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BETWEEN OLD AUSTRIA AND NEW FOES: ITALY AND THE YUGOSLAV PROJECT (1917-18)**

ABSTRACT: *After the 1917 Corfu Declaration several Italian political circles adopted a warm approach towards Yugoslav unity. Following Mazzini's ideas, democratic interventionists had claimed since the beginning of the war a policy based on the national principle. They were eventually joined by more conservative sectors, which believed the international context had radically changed since 1915 and therefore it was necessary to make a general reappraisal of Italy's war aims. They favoured a deal with Serbia and the Yugoslav Committee in order to destabilize the Austrian Empire and agree a mutually acceptable definition of the common border. Minister of Foreign Affairs Sonnino instead believed that Italian war aims had been fixed once and for all in 1915 and refused both direct talks and a reappraisal of Italian war aims. Lacking a bilateral deal with Serbs/Yugoslavs, Rome finally found itself helpless at the peace negotiations, when Paris and London backtracked from the promises made in 1915.*

KEY WORDS: *Italy; Yugoslavia; Corfu Declaration; Adriatic Question; First World War; Democratic Interventionism*

In the years that preceded the Great War, the Balkans played an important role in Italian foreign policy and it can be argued that regional questions determined both Italy's neutrality and later its participation to the war. Rome considered hegemony over the Adriatic not only an objective in itself, but also the cornerstone upon which to build its new role as a great power.¹ Rela-

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¹ L. Monzali, *Sidney Sonnino e la politica estera italiana nell'età degli imperialismi europei*, in P.L. Ballini (ed.), *La politica estera dei Toscani. Ministri degli Esteri nel Novecento*, Polistampa, Firenze, 2012, pp. 13-53; M. Bucarelli, *Grande Italia o Grande Serbia? Lo scontro tra Roma e Belgrado sugli scopi di guerra in Adriatico*, in F. Altamura (ed.), *Puglia*

tions between Italy and Serbia had been tense since the outbreak of the war, as the ambitions of the two countries over the Adriatic collided. The Serbian Government had since 1914 claimed its attachment to Yugoslav unity. Many believed that this ostensive attachment served as a cover for a less ambitious, purely Serbian, approach. The Corfu Declaration of 1917, however, proved that Yugoslavism was a realistic option, thus exacerbating already tense relations between Italy and Serbia. The aim of this article is to describe Italy's reaction to the emergence of Yugoslav unionism.

The Adriatic prize

Italy's involvement in the First World War included a mixture of irredentist and imperialist ambitions, in which the Adriatic was a key factor.² Among the Italian ruling *élite*, there was a widespread consensus that Rome should not only conquer Italian-populated lands, but also gain "an exclusive military supremacy" in the Adriatic³. Apart from its obvious political and military importance, the region had an economic significance, since the Balkans represented the best option to find markets abroad. Carlo Sforza, Italy's representative to the Serbian Government, argued the Italian industry was "not mature enough to look for clients in farther regions".⁴

In the struggle for the Adriatic, Austria was Italy's direct enemy, but to some extent the real enemy was Serbia and the eventual Yugoslavia.⁵ Many Italian policymakers explicitly claimed that Serbia was more dangerous than the Habsburg Empire, since Slavs were "stronger and more aggressive" than decadent Austria.⁶

e Grande Guerra. Tra dimensione adriatica e fronte interno: fonti e ricerche, Salento Books, Nardò, 2017, pp. 64-90.

² L. Monzali, *La politica estera di Sidney Sonnino e i fini di guerra dell'Italia (1915-1917). Alcune riflessioni*, in P. Neglie, A. Ungari (eds.), *La guerra di Cadorna 1915-1917: atti del Convegno Trieste-Gorizia 2-4 Novembre 2016*, USSME, Roma, 2018, pp. 315-25.

³ A. Salandra, *L'intervento: 1915, ricordi e pensieri*, Mondadori, Milano, 1930, p. 169; *Documenti Diplomatici Italiani* [hereinafter DDI], Quinta serie, vol. I, Istituto poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato, Libreria dello Stato, Roma, 1954, San Giuliano to Imperiali, 16/09/1914, doc. 703; De Martino to Salandra, 31/10/14, in S. Sonnino, *Carteggio, 1914-1916*, Laterza, Roma-Bari, 1974, p. 62; DDI, Quinta serie, vol. I, De Martino to San Giuliano, 04/09/1914, doc. 581.

⁴ ASMAE [Historical archive of the Italian Ministry of foreign affairs], Archivio politico ordinario e di gabinetto [hereinafter Apog] 1915-18, busta 177, Sforza to Sonnino, 24/10/1916.

⁵ G. Salvemini, *Dal patto di Londra alla pace di Roma: documenti della politica che non fu fatta*, Gobetti, Torino, 1925, pp. LI-LII; see also M. Bucarelli, *Allies or Rivals? Italy and Serbia during the First World War*, in D. Živojinović (ed.), *The Serbs and the First World War: 1914-1918*, SANU, Belgrade, 2015, pp. 247-62.

⁶ Martini to Bartolomei, 23/09/1914, in F. Martini, *Lettere, 1860-1928*, Mondadori, Milano,

While Rome was negotiating with the Entente its intervention in the war, Minister of foreign affairs Sidney Sonnino declared to the Serbian ambassador in Rome Ljubomir Mihailović that it was not worthwhile for Italy to wage war against Vienna, unless Rome was to gain an “absolute naval supremacy in the Adriatic Sea”. Such an objective, explained Sonnino, included gaining possession of territories inhabited by Slavs. It was therefore impossible to reach a compromise with Belgrade.⁷ England, France and Russia accepted Italian requests and with the Treaty of London (1915) recognized Italian rule over Trieste, Istria, part of Dalmatia and the Albanian city of Valona, strategically important to control the access to the Adriatic.⁸

The Treaty raised Serbia’s suspicions, preventing a cooperative attitude towards Rome.⁹ Since the spring of 1915, the Serbian Army restrained from leading consistent attacks against Austria-Hungary. Belgrade feared that its efforts could pave the way for Italy’s expansion on Slavic lands, yet Sonnino complained that Serbia behaved just like an Austrian ally, preferring to stir up tensions in Albania, instead of leading a joint effort against the Dual Monarchy.¹⁰ At the same time, Vienna used Italian ambitions to strengthen the loyalty of its Southern Slav soldiers, claiming they were fighting to protect their own lands from Italian imperialism and not just for the sake of the Habsburg dynasty.¹¹

Sforza concluded that even if Italy made “extreme compromises and concessions”, it could not raise “nor intellectual nor political clients” among Serbs. He added that the best option for Italy was to prevent Serbia’s expansion on the Adriatic and favor its enlargement towards Salonika. Such an op-

1934, p. 496; “the real fight is between us and the Yugoslavs” admitted Colocci, member of the Italian parliament and collaborator of the Ministry of foreign affairs, Colocci to Sonnino, 30/08/1918, in S. Sonnino, *Carteggio, 1916-1922*, Laterza, Bari, 1975, pp. 475-77, see also, A. Colocci, *Prima l’Adriatico!*, Gonnelli, Firenze, 1915.

⁷ S. Sonnino, *Diario*, Laterza, Bari, 1972, vol. II, 1914-1922, pp. 114, 118-19, 121-23.

⁸ L. Monzali, *Una difficile scelta: Il patto di Londra e la politica estera italiana 1914-1915*, *Acta Histriae*, 4/2017, pp. 919-38; D. Šepić, *Pitanje tajnosti Londonskog ugovora od 1915. g.*, *Zbornik Historijskog Instituta Slavonije*, 2/1964, pp. 85-105.

⁹ In August 1915, Serbia’s interior Minister Jovanović stated to the Italian envoy in Niš that because of Italy’s ambitions on Slavic lands “military cooperation or any act of solidarity [was] no longer possible”, DDI, Quinta serie, vol. IV, Squitti to Sonnino, 18/08/1915, doc. 617.

¹⁰ ASMAE, Apog 1915-1918, busta 177, Sonnino to Imperiali, Tittoni, Carlotti, Aliotti, Squitti, 15/06/1915; G. Salvemini, *Dal patto di Londra*, p. XLV; F. Cappellano, A. Gionfrida, *The role of the Serbian Army in Cadorna’s war*, in V. Pavlović (ed.), *Serbia and Italy in the Great War*, Institute for Balkan Studies, SANU, Belgrade, 2019, pp. 146-49. M. Bucarelli, *Allies or Rivals?*, in D. Živojinović (ed.), *The Serbs*, pp. 258-59.

¹¹ C. Sforza, *L’Italia dal 1914 al 1944 quale io la vidi*, Mondadori, Roma, 1945, pp. 49-50; Id., *Jugoslavia: storia e ricordi*, Rizzoli, Milano, 1948, p. 110; L. Albertini, *Venti anni*, part II, *L’Italia nella guerra mondiale*, Zanichelli, Bologna, 1952, vol. II, p. 10.

tion would have assured Italian hegemony over the Adriatic and weakened Greece, exacerbating its competition with both Serbs and Bulgarians. Sforza also argued the opportunity to keep “Serbo-Croatian lands strictly separated”; catholic populations had to remain in Europe, orthodox ones in the “East”.¹² Sonnino agreed with him and prevented the adoption by the Entente of any declaration that could pave the way for the unification of Serbia and Croatia.¹³

Italian plans for Montenegro and Albania

Montenegro’s king Nikola regarded his country as a purely Serbian land and had often defined himself as “the first of the Serbs”. Despite his vocal attachment to Serbian and Yugoslav unity, he did not favor it, since unification posed a mortal threat to the survival of his dynasty.¹⁴ In 1916, after the defeat of the Montenegrin Army and the armistice with Austro-Hungary, king Nikola went into exile, striving to get the backing of the Entente for the re-establishment of his kingdom in the aftermath of the war. A considerable part of Montenegro’s political circles opted instead for the immediate unification with Serbia, complaining that the king was sacrificing national aspirations for the sake of his own personal interests. Nikola counted on Italy’s support, having common interests with Rome and dynastic relations with the Italian monarchy, as his daughter Jelena had married king Vittorio Emanuele III. To assure Italy’s backing, Nikola eventually nominated an Italian citizen, Evgenije Popović, Prime Minister of his Government in exile.¹⁵

Another important factor in Italy’s policy was Albania, a country that had already caused rivalries between Rome and Belgrade. While Serbia wished to conquer an outlet to the Adriatic Sea in Northern Albania, Italy’s aim was to turn a formally independent Albanian State into a protectorate¹⁶. The dispute over the country had become a sensitive issue at the time of

¹² ASMAE, Apog 1915-18, busta 177, Sforza to Sonnino, 24/10/1916.

¹³ S. Sonnino, *Diario*, vol. II, pp. 193, 203-05, 208-09.

¹⁴ ASMAE, Serie Politica „P” 1891-1916, busta 199, Negrotto to San Giuliano, 09/07/1914; Documenti Diplomatici a Stampa [DDS], serie XXII, Serbia 1913-1914, Carlotti to San Giuliano, 22/07/1914; Bollati to San Giuliano, 27/06/1914. On the unification of Serbia and Montenegro, see also DDI, Quinta serie, vol. VI, Carlotti to San Giuliano, 12/09/1916, doc. 420. For the Serbian national consciousness of Montenegro’s king and public opinion, S. Pavlowitch, *Serbia: la storia al di là del nome*, Beit, Trieste, 2010, pp. 85, 134; A. Sbutega, *Storia del Montenegro: dalle origini ai giorni nostri*, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli, 2006.

¹⁵ D. Živojinović, *Italija i Crna Gora 1914-1925: studija o izneverenom saveznstvu*, Službeni List SRJ, Beograd, 1998, pp. 232-34.

¹⁶ B. Stojić, *The International dimension of a local problem: Serbian goals versus Italian aspirations in Albania (1912-1914)*, in B. Vučetić (ed.), *War, peace and nationbuilding (1853-1918)*, The Institute of History, Belgrade, 2020, pp. 205-21.

Serbia's retreat. Italy had then prevented the settling of Serbian troops, since their presence could create a *de facto* Serbian rule in Albanian lands.¹⁷ To hinder Serbian ambitions, on the 4th of June 1917 Rome proclaimed Albanian independence under its protectorate, for which Serbia complained to the Allies.¹⁸ Shortly afterwards, on the 20th of June, Sonnino officially included the re-establishment of the Kingdom of Montenegro among Italy's war aims.¹⁹

To counteract these acts, the Serbian Prime Minister Nikola Pašić considered the opportunity to reach a comprehensive deal with the Yugoslav Committee. Founded in 1915 and led by Croatian lawyer Ante Trumbić, the Committee's main task was to advocate the national rights of Yugoslav populations living in the Habsburg Empire, opposing Italian pretensions to their lands. A deal between Pašić and Trumbić marginalized the Montenegrin king, who reacted labelling Yugoslavism as an Austrian project.²⁰ He persuaded Italy that the differences between Serbia and the Committee were too big to be solved, adding that, with an adequate backing from Rome, he could eventually drag Trumbić onto Italy's side.²¹

In June 1917, Prime Minister Pašić invited the Committee to Corfu, keeping Italy unaware.²² Trumbić and his fellows were already in the Greek island, when Sonnino asked Sforza to split them from Serbia, offering in exchange financial support to the Committee. However, the very day Sonnino gave these instructions to Sforza, Trumbić expressed his wish that Serbian Prince Aleksandar could become king of all Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. In the following days, the ties between the Committee and Serbia became more and more evident. On the 5th of July, Sforza replied that his "direct and indirect inquiries" showed the Committee had no wish to detach itself from Pašić. Then, after a direct conversation with Trumbić, Sforza concluded: "unification with Serbia is (...) his political *raison d'être*".²³

Italy's maneuver finally collapsed on the 20th of July, when Pašić and Trumbić signed the Corfu Declaration. This document stated the national

¹⁷ O. Malagodi, *Conversazioni della guerra 1914-1919*, Ricciardi, Milano-Napoli, 1960, vol. I, *Da Sarajevo a Caporetto*, p. 150; M. Ković, *Italy and the evacuation of the Serbian Army from Albania 1915-1916*, in V. Pavlović (ed.), *Serbia and Italy*, pp. 223-34.

¹⁸ D. Živojinović, *The War aims of Serbia and Italy (1917)*, in V. Pavlović (ed.), *Italy's Balkan Strategies*, pp. 142-43; see also D. Fundić, *The Albanian question in Serbian-Italian relations 1914-1918*, in V. Pavlović (ed.), *Serbia and Italy*, pp. 187-99.

¹⁹ D. Živojinović, *Italija i Crna Gora*, pp. 234.

²⁰ D. Živojinović, *Italija i Crna Gora*, p. 230.

²¹ DDI, Quinta serie, vol. VIII, Romano Avezzana to Sonnino, 30/05/1917, doc. 158; Sonnino to Sforza, 23/06/1917, doc. 435.

²² D. Živojinović, *Italija i Crna Gora*, p. 235.

²³ DDI, Quinta serie, vol. VIII, Sonnino to Sforza, 23/06/1917, doc. 435; Sforza to Sonnino, 23/06/1917, doc. 446; Sforza to Sonnino, 05/07/1917, doc. 546; Sforza to Sonnino, 10/07/1917, doc. 609.

uniqueness of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, defining them as a “three-name nation”. The document envisaged the creation of a large Yugoslav State, including Serbia and the Yugoslav-populated lands of the Habsburg Empire. It would have been a constitutional monarchy, led by the Karadorđević dynasty. Trumbić and Pašić could not agree on the inner structure of the State and its definition was therefore referred to a constitutional assembly that had to include representatives of all Yugoslav regions. No reference was made to Montenegro. Serbia, with the consent of Trumbić, wanted to prevent the reconstitution of the Montenegrin State. The fears of both Italy and king Nikola became reality: Yugoslav unification was a real option for the post-war Balkans.²⁴

A compromise hard to reach

The Corfu Declaration was the outcome of a long and difficult negotiation between political figures that represented different interests. The international context helped Trumbić and Pašić put aside their divergences. Previously, Russia had opposed the creation of a larger State where catholic Croats and Slovenes could counter-balance the traditional Russophilia of orthodox Serbs. After the fall of the Tsar, however, the Russian Government adopted a different view on the issue. Furthermore, ongoing political instability put into question the effective relevance of Russian support to Serbia. At the same time, the prolongation of the war incited the Entente Powers to reconsider the opportunity of dismembering the Habsburg Empire.²⁵ The main enemy was Germany, and the allies therefore took into consideration the possibility to reach a separate deal with Vienna, in order to isolate Berlin. In such an eventuality, the Dual Monarchy would have suffered only smaller territorial losses.²⁶

To counteract those events, Pašić needed to achieve a more suitable position in the international arena. At the same time, the Serbian Premier had been subject to sharp criticism at home following the Salonika trial, in which Colonel “Apis” Dimitrijević and other relevant officers had been condemned to death. Apis was a popular figure, especially among the Army officers, and his condemnation weakened the popularity of the Prime Minister. Opposition parties sharpened their accusations against the Government,

²⁴ For the political significance of the Declaration, D. Janković, *Jugoslovensko pitanje i Krfska deklaracija 1917. godine*, Beograd, 1967.

²⁵ In May 1917, Ambassador in London Imperiali wrote that British ruling circles were against the “total dismember of the Austro-Hungarian Empire”, DDI, Quinta serie, vol. VIII, Imperiali to Sonnino, 24/05/1917, doc. 77.

²⁶ L. Albertini, *Venti anni*, part II, vol. III, p. 232.

while some advocated a warmer approach on Yugoslav unity. With the Corfu Declaration, Pašić re-established his prestige in the inner political arena, re-gaining political initiative.²⁷

The Committee's aims were quite different. The survival of Austria-Hungary was more worrisome for Trumbić than it was for Serbia. As Habsburg subjects, Croats and Slovenes could have been regarded as the defeated party in post-war negotiations, and their territories risked to be dismembered in favor of bordering countries. The Corfu Declaration strengthened the Committee's opposition to Italian plans by claiming the national principle in the setting of post-war borders and, in a politically more significant move, connecting the fate of Austro-Hungarian Southern Slavs to Serbia. As an allied country that had suffered enormous sacrifices for the cause of the Entente, Serbia expected large compensations in the aftermath of the war.²⁸

The Corfu Declaration was also a compromise between two leaders with opposite cultural and personal backgrounds. Sforza argued that it was difficult to imagine two men so different one from the other as were Pašić and Trumbić.²⁹ The Serbian Prime Minister was born in a village of the Timok valley, studied engineering in Switzerland and during his political career faced many difficult situations. He experienced jail, exile, and even a death sentence *in absentia*. Such a background made him a pragmatic politician, hostile to declamatory stances. He can be considered a patriot who devoted his life to the Serbian and Yugoslav national cause, but in terms of methods he was a pragmatic, even tricky politician. As an Italian journalist put it, Pašić had developed "byzantine" skills that had been crucial for his political survival.³⁰

Trumbić, instead, was a Split born lawyer, who studied in Zagreb, Vienna, and Graz. He had acted as a member of the Dalmatian provincial assembly and later of the parliament in Vienna. His political education was deeply influenced by his juridical studies and Austro-Hungarian political culture. In the Habsburg Empire, provincial assemblies, and to a lesser de-

²⁷ D. Bataković (ed.), *Histoire du peuple serbe, L'age de l'homme*, Paris, 2005, pp. 275-76; on the Salonika trial, D. MacKenzie, *The „Black hand” on trial: Salonika, 1917*, East European Monographs, Boulder, 1995.

²⁸ D. Djokić, *Nikola Pašić and Ante Trumbić: the kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes*, Haus Histories, London, 2010, p. 52. On different conceptions of unification, V. Pavlović, *Italy and the creation of Yugoslavia*, in V. Pavlović (ed.), *Serbia and Italy*, pp. 245-69.

²⁹ C. Sforza, *Pachitch et l'union des Yougoslaves*, Gallimard, Paris, 1938, p. 147. It is interesting to note that while in his book Sforza rejects the idea that Trumbić was an Austrophile, he himself had credited this suspect; cfr. DDI, Quinta serie, vol. VI, Sforza to Sonnino, 24/10/1916, doc. 606.

³⁰ L. Magrini, *Il dramma di Seraievo: origini e responsabilità della guerra europea*, Athena, Milano, 1929, pp. 92-95, 111-12.

gree the parliament itself, lacked real political power. As Sforza put it, deputies relied on “formalistic and procedural methods” to exert pressure on Government authorities.

It was with this political background that Trumbić negotiated in Corfu, where he conducted long discussions on the use of flags and national emblems in the future Yugoslavia. Those were common political arguments in Austria-Hungary, where in 1915 Croatian representatives had waged a long struggle against the new banners of the Empire, arguing that the emblems of Croatia, Slavonia and Dalmatia were not included in them. Article three of the Corfu Declaration deals exactly with the use of emblems, stating that Yugoslavia’s coat of arms had to include the national emblems of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. Trumbić had transposed in the negotiations with Pašić the usual arguments of the Dual Monarchy. He went further making politics “*à la autrichienne*”, irritating the Serbian Premier who could not understand the need to resort to “endless discussions on flags and coat of arms”.³¹

No reference to Italy

Serbia’s king Petar received with some reserves the Corfu Declaration. Prince Alexander instead showed sympathy for the Committee and was himself a partisan of a unified Yugoslavia.³² The reactions of the Croatian and Slovene political émigrés - who praised Serbia’s willingness to compromise - were generally favorable. Shortly after the Declaration, Pašić went to London, where he met with Frano Supilo, a Dalmatian Croat who had been a leading figure of the national movement. Relations between the two had been tense, as Supilo was among less pro-Serbian politicians in the Croatian political diaspora. Nonetheless, he received the Serbian statesman with enthusiasm, recognizing that “old orthodox Serbism had made enormous sacrifices”, accepting to “water down its centuries-old mentality in the new spirit”.³³

In Italy, the Declaration was received with less enthusiasm. Ambassador Sforza and General Marro, commander of the Italian military mission in Corfu, pointed out that the document was nothing new in terms of its statements. It merely enunciated principles long repeated in the pamphlets published by the Yugoslav Committee, as well as in the documents of the Serbian Government. The real political significance of the Declaration was that it

³¹ C. Sforza, *Pachitch*, pp. 147-48; Id., *Jugoslavia*, pp. 131-33; similarly, Salvemini considered Trumbić a “proceduralist”, G. Salvemini, *Impressioni sintetiche sul dialogo avuto col dott. Trumbich*, in M. Pacetti (ed.), *L'imperialismo italiano e la Jugoslavia: atti del Convegno italo-jugoslavo*, Argalia, Urbino, 1981, pp. 123-24.

³² DDI, Quinta serie, vol. VIII, Sforza to Sonnino, 25/08/1917, doc. 964.

³³ Cit. in C. Sforza, *Pachitch*, p. 149.

resulted from a negotiation. For the first time those principles were stated in a joint declaration signed by Serbia and representatives of the Yugoslavs living in the Dual Monarchy. For the first time plans for unification were thus endorsed by both Yugoslav Piedmont and “unredeemed” populations.³⁴

Sforza argued that the document was “a naive essay of mediocre political literature”, that did not explain what the eventual unified State would look like. Nevertheless, it contained several critical points, the most important of them being the lack of references to Italy.³⁵ Rome had not participated in the war since the beginning. Therefore, it posed no problem for Italian observers that the document conceded more importance to Russia, France, or Great Britain.³⁶ However, Italy was never mentioned, an omission that could not be considered meaningless. The United States of America was mentioned, even though it had joined the war two years after Rome. Admiral Foschini, commander of the cruiser “Siracusa”, wrote that Italy was “meaningfully excluded from the list of allied nations”.³⁷ Not even in article 10, where the document deals with the fate of the Adriatic Sea, is there some reference to Italy. General Marro reported as an “extraordinary fact” that while Pašić and Trumbić “praised France, England, Russia and America” they “forgot about Italy, as if it were possible to forget the country that has the greatest interest in the [Adriatic] question”.³⁸

Sforza concluded that this “wilful omission” was due to the competition for the conquest of Habsburg lands. Pašić and Trumbić had omitted any reference to Italy, in order not to irritate “Croatian and Slovene populations that are believed to be willingly fighting against us”.³⁹ Yugoslav soldiers in the ranks of the Austro-Hungarian Army were indeed fighting bravely against Italy, more because they regarded Rome as their national enemy, rather than out of love for Vienna. Sforza thought it was difficult for the eventual Yugoslavia to reach a lasting equilibrium between its different “populations, perspectives and traditions”. However, an external threat could

³⁴ ASMAE, Apog 1915-1918; busta 183, Patto di Corfù, Sforza to Sonnino, 05/07/1917; AUSSME [Historical archive of the Italian Army], E-11, busta 45, Rapporti trasmessi al comando supremo 1917, Military Attache in Corfù, 27/07/1917.

³⁵ ASMAE, Apog 1915-1918, busta 183, Patto di Corfù, Sforza to Sonnino, 25/07/1917.

³⁶ This is clearly noted by pencil in the copy of the Declaration available in the Archive of the Italian Army; AUSSME, E-11, busta 45, rapporti trasmessi al Comando Supremo, 1917, the Deputy Chief of Staff to the Ministry of foreign affairs, 02/08/1917.

³⁷ ASMAE, Apog 1915-1918, busta 183, Patto di Corfù, Report of Admiral Foschini, 31/07/1917.

³⁸ In the copy of the Declaration available at AUSSME it is noted: “here lies the greatest audacity, deciding the future of the Adriatic without Italy”; AUSSME, E-11, busta 45, rapporti trasmessi al Comando Supremo, 1917, the Deputy Chief of Staff to the Ministry of foreign affairs, 02/08/1917.

³⁹ DDI, Quinta serie, vol. VIII, Sforza to Sonnino, 24/07/1917, doc. 720.

help Yugoslavs put aside their differences and Italy could easily become this external threat, for the existence of many disputed territories. Sforza's concerns were fuelled also by the lack of any reference to the borders of the eventual State, thus raising the risk of exaggerated claims.⁴⁰

Similarly, General Marro argued that Trumbić and Pašić did not mention Italy in order not to "restrain the war effort of those Croats and Slovenes fighting against us"; they "pretend that Croats and Slovenes are fighting against Italy not for the sake of Austria, but rather for the sake of the Yugoslav nation".⁴¹ Admiral Foschini concluded that for Serbia and the Committee Yugoslav soldiers on the Italian front were not "defending the Austrian Monarchy, but rather defending a Yugoslav national cause".⁴²

Irritated by the Corfu Declaration, Italian authorities banned its publication.⁴³ However, reports and commentaries largely circulated in the press. Democratic interventionists warmly received the Declaration, supporting the Yugoslav cause and arguing that keeping Slovenia and Croatia separated from Serbia implied the survival of the Habsburg Empire. They added that denials of Yugoslav identity were hypocritical, recalling the Austrian definition of Italy as a mere "geographical expression".⁴⁴

Condemned as defeatists by nationalists and hindered by censorship, the democratic interventionists' enthusiasm for an Italian-Yugoslav compromise did not encounter the support of larger strata of the public opinion. Most Italian publications argued that the Corfu Declaration had an anti-Austrian appearance, but it was rather anti-Italian in its substance. Mistrust for the Yugoslavs was so strong that many believed the Declaration paved the way for the creation of a Yugoslav entity in the framework of the Habsburg Empire.⁴⁵

Trumbić and his fellows were labelled "austriacanti" i.e., Austrophiles, while the whole Yugoslav movement was considered an Austrian tool. Suggestions were made to keep Croatia and Serbia divided.⁴⁶ The issue of Yugo-

⁴⁰ ASMAE, Apog 1915-1918, busta 183, Patto di Corfù, Sforza to Sonnino, 25/07/1917.

⁴¹ AUSSME, E-11, busta 45, Rapporti trasmessi al comando supremo 1917, Addetto a Corfù, 27/07/1917.

⁴² ASMAE, Apog 1915-1918, busta 183, Patto di Corfù, Report of admiral Foschini, 31/07/1917.

⁴³ DDI, Quinta serie, vol. VIII, Banchieri to Sonnino, 01/08/1917, doc. 763; Banchieri to Boselli, 01/08/1917, doc. 765.

⁴⁴ G. Salvemini, *Dal patto di Londra*, p. 67; on democratic interventionists, F. Leoncini, *Alternativa mazziniana*, Castelveccchi, Roma, 2018.

⁴⁵ Albertini to Amendola, 08/08/17, in L. Albertini, *Epistolario, 1911-1926*, vol. II, *La Grande Guerra*, Mondadori, Milano, 1968, p. 742.

⁴⁶ Albertini noted that Italian nationalists actually resorted to the traditional Habsburg policy of playing Croats and Serbs one against the other; L. Albertini, *Venti anni*, part II, vol. II, p. 543; similarly, G. Salvemini, *Dal patto di Londra*, pp. 38-39; for a sample of the

slavs fighting in the Austro-Hungarian Army received large attention. Democratic interventionists such as Gaetano Salvemini complained that the Italian press was willfully exaggerating news that reinforced the belief that Croats and Slovenes were loyal to Vienna, while their acts of rebellion were kept in silence.⁴⁷ He added that if the Dual Monarchy could convince Yugoslav soldiers to fight against Italy, it was precisely because inappropriate claims on Slavic lands gave an imperialist character to Italy's otherwise just war.⁴⁸

A missed opportunity for Italian diplomacy

Until the end of the war, Sonnino remained tied to two basic ideas: the survival of the Habsburg Empire and the safeguard of the Treaty of London as the sole political and diplomatic basis of Italy's war. These two objectives were closely connected one to the other. The fall of Austria-Hungary would have indeed required a general redefinition of the borders in Central and Eastern Europe, and in this case Italian ambitions would have been hindered not only by South Slav nationalism, but also by French and British interest to prevent Italian hegemony over the Adriatic.⁴⁹

Sonnino always refused to engage in direct talks with Serbs and Yugoslavs. He remained adamant in his belief that Italian post-war territorial gains had been agreed once and for all in 1915. Shortly after the Corfu Declaration, Pašić stated in an interview to the British press that he wanted to reach "a frank and fair agreement" with Rome. He recalled that the Dual Monarchy was the common enemy and that the eventual Yugoslav State was based on the same principles that had inspired Italian unification. He made similar statements to the Italian press, underlining the similarities between the Italian *Risorgimento* and the Yugoslav movement.⁵⁰

arguments used against the Corfu Declaration, F. Caburi, *Italiani e Jugoslavi nell'Adriatico*, Treves, Milano, 1917; on the debate in the Italian press, M. Bucarelli, *Mussolini la questione adriatica e il fallimento dell'interventismo democratico*, Nuova Rivista Storica, 1/2011, pp. 137-205.

⁴⁷ Salvemini to Albertini, 06/08/17, in L. Albertini, *Epistolario*, vol. II, pp. 739-41; on Salvemini and his role in the Adriatic debate, E. Apih, *Gaetano Salvemini e il problema adriatico*, in M. Pacetti (ed.), *L'imperialismo italiano*, pp. 85-127.

⁴⁸ G. Salvemini, *Dal patto di Londra*, p. XLIV; the same interpretation was expressed by Trumbić, who replied to journalist Olindo Malagodi that if Yugoslav soldiers in the Habsburg Army were fighting bravely against Italy, while they often refused to fight against Russia, it was because of Italian imperialist ambitions towards Yugoslav lands, O. Malagodi, *Conversazioni*, vol. II, *Dal Piave a Versailles*, p. 336.

⁴⁹ A. Tamborra, *L'idea di nazionalità e la guerra: 1914-1918*, estratto da *Atti del 41° Congresso di Storia del Risorgimento italiano*, Istituto per la storia del Risorgimento italiano, Roma, 1963, p. 46.

⁵⁰ L. Albertini, *Venti anni*, part II, vol. II, pp. 540, 544-45.

In September 1917, when Pašić proposed to start talks to reach a bilateral agreement on the Adriatic, Sonnino replied that it was precisely the Declaration that made it impossible. That document was “inappropriate, even dangerous”, almost an “act of sabotage” against Italy’s war effort. It coupled with pacifist agitation led by socialists and supported by the Pope, who had shortly before proposed to end the “senseless slaughter” with a “just peace”. Serbia should have instead recognized and accepted Italy’s war aims, eventually asking for some lesser changes during the post-war negotiations. Pašić replied that the Declaration was not a provocation against Italy, but rather a guarantee against eventual Austro-Hungarian moves. In order to gain the loyalty of its Yugoslav populations, Vienna could have granted them some degree of autonomy, while the Declaration reminded them that full independence was possible through the union with Serbia. Pašić made several concessions, accepting Italy’s usual argument that, to define the future of the Adriatic, it was necessary to take into consideration not just demographic concerns, but also strategic ones. Serbia was actually ready to recognize Italian rule over Trieste, Pula, half of Istria, some Adriatic islands and the city of Valona. This solution would have granted Italy’s military hegemony over the Adriatic and assured good relations with Yugoslavia. Sonnino, however, regarded the territories granted by the Treaty of London as a “bare minimum”.⁵¹

According to Sonnino, Italy could give its consent to the enlargement of Serbia in Bosnia-Herzegovina and part of Dalmatia, as stated in the Treaty of London, but could not accept the creation of Yugoslavia, something that would put into question the very survival of Austria-Hungary and threatened Italy’s ambitions in the Adriatic. Consequently, in October 1917, Sonnino officially proclaimed in the Italian parliament that among Italy’s war aims there was not “the break-up of enemy States, neither the change of their constitutional regime”.⁵² Such a declaration disappointed Italian advocates of democratic interventionism; it also harshly embittered Serbia and the Yugoslav Committee.

Sonnino’s political views had an inner logic, but the political context in which they were elaborated was fading away. In 1917, several events radically changed the international landscape, and, as shown by a report of the general secretary of the Ministry of foreign affairs, Italian diplomacy was

⁵¹ S. Sonnino, *Diario*, vol. III, 1916-1922, pp. 190-92; C. Sforza, *Jugoslavia*, p. 113; Z. Bajin, *Nikola Pašić and Italy on the eve of the establishment of the Yugoslav state (1917-1918)*, in R. Cukić, V. Kastratović-Ristić, M. Vasiljević (eds.), *The day worth a century: 1. XII 1918*, Museum of Yugoslavia, Belgrade, 2019, p. 38.

⁵² P.L. Ballini (ed.), *I discorsi parlamentari di Sidney Sonnino*, Polistampa, Firenze, 2015, p. 182.

aware that the Treaty of London risked to be *de facto* outdated.⁵³ The USA had joined the Entente, but Washington was not bound by the provisions of the Treaty. The fall of the Tsar was also bad news for Italy, since the new Russian Government proposed a general revision of the agreements among the allies. Later, the October Revolution eventually took Russia out of the war, thus allowing the Austro-Hungarian Army to increase its pressure on the Italian front.

The Corfu Declaration represented a blow for Italy's strategy. In 1915, Rome had defined its war aims believing it had to conquer territories ruled by an enemy Empire. The Declaration instead turned the Adriatic question into an inner matter of the Entente. Furthermore, Serbs and Yugoslavs claimed those territories on the basis of the national principle, that in 1917 had gained a central place in the debate on post-war settlements. The USA, in particular, regarded this principle as the key criteria for settling territorial disputes. It was particularly worrisome for Italian diplomacy that American public opinion had adopted pro-Yugoslav stances, thanks to the active propaganda conducted by Yugoslav activists living in the USA.⁵⁴

The October Revolution in Russia went in the same direction; the Bolsheviks advocated the right of self-determination for oppressed peoples, the end of imperialistic agendas and of secret diplomacy. Furthermore, French and British leaders were increasingly persuaded that any eventual post-war settlement had to include measures to contain Berlin and prevent its reemergence as a major Power. The creation of Yugoslavia was indeed a useful geopolitical tool to prevent German expansion eastwards.⁵⁵

Later, in November 1917, the defeat of Caporetto lessened Italy's prestige and raised doubts amongst the allies on the significance of its military contribution. Finally, at the beginning of 1918, the USA President Woodrow Wilson published his 14 points for peace; imperialist tendencies were blamed as well as secret treaties. Sonnino considered Wilson's program inadequate, for it encouraged pacifist tendencies. He reacted by stating that Rome needed security guarantees in the Adriatic.⁵⁶

Italian diplomacy was going further down a dead-end street. As Minister Leonida Bissolati put it, Sonnino continued to live in the first phase of WWI, refusing to consider new developments in terms of politics and propaganda.⁵⁷

⁵³ DDI, Quinta serie, vol. VIII, Relazione di De Martino, 22/07/1917, doc. 711.

⁵⁴ DDI, Quinta serie, vol. VII, Macchi di Celere to Sonnino, 12/02/1917, doc. 283; Sonnino to Sforza, 28/12/1917, in S. Sonnino, *Carteggio, 1916-1922*, pp. 355-56.

⁵⁵ DDI, Quinta serie, vol. VI, Sforza to Sonnino, 24/10/1916, doc. 606.

⁵⁶ S. Sonnino, *Diario*, vol. III, pp. 251-52.

⁵⁷ O. Malagodi, *Conversazioni*, vol. II, p. 369.

The deterioration of Italy's prestige encouraged circles that favored a different policy to raise their voice. Democratic interventionists had since the beginning of the war believed that Rome was abjuring Italy's historical commitment to the national principle. Just as Giuseppe Mazzini had claimed decades before, such principle was a tool to weaken the Habsburg Empire from within, by exciting the national feelings of its different peoples.⁵⁸

In 1917, supporters of democratic interventionism were joined by figures of moderate liberals such as Andrea Torre, Giovanni Amendola and Luigi Albertini, editor-in-chief of *Corriere della Sera*, whose ideological background included a considerable dose of nationalism. The switch in their political stance was not due to ideal reasons, but rather to tactical ones. Following Sonnino's conservatism, the Government was weakening Italy's position. The national principle instead paved the way for a "moral bombing", that could "undermine the morale of the enemy".⁵⁹

They claimed that favoring the creation of Yugoslavia, Rome could gain influence on its leaders and get from them a full recognition of Italian interests. Yugoslav leaders would have otherwise adopted a hostile stance towards Rome.⁶⁰ On the practical level, advocates of a bilateral compromise favored the full recognition of Yugoslavia's right to Dalmatia, in exchange of its recognition of Italy's right to Istria and possibly Fiume/Rijeka.⁶¹

Such views implied that the Treaty of London was outdated, and Rome had to reconsider its policies. Shortly after the Corfu Declaration, the *Corriere della Sera* started a vocal campaign to favor a reappraisal of Italy's diplomatic strategy. The newspaper's editor-in-chief, Albertini, argued that the Yugoslav movement was the best tool to disrupt from within the Dual Monarchy. Fears that Yugoslavia could convert into a Russian base on the Adriat-

⁵⁸ See for instance A. Ghisleri, *Per l'intesa italo-jugoslava: Scritti della vigilia*, Istituto librario italiano, Lugano, 1918; Un gruppo di scrittori italiani e jugoslavi, *Italia e Jugoslavia*, Libreria della Voce, Firenze, 1918; on Mazzini's ideas on the Yugoslav movement, F. Leoncini, *Alternativa mazziniana*, pp. 27 seq.

⁵⁹ Emanuel to Albertini, 10/02/18, in L. Albertini, *Epistolario*, vol. II, p. 894.

⁶⁰ Favouring an Italian-Yugoslav agreement was for many of its advocates a matter of convenience. Bissolati for instance had no sympathy for Yugoslavs: "if I could exterminate them all, I would do it gladly, but since it is not possible we have to reach a deal with them", O. Malagodi, *Conversazioni*, vol. II, p. 461. In another occasion, Bissolati admitted: "I could never understand Slavs, I always felt repugnance for them", *ivi*, vol. I, p. 143.

⁶¹ O. Malagodi, *Conversazioni*, vol. II, p. 378. Claims on Dalmatia raised controversy even in Italy; see for instance Tittoni, who warned on the possible emergence of an irredentist movement inside Italy's borders, DDI, Quinta serie, vol. I, Tittoni to San Giuliano, 28/09/1914, doc. 834; similarly, G. Salvemini, *La Dalmazia*, 09/11/14, in *Id.*, *Come siamo andati in Libia e altri scritti dal 1900 al 1915*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 1963, pp. 370-73. While the Italian navy regarded Dalmatia as an important military objective, the Army argued it was not militarily defendable, O. Malagodi, *Conversazioni*, vol. II, pp. 501-05.

ic had faded after the Bolshevik Revolution and Rome had to seize this historical opportunity to become Serbia's main ally.

Several diplomats backed such views. At the beginning of 1918, Ambassador in London Imperiali wrote that Italy had to "reach immediately (...) a deal with Serbs and Yugoslavs". The deal would have raised Italy's prestige among the Entente Powers, denying those accusations of "imperialism, anti-democratism, opposition to the national principle" that were common in European and American democratic environments.⁶² Italian ambassadors in Paris and Washington voiced similar arguments. Sonnino objected that it was surely useful to reach a deal with Serbs and Yugoslavs, but "not on the basis of our waivers". They should have instead accepted Italy's war aims.⁶³

Neither Pašić nor Trumbić could support such a unilateral solution and Sonnino fell under increasing criticism, both at home and abroad. Nonetheless, he remained adamant, defending each provision of the Treaty of London and even the need to keep it secret. After Russian Bolsheviks had published the Treaty, the Minister argued secrecy was necessary in diplomacy.⁶⁴ The Italian Government finally published the text of the Treaty in February 1918, when its provisions were already generally known. However, even at this stage, Sonnino tried to prevent its publication.⁶⁵

Rivals and allies commonly considered Sonnino stubborn, even rude.⁶⁶ His critics went further, defining him a "madman" and a "maniac".⁶⁷ Minister Bissolati complained that he refused to discuss "any idea of possible revisions of the agreements", while ambassador and former Minister of foreign affairs Tittoni criticized Sonnino's "diplomatic inability". Salandra stated that other Ministers had problems in dealing with him, since he was not interested in listening to them, nor in explaining his own views. When they tried to persuade him that a change was necessary, Sonnino reacted harshly, making any discussion impossible.⁶⁸ He believed the issue of post-war settlements was closed in 1915, and it was therefore useless, even dangerous, to discuss again.⁶⁹ Giovanni Giolitti, Italy's longstanding political leader, witti-

⁶² DDI, Quinta serie, vol. X, Imperiali to Sonnino, 11/01/1918, doc. 75.

⁶³ Sonnino to Sforza, 31/01/1918, in S. Sonnino, *Carteggio, 1916-1922*, pp. 387-89.

⁶⁴ S. Sonnino, *Diario*, vol. III, pp. 237-38.

⁶⁵ O. Malagodi, *Conversazioni*, vol. II, pp. 278-79; L. Albertini, *Venti anni*, part II, vol. III, p. 263.

⁶⁶ F. Martini, *Diario: 1914-1918*, Mondadori, Milano, 1966, p. 1206.

⁶⁷ Orlando said "Sonnino's obstinacy breaks every will and every intelligence", cit. in O. Malagodi, *Conversazioni*, vol. II, p. 251; see also *ivi*, p. 383; for the opinion of Salandra, *ivi*, pp. 565-66; among the harshest critics of Sonnino was Barzilai, who considered him a "fool", a "maniac with no intelligence", cit. in *ivi*, pp. 517-18, 544.

⁶⁸ O. Malagodi, *Conversazioni*, vol. I, pp. 87, 146 et seq., vol. II, p. 544.

⁶⁹ O. Malagodi, *Conversazioni*, vol. II, pp. 262, 492-93.

ly pointed out that Sonnino's personal features made him an excellent Minister of treasury, but a terrible choice for the Ministry of foreign affairs.⁷⁰

The emergence of a parallel diplomacy

Since 1917, Italy found itself in a difficult position, but at the same time, as repeatedly stated by Albertini, the international context offered Rome a unique opportunity to improve its relations with the Yugoslav Committee and Serbia. However, that required a revision of Italy's strategy. Sonnino instead believed until the very end of the war that the Dual Monarchy could survive a military defeat.⁷¹ He argued that Serbs, Croats and Slovenes did not share a common history, something that made improbable the creation of Yugoslavia. Rather than expressing his deep convictions, he used those arguments to back his policy of keeping Yugoslavs divided. Minister Bissolati complained that Sonnino regarded the Treaty of London as a "promissory note", whose validity could not be questioned by political events.⁷² Sforza claimed that the Minister remained "enclosed in the provisions of his Treaty of London as if in a besieged fortress", thus preventing the Italian diplomacy to readjust to the new political context.⁷³

Pursuing his policy of non-recognition of Yugoslav aspirations, Sonnino, backed by other important officials, especially from the armed forces, prevented the creation of a Yugoslav Legion to fight alongside Italian troops.⁷⁴ Rome preferred to send Serbian volunteers to join the Serbian Army in Salonika, while creating smaller propaganda units on the Italian front for Croats and Slovenes. These units, mostly composed of prisoners of war, in no case could formally belong to the Serbian Army, nor swear loyalty to the Serbian king who, as stated in the Corfu Declaration, would become king of Yugoslavia.⁷⁵ Even the spread of propaganda materials among Yugoslav soldiers of the Austro-Hungarian Army was subject to strict constraints, in order to avoid any tacit recognition of Yugoslav national aspirations. Sonnino prevented, in particular, the spread of anti-Habsburg leaflets signed by the Yugoslav Committee, since Trumbić and his fellows were "renowned enemies".⁷⁶

⁷⁰ O. Malagodi, *Conversazioni*, vol. II, pp. 198-99.

⁷¹ O. Malagodi, *Conversazioni*, vol. II, pp. 373, 387; C. Sforza, *L'Italia dal 1914*, p. 50.

⁷² O. Malagodi, *Conversazioni*, vol. II, pp. 377, 527; Emanuel to Albertini, 16/01/18, in L. Albertini, *Epistolario*, vol. II, pp. 854-59.

⁷³ C. Sforza, *Pachitch*, p. 169.

⁷⁴ O. Malagodi, *Conversazioni*, vol. II, pp. 375-76.

⁷⁵ S. Sonnino, *Diario*, vol. III, pp. 292-95; Ojetti to Albertini, 14/07/18, in L. Albertini, *Epistolario*, vol. II, pp. 951-52; B. Hrabrak, *Jugosloveni zarobljenici u Italiji i njihovo dobrovoljačko pitanje, 1915-1918*, Filozofski Fakultet, Novi Sad, 1980.

⁷⁶ S. Sonnino, *Diario*, vol. III, pp. 262-63; Ojetti to Albertini, 12/06/18 and 22/08/1918, in L.

Advocates of the principle of nationalities therefore resorted to a parallel diplomacy. Intellectuals, politicians, and even military officers engaged in direct talks with the Yugoslav Committee in order to pave the way for a bilateral agreement. In December 1917, the Italian military attaché in London, General Mola, and influential journalist Guglielmo Emanuel met Trumbić and published a declaration that envisaged a mutually acceptable compromise. The national principle was the main criteria to define the border. However, it was added that to create stable, military-defendable borders, it was necessary to consider some exceptions that mostly favored Italy. The final declaration did not include an actual territorial delimitation, however during the talks it was agreed that a possible solution was to recognize Italy's right to Trieste and half of Istria, while Dalmatia could be assigned to Yugoslavia.⁷⁷

Other draft compromise solutions replied to this format. Trumbić was reluctant concerning the fate of Fiume/Rijeka, but on several occasions, he seemed ready to accept its annexation to Italy. The most important difference between compromise proposals and the Treaty of London, however, concerned Dalmatia. Advocates of a compromise solution pointed out that this province, inhabited by an overwhelming Slavic population, would have caused more problems than advantages to Rome. They recalled that Mazzini, himself quoting Dante, considered Istria the national and geographical border of Italy, thus recognizing that Dalmatia was a Yugoslav land. Salvemini remarked that the claim to Dalmatia gave to the Italian war effort an anti-Slavic dimension, creating animosity between two peoples that, otherwise, had common interests. Compromise proposals also included guarantees of cultural and political autonomy for Dalmatian Italians, while the Treaty of London, focused on purely territorial issues, did not. Supporters of a deal with Serbia/Yugoslavia therefore argued that their option represented a better defense of Italian interests.⁷⁸

Albertini, *Epistolario*, vol. II, pp. 934, 977; already in 1918, Sonnino approved and financed a plan elaborated by the Army to encourage separatist feelings among Croats and Montenegrins; F. Caccamo, *Il sostegno italiano all'indipendentismo croato*, Nuova storia contemporanea, 6/2004, pp. 23-56; later, Sforza revealed Italy's financial assistance to separatism in order to push Trumbić to compromise, U. Ojetti, *I taccuini: 1914-1943*, Sansoni, Firenze, 1954, p. 83.

⁷⁷ Steed to Sonnino, 29/01/1918, in S. Sonnino, *Carteggio, 1916-1922*, pp. 383-87; Emanuel to Albertini, 16/01/18, in L. Albertini, *Epistolario*, vol. II, pp. 864-70, 1054-61. Already in 1915, diplomat Galli considered this solution acceptable for both parties and believed Trumbić would eventually accept it, C. Galli, *Diarî e lettere: Tripoli 1911-Trieste 1918*, Leonardo, Roma, Sansoni, Firenze, 1951, p. 252.

⁷⁸ L. Albertini, *Venti anni*, part II, vol. III, p. 365; G. Salvemini, *Dal patto di Londra*, pp. 192-93; cfr. also Emanuel to Albertini, 16/01/1918, in L. Albertini, *Epistolario*, vol. II, pp. 854-58. For Yugoslav views on the issue of Dalmatia, L. Vojnović, *La Dalmatie, l'Italie et l'u-*

The efforts of this parallel diplomacy eventually led to the “Congress of oppressed nationalities”, held in Rome in April 1918. Representatives of Italians, Poles, Romanians, Czechoslovaks and Yugoslavs stated their common effort in the struggle for the dissolution of the Habsburg Empire.⁷⁹ Italian and Yugoslav representatives also stated their wish for a mutually acceptable definition of the border. The Italian Government granted some support to the Congress, but did not offer an official backing. Prime Minister Orlando met Trumbić, and earnestly discussed possible compromise solutions.⁸⁰ He praised the Congress, complaining that Sonnino kept “sitting on his Treaty”, without realizing that it was *de facto* “outdated” by events.⁸¹

Nevertheless, Orlando stepped back from a full endorsement of a new policy, mainly because Sonnino continued to enjoy considerable support among influential political circles, including the freemasonry and the nationalists. His opposition to the dissolution of Austria-Hungary also encountered the approval of catholic sectors.⁸² Consequently, Orlando believed Sonnino’s departure would have destabilized the Government. The Prime Minister could not afford a crisis on foreign policy issues since opponents would have labeled him a quitter and a traitor.⁸³

Even the Entente Powers solicited a switch in Italy’s foreign policy, to which Rome replied by making several statements that implied the recognition of the national principle. However, such moves did not mean Italy was actually ready to accept a review of the treaties, nor to renounce its war aims. Sonnino argued the Treaty of London had to remain the only diplomatic basis of Italy’s war.⁸⁴ Coming under growing pressure, he formally stated his commitment to direct talks with Serbs and Yugoslavs, but added bilateral talks were indeed useless, since they would have “cheated”.⁸⁵

The harsh consequence of Sonnino’s policy was to be seen during the peace negotiations. France and Great Britain, the same countries from which Sonnino expected the implementation of the 1915 Treaty, found it more convenient to backtrack from their promises and Rome found itself fatally isolated. The lack of a preemptive deal with Serbs/Yugoslavs thus proved to be

nité yougoslave (1797-1917): une contribution à la future paix européenne, George & C., Genève, 1917.

⁷⁹ G. Amendola, G. Borgese, U. Ojetti, A. Torre, *Il Patto di Roma*, La Voce, Roma, 1919; F. Leoncini, *Alternativa mazziniana*, pp. 150 seq, 240 seq.

⁸⁰ O. Malagodi, *Conversazioni*, vol. II, pp. 274, 751.

⁸¹ O. Malagodi, *Conversazioni*, vol. II, p. 540.

⁸² L. Valiani, *La dissoluzione dell’Austria-Ungheria*, Il Saggiatore, Milano, 1985, pp. 426, 430-31.

⁸³ O. Malagodi, *Conversazioni*, vol. II, pp. 371-72, 540; Ojetti to Albertini, 14/07/18, in L. Albertini, *Epistolario*, vol. II, pp. 950-51.

⁸⁴ S. Sonnino, *Diario*, vol. III, pp. 265-66.

⁸⁵ S. Sonnino, *Diario*, vol. III, pp. 347-48.

a weapon in the hands of Italy's rivals. London and Paris had by far more imperialistic ambitions concerning post-war settlements. Minister Bissolati did not hide his criticism towards Sonnino and eventually stepped down from Government. Nevertheless, he noted that it was mainly England and France that were betraying "the cause for which we asked so many sacrifices".⁸⁶ Renowned critics of Sonnino expressed similar concerns. Salvemini pointed out a significant difference between Rome and its allies. While the "great style imperialism" of France and Great Britain targeted enemy states, the less ambitious Italian imperialism targeted smaller peoples that were tied to the Entente.⁸⁷

Similarly, while President Wilson loudly proclaimed his attachment to the right of self-determination and his refusal of imperialist policies, he abstained from implementing these principles and eventually obtained the recognition of Washington's sphere of influence in Latin America, through the incorporation of the Monroe Doctrine in the statute of the League of Nations. Also, he prevented the adoption of the principle of equality among races that collided with both his foreign and internal policies.⁸⁸ Italian democratic interventionists, who had previously regarded Wilson as the best advocate of their thesis on "democratic war" and "fair peace", revolted against this flagrant adoption of double standards. Such an attitude made it difficult to argue the opportunity of a compromise with Yugoslavs, favoring instead those calling for an integral implementation of the Treaty of London.⁸⁹

However, it was actually Italy and its "smaller" imperialist policies that were blamed by the Entente press and diplomacy, and it was the lack of a preemptive deal with Serbia/Yugoslavia that made that possible. Focusing their suspicions and fears on Serbian/Yugoslav leaders, the Italian Government seemed to trust the signatories of the 1915 Treaty much more than they actually deserved. In 1915, London and Paris were available to make concessions, in order to push Rome against Austria. But, when the war was over, they acted to prevent the creation of an enlarged Italy, which could become a valuable competitor in international power politics.⁹⁰ Orlando pointed out that France and Great Britain were at the same time "wicked and bru-

⁸⁶ O. Malagodi, *Conversazioni*, vol. II, p. 463.

⁸⁷ G. Salvemini, *Dal patto di Londra*, pp. 172-73.

⁸⁸ N. Shimazu, *Japan, Race and Equality: The Racial Equality Proposal of 1919*, Routledge, London, 1998; P.G. Lauren, *Power And Prejudice: The Politics And Diplomacy Of Racial Discrimination*, Routledge, New York, 2018.

⁸⁹ G. Salvemini, *Dal patto di Londra*, pp. 272-74; M. Bucarelli, *Mussolini*, pp. 191-96.

⁹⁰ This was clearly stated by the influential pro-Yugoslav activist Seton-Watson, who already in 1915 regarded an enlarged Italy as a threat to British and French interests in the Mediterranean, R. W. Seton-Watson, *R. W. Seton-Watson and the Yugoslavs: correspondence 1906-1941*, British Academy, London, Sveučilište u Zagrebu, Zagreb, 1976, vol. I, doc. 109 and 131.

tal". They contributed to excite the Italian-Yugoslav dispute, because "hypnotized" by the Adriatic question Rome let them full freedom to decide autonomously on other relevant questions, such as the fate of German colonies and financial issues.⁹¹

Giordano MERLICCO

BETWEEN OLD AUSTRIA AND NEW FOES:
ITALY AND THE YUGOSLAV PROJECT (1917-18)

Summary

In 1915, Italy defined its war aims believing it had to conquer territories ruled by an enemy Empire. The Treaty of London harshly embittered Serbia and the Yugoslav Committee, as Rome claimed not only Italian-populated lands, but also Slavic ones, such as Dalmatia. Serbia had since 1914 claimed its attachment to a united Yugoslavia, but only in 1917, Yugoslav unity became a real option, when both Serbia and the Yugoslav Committee endorsed plans for unification with the Corfu Declaration.

Italy's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sonnino, believed Italy could approve the enlargement of Serbia in Bosnia-Herzegovina and part of Dalmatia, as stated in the Treaty of London, but could not accept the creation of Yugoslavia, something that would put into question the very survival of Austria-Hungary and threatened Italy's ambitions in the Adriatic. Sonnino's political views had an inner logic, but the political context in which they were elaborated was fading away. In 1917, several events radically changed the international landscape, and the Treaty of London risked to be *de facto* outdated.

Following Mazzini's ideas, Italian democratic interventionists had claimed since the beginning of the war a policy based on the national principle. Their views had found little support among officials. However, after the Corfu Declaration, they were joined by more conservative sectors, which believed the international context had radically changed since 1915 and therefore it was necessary to make a general reappraisal of Italy's war aims. They favoured a bilateral deal with Serbia and the Yugoslav Committee in order to destabilize the Austrian Empire and agree a mutually acceptable definition of the common border.

Such views were approved also by several diplomats and by some high-ranking officials. Sonnino instead believed Italian war aims had been fixed once and for all in 1915 and refused both direct talks with Serbs/Yugoslavs and a reappraisal

⁹¹ O. Malagodi, *Conversazioni*, vol. II, pp. 473, 651; for an actual example of a British officer stirring up Italian-Yugoslav rivalry, Ojetti to Albertini, 08/07/18, in L. Albertini, *Epistolario*, vol. II, pp. 948-49.

of Italian war aims. Ministers and observers disapproved Sonnino's stubbornness, however, the latter enjoyed relevant support among political circles. Prime Minister Orlando therefore believed Sonnino's departure would have destabilized the Government and, as consequence, Rome went to the Peace Conference asking for the implementation of the 1915 Treaty. However, Italy finally found itself helpless, when Paris and London backtracked from the promises made in 1915, supporting Yugoslav claims.

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