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0521019893 - Italy, the Least of the Great Powers: Italian Foreign Policy before the First World War

R. J. B. Bosworth

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In the heart of Rome beside the Capitol, confronting the Piazza Venezia, stands the Victor Emmanuel monument. In Rome, which until 1945 was so often accorded the adjectives 'eternal' or 'imperial', the *monumentissimo* (as sardonic socialists labelled it) is the most public, most theatrical and most excessive architectural celebration of post-Risorgimento Italian patriotism, nationalism and perhaps imperialism.

This book asks why the Victor Emmanuel monument, planned after 1878 and opened in 1911, was a structure raised by Liberal and not Fascist Italy. Through a detailed study of diplomacy, of policy-making, of policy-makers, and of the distribution of real power in pre-First World War Italy, it demonstrates how important foreign policy, and a foreign policy of greatness, was to Liberal Italy. Weakened by economic backwardness, regional diversity, and the gulf between the legal-political world and 'real' society, Liberal Italy was nonetheless ambitious to be a Great Power. On the other hand, for the clear mind of Giolitti and the more subtle one of Antonino Di San Giuliano, the Foreign Minister 1910-14, ambition was hedged in by the realisation that opportunity for Italy was largely controlled by the more genuine Great Powers: Germany, Britain, France, Austria-Hungary and Russia. Italian diplomacy was thus tortuous, 'dishonest', opportunist, and dependent on peacetime machinations. Italy was 'the Least of the Great Powers'.

This monograph contributes to a number of major historiographical debates. It produces evidence which casts doubts on the thesis that fascism was a parenthesis in Italian history; it provides evidence for assaying the rival primacies of internal and of external politics; and it makes a definitive statement as to how Italy fitted into the diplomatic constellation before 1914, and to what extent Italian actions contributed to the outbreak of the First World War.

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Preface

On 10 June 1940 Benito Mussolini appeared on the balcony of the Palazzo Venezia and declaimed to the marshalled throngs below that ‘destiny’ was sounding out the hour for Italy to enter the Second World War. As Greece, North Africa, and finally the islands and peninsula of Italy itself would soon testify, what the *Duce* was really heralding was the end of Italy’s role as a Great Power.

In domestic matters, after 1945, the wind from the north may have been diverted; Christian Democratic Italy may owe a large legacy to the Fascist or Liberal past. But the fiasco of Fascist military effort and the changed international balance after the war destroyed at a blow the imperial pretensions, the assertions of greatness made for almost a century by the intellectuals, industrialists and politicians of the ‘Third Italy’, the ‘resurgent’ Rome.

No doubt there is a distinct break in continuity between the foreign policy of Fascist Italy and its successors. Is there a similar break between fascism and its predecessor, the Liberal regime which governed Italy from 1860 to 1922? The greatest of Liberal historians, Benedetto Croce, of course declared that fascism was a ‘parenthesis’, and that Mussolini’s regime was different in kind from that of Giolitti or of other Liberal leaders. Croce’s theories have often met with withering criticism in so far as concerns Italy’s domestic affairs. In foreign policy, oddly, the concept of parenthesis has retained more support. For example the two most notable recent English-language studies of Fascist foreign policy argue respectively that in the nineteen-twenties Fascist foreign policy was new, aggressive and totalitarian and that in the nineteen-thirties Italy was dragged into ‘Mussolini’s wars’.¹

However the crowds in the Piazza Venezia on 10 June 1940 had some architectural reasons to doubt if matters had changed so much. Their chants and their uniforms were new; their *Duce* used new words about ‘Proletarian and Fascist Italy’. Yet, there in the heart

¹ See A. Cassels, *Mussolini’s early diplomacy* (Princeton, 1970); D. Mack Smith, *Mussolini’s Roman Empire* (London, 1976).

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of Rome, the most stridently imperialist atmosphere was not generated by the tinsel of the Fascist demonstration, but rather by the enormous, white, Victor Emmanuel monument which, from the southern side of the square, towered over Mussolini and those who shouted *Duce* up at him.

In the front, splendidly on his horse sat the caddish King Victor Emmanuel II, *pater patriae*, armed for combat; at the very top Winged Victories guided their chariots to glory; on the monument itself mosaics displayed Italian triumphs, bas-reliefs recorded Italian heroism and devotion; below there was the altar of the *Patria*, with its solemn guards. Rows of mock-classical pillars earned from sardonic foreigners the title 'the wedding cake', but, if viewed with appropriate patriotic gravity, outmatched the rivalry of the ruins of the Capitol and the Forum behind. The *monumentissimo*, as the Socialist paper *Avanti!* called it, made Fascist architecture look lean, restrained and even modest.

For the Victor Emmanuel monument was a Liberal structure, planned from 1878 and inaugurated on Sunday 4 June 1911 to celebrate the *Cinquantennio*, the fiftieth anniversary of the Risorgimento. In its size, in its decoration and in its positioning, the Victor Emmanuel monument is testimony to the fact that the ruling classes of Liberal Italy also had an ambition to locate an imperial heritage of 'Roman grandeur' for their Italy, a desire that Italy play a full role as a Great Power.

The book which follows is essentially a monograph. But, in looking at the aims and methods of Italian diplomacy just before the First World War, evidence is produced which is relevant to the wider debate on just what difference fascism made to Italy. In Germany, after the work of Fritz Fischer, it is widely accepted that the diplomatic hopes, and even plans, of Imperial and Weimar Germany differed more in style than in essence from those of Nazi Germany. There is little reason not to believe the same about Fascist and Liberal Italy. Pre-1914 Italy was a Power on the make, looking for a bargain package deal which would offer the least of the Great Powers a place in the sun. The major difference with Fascist Italy lay in the method of diplomacy, in the preference of Giolitti and his Foreign Minister, Antonino Di San Giuliano, for seeking out bargains, for conjuring up paper victories by stealth and diplomacy rather than by bluster or war. Yet, if a relationship is sought with

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the realities of Italian society, with the character of Italian poverty, Liberal foreign policy was as absurd and disastrous as was Fascist diplomacy.

This monograph also produces evidence challenging the theory of a clear-cut turning to imperialism, a '*svolta imperialistica*', in the sense of one managed by some arch-machiavel, Giolitti, the Nationalist Association or new Italian industrialists from 1908 to 1915. Instead a detailed study of the making of foreign policy illustrates that foreign policy remained basically in the hands of diplomats and leading politicians who were not, in any real sense, the puppets of their 'public opinion' or business community. Italian foreign policy became more expansionist from 1911 to 1914 very much within the domestic and international context. If there was a turning point, it was one prepared, recognised and approved by the majority of the ruling class of Liberal Italy, and one made possible by unusual international opportunity allowed to the least of the Great Powers by the peculiar relationship between the other, more genuine Great Powers just before the First World War.

The interest which produced this book was first stimulated during a Ph.D. thesis on British policy towards Italy, 1902–15, which I wrote for the University of Cambridge. I owe a great debt as supervisor and friend to Professor F. H. Hinsley of St John's College. My other debts to colleagues, librarians and students in Australia, Italy and England can hardly be repaid by a fleeting reference at the end of a preface. But in calming my impetuosity, ironing out my style or cutting through my detail, I must thank, among others, A. E. Cahill, G. Cresciani, G. Filippone Thaulero, C. Halder, G. Harrison, N. Pragnell, F. Stambrook, J. M. Ward, G. White and J. K. Wilton – not to mention Edmund and Mary. I also must acknowledge financial assistance from the Australian Academy of Humanities and the Italian Government's exchange scholarship scheme.

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