

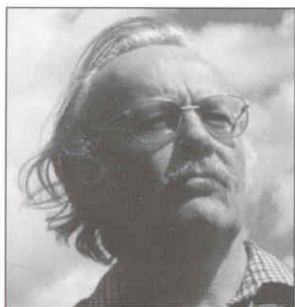
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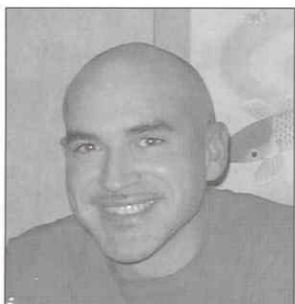
The Italian Army of World War I



David Nicolle • Illustrated by Raffaele Ruggeri



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Select Bibliography & Further Reading

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Dedication

For Frederick William Nicolle, 2338,
A Company, 5th Battalion, Royal Warwickshire Regiment,
who was sent for officer training before he could see Italy

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Artist's Note

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THE ITALIAN ARMY OF WORLD WAR I

ITALY AND THE GREAT WAR

ITALY'S SITUATION WAS MORE COMPLEX than that of the other major powers in the Great War. The united Kingdom of Italy was a young country, which had only been proclaimed in February 1861. The head of state was King Vittorio-Emanuele III (1869–1947), who had succeeded to the throne in July 1900 after the assassination of his father Umberto I. Despite considerable industrialisation in the past 50 years Italy remained an overwhelmingly agricultural country, and over three-quarters of the rural population were landless peasants. Under such circumstances Italy could not compete with the other 'Great Powers' in the arms race which dominated Europe prior to the outbreak of World War I. Although the Italians had won Libya and the Dodecanese islands of Greece from Ottoman Turkey in 1911–12, these had been difficult campaigns which highlighted weaknesses in their armed forces. While resistance to Italian occupation still continued in the Libyan provinces of Tripolitania, Cyrenaica and Fazzan, Italy herself faced political turmoil which culminated in 'Red Week' in June 1914.

Since 1882 Italy had formed part of a Triple Alliance with Germany and Italy's traditional enemy, the Hapsburg Empire of Austria-Hungary. This alliance was, however, intended as a purely defensive relationship, and Italy had made clear that she would never go to war against Britain. There was little surprise when Italy refused to join her allies in what was widely seen as an aggressive war in August 1914. Indeed, there was a growing feeling within Italy, especially amongst anti-clerical and nationalistic modernisers, that their country should ally herself with France and Britain, since the defeat of Austria-Hungary might mean the liberation of *Italia Irredenta* – those parts of the Hapsburg Empire which were largely inhabited by Italians, namely the Trentino in the north and the Littoral (Gorizia, Trieste and neighbouring regions) in the northeast. In these regions support for union with Italy was strongest amongst the middle class and, between August 1914 and Italy's declaration of war on the Central Powers the following May, many Italians fled from the Trentino and the Littoral to join the Italian Army. Meanwhile within Italy itself Peppino Garibaldi, grandson of the famous patriot Giuseppe Garibaldi, emerged as a leader of the Irredentist movement – namely those who wanted to fight for *Italia Irredenta*. Garibaldi led 4,000 Italian volunteers to enlist in the French Foreign Legion, and in winter 1914/15 they fought well on the Western Front. The survivors subsequently returned to join the Italian Army once Italy entered the war.¹

¹ See MAA 325, *French Foreign Legion 1914–45*. After their incorporation into the Alpi and Re Brigades, some members of those formations are reported to have continued to wear red shirts with their uniforms, in reference to the traditional dress of Giuseppe Garibaldi's patriot volunteers.



General Count Luigi Cadorna (1850–1928), Chief of the General Staff and commander of the Italian Army (under the nominal authority of King Vittorio-Emanuele III) until late 1917. By October 1917 Gen. Cadorna, an irascible and intolerant leader, had 'torpedoed' 216 generals, 255 colonels and 355 battalion commanders who disagreed with or disappointed him. Officers on his staff who criticised Cadorna's methods could even find themselves imprisoned – these included Col. Giulio Douhet, the air warfare theorist and prophet of strategic air power.

In this portrait Gen. Cadorna wears the traditional dark blue uniform which was retained for ceremonial wear after the introduction of low visibility grey-green uniforms following the lessons learned by observers of the Russo-Japanese War in 1904–05.

Between August 1914 and May 1915 the Italian Army prepared for the coming conflict while simultaneously facing problems in several parts of Italy's African empire. Things were quiet in Eritrea, where the Italians had widespread support, though there was fear of an Ethiopian invasion. Italy also cultivated good relations with the ruler of the Arab province of Asir on the other side of the Red Sea. To the south, in Italian Somaliland, the Italian government had taken over from a private trading company in 1905 because the latter could not cope with a resistance movement led by the Somali poet Muhammad Abd Allah Hassan, known to his foes as the 'Mad Mullah'. In 1914 this leader and his similarly misnamed 'dervish' followers inflicted a series of defeats on the British in the neighbouring colony of British Somaliland. The Italians' biggest problem remained Libya. Here resistance was led by, though not limited to, the Sanussi Islamic sect. By July 1914 the Italians controlled Tripolitania and had advanced to take Fazzan, but their situation was more difficult in Cyrenaica, close to the Sanussi spiritual and military centre of Al-Khufrah. Turkey's entry into the Great War on the side of the Central Powers rekindled Turkish support for the Sanussi, and although this was initially directed against the French and the British, neutral Italy also faced an upsurge in hostilities in Libya. In North Africa the recently arrived Italian colonisers were in a weaker position than the longer established French and British, and suffered serious setbacks. By May 1915 they were obliged to withdraw their garrisons to the coast, and even parts of this were lost to the Sanussi or other 'rebels'.

Apart from a largely naval garrison on the Dodecanese Islands, Italy's pre-war activities in the Balkans were diplomatic, Albania being the main focus of interest. Albania had in fact been declared an independent state only in 1913 and was still in virtual anarchy. Marauding Greeks caused mayhem in southern Albania, and in October 1914, with the Great War occupying international attention, Greece occupied much of Albania. The Italians then took control of Sazan Island, followed by the neighbouring port of Vlërë in December.

Even before the war Italy had good relations with the Entente Powers of France, Britain and Russia, and as early as January 1915 the Austrian government received reports that Italy was preparing to enter the war on their side. The Anglo-French attack on the Dardanelles (the Gallipoli campaign) further encouraged the Italians; and on 26 April 1915 Italy signed the Treaty of London, which promised Italy sweeping territorial gains following an Entente victory (promises which clashed with those made to other countries, and which included an agreement that Albania would be largely shared between Italy and Greece). On 3 May 1915 Italy left the Triple Alliance, but there was still resistance in the Italian parliament to Italy entering the war. A change of government was needed before the interventionists got their way; but on 24 May 1915 Italy declared war on Austria-Hungary, on 21 August on Ottoman Turkey, on 20 October on Bulgaria, and on 28 August 1916 on Germany.

When Italy entered World War I in May 1915 most of the army demonstrated the enthusiasm seen in other belligerent countries back in August 1914. Here men of the *Sanità* or Medical Corps have painted the name 'Trento' on the side of their railway wagon – this was a region which Italy hoped to liberate from the Hapsburg Empire.



CHRONOLOGY

Note: Events on or mainly relevant to the main Italian/Austro-Hungarian front are shown in **bold** type; those on Italy's secondary fronts, in *italics*; and related events, in normal type.

1914

February: Libya – Italians start offensive against remaining Sanussi camps.

28 June: Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand assassinated in Sarajevo.

28 July to 4 August 4: declarations of war by Austria-Hungary, Russia, Germany, France, Great Britain.

August–September: Libya – Italian punitive operations against Sanussi.

August–October: Balkans – Greeks occupy southern Albania.

26 August: *Libya – Italian column defeated by Sanussi at Bir al-Fatia.*

October: Balkans – Italy occupies Albanian island of Sazan opposite Vlorë, then Vlorë itself (December).

28 November: *Libya – anti-Italian rising in Fazzan resulting in an Italian withdrawal to Tripolitania by February 1915.*

17–23 November: East Africa – Major clash between supporters of Muhammad Abd Allah Hassan and the British in British Somaliland. *Tension between 'Dervishes' and Italians in Italian Somaliland escalates into major clashes in 1915.*

December 1914–February 1915: Balkans – Central Albania falls to neutralist Islamic forces.

1915

9–11 March: *Libya – Italians disperse Sanussi force in southern Tripolitania.*

April: Partial Italian mobilisation.

24 April: *Libya – Large Italian column moves east to crush Sanussi uprising in Surt region, defeated by Sanussi at Abu Zinaf on 28–29 April.*

26 April: Italy signs Treaty of London.

4 May: Italy abrogates Triple Alliance with Austria-Hungary and Germany.

6 May–23 June: *Libya – Italian garrisons at Banu Walid and Tarhunah in Tripolitania besieged; relief attempts fail.*

22 May: Official Italian mobilisation.

23 May: Italy declares war on Austria-Hungary.

23–27 May: 'First Offensive Bound' – Italians seize Stélvio, Tonale, Guidriari, Giau and Plöcken Passes in the high Alps, plus several salients beyond the frontier.

June: Balkans – Montenegro occupies Shkodër in northern Albania, Serbia occupies central Albania, Greece already occupies south.²

15–16 June: Italians take Monte Nero in night attack.

23 June–7 July: First Battle of the Isonzo; minor Italian gains.

30 June: *Libya – Italian column fails to break siege of Banu Walid.*

5 July: *Libya – Garrison of Banu Walid attempts a sortie but is overwhelmed; general Italian withdrawal from southern Tripolitania to coast completed by August.*

18 July–3 August: Second Battle of the Isonzo; minor Italian gains.

21 August: *Italy declares war on Ottoman Turkey for supporting Libyan 'rebels'.*

3–5 October: Balkans – French and British divisions land at Thessaloniki and move up Vardar river to help Serbia. 6 October: Austro-German-Bulgarian invasion of Serbia; Franco-British advance turned back.

October: Libya – Italian garrisons in Cyrenaica complete withdrawal to coast.

October–December: Balkans – Serbian army retreats through Serbian-occupied northern and central Albania.

18 October–4 November: Third Battle of the Isonzo; minor Italian gains.

20 October: *Italy declares war on Bulgaria.*

November 1915–March 1916: Sanussi campaign against the British and Egyptians in Egypt.

10 November–2 December: Fourth Battle of the Isonzo; minor Italian gains.

December: Balkans – British, French and Italian ships evacuate Serbian Army from Durrës to Greek island of Corfu. Italian troops land in Vlorë and start pushing back Greek occupation forces in southern Albania.

1916

January–February: Libya – Coastal peoples of Tripolitania and Jabal Nafusah rally to Italians; Sanussi control restricted to east of Wadi Zamzam; Italians defeat Sanussi column, 1 February.

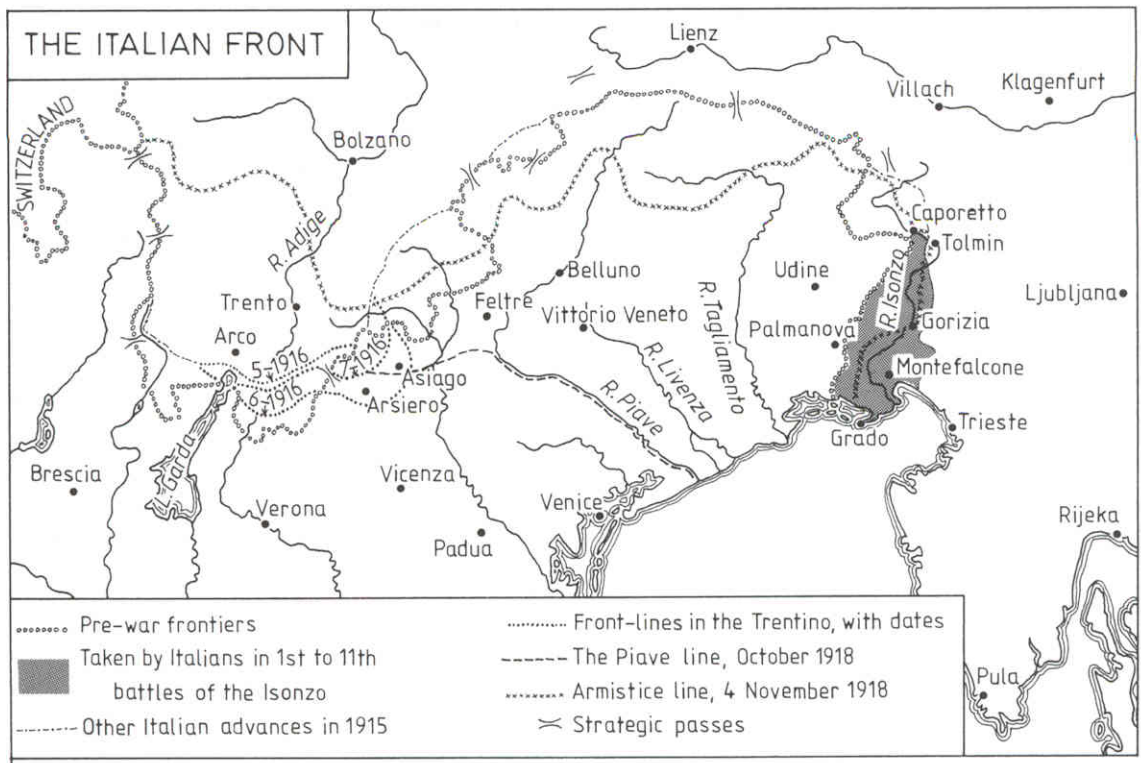
11–15 March: Fifth Battle of the Isonzo; minor Italian gains.

May: East Africa – Alliance formed between Muhammad Abd Allah Hassan (the 'Mad Mullah') and Emperor Lij Jasu of Ethiopia in support of Ottoman Turks, against British, Italians and French. Italians send reinforcements to Massawa in Eritrea; Lij Jasu deposed 27 September, but civil war continues in Ethiopia.

14 May–16 June: Austrian offensive on Trentino front takes Arsiero, Asiago, and retakes northern end of Lake Garda.

May: *Libya – Italian amphibious landing at Ras al-Muraysah in Cyrenaica recaptures al-Bardi, after which British-Italian column destroys Sanussi camp near Darnah. 18 May: Libya – Italians retake Zuwarah in Tripolitania. 27 May: Balkans – Greek Army hands a strategic frontier fortress to the Bulgarians.*

² For a fuller description of all operations on the Balkan front and details of the armies involved, see MAA 356, *Armies in the Balkans 1914–18*



17 June–1 July: Italian counter-attack on Trentino front retakes Arsiero and Asiago.

25 July: Libya – Start of negotiations between Italy, Britain and the Sanussi.

August: Balkans – Bulgarians enter northern Greece, advance towards Florina and occupy Kavalla.

6–17 August: Sixth Battle of the Isonzo; substantial Italian gains including Gorizia.

August: Balkans – Italian 35th Division arrives in Thessaloniki to join Entente forces on the Macedonian front.

24 August: Libya – Italians retake Surman and al-Ajaylat on coast of western Tripolitania.

28 August: Balkans – Entente forces halt Bulgarian thrust west of Thessaloniki.

September: Balkans – Entente counter-attack establishes a front along River Strymon, Lake Dojran and Serbian frontier towards Florina.

29 August: Italy declares war on Germany.

September–November: Balkans – Italians in western Albania push Greeks out of southern Albania and behind a 'neutral zone', officially established 16 November; establish an HQ in Gjirokastër.

10–18 September: Balkans – Entente forces attack on Macedonian front, with diversionary attacks by Italian 35th Div at Lake Dojran while French, Serbian and Russian divisions break Bulgarian right flank to take Florina.

14–17 September: Seventh Battle of the Isonzo; minor Italian gains.

17–20 September: Balkans – Bulgarian counter-offensive on Macedonian front defeated.

3 October–20 November: Balkans – Entente offensive breaks the Bulgarian line and takes Monastir. Italians in Albania advance eastwards during November; link up with French at western end of Macedonian front south-west of Lake Prespa to form a continuous front from Adriatic to Aegean Seas.

10–12 October: Eighth Battle of the Isonzo; minor Italian gains.

1–14 November: Ninth Battle of the Isonzo; minor Italian gains.

16 November: Balkans – Official establishment of neutral zone across northern Greece.

1917

January–February: Libya – Italians disperse Sanussi forces on coast west of Tripoli, make amphibious landing at Zuwarah to complete reconquest of western Tripolitania.

February: East Africa – 'Dervish' army attacks pro-Italian Sultan Uthman of Obbia in Italian Somaliland, but is defeated on 27 February.

17 April: Libya – 'Modus Vivendi of Akrama' agreed between Italians, British and Sanussi. 'Rebels' in Tripolitania no longer recognise Sanussi leadership and are not party to this truce.

22–23 May: Balkans – Entente offensive across Crna river, along shores of Lake Prespa, in Strymon valley and at Lake Dojran.

12 May–5 June: Tenth Battle of the Isonzo; Italian gains.

June: Balkans – Italians proclaim full independence for the part of Albania that they hold.

9 June: Italian offensive against Monte Ortigara on the Trentino front.

10–12 June: Balkans – Entente gives pro-German King Constantine of Greece an ultimatum; king abdicates; new Greek government declares support for Entente on 27 June.

Early July: East Africa – Pro-Italian army of Sultan Uthman of Obbia attacks 'Dervishes'.

3 July: Balkans – Greece enters war on side of the Entente.

17 August–12 September: Eleventh Battle of the Isonzo; Austrians appeal to Germany for help.

27 August–25 October: Balkans – French offensive around Pogradec, south-west of Lake Ohrid in eastern Albania.

4–11 September: Libya – Italians retake several oases in Tripolitania.

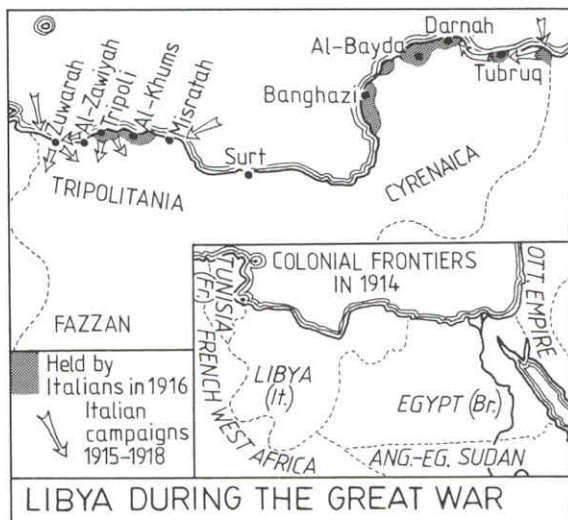
24–25 October: Austro-German offensive at the Battle of Caporetto – Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo – achieves breakthrough; Italian Army virtually collapses and begins general retreat from the Isonzo and Carnia fronts.

31 October: Italians attempt to form a new front on the River Tagliamento but fail; withdrawal continues.

5 November: Italians make a stand on the River Livenza while main defences are completed on the River Piave.

7–10 November: Italians withdraw to Piave line. Gen. Diaz replaces Gen. Cadorna as Chief of the General Staff on 9 November.

12 November: Austrian attack via Belluno to intercept the Italian retreat fails.



1918

4–5 May: Night raid by Italian *Arditi* and Navy destroys electrical sub-stations behind Austrian lines.

June: Austrian offensives defeated at Asiago, 15–16 June, and along River Piave, 15–24 June.

July: Gen. Diaz sends Italian II Corps to serve on the Western Front in France.

25 July: Libya – Major Italian bombardment of Misratah.

27 August–25 October: Balkans – Offensive by Entente forces in Albania, started by French divisions in Korçë region.

15 September: Balkans – Major offensive by Entente forces on Macedonian front; French, Serbian and Italian divisions achieve breakthrough between Albanian frontier and River Vardar.

23 September: Libya – Italian column from Zuwarah overruns rebel base at Qasr Tillil.

25–30 September: Balkans – French and Italian divisions begin rapid advance along the course of River Crna.

2 October: Balkans – Italians in western Albania advance north along coast, supported by Italian Navy.

5 October: Libya – Rebel attack on Italian position at al-Jamil defeated.

24 October: Start of Battle of Vittorio Veneto; Italian and British forces advance across the River Piave.

27 October: Austria asks Italy for armistice.

6 October: Libya – Italians defeat rebels at Zanzur.

2 November: Hungarian government orders Hungarian troops in Austro-Hungarian Army to lay down their arms.

3 November: Austria signs armistice to take effect the next day; Italian amphibious landing in Trieste; Balkans – Italians advancing into northern Albania take Shkodër from Montenegrans.

4 November: Austrian armistice takes effect at 1500 hours.

After the war was won, Italy received less than she had been promised in the Treaty of London, and much less than most Italians regarded as their country's due. The populations gained by the acquisition of the Littoral, Trentino and Alto Adige were virtually the same as Italy's wartime casualties. About five and half million men had entered the services and of these two-fifths became casualties, about 689,000 being killed and one million seriously wounded. The economy had expanded, but Italy was left with a massive international debt. All of these factors contributed to the rise of Fascism only a few years later.

THE CAMPAIGNS

The Italian front

Fighting on the Italian front was more dominated by geographical conditions than any other theatre in Europe. In the mountains some defensive positions and wire entanglements were situated on Alpine peaks or followed high ridges and clifftops to create virtually unassailable fortifications. The Austro-Hungarians had turned the Trentino into one vast fortress in which every major vantage point bristled with guns. Between August 1914 and May 1915 they had also carved elaborate defences into the limestone hills, plateaux and mountains along the River Isonzo, often extending the networks of natural caves which are a feature of this landscape. Learning from the lessons of the Western Front, the Austro-Hungarians strengthened the natural defensive features with belts of barbed wire and mutually supporting blockhouses, all served by new military roads and railways.

Meanwhile the Italian Chief of the General Staff, Gen. Luigi Cadorna, drew up his essentially offensive strategy. Using the benefit of interior lines of communication, he ensured that troops could be moved easily between the Trentino and the Isonzo. Once war was declared, Cadorna established his supreme headquarters at Udine, less than 20km from the frontier. The front from the Stélvio Pass near the Swiss border to the Adriatic Sea was about 675km (419 miles) long. It was divided into three sections: the Trentino in the west, which was pierced by the River Adige; the Carnia in the centre, which was so mountainous that major offensives were unrealistic; and the Isonzo in the east, which offered several strategic possibilities. It was in the east that Cadorna concentrated Italian efforts.

In May 1915 the 1st and 4th Armies under Gens. Brusati and Nava held the Trentino sector; Gen. Lequoi's 19 battalions of Alpini plus cavalry and artillery held the Carnia line. The 2nd Army (Gen. Frugoni in the north) and the 3rd Army (Gen. Zuccari, soon to be replaced by the Duke of Aosta, in the south) were ranged along the Isonzo front. Three other army corps were held in reserve. Despite various modifications, this structure remained basically intact for two and a half years until the battle of Caporetto. In some sectors, most notably around Caporetto at the northern end of the 2nd Army's front, Italian dispositions were very thinly spread. On the Isonzo front the bulk of Italian strength was concentrated along the southern sector, where Cardona repeatedly attempted to achieve a breakthrough.

Gen. Cadorna's attacking strategy was unleashed with the 'First Offensive Bound' of 23–27 May 1915. This was a considerable success,

with the Italians seizing vital objectives on all fronts including the several Alpine passes and territory beyond. But a hesitant advance on the lower Isonzo led to the dismissal of Gen. Vercellana – the first of many such sackings by Cadorna, who initially hoped to break through to Ljubljana, Vienna and Budapest. This strategy resulted in the initial very costly battles of the Isonzo. Failing to achieve his breakthrough, Cadorna changed his objective but not his strategy, now aiming to liberate Trieste rather than drive on the enemy capitals. This resulted in further bloody battles of the Isonzo, no less than eleven of which were identified, eventually winning territory up to and in several sectors beyond the River Isonzo, including the city of Gorizia.

Even though Cadorna soon realised that this was going to be a war of attrition, he continued to have faith in massed artillery and massed infantry attacks. In 1917, before the disaster at Caporetto, the British Gen. Robertson toured the Italian defences, which he described as old-fashioned and lacking depth; co-ordination between artillery and infantry was inadequate, and there was as yet no use of the creeping barrage, while communications were 'elementary' in Robertson's view. (Another senior British officer, the very experienced Gen. Plumer, visited the front after Caporetto; he too was critical of the Italian use of artillery.)

At Caporetto (or the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo) in October 1917, the Austro-Hungarians (with modest but decisive German support) smashed the 2nd Army front, outflanking the 3rd Army to the south and the Carnia front to the north-east. The initial panic retreat was halted and a new Italian front was established along the River Piave to the Alpine foothills, where it joined the largely unchanged front which the Italians maintained in the Trentino sector. Six French and five British divisions were sent to Italy from the Western Front after the Italians halted the enemy advance, but once they had arrived the front was divided into smaller corps sectors as follows: that of VII Corps from the Swiss frontier to Lake Garda; I Corps between Arsiero and Asiago; VI Corps from there to the River Brenta (incorporating a British and a French division); IV Corps from the Brenta almost to the River Piave, where a short front was held by the French 12th Army (incorporating Italian divisions); VIII Corps with the Montello to their rear and the Piave ahead; the British XIV Corps/10th Army as far as Ponte de Piave (incorporating Italian divisions); and III Corps (ex-3rd Army) from there to the Adriatic coast. The IX and Cavalry Corps were held in reserve.

The Italians were aware of the shortcomings which had exposed them to defeat at Caporetto, and the first half of 1918 was dedicated to changing the army's outmoded tactics. Colonel Pietro Badoglio (who rose to greater prominence

Although the Italian front ran from the Swiss border to the Adriatic coast, most of its length was so mountainous that major military operations were impractical. By far the most intensive fighting was concentrated along the lower course of the River Isonzo and in relatively low mountains on either side. Large camps and dumps of men and material were often concentrated in the narrow Isonzo valley, seen here from the air.



during World War II) was responsible for this new battlefield doctrine. It involved a defensive system along the Piave river based upon mutually supporting strongpoints instead of a continuous line, with defence in depth and local counter-attacks to support the defenders. Badoglio also standardised tactical doctrine so that sector commanders could no longer fight as they pleased.

After being defeated at Caporetto, Gen. Cadorna was replaced by Gen. Armando Diaz. The new chief of staff initially used Cadorna's plan of withdrawal, but thereafter Diaz abandoned his predecessor's costly offensive approach. Instead he adopted a cautious defensive strategy – so cautious, indeed, that the Italian government had to order Diaz to launch his final offensive, fearing that Italian claims would be ignored in the peace conferences if Italy did not attack. In the event Gen. Diaz waited until late October 1918, when the Central Powers were reeling on several fronts, before authorising an offensive which overwhelmed the Austro-Hungarian army at Vittorio Veneto, resulting in an armistice within days of the Italian assault.

Other fronts

The *Corpo Truppe Ausiliarie in Francia* was an organisation of labour battalions that Italy sent to the **Western Front** at the end of 1917; this was quite separate from II Corps, which was a fully fledged combat formation sent to France in July 1918. The latter included infantry, artillery and air support, and took part with French, British and American forces in halting the last German attack in the Bois de Reims sector, and in the final offensive which rolled back the German line.

* * *

Italian commitment to the **Albanian-Macedonian front** reflected Italy's significant interests in the Balkans. Italian troops occupied Sazan and Vlorë in 1914; a month after Italy entered the war, pro-Entente Montenegro occupied part of northern Albania; pro-Entente Serbia then seized much of central Albania, while neutral Greece already controlled the south (although in each area local Albanian leaders continued to resist). Later in 1915, Gen. Cadorna rejected a plan by some of his generals for an amphibious operation in support of Serbia to outflank the Austro-Hungarians; and in October 1915 Serbia was overrun by Austro-Hungarian, German and Bulgarian armies. As this catastrophe loomed, French and British troops landed at Thessaloniki in northern Greece, but their plan to help the Serbs was thwarted when the pro-German King Constantine of Greece proclaimed his country's neutrality.

The politics of the Macedonian front were extraordinarily complex (the sequence of events and the armies involved are described in MAA 356, *Armies in the Balkans 1914–18*).

In 1915 Austro-Hungarian forces advanced across Albania until they faced Italian troops deployed along the River Vjosë north of Vlorë; but the first major action undertaken by the Italians in Albania was in fact against Greek forces. Neutral Greece was divided between two rival

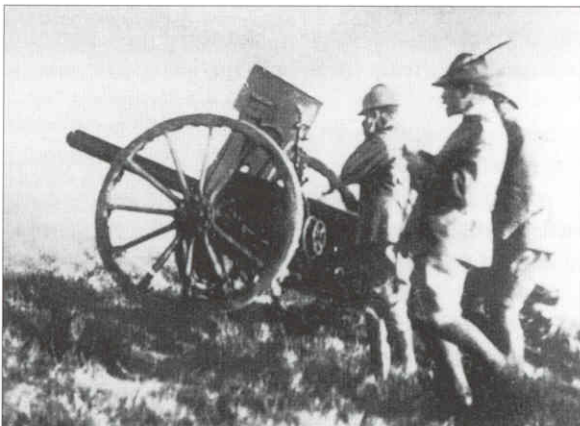


Warfare in the high Alps made huge demands upon the engineer and transport units. Here pack mules stand next to the lower terminus of a military *teleferica* – cable car – which was used to transport ammunition on Monte Grappa. New cable routes were constructed during the war to carry supplies across deep valleys and up steep slopes.

OPPOSITE Italian operations in Albania remain one of the least known campaigns of the Great War. The medieval level of communications and all other infrastructure dictated a 'front' consisting of isolated outposts linked by patrols; occasional serious clashes erupted at Fier near the Adriatic coast, in the Shkrapar Hills south of Berat, and near Lake Ohrid. In this photograph an officer of the *Alpini* supervises a mountain artillery battery. The gun is a 75mm Skoda M1911, made in what is now the Czech Republic for the Chinese market; large numbers of these guns were captured by the Italians aboard the German merchant ship *Bayern*.



The extraordinary road which Italian Army engineers constructed across previously untouched mountains in southern Albania meant that supplies for French, British and other Entente forces on the Macedonian front no longer had to risk the threat of enemy submarines around the Greek coast. It led from Vlorë across the mountains to Santa Quaranta, Tepelena, and up the Vjosë valley to cross the Greek frontier, linking up with a road across Greece from Florina to Thessaloniki; and it is still in use to this day. Under the pressure of military needs many new roads were also constructed by Army engineers in the Italian Alps. (Imperial War Museum Q19121)



governments: that of the pro-German King Constantine in Athens, and that of the pro-Entente prime minister Venizelos in Thessaloniki. Greek irregulars indulged in 'ethnic cleansing' against Muslims in southern Albania; and Constantine's army was also communicating with the Austro-Hungarians and Germans via Berat in central Albania. An Entente campaign to break this link started in autumn 1915 with the Italians extending their zone of occupation, although Constantine's men remained in south-eastern Albania.

If Greece joined the Central Powers this would pose a threat to Entente sealanes, so in October

1916 the allies demanded that Constantine withdraw his forces from Albania. The king refused, but by now the Italians numbered 100,000 men with air support and were strong enough to drive Royalist Greek troops out of Albania altogether. The Italians planted an HQ at Gjirokastër near the Greek frontier, while a 'neutral zone' was established across northern Greece from the Albanian frontier to the Aegean Sea.

By December 1916 Entente forces in Thessaloniki had established a new front, roughly following the Greek-Serbian border. After clashes with Greek Royalist forces in Athens the Entente finally forced the abdication of King Constantine in favour of his son Alexander in June 1917; Venizelos became prime minister of a united Greece, which entered the war as an ally of the Entente Powers on 3 July 1917.

Once the Italians and French linked up in the mountains north-west of Korçë late in 1916, a continuous Albanian-Macedonian front was established from the Adriatic to the Aegean. The Italian sector in Albania became the responsibility of XVI Corps under Gen. Ferrerri. On this front the Italians did not hold a continuous line of trenches, however; this was a war of scattered outposts, patrols, and desultory clashes in the wilderness. More important than this occasional fighting was a remarkable road which Italian military engineers constructed in 1916 across the Albanian mountains, which meant that vital supplies for the Entente armies on the Macedonian front no longer had to run the gauntlet of enemy submarines off the Greek coast.

By August 1916 an Italian division had also joined the French, British, Serbians and Russians on the Macedonian front. This 35th Division was commanded by Gen. Pettiti, whom the British described as a 'courageous soldier through and through'. It eventually consisted of three brigades with support units and an air component, making this 30,000-man force as strong as a corps.³

* * *

As Gen. Cadorna prepared for Italy's entry into the war in spring 1915 he decided that operations in **Libya** must merely contain the local 'rebels' while the Army focused on the Austro-Hungarian front; however, the situation was so dangerous

³ The Cagliari, Sicilia and Ivrea Infantry Brigades, the latter being a third-line militia formation.



Many Italian units which served in Libya during World War I apparently wore normal grey-green uniforms. Other aspects of their equipment were, however, modified for local conditions. This infantry *sergente* still has the gold rank chevrons which were officially replaced by black in 1915. His non-standard boots have integral lace-up leather gaiters; his leather belt equipment was probably made locally. Note the sand goggles on his *berretto* cap.

that troop numbers could not be much reduced. In Tripolitania the Italians attempted to hold a line from Zuwarah through Yafran, Gharyan, Tarhunah and along the coast to Misratah and Surt, but even this proved too ambitious. In Cyrenaica they held a series of coastal enclaves and tried to retake the eastern coast to stop the Sanussi receiving supplies from supporters in Egypt. At first this failed, though the skirmishing went largely in the Italians' favour. Meanwhile German submarines brought numbers of men and weapons from Turkey to help the rebels.

A Sanussi attack on the British in Egypt was defeated, after which the British and Italians joined forces to counter-attack the Sanussi in Cyrenaica in spring 1916; this involved Italian amphibious landings supported by the Navy and aircraft. Meanwhile the Sanussi faced counter-attacks by the French elsewhere in the Sahara. In April 1917 the fighting ended with a truce known as the 'Modus Vivendi of Akrama' which left the Italians with little beyond the coast of Cyrenaica. In return the Italians supplied the Sanussi with rifles, uniforms, money and a battery of mountain artillery for use against other pro-Ottoman bands

led by Ramadan al-Shtaiwi in Tripolitania. Thereafter the area remained largely quiet until the government decided on a major operation in September–October 1918, and Italian forces in Tripolitania waged a tri-service campaign which brought a string of successes. (Victory in Europe freed the Italians to concentrate on Libya, but not until 1922 was their authority firmly re-established in Tripolitania.)

The Italians had a maximum of around 60,000 troops in Libya during the Great War, and suffered higher losses in North Africa than either the British or the French. The troops involved included line infantry from at least 20 different regiments, *Bersaglieri*, the 111th Bn of *Volontari Italiani* militia, cavalry from two regiments, plus engineers, artillery, mountain artillery, armoured cars, other support troops, and militarised customs police. The considerable number of men from the *Regio Corpo di Truppe Coloniali* included soldiers from at least five Eritrean battalions and from nine or ten locally recruited Libyan battalions. Unlike the reliable Eritreans, however, the Libyan units did not have their own machine gun sections.

At the start of the war Italy's garrisons in **Eritrea** numbered five indigenous infantry battalions, a squadron of indigenous cavalry, two batteries of indigenous mountain artillery, a company of indigenous field artillery and an indigenous company of Coast Guards, plus some Italian soldiers forming an HQ, a company of *Carabinieri*, three companies of *Cacciatori d'Africa*, a mixed European-indigenous company of engineers and other support units. In 1916 the Italians, British and French sent additional troops because of the threat posed by an alliance between Emperor Lij Jasu of Ethiopia and the so-called 'Mad Mullah' of Somalia supported by the Ottoman Turks in Yemen. In the event

the provincial warlords and the Ethiopian Church deposed Lij Jasu; but the Mad Mullah remained, being recognised by the Turks as ruler of Somalia. His followers continued to harrass the Italians, who for their part relied upon local police and *ascaris* under Italian officers and NCOs – both infantry and cavalry. Several Somali coastal peoples also remained loyal to Italy, including the Sultan of Obbia, whose tribal army fought against the Mullah's 'dervishes'. In 1917 a combined British-Italian operation involved 4,000 mounted troops of the *Reale Corpo di Truppe Coloniali*, including Eritrean units.

Finally there was a small Italian contingent of Bersaglieri and Carabinieri Guardie attached to the British Army in **Palestine** and commanded by Major da Agostino, a Bersaglieri officer. Like a comparable French brigade, these Italians fought in the battles of Gaza in March and April 1917, later forming an honour guard inside the Jaffa Gate during Gen. Allenby's ceremonial entry into Jerusalem.

MOBILISATION, STRENGTH & CHARACTER

Like several other major powers, Italy introduced conscription in the 1870s, setting the period of compulsory military service at three years. In many ways the army was the only truly national organisation in the newborn nation of Italy; yet it was itself an amalgam of previous local armies united around the Piedmontese Army, just as Italy had herself united around the Piedmontese monarchy. Although its constituent parts had their own proud traditions the Piedmontese heritage dominated, causing frustration and resentment when Piedmontese officers enjoyed preferential treatment and promotion. (There were, of course, exceptions – notably Gen. Armando Diaz who, despite being a Neapolitan of Spanish descent, rose to command the Italian Army during the last year of the war.)

Despite the limitations imposed by Italy's economic and educational weaknesses, the Italian Army had been a leader in various aspects of military modernisation. The Italians were the first to use aeroplanes in war (in Libya, from October 1912) and to make widespread use of armoured cars, while an increasing enthusiasm for motorised transport may have reflected the country's historical shortage of horses.

Economic and political constraints meant that a much needed re-equipment programme was carried out very slowly. By 1914 the Italian Army had still not replaced material lost in Libya, but between August 1914 and May 1915 things moved faster against the background of war to the north; there was a dramatic reduction in wastage, and a significant increase in the number of junior officers. The army was also helped by the phenomenon of '*volontarismo*', which reflected the popular mood.

The policy of using the army to promote national unity resulted in a complex system of conscription and mobilisation. Each regiment drew its recruits from two separate regions and then sent them to a third. Once their period of service was ended, however, men returned home as reservists. When recalled to the colours, these men joined their local rather than their original regiments. Consequently such regiments of



Volontarismo or enthusiasm for patriotic voluntary organisations with military overtones was a feature of Italy in the immediate pre-war years, at a time of tense relations with Austria-Hungary and an explosive situation in the Balkans. A law of 1908 had resulted in various volunteer organisations being militarised to provide fighting units when required. These men belong to the *Volontari Ciclisti ed Automobilisti* (Volunteer Cyclists & Drivers, VCA – an offshoot of a national sporting organisation called the *Corpo Nazionale Ciclisti ed Automobilisti*). The VCA – see Plate E1 – served as a model for other formations such as the *Guide a Cavallo* (Mounted Guides) established in 1914, the volunteer *Alpini* formed in April 1915, and the *Volontari Costieri* coastguards.



Numerous patriotic postcards were published in Italy during the Great War. This one, issued by a bank in 1917, shows a *fantaccino* – one of the ordinary line infantrymen who bore the brunt of Italy's war – with his little daughter. In the background is an *autocannone* self-propelled gun – see photograph on page 38.

reservists developed territorial identities. The only exceptions to this system of mixing and transferring trainees were the *Alpini*, recruited from the Alpine regions of northern Italy in which they remained rooted.

Under the recruitment scheme of 1907, all able-bodied men were liable for call-up in three classes between the ages of 19 and 38 years. The first class spent two years with the colours, six in the reserve, four in the Mobile Militia, and seven in the Territorial Militia. The second class spent six months with the colours, seven and half years in the reserve, and the same periods in the militia as class one. The third class spent all 19 years in the Territorial Militia, but received no effective training.

In reality, however, only a minority of those eligible actually served in the army; e.g. in 1911 less than 25 per cent of those liable for service were actually called up for training. As a result the 'active army' consisted of regular officers – always fewer than needed – plus class one conscripts. To make matters worse, the latter were supposed to report in November each year, but their actual service was deferred until the following March. Since the gap was not, in practice, filled by class two men under training, there was effectively no army in being during the winter months. Even in summer some units had less than ten per cent of their nominal strength. Problems were compounded by an acute shortage of NCOs, who were traditionally drawn from Italy's very small literate lower middle class. Nevertheless, the army did achieve notable improvements during the immediate prelude to war.

Strengths

By May 1915 the Chief of the General Staff, Gen. Cadorna, had mobilised 23,039 officers, 852,217 other ranks and 9,163 civilians. King Vittorio-Emanuele was nominally commander-in-chief and spent the war close to the front, but Gen. Cadorna actually exercised command while the king mediated between his chief of staff and his government in Rome.

Italy entered the war with 12 army corps in Italy, each with two active infantry divisions. The corps were headquartered as follows: I Corps – Turin, II – Alessandria, III – Milan, IV – Genoa, V – Verona, VI – Bologna, VII – Ancona, VIII – Florence, IX – Rome, X – Naples, XI – Bari, and XII – Palermo/Cagliari (the latter being unique in having three divisions). There were also two corps in the colonies. These 14 corps were divided between four armies. Including second line reserves there were 35 infantry divisions and a dozen militia divisions (totalling two grenadier and 94 line regiments); a division of Bersaglieri (12 regiments); two Alpini Groups (52 battalions in eight regiments); four cavalry divisions; 14 battalions of combat engineers; 467 field artillery batteries with almost 2,000 guns and howitzers; plus battalions of paramilitary Carabinieri and *Guardie di Finanza* (militarised customs police) to support the field army.

During the war the army expanded massively and its structure was modified to reflect the new realities of trench warfare. By late 1915 there were already 181 new combat battalions including 72 of line infantry, four of Bersaglieri, 26 of Alpini, four of mountain artillery, 18 of heavy artillery, 20 of superheavy artillery, and 37 of combat engineers. This increased still further by October 1917, when there were officially 26 army corps totalling 65 infantry and four cavalry divisions (in reality

there were 27 infantry corps, since the 35th Division in Macedonia was as strong as a corps).

The disaster at Caporetto in October 1917 and the consequent Italian withdrawal to the Piave river cost the army some 300,000 men killed, wounded and captured, 3,150 artillery pieces, 1,732 mortars, 3,000 machine guns and 300,000 rifles, thus demanding the virtual rebuilding of the Italian Army. The new Chief of the General Staff, Gen. Armando Diaz, disbanded the shattered remnants of 46 infantry regiments, four Bersaglieri regiments, 15 Alpini battalions and numerous support units. The army shrank to 33 divisions; but 1917–18 witnessed an astonishing recovery, with the raising of new units and the creation of new formations. By the end of war some 5.2 million men were serving, in nine numbered armies and countless rear echelon organisations. Each corps comprised two infantry divisions, a Bersaglieri regiment, a cavalry regiment, an eight-battery field artillery regiment, two or three batteries of heavy howitzers, and support units.

As in other belligerent armies, the proportion of infantry to support services declined during the war as the conflict became increasingly 'industrialised', with a significant expansion of artillery, engineers, construction, transport, maintenance, signals and medical corps.

The character of the Army:

The rank and file

Although the Italian Army enjoyed a numerical advantage over the Austro-Hungarian forces which it faced at the outbreak of war, it suffered from particular difficulties. Although the initial chronic shortage of officers (some 13,000 in 1914, including nearly half the establishment of the artillery arm) had to some extent been addressed by the outbreak of war, the level of experienced leadership would remain a problem. The high levels of illiteracy in the ranks also meant that insufficient suitable men were available to serve as NCOs. Large variations in regional dialects made communication difficult, and some groups such as the Sardinians were virtually unintelligible to outsiders.

Under wartime pressure on manpower the theoretical three-class distinction by age group broke down to some extent. The bulk of front line units included men aged between 19 and 39, but Mobile Militia cadres aged 40 to 42 had also begun to be attached to infantry and field artillery units as early as 1910/11. During the war 51 three-battalion regiments of the Mobile Militia were mobilised, one being attached to the two 'active' regiments within each of 48 infantry brigades (the

Italian infantry trudge up a serpentine mountain road, led by their *capitano* and a standard-bearer. Movement along the road is obscured by camouflage netting hung from the trees – a vital precaution in mountains where enemy observers could see movements from miles away. (Imperial War Museum Q25947)



General Armando Diaz (1861–1928) took over from Gen. Cadorna as Chief of the General Staff after the Italian front collapsed at Caporetto in 1917. A Neapolitan of Spanish family background, whose talents overcame the bias which traditionally held back the advancement of non-Piedmontese officers, he rebuilt the Italian Army until it was able to drive the Austro-Hungarian Empire out of the war a year later. For notes on general officers' uniform, see under Plate G1.



other three were posted to Sardinia). Their limitation to supposedly second-line employment, and even that of third class Territorial Militiamen in their mid-40s to rear area and line of communications duties, became blurred during the war.

The ordinary Italian soldier was amongst the worst paid in Europe and endured a ferocious disciplinary system. Contact with Italian units did not impress allied or enemy observers accustomed to the norms of northern Europe; yet their morale remained high, and their willingness to attack again and again in the face of appalling casualties astonished their own officers. Inevitably, however, cracks were beginning to show by 1917, at least on the home front. A message from Pope Benedict XV in August 1917, calling on all sides to lay down their arms and seek a 'just and lasting peace', had a worrying impact on the deeply devout soldiers of the Italian Army.

Paradoxically, defeat at Caporetto and a costly retreat which left a large part of north-eastern Italy under enemy occupation were to change attitudes throughout Italy in favour of the war effort. What had been widely regarded as 'the government's war', in a newly invented state which had not had time to develop a deep-seated sentiment of patriotism, was now transformed into a struggle for national survival against an age-old enemy. Morale revived and defeatism evaporated; most of the thousands of men who had deserted in the chaos of Caporetto either returned to their regiments or were rounded up. (The most recalcitrant were sent to prison, while 60,000 of the least reliable were sent to France in the labour battalions of the Auxiliary Corps.)

The officer corps

One duty of the Italian officer corps was to instil regimental spirit and a sense of national identity amongst their men. Unfortunately, there had been a tendency to promote officers according to length of service and bureaucratic rather than military skills. In addition, many men in the senior ranks had been recruited at a time when a military career had low prestige amongst Italy's educated élite. Some officers had little interest in military matters, but most took their work seriously, and they included some innovative thinkers. Italy's small but notably well educated Jewish community was strongly represented in the officer corps, and one of them, Emmanuele Pugliese, became the country's most highly decorated wartime general. Italian officers were generally courageous and maintained their poise under fire; but foreign observers criticised them for lacking rapport with their men, and for a relative lack of tactical intelligence.

As chief of staff Gen. Cadorna was notoriously intolerant of those who disagreed with or displeased him, dismissing some 800 senior officers in two and a half years. This regime naturally discouraged initiative; and since there had also been high casualties amongst field commanders, most infantry units were led by inexperienced officers by the time of Caporetto. Some other senior officers were more realistic in their expectations, among them the Duke of Aosta, who commanded the 3rd Army; he was widely expected to succeed Cadorna at the head of the general staff but – perhaps because the duke was the king's cousin – he was overlooked in favour of Gen. Armando Diaz when Cadorna was dismissed at the insistence of the prime minister and the allied powers.



Miserably paid and fiercely disciplined, the Italian soldier also had perhaps the least opportunities among all the European combatants for rest, recuperation or home leave; strong red wine and an occasional visit to a grim field brothel were about the best he could expect when pulled out of the line. Nevertheless, like soldiers in all armies, the Italians made their own amusements where they could; here a battalion of *Alpini* have organised an impromptu dance – though sadly without any girls. (Imperial War Museum Q53693)

General Diaz was originally an artillery officer who had spent most of his career in staff positions. However, he had commanded an infantry regiment in the Libyan War, where he had been wounded and decorated for valour. Popular with his men because of his humane approach to discipline and his concern for their welfare, Gen. Diaz was also noted for his common sense. On the Isonzo front his infantry division had captured more ground for less casualties than those of other generals.

The British Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Gen. Sir William Robertson, toured the Italian front shortly before Caporetto. As a former ranker,

his eye was sharp: he thought many Italian senior officers old, unfit, out of touch with current ideas, and too often intimidated by the (relatively small) German force facing them. General Herbert Plumer, the extremely able former commander of British 2nd Army, worked with the Italian staff after Caporetto. He regarded his Italian colleagues as easy to work with, though their knowledge tended to be very theoretical and as a result they tended to issue impossible orders. As the architect of the victory at Messines in June 1917, and the salvager of the subsequent débâcle at Passchendaele, Plumer was an expert on this point.

LINE INFANTRY

The basic infantry unit of the Italian Army in 1915 was the regiment, with three 1,043-man battalions each with four 250-man companies. During the war years the battalion strength was reduced to 780, with three rifle companies each with two integral light machine guns, plus a machine gun company with eight guns, a mortar platoon with four weapons, and a pioneer platoon.

Under the test of war the Italian infantry displayed more spirit and endurance than anyone had expected, and this included men from regions which had not traditionally been sources of soldiers. Once again the opinion of Gen. Robertson is illuminating: he described Italian soldiers as having 'splendid physiques', as being 'cheerful and healthy' and 'likely to prove excellent fighters if properly led'. General Plumer agreed that the men were brave and fit, but poorly trained and lacking confidence in their officers.

Other evidence indicates that Italian infantry were stoical, accepting appalling conditions as well as terrible losses. Home leave was very rare, rations inadequate and front-line cooking facilities worse than those of their enemy. Abysmal pay meant that the men's families often suffered hardship, and there was widespread resentment against the high wages of industrial workers who were exempt from conscription. Nevertheless, morale at the front was generally higher, and relations between unit officers and their men better, than among the troops in rear areas. Conditions improved markedly during the reorganisation following Caporetto, with better wages and food, more leave, and even free life insurance so that men were assured that their families would be cared for.

Infantry tactics remained primitive during the early battles on the Isonzo, when troops advanced in dense columns led by officers with swords and standard bearers with large flags. Poor co-ordination between infantry and artillery meant that such attacks relied on courage and numerical advantage alone, but by November 1915 new infantry tactics were emerging. After a preliminary bombardment, infantry now rushed forward to reach enemy positions before the defenders emerged from their dug-outs. By 1918 Italian infantry tactics, like those on other fronts, were based upon firepower, machine guns and mortars. Nevertheless, anecdotal evidence suggests that there may have been more hand-to-hand fighting with bayonets and knives on the Italian front than elsewhere in the Great War – perhaps as a result of the special geographical conditions, a lack of deep trenches in rocky areas, and the relatively limited use of massed artillery.

Infantry uniforms

The Italian Army had recognised the need for a new uniform by abandoning the dark blue M1903 except for ceremonial purposes and, after practical experiments, adopted the famous *grigio-verde* grey-green which would identify Italian soldiers for generations. Accepted for infantry, Alpini, Bersaglieri and artillery in December 1908, and officially introduced from 22 September 1909, this uniform was extended to the cavalry two months later. The engineers only adopted *grigio-verde* in September 1915, and during that year some reserve and militia units still wore dark blue uniforms, sometimes mixed with beige canvas fatigues. The former button and lace colours of the different arms and branches – gold or silver – were retained in some insignia, e.g. officer's ranking; in the line infantry these were silver.

The standard *berretto* was a képi-style cap with a soft crown, a leather peak and chinstrap, and a black badge consisting of the regimental number beneath a crown (see Plate A1); for sergeants and warrant officers this was replaced by the badge of the arm of service – for infantry, a crown above crossed rifles with the regimental number in a central disc. A rounded *berretto* M1915 called a '*cupolino*' or '*scodellino*' was introduced during the war (see Plate C3).

For foot personnel the M1909 tunic (see Plate A1) was loosely cut, single-breasted, with a fly front, a stand collar, pointed cuffs and no external pockets; side vents could be fastened with two buttons. Its most distinctive feature was padded shoulder rolls to stop equipment straps sliding off the shoulders. The tunic was worn with matching pantaloon-cut trousers. Initially these were usually worn tucked into the leather ankle boots, but

Italian infantry, probably from XI Corps, during an assault on Nad-Logem on the Carso plateau in 1916. In such rocky terrain it was extremely difficult to dig trenches or shelters, and fragments of rock created a deadly hail during any artillery bombardment. (S.Atelier photograph)



front line experience prompted the issue of woollen puttees – though many troops, especially those in mountainous regions, found that long, heavy woollen socks served better. The boots themselves proved inadequate and were gradually replaced by sturdier types like those worn by the Alpini.

The greatcoat was double-breasted with a large falling collar, fly-fronted like the tunic, but having shoulder straps rather than shoulder rolls, side pockets, and an adjustable rear half-belt (see Plate C1). An alternative was a crotch-length semi-circular *mantellina* cape with a fall collar (see Plate A2), often replaced by a heavier hooded cape in front line service; a buttoned waistcoat was also issued for extra warmth. Under front-line conditions there was considerable local variation in infantry clothing during the war.

Insignia

All Italian soldiers displayed the silver or white five-point national star on the collars of their tunics and greatcoats, and on tunics this was set on a coloured *mostrine* or *fiamme* collar patch which identified the brigade or arm of service. The *mostrini* of 'permanent' Army infantry brigades (comprising, in consecutive pairs, the 1st-94th Regts, plus the 95th-98th raised during the war), were rectangular with a pointed outer end, either of a solid colour; of one colour with a second in a lengthways central stripe; or with two such stripes set near the edges (see Plates A1, C1, E2). Examples are the 3rd & 4th Regts forming the Brigata Piemonte, which wore solid red patches; the 15th & 16th Regts of the Brigata Savona had white patches with a black centre stripe; and the 21st & 22nd Regts of the Brigata Cremona had green patches with red side stripes.

Milizia regiments (111th-164th Regts) had *mostrini* of two colours divided horizontally. *Milizia Territoriale* infantry had *mostrini* of scarlet piping in 1915; the 16 brigades of *Milizia Territoriale* (201st-232nd Regts) established in 1916-17 had *mostrini* in two colours divided vertically, while 23 new brigades (233rd-282nd Regts) raised in 1917 had *mostrini* of two colours in three vertical sections.

Under an order of January 1915 small black patches were sewn to the outside surface of the shoulder rolls (or to the shoulder straps of uniforms without this feature), with a white number or other cypher indicating a soldier's company, section, battalion or battery, or whether he was attached to the *Stato Maggiore*, to a depot, or was from one of the militias (see Plates D2, F2). This was far from universal in practice.

Non-commissioned officers wore rank insignia on the cuffs of tunics and greatcoats, from 1915 in the form of black lace chevrons in various combinations of wide and narrow bands (senior privates and corporals – see Plate A1); wide surmounted by narrow bands with a 'curl' in the top one (sergeants – see Plate B1); and narrow wavy bands (*marescialli* or warrant officers – see Plate E2). For battlefield promotions a crown badge in button colour was worn above the cuff ranking (see Plate C1). From September 1917 the rank of 'battle adjutant' was instituted for merit on active service; *aiutanti di battaglia* wore warrant officers' wavy cuff chevrons but with a curl in the top one, and a line of black piping up the four vertical seams of the cap crown.

Foot troops carried a set of M1907 leather equipment comprising a belt with four rifle ammunition pouches and a bayonet frog, and a sup-



In complete contrast to the conditions they had faced on the Isonzo front, the Italian infantry who held the Piave line following the retreat after Caporetto found themselves in a virtually flat flood plain where their shallow trenches often became waterlogged.

porting brace passing behind the neck; older two-pouch and four-pouch M1891 sets were also still in use. The canvas knapsack had side pockets and straps for external stowage including an entrenching spade or other tools; a haversack with attached water bottle was slung either below the knapsack or to hang on the left hip. Within four days of Italy's entry into the war the men were ordered to paint all leather equipment grey-green, including the leather peak and strap of the cap.

Officers

The officers' cap resembled the enlisted ranks' *berretto* but was stiffer, and slightly higher at the front; it bore the badge of the arm of service, and appropriate numbers of lines of lace around the band, initially in silver metallic thread but later, from December 1915, in silver-grey silk. Field officers were identified by one 20mm line below one to three 4mm lines, company officers by one to three 4mm lines (see Plates C2, H3).

Officers' uniforms were privately tailored, often in a lighter grey shade than that of the troops, the tunic usually with patch breast pockets, internal side pockets with external flaps, and shoulder straps. It was worn with breeches, and brown strapped leather gaiters with ankle boots. As the war progressed front-line officers often chose to wear the enlisted ranks' *grigio-verde* and puttees to make themselves less conspicuous. Collar patches or 'flames' of unit or arm were worn by officers below general rank. Initially rank was indicated on the shoulder straps: company officers wore one to three silver stars and (for first captains) three stars above a transverse bar; field officers the same, but on shoulder straps trimmed round the edges with 6mm silver lace. Infantry officers suffered particularly heavy losses during the early battles of the Isonzo because of their distinctive uniforms, and in December 1915 Gen. Cadorna ordered that officers' rank insignia be moved from shoulder straps to cuffs. They were worn stacked vertically on a cloth patch, with the first captain's vertical bar in front of his three stars (see Plate D3), and field officers' patches edged with lace. The officers' forearm badge for battlefield promotion was a crown set on crossed swords.

Protective and camouflage clothing

Given the extreme geographical and weather conditions under which many Italian infantry served it is not surprising that special forms of clothing appeared. The army had expected a relatively short summer campaign and so ordinary infantry were not issued with adequate winter dress in 1915; only the Alpini were given kit suitable for the mountains. During the war, however, men on exposed sentry duty in the Alpine winter wore large natural-coloured sheepskin watchcoats. Other special issues included huge sheepskin-lined overboots with very thick soles which made walking difficult; some had spikes fitted to the soles to prevent slipping on the ice (see Plate B3). White snow camouflage clothing was first



A scouting unit of *Alpini* equipped with skis and wearing snow camouflage hooded overjackets and trousers sets out on patrol in the high Alps – see Plate B2.

mentioned in late October 1915 when it was used by I Corps troops, though only by scouts or reconnaissance patrols. A white coat with a hood appeared in the winter of 1916–17, and such white clothing eventually included trousers, coats, jackets, balaclava helmets, mittens and helmet covers (see Plate B2) – though it was very far from general issue. Other Alpine equipment included snow shoes, crampons for boots, skis, white sleeping bags, anti-slip horse shoes for mules, dog sleds and dog carts.

Helmets and armour

Artillery bombardment on the limestone Carso plateau and in the mountains caused showers of stone fragments, resulting in an exceptional number of head wounds; consequently the Italians adopted from April 1916 the French Adrian steel helmet (see Plate D2). It was painted dark grey-green, often with the arm-of-service badge incorporating the unit number stencilled on the front in black; initially some officers had rank insignia painted on the left side. Later in 1916 an improved Italian-made version was produced, stamped in two rather than four pieces; and a grey-green fabric cover for these helmets was issued early in 1917. The much heavier Elmo Farina trench helmet was initially designed for men who had to keep watch close to enemy lines, but it was soon issued to assault engineers; it was worn over a padded cap (see Plate F3 and page 47). French Dunand visors were used with both Adrian and Farina helmets, sometimes with Lippmann cheek pieces as additional protection against stone fragments (see Plate F1). By 1917 many troops were also issued with armoured anti-splinter goggles.

The Italians put greater efforts into developing armoured shields and body armour, especially for assault engineers, than most other combatant nations. As early as June 1915 an order established specialist ‘wire-cutting companies’ as a result of unacceptably high losses among conventional infantry during the ‘First Offensive Bound’. These *compagnie tagliafili* soon became known as the *compagnie della morte* (‘death companies’). Apart from various portable steel shields for one or more men, they adopted Farina *corazza* body armour (see Plate F3). Various forms were developed, although one for assault infantry proved too heavy to be practical.

Gasmasks

In July 1915 a Chemical Commission was established to study gas as a weapon, but the design of gasmask which resulted was neither developed nor manufactured. Once the Central Powers started using poison gas, however, the Ciamician-Pesci mask was quickly issued. Unfortunately it was only effective against chlorine, not phosgene, so new forms based upon the French TN mask were adopted. Finally, in 1918, many Italian troops received the British ‘small box respirator’.

ÉLITE & SPECIALIST UNITS

Two regiments of *Granatieri di Sardegna* forming a Grenadier Brigade were the Italian Army’s senior unit, having originally been raised for the Piedmontese Army in 1659. They took the tallest recruits and, in the Great War, were first committed to battle on 28 October 1915.

Tenente Emilio Briganti (left) joined the *Alpini*, while his brother Alberto joined the Navy and became a fighter pilot.

Emilio wears the standard grey-green officers' field uniform with external pleated breast pockets and flapped internal skirt pockets, shoulder straps, cuff rank patches, and a stand collar bearing the national star and - here - the green double-tailed 'flames' of the *Alpini*. His eagle feather hat plume has been removed but the battalion-coloured pompon is still worn on the left side.



Apart from a few minor differences the uniforms of these Granatieri were the same as those of line infantry; their arm-of-service badge was a flaming grenade with the regimental number set centrally, and they wore white collars edged with scarlet. (Note that the badges of most arms and branches of the Italian Army featured a round central cartouche bearing or voided with the unit number. The flaming grenade motif also appeared in many versions, differing mainly in the size and direction of the flames.)

The **Bersaglieri** light infantry regiments had four battallions, each of three companies, one of which was issued with bicycles (during the Libyan War three Bersaglieri regiments had received an extra battalion). In addition to the first-line units, 20 Bersaglieri battalions of the Mobile Militia were attached to the regimental depots. Bersaglieri were distinguished by double-tailed dark red 'flame' collar patches, and gold 'button colour'. The cyclist units had a tunic (later acquired by some other units) with a stand-and-fall collar, shoulder straps, patch breast pockets, an internal rear pocket accessed from each side, and broad, buttoned belt loops each side of the front; they wore leather mounted troops' gaiters rather than puttees. The famous *piumetto* of cockerel feathers worn on the right side of their broad-brimmed *moretto* hats (see Plate A2) was removed for front-line service in September 1915 because it was too visible, only to be reinstated for morale reasons late in 1917, when it was attached to the steel helmet (see Plate E3). The arm-of-service badge was a flaming grenade superimposed on a bugle-horn set on crossed rifles, with a central regimental number. Other features which set the Bersaglieri apart from line infantry included their greased, unpolished brown boots, the same as those issued to mountain troops; and the red *fez* with a long blue tassel which they wore as undress headgear. Some Bersaglieri adopted daggers for assault work; many such weapons were said to have been captured from the Austrians, though they more likely came from Dalmatian or Bosnian troops, since these had a tradition of close-combat knife fighting.

The **Alpini** were specialist mountain troops; during the war their regiments had three or four battalions with three or four companies each. The Alpini were distinguished by their felt hats (see Plate B1), bearing the frontal arm-of-service badge (a flying eagle over a bugle-horn set on crossed rifles, with central regimental number), and an eagle feather rising from a battalion-coloured pompon on the left; their tunic collars bore double-tailed green 'flames'. In addition to the line regiments, 38 Alpini companies of the Mobile Militia were attached to Alpini depots, while the Territorial Militia included a further 26 Alpini battalions; their collar insignia consisted of green piping. Alpini wore infantry jackets with trousers that narrowed below the calves. Like the Bersaglieri, front line Alpini lost their hat feathers in September 1915, though retaining the coloured woollen pompoms indicating their battalion (respectively white, red, green, blue, and yellow for the regimental depot).

The best-known of the militarised **volunteer organisations** was the *Corpo Volontario Ciclisti ed Automobilisti*, which was attached to the Bersaglieri and cavalry; similarly

the *Voluntari Alpini* were attached to Alpini. These volunteer units took part in military operations but disappeared at the end of 1915 when they were incorporated into the regular army. Their grey-green uniforms were officially regulated in March 1915. With the exception of the *Voluntari Alpini* – who wore Alpini hats and were distinguished from line troops by three-tailed green collar flames – the volunteer formations wore a *berretto* with a broadened crown (see Plate E1).

The **Arditi** were a new branch created during the Great War. To some extent they evolved out of the *Esploratori*, small scouting and raiding parties established at unit level in June 1914; but another élite group which influenced their formation were the ‘death companies’ first formalised in October 1915 under Capt. Cristoforo Baseggio. These small units attracted strongly motivated volunteers with higher than average education from the infantry, Bersaglieri, Alpini, artillery, engineers and even Guardia di Finanza. They led assaults, often wearing body armour and carrying wire-cutters. In 1916 the term *militare ardito* (‘bold soldier’) was used for such men; and a left arm badge to be awarded to them at unit level was authorised in the official gazette that July (the king’s monogram, a superimposed ‘V’ and ‘E’ shaped rather like ‘&’, above the horizontal double knot of Savoy, in silver on black or black on grey).

In November 1916 the idea of creating permanent companies of fast but heavily armed assault troops was put forward by Capt. Giuseppe Alberto Bassi. It was accepted the following May, and the first experimental company was assembled for training near Gorizia on 12 June 1917. Each platoon included two Villar-Perosa ‘machine pistols’ and a Fiat machine gun section, and support was provided by a section of 65mm guns from the 68th Battery, Mule Artillery. The *Truppe d’Assalto* were established only a month later, the raising of a three-company battalion for 2nd Army being authorised on 15 July. Their first successful action was the capture of the village of San Gabriele in early September.

Although universally known as Arditi (‘bold ones’), these units were officially designated *reparti d’assalto*, and were slightly smaller than infantry battalions but much more heavily armed. Each company had an established strength of five officers, 41 NCOs and 150 men. Its **heavy weapons comprised** two tripod-mounted Fiat M1914 machine guns, 14 bipod-mounted Villar-Perosa machine pistols, and a flame-thrower platoon; the battalion also had a pair of 65/17 mountain guns and sometimes a trench mortar platoon (a list which immediately recalls the contemporary German *Sturmtruppen*).

An assault group of *Arditi* on the Piave front in June 1918. The machine gun is a Fiat-Revelli M1914; cartridge extraction required lubrication by a built-in oil pump (a characteristic of later Italian designs). In the left foreground are two examples of the *Moschetto da Cavalleria mod.1891*, one with its folding bayonet extended. None of these soldiers seem to wear belt pouches; the foreground man visibly has ammunition and grenades stuffed lumpily into the rear ‘poacher’s pocket’ of his *Bersaglieri* cyclist-style tunic, which has side access slits. A string around his waist suggests that he wears the British-supplied respirator satchel low on his chest. Other men in this group wear the haversack, water bottle, and a tent section in a roll around the torso.

The picked men of the *Arditi* became an inspiration for the rest of the Army because of their daring, and also their reputation for defiance of authority. Their response to outsiders was ‘*Me ne frego!*’ (‘I don’t give a damn!’); and instead of the traditional Italian Army cheer of ‘*Hip, hip, hurrah!*’ the *Arditi* would chant ‘*A chi l’onore? A noi!*’ (‘Who deserves the glory? We do!’).



The men themselves were armed with cavalry or 'special troops' carbines and plentiful grenades, and all ranks carried *pugnali* fighting knives (of a variety of models), which became a symbol of the Arditi's eagerness for hand-to-hand combat. Officers, senior NCOs and weapons crews carried pistols instead of carbines.

An instruction centre was set up at Sdricca di Manzano, and during 1917–18 each army corps raised an Arditi battalion and each infantry regiment an Arditi platoon. Volunteers were selected for their physical and mental toughness, and trained intensively in close quarter combat skills. After Caporetto a full division of Arditi was formed for the defence of the Piave line, comprising six battalions of Arditi and four of Bersaglieri plus mountain artillery and assault engineers. This formation proved so effective that a second division was raised, to form an Arditi corps.

Captain (later Col.) Bassi devised a special uniform incorporating an open-collared *Bersaglieri ciclisti* jacket with external breast pockets and belt loops, double-tailed black collar *fiammi*, a woollen pullover, Alpini trousers tucked into long grey-green socks, mountain boots, and for undress a grey-green shirt, black necktie, and a long-tasselled black *fez*. The distinctive badge worn on the left upper sleeve featured a Roman *gladius* shortsword point up in a wreath of laurel and oak leaves, with the legend 'FERT' across the guard; this was black on combat dress, but was available in gold or silver for officers' or NCOs' service uniforms. A branch badge was worn on the service cap: a grenade bearing the company number (usually, but not always, in Roman rather than Arabic numerals), set on crossed swords – an illustrated variant showed the sword and wreath set on a flaming grenade. The badge was also sometimes stencilled on the Adrian helmet or stitched to its cover; an alternative was simply the Roman unit numerals. The black square, with white Roman unit numerals, was sometimes worn on the shoulder strap.

WEAPONS

The three-battalion infantry regiment of 1915, with more than 3,000 men, had just two – or at most, four – machine guns at regimental level. Changes in infantry tactics demanded more machine-guns, trench mortars and hand grenades; but the Italians had started the war in 1915 with a serious shortage of modern rifles, machine guns and artillery, and by late that year the army was scouring arsenals for any available weaponry. As mentioned above, the revised wartime battalion had three rifle companies each having two machine guns, and an integral machine gun company fielding eight guns; the battalion also had a platoon of four mortars and a pioneer platoon.

The principal Italian **rifle** was the bolt-action 6.5mm Mannlicher-Carcano M1891 with a six-round magazine, though many Territorial units still had old 10.4mm Vetterli M1871 single shot weapons. The Mannlicher-Carcano M1891 *Cavalleria* had a shortened barrel and a folding integral bayonet, while the M1891 *Moschetto per Truppe Speciali* had a shortened barrel but a normal bayonet. Special attachments for

(continued on page 33)



ITALY ENTERS THE WAR, 1915

1: *Caporale, 13o Reggimento di Fanteria, Brigata Pinerolo, May 1915*

2: *Sergente Maggiore, Bersaglieri, spring 1915*

3: *Sottotenente, Reggimento di Cavalleria di Linea Savoia (No.3), summer 1915*

WAR IN THE ALPS

1: *Sergente, 4o Battaglione, 1o Reggimento di Alpini*; December 1915

2: *Alpino ski raider*, winter 1916/17

3: *Infantryman, protective clothing*, winter 1916/17

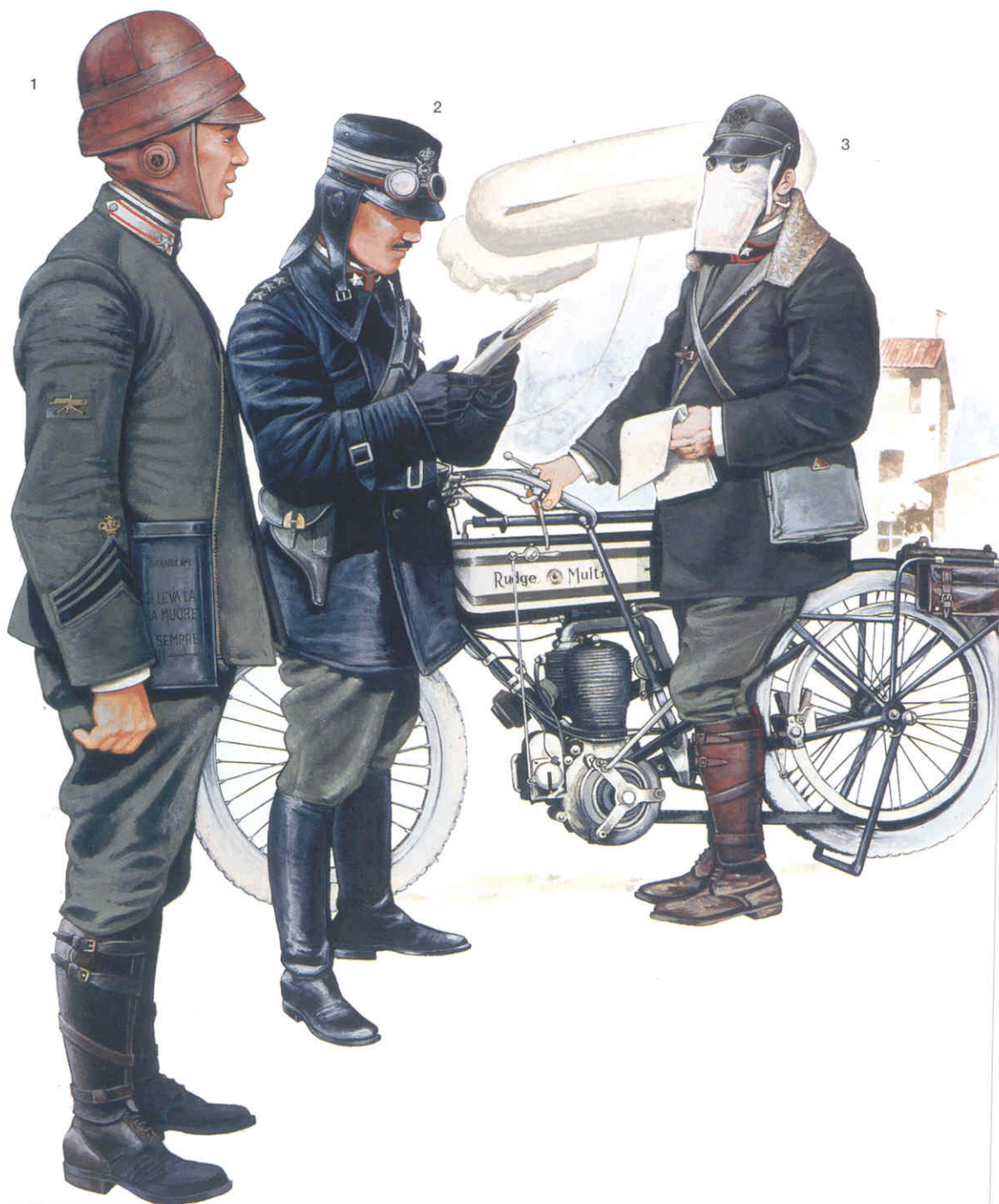


MOTORISED TROOPS

1: *Caporale Maggiore, 37o Reggimento di Fanteria, Brigata Ravenna; armoured car gunner, late 1915*

2: *Capitano, Automobilisti, 1916*

3: *Despatch rider, Genio Ferrovieri, 1917*



ARTILLERY & MACHINE GUN TROOPS

1: *Maresciallo Ordinario, Artiglieria a Cavallo*, 1916

2: *Gunner 1st Class, No.1171 Autonomous
Machine Gun Company*, 1918

3: *Primo Capitano, Artiglieria di Fortezza*, spring 1917



CYCLISTS & INFANTRY

1: Trombettiere, Volontario Ciclisti ed Automobilisti, winter 1915/16

2: Maresciallo Capo, 65o Reggimento di Fanteria, Brigata Valtellina, October 1918

3: Caporale, 5o Battaglione, Bersaglieri Ciclisti, 1918



ASSAULT TROOPS

1: *Ardito*, spring 1918

2: *Ardito*, 1o Reparto d'Assalto, spring 1918

3: *Tenente*, *Genio Pionieri Zappatori*, 1916



STAFF & SUPPORT PERSONNEL

1: *Tenente Generale* commanding division, 1916

2: *Brigadiere*, *Carabinieri Reale*, summer 1916

3: *Cappellano Ordinario*, 74o *Reggimento di Fanteria*, *Brigata Lombardia*, 1916



COLONIAL & NAVAL TROOPS

- 1: Sottotenente, Carabinieri Guardie;
Palestine, 1917
- 2: Soldato, 3o Battaglione,
Cacciatori d'Africa, 1916
- 3: Timoniere Scelto,
Regia Marina, 1917



rifles included a wire-cutting guide, and a clip-on foresight to help men 'aim off' when shooting at aircraft.

The Italian Army had entered the war with only 700 **machine guns**, but had 12,000 by the end. The main Italian design was the 6.5mm Fiat-Revelli M1914, a tripod-mounted weapon fed by an unusual 50-round magazine divided into 5-round compartments. Small numbers of Maxim guns chambered for 6.5mm were used in M1906 and M1911 versions, together with 6.5mm Colt M1914 'potato-diggers'. Many French M1907 St Etienne guns and smaller numbers of the Hotchkiss M1908/14 were acquired in their original 8mm versions; it is reported that a few of the antiquated M1886 Gardner and the innovative 7.7mm M1908 Perino (a highly original weapon, but never mass produced) were also pressed into service. Light machine guns included the disappointing French M1915 CSRG ('Chauchat') and the reliable British/Belgian Lewis; and the Revelli-designed 9mm double-barrelled Villar Perosa M1915. This remarkable 'machine pistol', the world's first true sub-machine gun, was fed Glisenti pistol cartridges from two top-mounted 25-round (later, 50-round) box magazines, and each barrel had a rate of fire of 1,500rpm. Designed originally for use in aircraft and vehicles, it weighed 6.6kg (14½ lbs). It was modified for infantry use with a bipod and a steel shield, and proved very effective at short range – though awkward to handle, due to its weight, shape and enormous rate of fire.

At first the Italians made little use of **hand grenades**, although the easily thrown discus-shaped M1914, initiated by a burning fuze, was issued to the Alpini; a more advanced discus type, the Spaccamela, was issued in 1918. Other grenades used by the Italians included versions of the Thévenot; the Baldari, which resembled a 'Mills bomb' on a wooden handle; the Carbone, an Italian version of the Austrian *Zeitunder-Handgranate*, with a handle made of steel wire; and assorted versions of the SIPE, which also looked like a Mills bomb – one model could be attached to long cords to be swung around the head before releasing. The shell-shaped Bertone grenade could be shot from a discharger tube attached to the muzzle of a rifle.

Bombarde or **trench mortars** came in various types, including small weapons which threw bombs such as modified hand grenades, some of them with winged tails. The Ansaldo 50 was a larger mortar using a hydraulic recoil system. In autumn 1915 the Italians adopted the French Dûmezil 58 type and the lighter Italian 65mm Torretta; the 58A shot a flighted bomb (see Plate D1), while the similar 58B was designed to be disassembled quickly. The Van Dueren 70 was mounted on a steel and wood carriage with controls to adjust the power of the shot and thus the range. The Minucciani bomb-thrower used centrifugal force to throw a bomb by turning a handle, while simple catapults were similarly used to throw small missiles. Another remarkable mortar was the Maggiora which used acetelene gas as a propellant charge. Later mortars included the large Type 240, which came in several forms; and some units were issued with British Stokes 81mm trench mortars.



Independent companies of a Machine Gun Corps were formed in April 1918 and were deployed at brigade and divisional level (two and four companies respectively). These units wore different *mostrini* on their collars depending upon their weapon types: blue with three vertical white bars for units armed with St Etienne guns, red and white for Fiat-Revellis, and green and white for Maxims – a separate *Reparto Autonomo Divisionale Mitraglieri Fiat* had red and white patches edged with blue (see Plate D2). This section mans a St Etienne M1907-F; under magnification the gunner can be seen to wear a black machine gun qualification badge on his upper right sleeve, and a white-barred blue collar patch. (Imperial War Museum Q57000)



Loading a 58mm Type A Dumèzil trench mortar on the Carso front – see Plate D1. Three of the crew wear light-coloured canvas fatigues while the man at left foreground has the normal grey-green uniform, with a dark, single-tailed 'flame' collar patch – possibly the yellow-piped black of the artillery? The two men at the left wear the round-topped M1915 'cupellino', the man at right the old M1909 berretto.

During the first half of 1916 the army established autonomous batteries of *bombarde*, each having 12 weapons if equipped with small types, eight medium calibre mortars, or six heavier weapons – though this was raised to eight at the end of 1916. Other mortars were organised into *gruppi* of three or four batteries, usually with a variety of calibres. These units were formed into larger *raggruppamenti*, the size of which depended on the tactical situation. There were about 200 batteries and as many autonomous platoons; but much equipment was lost at Caporetto, the surviving troops serving as infantry until it could be replaced. Qualified troops wore a firing mortar badge on the left upper sleeve.

Flame-throwers used by the Italian Army were modified versions of the French Schilt 3bis with a range of ten to 15 metres. The men using these fearsome weapons were issued with a heat-resistant hood but this was found to be very clumsy. The insignia of a black shoulder square outlined in crimson, bearing a white 'LF' and a company number, has been described.

CAVALRY & MECHANISED TROOPS

There were 30 regiments of Italian cavalry, *Cavalleria di Linea* Nos.1 to 4 forming an élite of which the senior regiment, *Nizza Cavalleria No.1*, was named after a city (Nice) which now formed part of France. The 5th to 10th Regts, 25th and 26th Regts were *Lancieri*; the 11th to 24th and 27th to 30th were *Cavalleggieri* (light horse). Each regiment had five 142-man squadrons, although five regiments received a sixth squadron for Libyan service in 1912. The Mobile Militia included 31 cavalry squadrons which were used as training and reserve cadres, no further cavalry regiments being raised during the Great War.

In 1915 the four senior regiments wore white metal M1910 dragoon helmets with brass combs, black turbans, and the badge of the cross of Savoy, the latter painted in black on grey-green cloth field covers. The lancers and light cavalry had a low fur-felt *colbacco* (from the Turkish *kalpak*) with crowned crossed lance and bugle-horn badges respectively; but all traditional cavalry headgear was abolished in combat zones in April 1916, in favour of standard service caps and steel helmets.

The M1909 cavalry tunic had shoulder straps instead of padded rolls, and was more tightly cut than the foot troops' model, with a half-belt at the rear. It was worn with riding breeches, high leather gaiters and spurred ankle boots. As the war progressed cavalry often acquired the short cape previously issued only to foot troops. *Cavalleria di Linea* and *Lancieri* had entire single-colour tunic collars, three with narrow edging of another colour, while the *Cavalleggieri* had two-colour collars with the contrasting frontal patch terminating in three tails. *Milizia Territoriale di*

Cavalleria had scarlet collars and initially wore *colbacchi*. Troopers were armed with M1891 Mannlicher-Carcano cavalry or 'special troops' carbines plus sabres, and *Lancieri* with lances. Mounted troops wore a leather bandolier with two long cartridge pouches on the face (see Plate A3).

Apart from the adoption of steel helmets and light backpacks, the only changes to cavalry equipment during the war seem to have concerned horse harness. The cavalry machine gun sections were soon transferred to the infantry, and dismounted machine gun units were formed from cavalry reservists. Two complete cavalry divisions were also dismounted for service at the front in 1916. In their new role they wore puttees rather than leather gaiters and had infantry field equipment, but they retained their cavalry breeches.

Mechanised troops

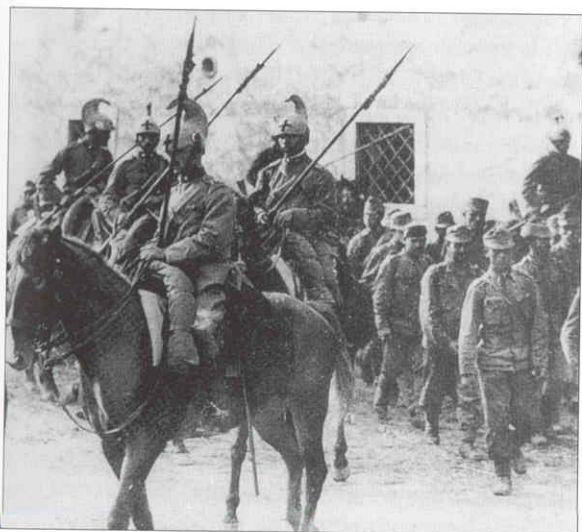
Having successfully used armoured cars in Libya, the Italian Army employed them on various fronts during the Great War. The first was the Fiat-Torino 1912 designed by the *Arsenale d'Artiglieria*. Although armed with one machine gun in a turret this was actually an armoured lorry; it was soon abandoned, although a later Fiat model was used by both the Italians and the British in North Africa. A 4-ton vehicle designed and built by Bianchi also had one machine gun. An Isotto-Fraschini design with one machine gun in a turret and another in the rear was tested in 1912 and became available in 1913; 15 heavily armoured Isotto-Fraschini Tipo RM cars were used during the war. In 1915 considerable effort was devoted to increasing the effectiveness of Italy's armoured cars, resulting in the Bianchi 1915/16 (which also came in an open-topped form). The best-known Italian types were constructed by Ansaldo-Lancia, the first appearing in 1915; these included the IZ Tipo 1 with two superimposed turrets, the single-turret Tipo 2, and the IZM. The Italians also obtained two British Lanchesters for use in Libya. The cars and their crews were originally part of the Cavalry Corps, but by summer 1916 they were organized in 17 *Squadriglie di Automitragliatrici*, each with eight machines. Italian enthusiasm for mechanisation resulted in proposals

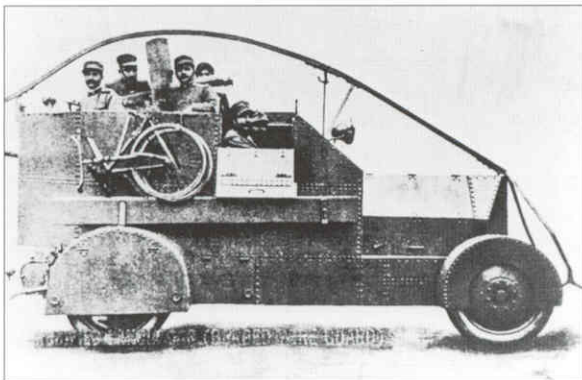
for armoured lorries to carry men under fire, but the war ended before this idea came to anything.

The uniforms of the first *Automobilisti* were the same as those of the infantry, whereas *Motociclisti* had mixed cavalry and artillery informs. In March 1915 new protective coats were introduced, in separate designs for *Automobilisti* and *Motociclisti*, while mechanics had blue work clothes similar to the artillery's beige fatigues. Officers of the *Automobilisti* were then given black uniforms cut like those of the cavalry with black caps and accoutrements, and these were sometimes used by *Motociclisti* officers. A black leather outfit is illustrated as Plate C2.

Italy was soon considering tanks – *carri d'assalto* – and in 1917 a Schneider arrived from France for trials. Impressed, the Italian Army asked for more, but these were unavailable. Instead, in summer

Troopers of one of the four senior cavalry regiments of the Italian Army with Austro-Hungarian prisoners taken at the capture of Turriaco in 1915. Cavalry played a significant role during the initial Italian advance across the lower Isonzo river, but once the front became fixed in the rugged hills a few miles further on they became largely redundant. The grey fabric helmet cover with the black cross badge peculiar to these regiments – 1 (Nizza), 2 (Piemonte), 3 (Savoia) and 4 (Genova) – is clearly visible. See Plate A3.





A Bianchi armoured car of 1916, with one machine gun mounted in the open-topped rear of the vehicle, and an overhead device for deflecting barbed wire. The first Bianchi cars entered service during the 1912 Italian invasion of Libya; during the Great War this modernised version was also used on the Alpine front. (Tank Museum photograph)

1918, Italy received a few Renault light tanks as the nucleus of a new force. This was formed only in the last month of the war, equipped with the Renault FT 17 with a Girod turret; Italy also started building a modified version as the Fiat 3000 or Carro Armato M21. The Ansaldo company had meanwhile designed and constructed a light tank mounting a 105mm howitzer, while Fiat produced the heavy Fiat 2000; two of the latter were built in 1918, one being sent to Libya for desert testing.

TECHNICAL TROOPS

Artillery

The Italian Artillery had been restructured since 1910. The field artillery was to consist of 36 regiments (12 as corps assets, each having six four-gun batteries and a depot and train company, and 24 at divisional level each with five batteries and a depot/train). These were augmented with seven batteries of mountain artillery; a horse artillery regiment with two batteries; and two heavy artillery regiments totalling 20 batteries. (Most batteries were, of course, horse-drawn, although two motorised regiments were formed later.) Fortress artillery, now incorporating coastal artillery, was reorganised into ten regiments with 15 new companies; and a *Corpo Superiore Tecnico d'Artilleria* was established.

It was an ambitious programme, but by May 1915 the army had 491 field artillery units at regimental level, 134 at *gruppo* (usually meaning brigade) level, and 355 independent batteries. The horse artillery included four units and eight batteries at *gruppo* level; there were 12 heavy field artillery units and 28 independent batteries at *gruppo* level; 14 units of mountain artillery at regimental level with 56 at *gruppo* level and 56 independent batteries, plus 20 mule batteries. There were 52 fortress artillery units at *gruppo* level with 197 companies, and 40 batteries of siege artillery. The Mobile Militia artillery had 63 batteries, attached to the regimental depots of active regiments.

Nevertheless, artillery remained the weakest arm of the Italian Army at the start of the war. There was a particular shortage of the 65mm mule-borne mountain guns needed in the Alps. The additional 20 mule batteries listed above initially had older 70mm pieces for infantry support; as time brought larger numbers of 65mm guns these were issued to both mountain and mule batteries, of which there were a combined total of 170 by November 1918.

By November 1918 the number of field artillery batteries was back to 490 despite the huge losses suffered during the retreat from Caporetto. The most famous Italian medium calibre field gun was the Armstrong-designed, Italian-manufactured Ansaldo-Schneider 149A; the short-barrelled 149A M1916 was also made by Ansaldo, while many ex-naval 149B guns were transferred for use on land. The 10cm field howitzer was also used with great success.

The heavy artillery had only 112 pieces when the war began – 149mm guns and 210mm howitzers; like the other combatants, Italy found the lack of heavy artillery a serious handicap when the fighting settled down

to static trench warfare. This arm expanded to no less than 280 batteries by the war's end; but it was late 1917 before mixed groups of 105mm and 149mm guns could be permanently assigned to each army corps. Late in the war each infantry division received three 149mm batteries.

Although the equipment of the coastal and fortress artillery regiments was mixed and often obsolete, many of their guns were transferred to the front during the war, provided with motorised tractors. Most of the older pieces were lost in the retreat after Caporetto, and had to be replaced with Italian, French and British types; even so, from an initial strength of 40 batteries the siege artillery increased to 750 batteries by the end of the war, with 120mm, 149mm, 152mm, 155mm and 381mm guns; 152mm and 305mm howitzers; and 210mm and 260mm mortars.

During the early part of the war co-operation between Italian artillery and infantry was often poor, the gunners tending to bombard areas rather than specific targets and doing little counter-battery work. Munitions reserves had only been sufficient for a short war; like other belligerent nations, Italy suffered a 'shell crisis' early on, though home production later improved markedly and other supplies were received from France and Britain. In parallel there was a steady improvement in artillery effectiveness; one example came in September 1916, when long range Italian guns badly damaged the main water-pumping station far behind the Austro-Hungarian front. In the Alps long range artillery was used against railway lines, often firing over the mountains at targets in neighbouring valleys; the Italian guns not only had to fire at very steep elevations, but were also challenged by the need to fire at angles lower than the horizontal to engage targets in valleys from relatively higher ground. The defeat of a full scale enemy assault upon the Piave line was another significant success for the Italian artillery.

Since the first aircraft to be shot down in war was an Italian machine lost during the invasion of Libya, the Italian Army was naturally amongst the first to experiment with anti-aircraft artillery. By the end of 1916 they had 25 batteries plus 315 isolated anti-aircraft guns and 295 machine-guns mounted for anti-aircraft work. Some 75mm M1911 field guns were mounted on a wood and concrete structure with the trail on a manually turned roller. Eventually lorry-mounted 75mm Krupp and Ehrhardt AA guns operated alongside fixed guns and Maxim and Hotchkiss machine guns.

The distinctive insignia of the artillery were black single-tailed collar 'flames' edged in orange-yellow, and a branch badge of crossed cannons surmounted by a flaming grenade (see Plate D3); horse artillery had crossed sabres added, fortress artillery crossed rifles.

Engineers

Italian Army engineers were originally organised in four regiments (totalling 42 companies in eleven battalions), the individual companies



Few pictures better illustrate the difficulties the Army faced in the Alps than this view of artillerymen raising a 75mm Déport M1911 field gun into position. The army's main field gun was obsolete before the war started, and in 1912 a new 75mm gun was selected; but deliveries in quantity from Italy's small arms industry would not arrive until mid-1915, so the army looked abroad for stop-gaps. As a result field artillery still used outdated 75mm M1906 Krupp and M1911 Déport guns when it went to war (the horse artillery did, however, obtain the new 75mm M1912).



A 305mm howitzer, known in Italy as a 'heavy mortar', on a De Stefano carriage; this distinctive system featured four large solid iron wheels running on rails to absorb the recoil. It came in several sizes, some of which were designed for the largest guns. Among other types of carriage used by the Italian artillery was the Garrone system, which had 'tracks' around the wheels, usually with ramps up which the wheels rolled under recoil. Other heavy ordnance was mounted on trains, including the huge Ansaldo 381/40 railway gun. (A. Curami photograph)

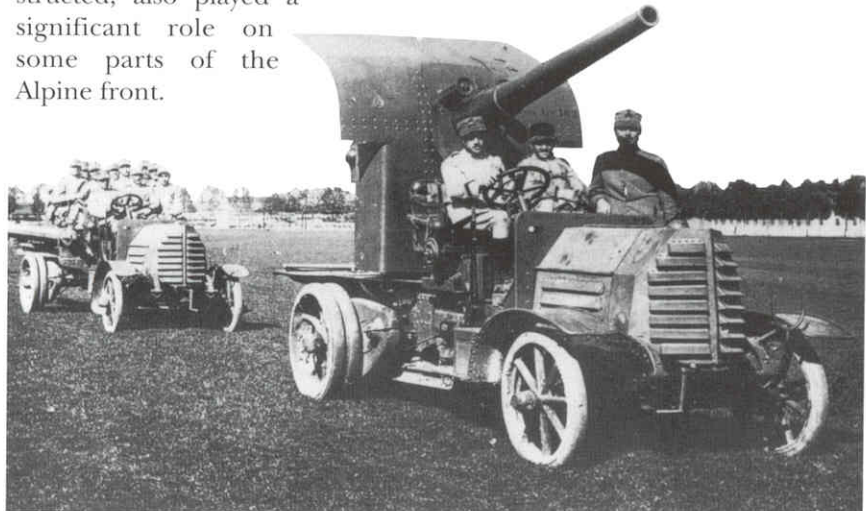
(including bridging and telephone sections) being deployed one per infantry division. During the war each infantry division received an engineer battalion of three companies, their total number increasing to 78 battalions. The Alpini also had their own specialist corps, the *Genio Alpino*.

During May–September 1915 the engineer branch retained the M1903 dark blue uniform, receiving the

grigio-verde M1909 from that month. The grey-green tunics worn by engineer officers supposedly had four large pockets, but photographs show considerable variation; those of NCOs and men lacked pockets, but engineers' tunics had shoulder straps rather than padded rolls. Trousers for both officers and men were of cavalry style, though worn with puttees. The distinctive insignia were a single-tailed black collar *fiamme* edged in crimson, and a branch badge of crossed axes surmounted by a flaming grenade. Milizia Territoriale engineers had two-tailed 'flames'; the Genio Alpino, the same but edged with green.

Generally speaking, Italian front-line trenches were not as well constructed as those of the Austro-Hungarians, the Italians being almost constantly on the offensive while their enemy was on the defensive. The resulting trenches tended to be shallow, uncomfortable and all too often unsanitary, though some front-line infantrymen and engineers naturally improved these conditions on their own initiative. In those areas where the general staff accepted that the front would remain static, concrete was used for fortifications in regions like the Carso and the Alps where the soil was only inches deep over the underlying rock.

The roads constructed by Italian engineers particularly impressed their allies. *Teleferica* cable car systems, both existing and newly constructed, also played a significant role on some parts of the Alpine front.



SUPPORT TROOPS

Italian Army support services included the *Carabinieri Reali*, *Guardia di Finanza*, *Sanità*, *Veterinari*, *Commissariato*, *Sussistenza* (Quartermaster Corps), *Contabili* (Pay Corps) and *Giustizia Militare* (Legal Corps). All had their distinguishing collar patches, most in the form of single-tailed 'flames'; and most displayed branch badges in slight variations on a cross centred on a crowned five-point star. At the start of the war, as a result of urgent and rapid expansion, the colour of their uniforms varied from unorthodox brownish-grey to standard grey-green – this also being a feature of some volunteer formations. These support organisations expanded considerably during the course of the war.

The **Carabinieri Reali** para-military police were volunteers, who formed part of the Cavalry Corps but were not considered an operational fighting unit. At the outbreak of war the Carabinieri consisted of 65 officers and 2,500 NCOs and men in three battalions with three companies each. In November 1915 these were dispersed and assigned separately to major formations. Officially the Carabinieri only wore grey-green uniforms from late June 1915 onwards, though in fact these were issued in May. The most distinctive aspect of their uniform was a large *lucerna* tricorne hat which, from December 1915, received a grey-green cloth cover (see Plate G2). They wore infantry tunics with shoulder straps rather than rolls, cavalry trousers with puttees, and mountain boots which – unlike ordinary soldiers – they polished black to a high shine. Unsurprisingly, there were tensions between the Carabinieri and other troops, most notably the notoriously free-spirited Arditi, who nicknamed these military police '*aeroplani*' (aeroplanes) for their broad-winged hats. The Carabinieri wore black collars or rectangular black patches, with silver (or subdued grey) lace bars; their branch badge was a large flaming grenade bearing the royal monogram.

The **Carabinieri Guardie** were an élite unit of royal bodyguards who protected the king when near the front. They were distinguished from ordinary Carabinieri by having oblique pockets on the hips of their jackets, and red epaulettes and collars; some other aspects of their equipment followed that of the four senior cavalry regiments. One unit was sent to Palestine (see Plate H1), where it served alongside a unit of Bersaglieri; others guarded the Royal Palace in Rome.

The militarised **Guardia di Finanza** customs police had been employed in Libya before the war, and in 1915 was reorganised into four combat regiments each of three battalions. Others served in Italian East Africa. Collar insignia were yellow double-tailed 'flames' edged with green; the 'button colour' was gold, and the branch badge resembled that of the Bersaglieri.

Intelligence and communications troops were drawn from various corps. Despatch riders and staff motorcycle-sidecar drivers used both Italian and British motorcycles. Other forms of communications included radio and telephone, while closer to the front carrier pigeons were used, some of the birds living in motorised pigeon lofts. (As a result there was a ban on shooting pigeons throughout the region of Venetia during the war.) Although the army's use of motorised transport increased greatly during the war, it also used traditional long-horned draught oxen, some of these animals being shipped for service on the Macedonian front.

OPPOSITE The Italian Army also used self-propelled artillery. In 1915, 20 *autobatterie pesanti campali* or 'motorised heavy field batteries' were formed, most of them with four of these Ansaldo 102mm guns mounted on SPA 9000 lorries with armoured engine compartments; a few of the batteries had 105mm guns. Apart from the *autocannoni* full teams also included *autocassoni* for the crews (see left), *autocarri* for the escort, ammunition and baggage, and an *autovettura* for the commander. Apart from the right hand figure, all the soldiers in this photograph wear grey-green caps and pale canvas fatigue dress. The batteries were divided between six autonomous groups, and until 1918 these were attached to the general artillery reserve. (A.Curami photograph)



Officers of the *Corpo Militare della Croce Rossa Italiana* – the militarised Italian Red Cross – in 1915. Their uniforms ranged from orthodox grey-green to a greyish-brown, these being privately made because the men were volunteers. The Franciscan friar on the left was one of many attached to the Red Cross to offer wounded men spiritual comfort.

Sanità which incorporated the Italian Red Cross. Each regiment had a medical captain, supported by one or two subalterns per battalion, these usually being medical students or medical officer cadets; each battalion also had two *caporali di sanità*. In Alpini and Bersaglieri Ciclisti units these were at company level, while in machine gun units they were at section level. All such men were distinguished by Red Cross armbands.

At the start of the war the Italian Red Cross mobilised about 9,500 men and 1,200 officers for 209 hospitals, ambulance units, hospital trains and comparable facilities. The *Sovrano Ordine di Malta* (the Knights Hospitaller of Malta, of Crusader fame) was similarly placed under military discipline for the duration. The uniforms of both medical organisations were regularised by the Army, though each had its own distinctive ranking structure. The Medical Corps collar insignia was a dark red single-tailed 'flame', and the branch badge featured a red cross set on the crowned star; for doctors the star was set on crossed caduceus staffs. In May 1915 the Fiat 15^{ter} ambulance car was adopted. More specialised ambulances appeared during the war; by November 1918 there were 945 in service, of which 710 were the Fiat 15^{ter} (six being radiological versions), while many others were the larger Fiat 18 BLR. Another volunteer organisation conscripted during the war was the *Croce Azzurra* (Blue Cross) which formed a Veterinary Corps. Its uniforms were the same as those of the Medical Corps except for a blue rather than a red cross.

Chaplains disappeared from the army in 1871 as a result of the Kingdom of Italy seizing the Papal States; nevertheless, some priests still accompanied the army voluntarily. During the Great War they were placed under a *vescovo da campo* (field bishop) who held the rank of *maggiore generale*. He was in charge of three vicars with the rank of *maggiore*, while chaplains held the rank of *capitano* if they were a *cappellano d'armata*, or *tenente* if they were a *cappellano ordinario*. Uniforms were regularised in November 1915, consisting of wide-brimmed hats, long coats, short jackets, trousers and puttees, all in black (see Plate G3), plus a grey-green field uniform; chaplains always wore Red Cross armbands. Equivalent ranks were indicated by the usual silver stars, and silver bands around the pastoral hat. Many chaplains actually accompanied infantry assaults to give the last rites to the dying, while some Franciscan friars were attached to the Medical Corps and Red Cross, presumably for the same purpose.

Medical facilities were overwhelmed by the unexpectedly high casualties in the first battles of the Isonzo; according to the soldiers, all that could be offered to the wounded were 'iodine and aspirins'. There was subsequently a major outbreak of cholera and typhus on the Isonzo front. Yet by the time Gen. Robertson visited the Italian Army in 1917, he could report that the hospitals and other medical services were efficiently organised, the men being housed and with adequate transport.

These overstretched medical services were divided into two parts: the medical elements of the combat units, and the troops of the *Corpo di*

COLONIAL & NAVAL TROOPS

Italian Colonial forces included European and African soldiers; the *Cacciatori d'Africa* (African Light Infantry) were, however, the only European units permanently serving in East Africa. They were raised shortly after the Italians occupied Massawa and formed part of the *Corpo Speciale d'Africa* which sailed to Africa in 1885. Most were mounted infantry, in three battalions of four companies each, but they included some squadrons of *Cacciatori a Cavallo* cavalry. Volunteers were preferred, plus reservists drawn from Italian colonists permanently resident in Eritrea. These troops wore black vulture feathers in their solar topees, fastened to a green woollen pompon, with a white regimental number on a black ground. Much of their equipment was the same as that of the Bersaglieri, though their uniforms were khaki.

The indigenous battalions raised in Libya served within Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, the interior province of Fazzan having been lost in 1915. Their loyalty remained fragile, but they were recruited in substantial numbers and included élite Carabinieri plus several battalions of both regulars and irregulars. The Eritrean battalions were far more reliable, and included men enlisted in Eritrea, Yemen, and Asir in southern Arabia. They included the original four battalions of *ascari* infantry, plus four battalions formed in the late 19th century which had been disbanded and then re-created for the invasion of Libya in 1911. Two more battalions were created in 1913, followed by yet five more in 1914; three further 'provisional battalions' were raised during the Ethiopian crisis of 1916; and in August 1918 yet another Eritrean battalion was raised for a proposed campaign in support of the Arab Revolt in Arabia. In fact the Ottoman Turkish surrender meant that this last unit was not required and, like many of the other additional Eritrean battalions, it was disbanded after the war. There were also cavalry, a camel corps and coastguards. Several Eritrean battalions served in Libya during the Great War, and some of these were described as being 'mixed', i.e. they were not only recruited from Eritreans and southern Arabians but also included Libyans.

While Italian Somalia was governed by a private trading company, the largest local regular force was the *Corpo delle Guardie del Benadir*. This was suppressed when the Italian government took over control, its units being restructured and renamed as part of the *Regio Corpo di Truppe Indigene*. Initially it consisted of one artillery and five infantry companies led by Italian regular officers, plus a local police force led by officers of the Italian Reale Carabinieri. Like the Eritrean battalions, these Somali units were supplied from the military depot in Naples. During the crisis of 1916 the companies were increased to ten, most of the additional men being Arabs recruited from Yemen. One nominally Somali battalion had also been sent to Tripolitania in Libya in 1913. (See MAA 208, *Lawrence and the Arab Revolts* for colour plate of Italian colonial troops 1915–18.)

Naval troops

The Italian Navy did not have marines; instead, many sailors were trained to operate in landing parties, and several larger ships carried field guns for their use. These tactics had proved their worth during the Libyan War, and during the Great War Italian naval units fought



Though small in number, the Italian contingent which served under British command against the Ottoman Turks in 1917-18, from a base at Rafah in southern Palestine, were drawn from two élite organisations. Some were from the *Carabinieri Guardie* or Royal Guard - cf Plate H1 - seen here in their distinctive tricorne hats; while at far right is an NCO of the *Bersaglieri* in tropical white uniform and with his corps' equally distinctive cockerel feathers attached to his solar topee. (Imperial War Museum Q12891)

Defence of the Venetian Lagoon and coastal marshes and canals was largely left to naval troops by an inter-service agreement of September 1914. These units also provided coastal artillery at the southern end of the Isonzo front. Some of their pontoons were little more than rafts carrying a single 76/30 gun; others were converted Venetian barges. Many were jointly crewed by soldiers and sailors, while on land some naval gunners operated heavy field artillery (see Plate H3). During the retreat after Caporetto much heavy coastal artillery had to be destroyed to prevent it falling into enemy hands. Other guns were withdrawn on pontoons to Venice, some actually bombarding the advancing enemy from the cover of little-known coastal canals. Once the front had stabilised along the Piave river the defence of the Lagoon area was again left to Navy personnel, many guns which had been transferred to the Army now being returned for this task.

Shortly before the battle of Caporetto the first *Reggimento Marina* (Naval Infantry Regiment) was formed. Later known as the *Reggimento San Marco*, it had three battalions, and was tasked with the defence of Venice. Strength was later increased to four battalions, and the regiment took part in the final battle of Vittorio Veneto. Its men were issued with the same equipment as soldiers, including steel helmets, machine guns, gasmasks and hand grenades. They even included an assault unit called the *Brigata Amalfi*, which displayed an *Arditi* badge and yellow-red collar *mostrini*.

Some naval personal served far inland, on and around Lake Garda, especially after the Austro-Hungarian counter-offensive of spring 1916 gave the enemy control of the northern tip of the lake. Following the retreat of late 1917 the defences in this area were further strengthened with artillery and armoured cars, while the Navy played a vital role by moving units and weapons around the lake. They also ferried *Arditi* raiders against enemy-held parts of the shore.



Sailors of the *Regia Marina* manning a pair of Maxim M1906 machine guns on a lorry in the anti-aircraft role - see Plate H3. Naval personnel, sometimes under Army command, played a major part in operations at the southern end of the Isonzo front, along the lower course of the River Piave, in defence of the Lagoon of Venice and on Lake Garda. (A. Curami photograph)

THE PLATES

A: ITALY ENTERS THE WAR, 1915

A1: *Caporale, 13o Reggimento di Fanteria, Brigata Pinerolo, May 1915*

The M1909 *grigio-verde* uniform – note the fly front and shoulder rolls, and the lack of puttees at this date – is worn with the soft-crowned M1909 *berretto* cap; the leather peak and chinstrap have been painted grey-green, and the crowned regimental number is displayed in black thread. The distinctive *mostrine* collar patch of the Pinerolo Brigade (13th & 14th Inf Regts) was red with two black stripes near the edges; all patches bore the five-point national star. NCO ranks were indicated by black chevrons above the cuffs. He is armed with the 6.5mm Mannlicher-Carcano M1891 *Fanteria* rifle and bayonet – note the guide (*dispositivo tagliafile*) clipped to the muzzle and bayonet for cutting a strand of wire by firing a round. The M1907 belt equipment is painted grey-green; note that the supporting braces form a continuous neck strap. A large haversack with a water bottle attached is worn on his left hip; on his back is the waterproofed canvas *borsa* knapsack, to which a rolled tent section and poles are strapped.

The weapon in the centre of the plate is a Gusman M1916 bomb-thrower.

A2: *Sergente Maggiore, Bersaglieri, spring 1915*

The distinguishing headgear of the Bergalieri light infantry was this broad-brimmed *moretto* hat, at this date retaining its plume of cockerel tail feathers although fitted with a drab grey field cover; the latter bears the Bersaglieri arm-of-service badge. The double-tailed 'flames' insignia in dark red, with the national star applied, can just be seen on the tunic collar beneath the cape. This *mantellina* was originally issued only to enlisted ranks of foot units but was later acquired by officers and mounted troops. The Bersaglieri wore nailed brown boots, greased but not polished. The M1891 *Cavalleria* model short-barrelled rifle with integral folding bayonet was issued to the light infantry.



This *bersagliere ciclista* was photographed around the time of Italy's entry into the war; his broad-brimmed *moretto* hat still has its abundant *piumetto* of cockerel tail feathers, and his small M1891 ammunition pouches have not yet been painted grey-green. Note also the leather gaiters; and the special tunic with fall collar, shoulder straps instead of padded rolls, and external breast pockets, later used as a model for that of the *Arditi* – cf Plates E3 & F.

A3: *Sottotenente Dragone, Reggimento di Cavalleria di Linea Savoia (No.3), summer 1915*

Like several cavalry units in other combatant armies, the Savoy Cavalry and the other three senior Line regiments of horse went to war wearing an impractical parade helmet, the *Dragone* M1910, here with the chinstrap worn up and fitted with a light grey fabric cover, painted with the black cross of Savoy which distinguished Regiments 1 to 4. The M1909 cavalry tunic was fitted more tightly than the infantry version, had shoulder straps, and was worn by all ranks with breeches and high, strapped gaiters (termed 'artillery', though also worn throughout the cavalry). The 3rd Line Cavalry had an entirely black collar edged with crimson. At the start of the war officer ranks were indicated on the shoulder straps – here the single white metal star of a sub-lieutenant. In place of the infantry's four belt pouches the mounted arms of service wore this M1897 black leather bandolier equipment with two larger cartridge pouches for the M1891 carbine; a pistol holster could also be attached to it at the right hip (see C2). The sword attached to his saddle is the M1908 *sciabola*; the partial black bearskin shabraque was peculiar to officers. He also wears a slung mapcase.

B: WAR IN THE ALPS

B1: *Sergente, 4o Battaglione, 1o Reggimento di Alpini; December 1915*

Like the Bersaglieri, the Alpini were considered elite units, and this status was indicated by the double 'tails' of their green *fiammi* collar insignia. This NCO's felt *cappello* hat bears the frontal arm-of-service badge in black thread; the eagle feather worn on the left has been removed as being too visible for the front lines, but its mounting pompon is retained, displaying the blue 4th Battalion identifying colour. Officers sometimes wore rank insignia on the left side of the hat in the form of lace chevrons, points up, matching the number of stripes worn around the band of the *berretto* by line infantry officers. The middle range of NCO ranks were distinguished by cuff chevrons of which the upper narrow stripe had a central 'curl'. Note the nailed and cleated mountain boots issue to these regiments. His equipment includes old M1891 pouches each holding 48 rounds, an entrenching spade, spare boots, and a water bottle with a hessian cover; on his shoulder he carries a long alpenstock.

At his feet are illustrated the Bettica trench mortar and one of its 'aerial torpedoes' – the cylindrical base fitted over the barrel of the mortar.

B2: *Alpino ski raider, winter 1916/17*

Special equipment and clothing for war in the high mountains and during winter were issued to the Alpini, much of it reflecting the new sport of mountaineering which had become fashionable in the late 19th century. This member of a scouting or raiding party wears orange-tinted goggles and white snow camouflage clothing including a rolled balaclava, knitted mittens, hooded overjacket, overtrousers and puttees. His equipment is made of whitened canvas; note the rucksack, and the broad belt with pouches fastened by loops and straps, easier to manipulate with cold fingers than the leather set.

B3: *Infantryman, Alpine protective clothing, winter 1916–17*

Ordinary infantrymen and members of the other front line

branches of service also needed special warm clothing when serving in the mountains. For such static duties as manning guard posts they were issued heavy sheepskin *giubboni* watch coats, and enormous *gambali* overboots which could be stuffed with straw for insulation. The French Adrian M1915 helmet was adopted in April 1916 and was being manufactured in Italy before the end of the year.

From 1916 to 1918 dogs were used on the Adamello front to carry food and water to men in inaccessible positions; they were also used to pull sledges and small wheeled carts.

C: MOTORIZED TROOPS

C1: Caporale Maggiore, 37o Reggimento di Fanteria, Brigata Ravenna, serving as armoured car machine gunner, late 1915

His crash helmet is of the double-domed hardened leather type originally designed for aircrew but adopted by motor cyclists and other motorised troops. His M1909 tunic bears the white collar patches with two red edge stripes of the Ravenna Bde (37th & 38th Inf Regts), and his cuff rank insignia are surmounted by the crown badge indicating that he has received a special 'field merit' promotion. The machine gun emblem on his upper right sleeve is a qualification badge. He has acquired artillery troops' gaiters, worn with cavalry breeches and light M1912 boots. He carries slung on a cord the tin canister for the Polivalente gasmask, marked 'Modello Grande No.1'.

C2: Capitano, Automobilisti, 1916

The enthusiasm with which the Italian Army adopted new

technology such as armoured cars was soon reflected in the specialised clothing issued to the troops using such equipment. This captain of the *Automobilisti d'Artiglieria* has acquired not only a short, double-breasted coat in black leather, but also a leather copy of the service cap with a buttoned-in *coprinuca* neck and ear piece. The coat displays his three stars of rank on the shoulder straps, and the cap three bands of rank lace and the *Automobilisti* arm-of-service badge (a wreathed car emblem set on crossed rifles beneath a crown), all in silver. The collar patch is the black single-tailed 'flame' edged with crimson, as worn by the engineer branch. He wears the breeches and officers' riding boots of the mounted branches, and the officers' M1911 black bandolier equipment with a holstered pistol at the right hip. A number of handguns were used throughout the war, ranging from the old M1889 Glisenti revolver in 10.35mm calibre, through the 9mm M1910 Glisenti semi-automatic (superficially resembling the German P08 in appearance), to the 7.65mm M1915 Beretta semi-automatic and its 9mm variant.

C3: Despatch rider, Genio Ferroviari, 1917

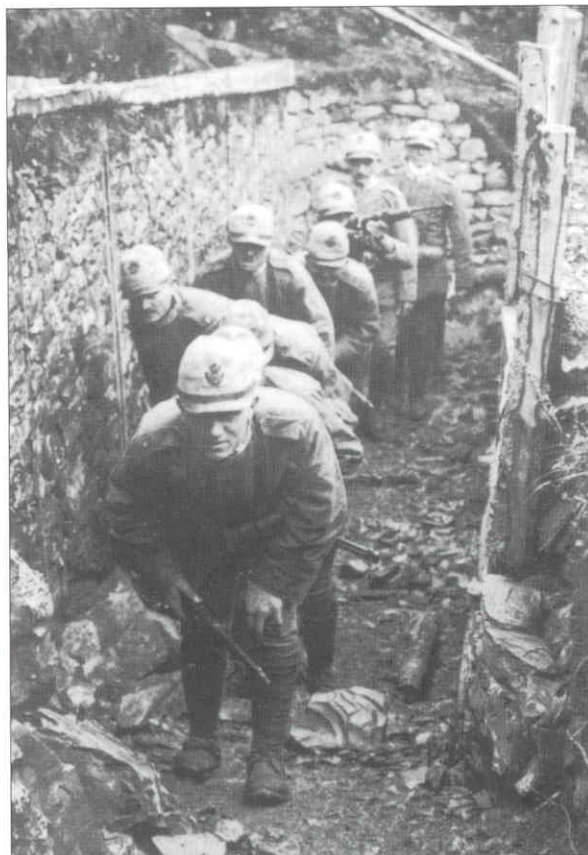
This messenger of the Railway Engineers branch displays the same collar insignia as C2. His headgear is the rounded-top M1915 'cupelino' or 'scodellino' cap; his heavy, fleece-lined canvas driving coat is fastened with buckled straps and worn with mounted troops' breeches and gaiters. The early Polivalente gasmask was based on the French M2 but with a full face piece; the Tipo Z was introduced in January 1917. The despatch case of proofed grey canvas on a painted grey-green leather strap was said to be hermetically sealed. His mount is a 3.5hp British-made Rudge Whitworth Multi 1913 motorcycle.

D: ARTILLERY & MACHINE GUN TROOPS

D1: Maresciallo Ordinario, Artiglieria a Cavallo, 1916

The rank of *maresciallo* was roughly equivalent to a warrant officer in the British Army and tended to be held by very experienced men. With the *berretto*, mounted troops' breeches, gaiters and boots this Horse Artillery soldier is wearing a fatigue jacket made of hard-wearing beige-coloured linen. The national star is worn on the collar, but without a patch; the wavy black chevron of this rank is attached above the cuffs. Two divisions of the Cavalry Corps were dismounted and sent into the trenches as infantry; our horse gunner is loading a Tipo 58A trench mortar, based on the French Dumèzil N2. The spigot of the projectile fits

Troopers of the Cavalleggeri di Roma 20, or 20th (Rome) Light Horse – one of several cavalry regiments which were dismounted to serve as infantry during the war. This photograph was probably taken early in 1916, before front-line troops were issued with the Adrian steel helmet; they carry carbines, and have been issued with puttees and four-pouch belt equipment. The foreground man and several others seem to wear the rounded-top M1915 'cupelino' cap, bearing the light cavalry's badge in black – a crowned bugle-horn with the regimental number in the curl. They also wear black square patches on the ends of their shoulder straps, though the white cypher is illegible; and this regiment's solid black collar with three-tailed white 'flames'. (Imperial War Museum Q54766)



inside the barrel, the finned tail outside (this massive tail meant that the explosive warhead represented only 25kg of the total 45kg weight).

D2: Gunner 1st Class, No.1171 Autonomous Machine Gun Company, 1918

In the Italian Army some machine gunners were formed into separate specialist companies while others remained integral to infantry battalions. Machine gunners' tunics had shoulder straps rather than rolls; and note the socks worn instead of puttees, a common choice by this date. The specialist companies had distinctive *mostrini* collar patches, the colours depending upon their weapons – Fiat-Revelli, Maxim or St Etienne. Those equipped with the M1914 Fiat-Revelli, as here, wore red patches with white vertical bars; the blue 'tailed' outline of this man's patch also shows that his unit is under the direct command of a division. The company number and machine gun emblem appear on both his Adrian helmet and his left sleeve, and a black patch with a white 'M' (for *mitragliatrice*, 'machine gun') on his shoulder strap. The insignia below the company sleeve patch is the Savoy knot badge of his first class gunner's qualification.

D3: Primo Capitano, Artiglieria de Fortezza, spring 1917

Given the dirty nature of their work, many artillery officers seem to have worn fatigues most of the time, even adding rank insignia to the crumpled beige canvas. This first captain of Fortress Artillery displays the new form of officers' cuff rank insignia introduced late in 1915. Surprisingly, this officer displays the 'first class' gun-layer's badge on his left sleeve. The artillery collar patch was a black single-tailed 'flame' outlined in yellow; the Fortress Artillery's arm-of-service badge – a flaming grenade with the unit number, over crossed cannons and crossed rifles – is stencilled on his Adrian helmet. He wears infantry enlisted men's boots with short ankle puttees. The grey-green leather officers' belt set, with holstered pistol and ammunition pouch and a plate bearing the arms of Savoy, was introduced just before the war; it had two supporting braces and a sword attachment on the left side, but these were usually discarded. He holds a shell marked 'Buona Pasqua' – 'Happy Easter'...

E: CYCLISTS & INFANTRY

E1: Trombettiere, Volontario Ciclisti ed Automobilisti, winter 1915/16

Although the VCA were issued with grey-green uniforms similar to those of the Bersaglieri Ciclisti in March 1915, they retained a distinctive style of cap with a broad crown, worn here with the VCA's elaborate cap badge. The tunic collar bears the light infantry's dark red double-tailed *fiammi*, with special national star badges bearing 'VCA' in red enamel. The national star is worn both on the collar of the standard issue greatcoat, and also – confusingly – on the shoulder straps (above this, though obscured here, was a VCA badge). Despite this apparent rank badge of a subaltern he is in fact a simple *Volontario Automobilista*, the bugle-horn badge on his right sleeve marking his function. He is armed with the short *Truppe Speciali* carbine variant of the M1891 rifle, and wears two M1891 small black leather belt pouches without a neck strap.

E2: Maresciallo Capo, 65o Reggimento di Fanteria, Brigata Valtellina, October 1918

This warrant officer in marching order wears his M1916 Adrian

The Italian mobilisation system meant that men were eligible for service well into middle age. In this photograph a splendidly whiskered sergente maggiore of the 7o Battaglione of Territorial Militia infantry wears gold cuff ranking on the beige canvas fatigue uniform, which includes canvas gaiters. This clothing was used by several branches of the Army, but most notably by the artillery – see Plate D3.



helmet over a knitted balaclava, and has turned the lower part of this up and out to cover the helmet brim. On his collar he wears the white patches with two black edge stripes of the Valtellina Brigade (65th & 66th Inf Regts); and above both cuffs the two wavy chevrons of his rank and the crown of a battlefield promotion. On his upper left sleeve are skill-at-arms badges: a silver-on-black rifle for 1st Class Marksman, and a black-and-white grenade for qualified grenadier. Instead of a spade he carries a short entrenching pickaxe on his pack – a most necessary tool in rocky terrain. His water bottle is a *borraccia* of the old iron-banded wooden type.

E3: Caporale, 5o Battaglione, Bersaglieri Ciclisti, 1918

Once a breakthrough had been achieved at the battle of Vittorio Veneto, the fast-moving cyclists came into their own as a modern form of mounted infantry. Towards the end of 1917 the Bersaglieri and Alpini were allowed to wear their feather plumes once again, for reasons of morale. This junior NCO wears the special M1910 *Bersaglieri ciclisti* tunic with fall collar, shoulder straps, external breast pockets and buttoned belt loops, over a pale grey-green high-necked sweater; collar and cuff insignia are conventional, and a black qualified cyclist's badge is worn on the upper left sleeve. The high leather gaiters, of a lighter style than the artillery pattern, were originally for officers only, but were later adopted for all ranks of Bersaglieri cycle units; they are worn with unpolished infantry boots. His field equipment is lightened (most kit being carried in shaped canvas bags on the bicycle): the normal belt supports economy pouches in pale canvas with leather straps; his slung haversack carries hand grenades; and he wears the British-supplied 'small box respirator' on his chest.

F: ASSAULT TROOPS

F1: Ardito, spring 1918

This volunteer wears an Adrian helmet with a light grey fabric cover bearing the badge of a Roman company numeral on a flaming grenade set over crossed short-swords. For extra protection against shell fragments and the



Two junior officers of a scout unit of the *64o Reggimento di Fanteria, Brigata Cagliari*, pose for the camera with fighting knives. The centre man wears an early form of gasmask based on a French model, and both wear Adrian helmets with added Dunand anti-splinter visors, plus Lippmann ear and cheek pieces – see Plate F1; note the thick, pale-coloured interior padding. On the upper left sleeve the centre man displays a silver or light grey silk officers' version of the *Esploratore* six-point star badge; the black enlisted men's version can be seen at far left. The Cagliari Bde (63rd & 64th Inf Regts) wore red *mostrini* with two white edge stripes. (S. Corsetti photograph)

stone splinters thrown up by artillery in mountainous terrain he has acquired one of many variants of the French Dunand slotted visor, and Lippmann strap-on cheek pieces. His Bersaglieri cyclist-style tunic with breast pockets displays the Arditi black double-tailed 'flames' on the opened collar, worn over a woollen sweater; the black sleeve badges are the wreathed *gladius* of the Arditi, above the six-point star of a qualified *esploratore* scout. Late in the war a tunic with four external pleated pockets and exposed buttons was also photographed. He wears mountain troops' trousers and boots with extra nails, long socks instead of puttees, and lightened field equipment – some or all of the belt ammunition pouches were often discarded, and the tunic's belt loops removed the need to wear the leather neck brace. The haversack contained grenades and extra ammunition; the cord over his left shoulder supports a Polivalente gasmask on his right hip. The standard weapon was a cavalry (as here) or 'special troops' carbine. Many combatants of the Great War adopted fighting knives, officially issued or improvised, but in the Arditi a *pugnale d'assalto*, of one

of several patterns, was general issue to all ranks. Note also the spiked knuckle-duster on his right hand.

F2: Ardito, 1o Reparto d'Assalto, early 1918

This soldier of the 1st Assault Battalion is 'sighting in' a carbine while behind the lines. The undress headgear of the Arditi was a black version of the soft red *fez* with a long blue tassel which had long been the mark of the Bersaglieri. Note, at the end of the shoulder straps, the black square with a white '1' battalion numeral, and on the upper left sleeve the Arditi badge. Below it is a flame-thrower operator's qualification badge: a vertical silver staff rising from a silver Savoy knot, with a black dragon winding around it, spitting red flames at top right.

F3: Tenente, Genio Pioneri Zappatori, 1916

The Italian Army paid early attention to the problem of clearing a way through barbed wire entanglements, and this resulted in the development of special spearhead companies – officially 'wire-cutting companies', unofficially 'death companies'. These extraordinarily courageous men often wore heavy head and body armour and were issued with assorted wire-cutting devices. This engineer subaltern wears the single-tailed collar 'flames' of his arm of service on a uniform of a notably lighter shade than the troops' *grigio-verde*; the two stars of his rank are worn vertically on cuff patches. His arm-of-service badge – a grenade over crossed axes – identifies the Engineer Pioneers & Sappers who provided many men for these units, and is worn on his left sleeve. Like his rank stars, it is worked in the grey silk thread which replaced silver for officers' insignia (enlisted ranks wore it in black). The lieutenant wears over a quilted 'arming cap' one of a variety of heavy, rivetted trench helmets produced by the Milan firm of Elmo Farina, and adopted from late October 1915; it weighed 2.85kg (6lbs 5 ounces). The body armour is one of several patterns also produced by Farina, and weighed 9.25kg (20lbs 6oz); variants with abdominal, arm and knee protection were also seen. The helmet and armour could stop a rifle bullet at ranges down to 125 metres. He wears heavy gauntlets for handling barbed wire and tools; the Malfatti wire cutter he carries is fitted to a long pole, and has a bayonet attached as a weapon of last resort.

G: STAFF & SUPPORT PERSONNEL

G1: Tenente Generale in command of a division, 1916

The light grey-green field uniform was similar for all officer ranks; their *berretto* was slightly higher at the front than the back, and note that like enlisted ranks they had the peak and strap painted grey-green. A gold national star on the collar, and red backing to the cap insignia, were particular to general officers. Their cap badge was the crowned eagle of Savoy in silver or, for lieutenant-generals commanding army corps and above, in gold. It was set on a red band decorated with 30mm silver *greca* pattern lace. Major-generals had one 4mm line of lace above this; lieutenant-generals (as here), two lines; only the king, as General of the Army, had three lines. The red-piped silver cuff patches were more complex, reflecting the shoulder boards worn until the end of 1915. A new rank of colonel-brigadier was introduced, wearing the major-generals' cap badge but not the *greca* lace; instead they wore one 20mm below three 4mm lines of plain silver lace around the band, and a plain cuff patch piped red.

Major-generals commanding a brigade wore one five-point gold star, those commanding a division a star below a crown; lieutenant-generals commanding a division (as here), two stars; those commanding an army corps, a crown between two stars; and those commanding an army, the same but with the crown set on a horizontal stripe of gold lace.

Staff officers seem to have been among the few who had their boots and gaiters polished black. Note the plain grey-green officers' waist belt; the blue and white ribbon of the *Croce al merito di guerra*; and the personal black mourning band.

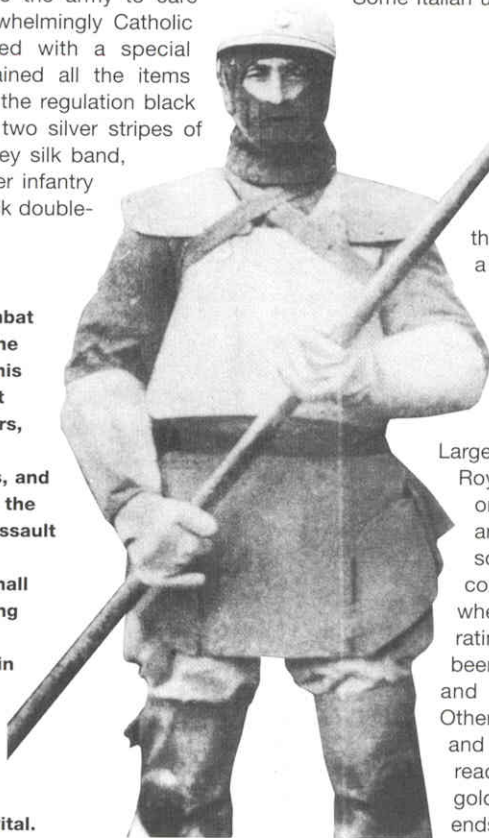
G2: Brigadiere, Carabinieri Reale, summer 1916

The rank of *brigadiere* corresponded to sergeant-major in this military police service. The Carabinieri were most immediately distinguishable by the large 18th century-style *lucerna* tricorn hat; stencilled on its grey-green field cover is their badge of a flaming grenade bearing the king's 'VE' monogram in silver. The gasmask is the very early Ciamician-Pesci Monovalente type. The Carabinieri were also distinguished by a solid black collar with patches in the form of silver lace bars; and by highly polished black leather equipment – note the pouches with silver grenade badges. The tunic is worn with cavalry breeches, here with puttees for dismounted service, and a *mantellina* cape. He is armed with a cavalry carbine, and a holstered pistol on the left hip secured with a leather lanyard around the neck.

G3: Cappellano Ordinario, 74o Reggimento di Fanteria, Brigata Lombardia, 1916

Despite an equivocal attitude by the Pope towards Italy's participation in the Great War, and the Catholic Church's traditionally close links with the Austro-Hungarian Hapsburg monarchy, priests were attached to the army to care for the spiritual needs of the overwhelmingly Catholic soldiers. This chaplain – equipped with a special portable folding altar which contained all the items needed to celebrate Mass – wears the regulation black uniform. The *cappello* hat has the two silver stripes of lieutenant's equivalent rank on a grey silk band, and the regimentally numbered silver infantry arm-of-service badge. The long black double-

An early version of the type of body armour developed to protect the combat engineers who went forward to cut the enemy's barbed wire – cf Plate F3. This man wears an ordinary Adrian helmet but has steel plates over his shoulders, chest, back and abdomen, plus knee protectors, massive leather gauntlets, and a wire-cutter on a long pole. Many of the 'compagnie della morte' spearhead assault companies were volunteers from the engineers. These men operated in small squads of three or four, often including explosives experts protected by riflemen, and their skill and courage in cutting the enemy wire under fire was legendary. Even after the artillery developed methods of destroying barbed wire entanglements more efficiently, such small wire-cutting squads remained vital.



breasted coat, with four pairs of visible silver buttons, displays national stars on the collar and a *tenente* equivalent's two stars on the shoulder straps. Like medical personnel, all chaplains wore the Geneva Cross brassard on the left arm. Their grey-green field uniform also featured a large red cross badge sewn directly to the left breast, and a grey cover for the hat. (The *mostrine* of the Lombardia Bde, 73rd & 74th Inf Regts, was white with a blue central stripe.)

H: COLONIAL & NAVAL TROOPS

H1: Sottotenente, Carabinieri Guardie; Palestine, 1917

The Carabinieri Guardie were from the Italian Royal Guard and, as such, were regarded as representing King Vittorio-Emanuele III. Their officers had particularly well tailored uniforms, though those of the detachment sent to the Middle East were of the same reddish-khaki material as worn by other troops serving in the Italian overseas empire. The *berretto* is of the same design as the grey-green version, with the same single silver cord identifying sub-lieutenant's rank and the metallic thread grenade badge of the Carabinieri. The tunic, with exposed front buttons, has red shoulder straps with the single silver star of rank; the collar is entirely red, with silver emblems in the form of a grenade on each side with two 'flames' running forward to unite under the national star. Cavalry breeches are worn with polished brown gaiters and boots with strap-on spurs. The sword is the cavalry officers' M1914 with steel hilt.

H2: Soldato, 3o Battaglione, Cacciatori d'Africa, 1916

Some Italian units in the African colonies continued to wear tropical white uniforms but the majority were issued with a reddish-brown desert khaki. (This was also worn by many locally recruited native troops.) The broad brimmed hat has the battalion number directly attached, though it was sometimes seen with a black backing patch. The black *mostrini* edged with scarlet identify the Cacciatori d'Africa. The tunic is worn with cavalry breeches and puttees.

H3: Timoniere Scelto, Regia Marina, 1917

Large numbers of sailors of the Italian Royal Navy were transferred to service on land, many of them operating heavy artillery under Army command at the southern end of the Isonzo front. This coxswain first class – note the red wheel badge on his left sleeve and the rating chevron on both sleeves – has been issued Army grey-green puttees and infantry boots, polished black. Otherwise his uniform of blue cap, jumper and trousers is unchanged. His cap tally reads 'REGIA MARINA' between two gold stars; and note the two short ribbon ends hanging over his left ear.

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