail too.<sup>102</sup>

Dalton’s book is less vivid than his diary about the rout. On 28 October, he watched ‘Italian Batteries & Infantry in retreat all afternoon & evening ... some of the Infantry very demoralised, throwing away arms & equipment.’ Presumably he omitted this emblematic detail in order to deter readers from thinking that these dejected men had caused the breach. Early on 30 October, approaching the Tagliamento river along a road crammed with soldiers and civilians, he witnessed ‘a wild stampede’:

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<sup>102</sup> Dalton, *British Guns*, p. 141.

It is started by some cavalry galloping along the road in rear, [...] & spreads contagiously. A howling mob, crying “Tedeschi, Tedeschi! Sulla strada!”, comes foaming down the road, with wild terror on their faces. It is the most demoralising sight I have ever seen. Kit & guns & equipment are thrown away. People are knocked down, & trampled under foot, drivers leave lorries & horses, carts & tractors are overturned. The infantry run also along tracks parallel to the main road. Further down, at Latisana, I learn that machine guns were turned on the crowd, & many killed. On Latisana bridge, officers stood with revolvers & shot down many fugitives, in vain efforts to stop the rush.

In the book, this compelling scene is flattened into two bland sentences: “About 7 a.m., it was reported that enemy cavalry patrols had been seen to the north of the road, and that shots had been exchanged. For a moment there was some panic and confusion, but a scheme of defence was quickly organised.” Again, it is difficult to account for Dalton’s writerly restraint except as a bid to focus his readers’ attention on the genuine causes.

We can compare Dalton’s account with his commanding officer’s. Charles Buzzard, who arrived in Italy in April, attributed the breakthrough to three causes: the loss of ‘nearly all’ the ‘best infantry officers’ in Second Army’ during 1917;<sup>103</sup> ‘enemy propaganda’ and ‘the unfortunate peace proposals by the Pope’; and the ‘example of Russia.’<sup>104</sup> Revisiting the topic in January 1918, Buzzard omitted the Pope and added three further causes: the use of gas

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<sup>103</sup> Total officer casualties in the Tenth and Eleventh Battles are not available. According to John Schindler, 41 Italian regiments suffered more than 50 per cent casualties during the Tenth Battle, and the Eleventh was the ‘largest and bloodiest Isonzo battle’ of all, measured by Italian casualties: 166,000, including 40,000 dead. (Schindler, *Isonzo*, pp. 215, 241, 242.)

<sup>104</sup> Lt. Col. C.N. Buzzard, ‘Appendix I. Further Notes on the Retreat from the Carso (27<sup>th</sup> October to 1<sup>st</sup> November 1917)’, 94<sup>th</sup> HAG (RGA) War Diary for Nov. 1917: TNA WO 95/4206.

shells against ineffective Italian masks; incompetent staff; inadequate separation allowances ‘and consequent despondency.’<sup>105</sup> On neither occasion did he mention Socialism, the enemy within, plotting, treachery or cowardice.

[line space]

The first book in English about the Italian front appeared in March, pipping Dalton by a few weeks. This was *Scenes from Italy's War*, by George Macaulay Trevelyan (1876-1962).

Before the war, Trevelyan's trilogy about Garibaldi made him the best-known British historian of modern Italy. Offering ‘a heroic account of the struggle for liberal humanism’,<sup>106</sup> these books capped a romantic cult of Garibaldi and unified Italy which dated from the 1860s, when it was fostered by poets and novelists. During the war, Trevelyan led the first unit of British Red Cross ambulances in Italy. The British Red Cross in Italy had around 100 staff in three units.<sup>107</sup> Between August 1915 and December 1918, British ambulances in Italy ‘carried close to 400,000 Italian sick and wounded.’ Trevelyan's unit, with some 40 personnel, operated on the Isonzo front.

Trevelyan's book centres on its seventh chapter, ‘Caporetto and the Retreat’. It begins by acknowledging that ‘causes and effects’ were ‘complicated’. Among the former, Trevelyan lists:

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<sup>105</sup> Buzzard, ‘Some impressions’.

<sup>106</sup> Joseph M. Hemon, Jr., ‘The Last Whig Historian and Consensus History: George Macaulay Trevelyan, 1876-1962’, *The American Historical Review*, 81/1 (1976), p. 72.

<sup>107</sup> British Red Cross Society, *Reports by the Joint War Committee and the Joint War Finance Committee of the British Red Cross Society and the Order of St. John of Jerusalem in England* (London, 1921), pp. 433, 438, 440.

the mentality and character of a race; the merits and defects of its political and educational system; the relations of the different classes and parties to the war; the enemy propaganda; the grievances of the soldiers at the front; the world-strategy of Ludendorff and the new German tactics; the actions of Cadorna and his subordinates; Rapallo and the coming of the Allies.<sup>108</sup>

Caution and complexity are then abandoned: ‘there were a few regiments who, in accordance with a previously-formed intention, abandoned their duty, and surrendered on purpose.’ This ‘betrayal’ occurred around Caporetto. The rest of Second Army ‘successfully resisted the attacks ... until the order came from Cadorna to retreat’; it withdrew ‘irreproachably’ until, reaching the plains, ‘they were gradually infected by the sense that all was lost.’<sup>109</sup> Conceding that he ‘can say little’ about ‘the positive treachery’ because he ‘was not there’, Trevelyan writes: ‘It is common knowledge that the ranks of these regiments were filled up with several thousands of the munition workers who had taken part in the recent Turin revolt.’<sup>110</sup> Pitying the plumage, Trevelyan commiserates with Italy’s commander:

Possibly the too great isolation in which the Comando Supremo was said to live under General Cadorna’s *régime* is partly responsible for the failure to scent the smoke before the fire. If so, that General, to whom Italy and the Allies owe so much, has dearly paid for the defects of his qualities.<sup>111</sup>

The stylistics of fake news abound here. A controversy is framed with moralising and prejudicial terms, which settle the issue as it is introduced. Gestures of accountability (‘I may

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<sup>108</sup> G.M. Trevelyan, *Scenes from Italy’s War* (London, 1919), pp. 163-4.

<sup>109</sup> Trevelyan, *Scenes*, p. 165.

<sup>110</sup> Trevelyan, *Scenes*, p. 167.

<sup>111</sup> Trevelyan, *Scenes*, p. 168.

be regarded as partial...') claim our trust. Unsourced gossip is 'common knowledge' beyond need of demonstration. Pompous language ('geographical propinquity') implies judicious probity.

Having delivered this farrago, Trevelyan invents an average Italian infantryman in order to 'reconstruct' his experience and understand his outlook. He had already admitted that the ordinary soldier endured 'slavelike drudgery amid damp trenches and grimy ruins, for a cause that had never been intelligibly explained'. Elaborating the circumstances of his 'imaginary "Giuseppe"', Trevelyan demonstrates the imaginative sympathy which he believed was a defining requirement of historians:<sup>112</sup>

... even when he is *in riposo* life is wet, dirty, and dull. It is seldom one is near a *casa del soldato*.

... '*Porca miseria!*' he says, what are we doing shivering and starving and dying here to win these barren mountains where no one lives at all except a few barbarians who cannot even talk Italian?

... Giuseppe has had two leaves of ten days each since he joined in 1915, and each time he went back his wife was more depressed and thinner, and every one in the village had turned against the war except the chemist—but he is always against the priest anyhow.

Ordered to retreat, 'Giuseppe' obeys automatically, as he had fought.

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<sup>112</sup> Trevelyan, *Scenes*, p. 115; Hernon, 'The Last Whig', p. 92.



It was raining like ruin. No one gave orders or made them keep rank. They just splashed on, getting more and more like a mob, in the mood of children coming back from school.

“Andiamo a casa,” they said. Evidently Cadorna had given it up, and the war was over.<sup>113</sup>

Not all of Trevelyan’s ventriloquism convinces; it is unlikely that ‘Giuseppe’ would reflect: ‘The officers are not unpopular and never cruel’. There were aspects of Cadorna’s command that Trevelyan did not notice or refused to believe. Resuming his own voice, he writes: ‘These peasant soldiers were neither educated up to understanding the objects and ideals of the war like the English and American soldier, nor terrorized like the soldier in the enemy ranks.’ That last statement was untrue, as Dalton and others were aware. Cadorna’s disciplinary regime was brutal in the extreme, and reached its nadir during 1917.<sup>114</sup>

Trevelyan’s literary device removes his imprimatur. The complaints of an invented everyman are conjectural, like fiction: categorically distinct from the author’s account of causes. Trevelyan saw the ordinary soldier’s experience, but he could not credit it; presumably it diverged too much from his preconception about Italy’s glorious endeavour; besides, the meaning of history could not derive from the experience of its unheroic objects.

Reviewers took for granted that author and theme were perfectly matched. Posterity thought otherwise. J.H. Plumb, in a laudatory profile, called *Scenes* ‘fascinating’ because of ‘its singular lack of merit’. Trevelyan himself remarked, as late as 1949, that ‘the best thing

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<sup>113</sup> Trevelyan, *Scenes*, pp. 171-2. The Soldiers’ Houses (*case del soldato*) were equipped with simple amenities for rest and recreation.

<sup>114</sup> Trevelyan, *Scenes*, pp. 170, 175. For an overview in English, see Thompson, *White War*, pp. 261-76.

in it is an analysis of the causes and character of the Caporetto disaster.’<sup>115</sup> Coming so long after his chief claim had been discredited, this judgement was unprofessional at best.

The impression that his analysis was shaped by unacknowledged personal pressure deepens in light of his views on the Italian army, given to British Military Intelligence early in 1918. He identified problems that hardly feature in the book, such as disorganisation, poor sanitation and supplies: ‘At best conditions were never really good’. By October 1917, ‘the soldiers had already put up with more than could reasonably be anticipated of them by anyone who knew Italy. ... On top of this [*sic*] came propaganda of various kinds.’ Relations between officers and men ‘were very bad’, and the morale of troops around Tolmin was ‘very shaky’. As for the effectiveness of command, he had not seen a single military policeman during the retreat. ‘In Udine which he reached on the Sunday [28 October] there were no military authorities in command at all.’ Practical remedies could be introduced: ‘increase the separation allowance for the wives and families’; improve insurance and pensions for casualties; increase pay and rations; provide facilities for rest and recreation out of the line.<sup>116</sup> Pensions, insurance and rations are not mentioned in the book as affecting morale. The interview makes no mention of treachery, betrayal or duty abandoned.

Regarding the sources of such pressure: Cadorna’s accusation would appeal to what Plumb called ‘the great simplicities of Trevelyan’s heart and mind’. His theory about ‘a native dualism in the Italian character and philosophy’, with ‘idealist’ and ‘materialist’ assumptions vying, disarmed him. In the course of praising Sir Walter Scott, Trevelyan once

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<sup>115</sup> J.H. Plumb, *G.M. Trevelyan* (London, 1951), p. 20; G.M. Trevelyan, *An Autobiography & other essays* (London, 1949), p. 37.

<sup>116</sup> ‘Mr. G.M. Trevelyan on the conditions of the Italian Army. 1915 to 1917.’ Dated 2 Jan. 1918: TNA WO 106/808.

disparaged the figure of the ‘impartial historian’.<sup>117</sup> Perhaps it seemed incumbent on him as author – not as informant of Military Intelligence – to wear colourful partiality as a badge of his guild. A feeling of class solidarity with senior commanders may also have exacted its due; like Cadorna, Trevelyan was moved by a sense of *noblesse oblige*, strong enough to qualify the obligation to humdrum truthfulness. Abhorrence of Socialism as well as anti-clerical prejudice may also have played their parts.<sup>118</sup> Caporetto had soured Trevelyan’s old enchantment with Italy, indeed he lamented that his ‘political heart’ was ‘broken’.<sup>119</sup> Someone had to pay.

Yet *The Observer* praised his account as ‘perhaps the most lucid explanation that has yet appeared in England.’<sup>120</sup> In the *New Statesman*, Hugh Dalton took a different view. After paying his respects (‘Mr Trevelyan has done as much as any living Englishman to make England and Italy better known to one another’), he came to the nub: ‘In his analysis of the causes of the retreat he says many true and suggestive things [about the psychology of ‘Giuseppe’]. But he appears to me in this part of his book to see less than half the truth. For there were Giuseppes in all the [Italian] Armies’.

Dalton countered that Caporetto had two chief causes: the enemy’s superior strength, and the ‘manifold blunders’ of the Supreme Command. On Trevelyan’s assessment that Cadorna ‘has dearly paid for the defects of his qualities’, quoted above, Dalton commented drily: ‘Much more than this might be said, and in any case what an unsuccessful General pays in loss of position and prestige is a derisory thing by comparison with what countless sons

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<sup>117</sup> Plumb, *Trevelyan*, p. 21; Trevelyan, *Scenes*, p. 11; Hemon, ‘The Last Whig’, p. 92.

<sup>118</sup> Class solidarity too with Sir Rennell Rodd, saluted after the war as ‘the flower of the old diplomacy, and of English, Italian and Greek culture. There will never be anyone like him again.’ (Trevelyan, *Autobiography*, 36.)

<sup>119</sup> M. Moorman, *George Macaulay Trevelyan* (London, 1980), p. 171.

<sup>120</sup> E. Hutton, ‘Two books about Italy’, *The Observer*, 27 Apr. 1919, p. 5.

and wives and mothers pay. Polite sympathy of this kind is an almost indecent mockery of realities.’ He suggested, mischievously, that Trevelyan wrote ‘smooth things of those in high places’ due to his ‘semi-official position’.<sup>121</sup>

Shortly after his review was published, Dalton received ‘a letter from Trevvy agreeing with my criticisms’.<sup>122</sup>

## VII. Postwar histories: having it both ways

The gradual and inconsistent expunging of fake news in British accounts of Caporetto can be briefly traced.

Issued in weekly parts from 1914 to 1920, *The Times History of the War* amounted to over 11,000 pages. The instalment about Caporetto appeared a fortnight after the end of the Italian war. Regarding causes, the *History* corrected certain errors while extenuating them. ‘The talk of widespread treachery, or general panic, was quite unjustified,’ it stated, then shrugged: ‘though it was natural enough at the time under the shock of disaster.’ Those Second Army corps which ‘lost order’ did so ‘owing to the immense difficulties of the retreat, and not through panic or weakness in the face of the enemy. It is essential to repeat this point...’ So it gets repeated: ‘when the retreat came, it was not for lack of moral that many units lost order and cohesion, *but for lack of training and experience.*’<sup>123</sup> About Cadorna’s communiqué, the *History* said this:

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<sup>121</sup> H. Dalton, ‘Garibaldi’s Biographer on the Italian Front’, *The New Statesman*, 15 Mar. 1919, pp. 525-6.

Edward Hutton in the *Observer* also mentioned ‘all its [the book’s] “official” limitations’, without identifying these.

<sup>122</sup> Dalton, diary, 22 Mar. 1919.

<sup>123</sup> *The Times History of the War* 18/222, 19 Nov. 1918. ‘Caporetto: Italy’s Disaster and Recovery’; *Times History*, pp. 8, 14, 36. Emphasis added.

The simple candour of his announcement has had no parallel in the course of the war, and as a result it was assumed that if he told this much there was far more that he withheld.

Regretfully it must be admitted that his open admission was a mistake, in so far at least as the effect upon Allied opinion was concerned.<sup>124</sup>

The substance of the communiqué was not faulted.

John Buchan, the most prolific popular historian of the war, gave successive accounts of Caporetto. His chief contribution to the Allied cause was *Nelson's History of the War*, which appeared between February 1915 and July 1919 in 24 volumes of approximately 50,000 words each: an astonishing achievement in the margins of full-time employment. 'It is a heavy job keeping the thing going', he admitted in 1917, 'but it is such good propaganda I must try.'<sup>125</sup> The instalment covering Caporetto described the 'secret campaign ... conducted throughout Italy' by the Central Powers. 'Nothing had been done to check peace propaganda among the troops.' Buchan further alleged that 'treachery and folly' had been found 'in the Italian ranks' at Caporetto, where Second Army was 'weakened with discontent and treason'. *The Spectator* commended this account as 'discreet and clear'.<sup>126</sup>

In January 1917, Buchan told Captain Liddell Hart: 'There are very many things in the early volumes of my History which will have to be revised after the war.' *A History of the*

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<sup>124</sup> *Times History*, p. 15. The 'noble candour' of Cadorna's communiqué had been praised in *The Mail* and *The Times*.

<sup>125</sup> J. Adam Smith, *John Buchan* (Oxford, 1985), p. 206. Buchan's war career, and the question of whether his war writing should be categorised as propaganda, are assessed by Hew Strachan, 'John Buchan and the First World War: Fact into Fiction', *War in History*, 16/3 (2009), pp. 298-324.

<sup>126</sup> J. Buchan, *Nelson's History of the War. Vol. XXI* (London, 1918), pp. 28, 14, 34, 35. *The Spectator*, 25 January 1919, p. 21.

*Great War* duly appeared in four volumes in 1921 and 1922. Appraising Buchan as war historian, Keith Grieves said the new version was ‘rewritten, but barely reconsidered’.<sup>127</sup> This is not quite fair to Buchan’s treatment of Caporetto, which now stated that responsibility ‘must rest mainly with Cadorna and the High Command’. After specifying five military failings, Buchan added: ‘There were other and graver derelictions.’<sup>128</sup> Namely, Cadorna’s methods ‘were too often like a bad copy of Prussianism; no effort has been made to counteract the inevitable war-weariness, to relieve the intolerable tedium of trench life, or to improve the inadequate ration scale.’<sup>129</sup> The new material came from Dalton and from Trevelyan’s portrait of ‘Giuseppe’. He also borrows Dalton’s anecdote about the cavalry commander who declared that the gentlemen of Italy would save the country’s honour.<sup>130</sup> When Buchan explains the failure to appreciate the ‘gravity’ of the situation before Caporetto by the ‘isolation’ of the High Command, he draws directly from Trevelyan.

Buchan did not iron out the difference between his old and new explanations. Winston Churchill’s summary of the defeat (1927) likewise has it both ways:

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<sup>127</sup> K. Grieves, ‘Nelson’s History of the War: John Buchan as a Contemporary Military Historian 1915-22’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 28/3 (1993), pp. 541, 547, 544.

<sup>128</sup> The five failings were: no proper plans for retirement behind defensive lines; Cadorna had maintained forward lines without strengthening them; Second Army was inadequate to the challenge facing it; ‘there was no real reserve’; and communications on the front were defective. J. Buchan, *A History of the Great War. Volume IV* (London, 1922), p. 54.

<sup>129</sup> Buchan, *A History*, p. 54.

<sup>130</sup> Buchan, *A History*, p. 58; Dalton, *British Guns*, p. 123.

A sudden bombardment by heavy artillery and gas shells, followed by a general assault along the whole front ..., aided by the effects of defeatist propaganda within the Italian lines, produced in twelve hours a complete and decisive defeat...<sup>131</sup>

Liddell Hart's history of the war (1930) echoed Trevelyan when it proposed Cadorna was one of those commanders whose 'mental remoteness is often accentuated' by 'natural isolation'. However, hindsight showed that 'excessive emphasis was placed on the effect of enemy and seditious propaganda'.<sup>132</sup> Cruttwell's history (1934) recycled the fake news meme about 'large numbers of munition-workers from Turin ... drafted into the ranks as a punishment for their revolutionary strike in August ... some among them were not merely unwilling to fight, but anxious to betray.' Cruttwell added a puzzled reflection: 'It seems inconceivable that the High Command could have been ignorant of this serious infection. But ... apparently this was true.'<sup>133</sup>

The Italy volume of the *History of the Great War Based on Official Documents* was not published until 1949. The summary account of Caporetto includes this sagacious sentence:

How far the morale of the Italian army, composed as it was of varying elements drawn from the hardy north and the easily excitable south, had been weakened by heavy losses and undermined by pacifist, defeatist, and Socialist propaganda must remain a matter for speculation.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Churchill, *World Crisis*, p. 243.

<sup>132</sup> B. Liddell Hart, *The Real War, 1914-18* (London, 1930), pp. 384, 387.

<sup>133</sup> C.R.M.F. Cruttwell, *A History of the Great War 1914-18* (Oxford, 1934), p. 459.

<sup>134</sup> Edmonds, *Military Operations*, p. 57.

It is strange to find Maurice's and Delmé-Radcliffe's remarks to the War Cabinet preserved here as in amber. And it is stranger yet to see the workers from Turin emerge again like revenants as recently as 2004; in his excellent history of the war, David Stevenson wrote that 'recently conscripted munitions workers involved in the August uprising in Turin' were placed on the left wing of Second Army before Caporetto.<sup>135</sup>

## VIII. Conclusion

Mario Isnenghi, Italy's dean of First World War studies, once characterised Caporetto poetically as 'a shapeless dream' nourished by prejudices and compounded of 'rumoured events, hearsay, interpretive flashes, unproven and undocumentable.' Asked in 2017 if Caporetto was 'still a mystery', he was brisk: 'No. It is simply an event that we have not finished studying.'<sup>136</sup> Research into the reception of General Cadorna's communiqué suggests that journalists and traditional elites were highly susceptible to this fake news, while Lloyd George and Hugh Dalton, tough-minded democrats, were immune to the sentiments which led many astray. For Italy's political class, the message awakened a dread about mass repudiation of the war and even of the liberal state. For British leaders with little confidence in Italian valour, Cadorna's message confirmed a bias. More remotely, it conformed to a caricature of duplicitousness and betrayal, associated in the educated English mind with Italy since Elizabethans thrilled to the bogeyman Machiavel.

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<sup>135</sup> TNA CAB 23-4, War Cabinet 260, p. 2; D. Stevenson, *1914-1918. The History of the First World War* (London, 2005), p. 379. Stevenson's references do not support his statement.

<sup>136</sup> Isnenghi, *Tragedia*, p. 31; P. Rumiz, 'Mario Isnenghi: "Solo chi cadde può risorgere così"', *La Repubblica*, 23 Oct. 2017, at

[http://www.repubblica.it/cultura/2017/10/23/news/mario\\_isnenghi\\_solo\\_chi\\_cade\\_puo\\_risorgere\\_cosi\\_caporett\\_o\\_si\\_trasformo\\_in\\_un\\_occasione\\_di\\_riscossa\\_-179112573/](http://www.repubblica.it/cultura/2017/10/23/news/mario_isnenghi_solo_chi_cade_puo_risorgere_cosi_caporett_o_si_trasformo_in_un_occasione_di_riscossa_-179112573/) [accessed 6 Jan. 2018].



In practical terms, Italy rose to the urgent challenge after Caporetto and held the enemy at the Piave line. Allied decisions to despatch forces to Italy predated Cadorna's communiqué; they were not influenced by any explanations of causes. At Rapallo in November, Allied leaders helped Prime Minister Orlando to dislodge the *generalissimo* by insisting that they were ready to entrust their forces to the bravery of Italy's soldiers but not to the efficiency of its commanders. The rebuttal of Cadorna could not have been more pointed. It is certain, however, that the last echo of his fake news has not yet been heard.

[end]

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