

# H-Diplo ARTICLE REVIEW 1107

11 May 2022

**Marco Clementi, David G. Haglund, Andrea Locatelli, and Valentina Villa. "The Guns of April: Status Anxiety as Motivation for Italian–Possibly Even American–Intervention in the First World War."**

*Diplomacy & Statecraft* 32:3 (September 2021): 417-439. DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09592296.2021.1961484>.

<https://hdiplo.org/to/AR1107>

Editor: Diane Labrosse | Commissioning Editor: Thomas Maddux | Production Editor: George Fujii

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After so many years, the origins and course of World War I remain the subject of lively debate. Even recent publications associated with the centennial commemorations – although providing new, insightful enquiries – left the debate open.<sup>1</sup> The questions that remain unanswered, or partially so, can be framed as being part of two types of enquiries. In the first, the objective is to trace the ultimate causes, which involved the classical problem in IR studies of levels of analysis. There are at least three ways to proceed: by examining the decisions of individual statesmen; assessing the types of states (e.g., democratic vs. autocratic regimes); or by looking at systemic conditions (e.g., balance of power, hegemonic transition, status quo vs. revisionist powers). This is the classical division into what IR scholars call the first, second, and third image, respectively.<sup>2</sup> The second type of question has to do with the types of explanations offered. Here we can see many different approaches at play: economic explanations (focused on profitability and cost-benefit analyses); strategic-rational ones (based on rational thinking), ideational-constructivist explanations, and so forth.

Marco Clementi, David G. Haglund, Andrea Locatelli, and Valentina Villa's article, "The Guns of April: Status Anxiety as Motivation for Italian – Possibly Even American – Intervention in the First World War," engages with both types of question, focusing not on the origins of the first World War but on the spread of the Great War. Indeed, one important aspect concerning the scope of the War is its spread across the old continent and eventually even beyond. In this view, in addition to the origins of the war, it is of paramount importance to investigate why and how other countries that were originally neutral joined the war. A case in point is the late Italian entrance in May 1915, coupled with the American case (April 1917). The authors argue in favor of a first-image explanation and the focus is on the three individuals who established the informal executive group that eventually *decided* for war (King Vittorio Emanuele III, Prime Minister Antonio Salandra, and Minister for Foreign Affairs Sidney Sonnino). Second, their focus is on the ideational dimension of that decision: status anxiety, according to the authors, is a more compelling explanation for the Italian entrance than other, competing hypotheses.

Overall, the article is convincing on both of these issues. The first-image type of explanation is unquestionably the most neglected side of foreign-policy decision-making, particularly when a phenomenon with huge systemic consequences like a

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<sup>1</sup> James Joll and Gordon Martel, *The Origins of the First World War* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013); Mark Hewitson, *Germany and the Causes of the First World War* (London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014); Annika Mombauer, *The Origins of the First World War: Diplomatic and Military Documents* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> J. David Singer, "International Conflict Three Levels of Analysis," *World Politics* 12:3 (1960): 453-46; Kenneth Neal Waltz, *Man, the State, and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

world war is under investigation. Often, in these cases, the analysis begins with the false premise that a broad outcome needs wide-ranging causes. Instead, Italy's decision to abandon neutrality in 1915 was actually an *open* decision; no systemic conditions during the first year of war seem unambiguously to have *determined* the Italian decision. More specifically, the choice to be made was not only whether to enter the war but also on which side – and the former largely depended on the latter. This high degree of indeterminacy makes the focus on micro decision-making a promising path for tracing the ultimate factors in Italian decision-making regarding the war. In line with other historical works on the subject,<sup>3</sup> the article identifies the three key political leaders who made the decision: the king, the prime minister and the minister of foreign affairs. While the role of Vittorio Emanuele di Savoia – who probably was the most decisive actor – is fairly well researched and known,<sup>4</sup> the authors' analysis is more cursory with regard to the other two statesmen. This omission is surprising, since it was mainly Sonnino – leader of the Liberal-Conservatives and Salandra's mentor – who was the driving force of the wartime government, from autumn 1914 until the Paris Peace Conference.

Moreover, one should also take into consideration the fact that Sonnino's influence cannot be reduced to idiosyncratic or merely psychological aspects of his personality (i.e., 'first-image' factors). He actually embodied an important tendency within the heterogeneous Liberal party which, starting with the international humiliation suffered by Italy following the Congress of Berlin (1878) and, later, with the "schiaffo di Tunisi" (1881), pursued the full recognition of Italy as a Great Power. Significantly, in the late nineteenth century, Sonnino stood beside Francesco Crispi (then Italian prime minister) during the first Italian attempt to seize Abyssinia, mostly for reasons of prestige.<sup>5</sup> Later, he became a point of reference for an array of newly created colonial and expansionist associations that promoted the ambitious policy of creating a 'Greater Italy.'<sup>6</sup> Therefore, if the focus should indeed be on Sonnino, this political figure moves the analysis beyond the analytical level of 'first-image,' toward one which takes systemic factors into consideration.

The second aspect investigated in the article is the driver behind the Italian decision to join the war on the side of the *Entente* – that is, the logic behind it. The article regards the ideational-emotional dimension as a key variable. More precisely, according to the authors, status anxiety was the most compelling factor motivating the king, Salandra, and Sonnino. This focus on status is not new in the literature on Italian foreign policy, yet it has commonly been considered as a general attitude of the country rather than a driver that could explain individual decisions.<sup>7</sup> In this regard, the article offers a fresh look at a very well-studied event. Since status is an exceptionally elusive concept and defies any straightforward empirical assessment, the authors proceed by discharging the most reasonable alternative hypotheses.

The economic explanation is convincingly rejected. Indeed, the idea that domestic economic interests and key economic sectors (i.e., the military-industrial complex and landowners) pushed Italy into war is highly debatable because neutrality was much more profitable for the national economy. Moreover, 1914 was such a dramatic year that Italian decision-makers could not fail to value how costly it would be to join the war.<sup>8</sup> The role of public opinion seems negligible as well: despite the tense period of the 'radiant days of May' (1915) and the interventionist rallies, overall, public opinion was mostly neutral at

<sup>3</sup> Giuseppe Astuto, *La decisione di guerra. Dalla Triplice Alleanza al Patto di Londra* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> Andrea Ungari, *La guerra del re. Monarchia, sistema politico e forze armate nella Grande Guerra* (Milano: Luni Editrice, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> Luciano Monzali, "Sidney Sonnino e la politica estera italiana nell'età degli imperialismi", in Pier Luigi Ballini, ed., *I discorsi parlamentari di Sidney Sonnino 1915-1919* (Firenze: Edizioni Polistampa, 2015), 29-69.

<sup>6</sup> Giancarlo Monina, *Il consenso coloniale. Le Società geografiche e l'Istituto coloniale italiano (1896-1914)* (Roma: Carocci, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> Carlo Maria Santoro, *La politica estera di una media potenza: l'Italia dall'Unità ad oggi* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1992).

<sup>8</sup> Max Hastings, *Catastrophe 1914: Europe Goes to War* (New York: Vintage, 2013).

the outbreak of the war and similar attitudes prevailed in early 1915.<sup>9</sup> It appears counterintuitive to believe that over a brief span of time sentiment among the Italian public could be reversed completely. However, the pro-war vote in parliament and the ensuing public acquiescence revealed that the anti-war attitude was probably less resilient than is commonly supposed. Indeed, one should also note that a process of radicalization of Italian nationalism was clearly underway (well beyond the founding of the *Associazione Nazionalista Italiana* in 1910).<sup>10</sup> Tellingly, Italy's seizure of Lybia (1911-12) was but the most impressive manifestation of this "new Italian nationalism," which 'compelled' Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti – who was hardly a fervent colonialist – to resume Italian colonial expansion.<sup>11</sup>

The role of nationalism is more contentious, as territorial compensations were possibly a determining factor shaping Italian decision-making. The issue of the so-called *terre irredente* – unredeemed territories under Austrian control – was undoubtedly relevant at the time and it is difficult to dismiss the idea that it was an important factor in the Italian decision to intervene in the First World War. The fact that Italy eventually joined the *Entente* seems to confirm the importance of nationalism. That public opinion was not so actively in favor of a pro-interventionist move is not a conclusive argument for rejecting the role of nationalism and irredentism, as the authors suggest. Nationalism was probably a more widespread passion than the article is willing to concede; indeed, the acceptance of the final decision to fight against Austria is revealing. The fact that Austria-Hungary and Germany were prepared to accede to almost all Italian territorial requests, in order to keep Italy on their side, is a persuasive argument against the irredentist hypothesis. However, if nationalism played its part, it did so at an ideational level, not as a mere rational assessment based on comparing concessions. Indeed, animosity against Austria, both among the elite and the public, could have prevailed over a quantitative appraisal of territories.

The article does not take into consideration an essential element that helps to explain Italy's decision to reject the territorial proposals advanced by the Central Powers: namely, that Salandra and Sonnino did not trust their allies. Indeed, they feared that, in case of victory, the Central Powers would renege on their promises. In this view, the fact that Vienna insisted on postponing the transfer of Trento to Italy *until the end of the war* reinforced Salandra and Sonnino's suspicions. In conclusion, nationalism was a major driver of Italy's entering the war: the point is that Italian nationalism wanted more than to retrieve the *terre irredente*, and achieving the status of a Great Power was a priority for Italy.<sup>12</sup> This in turn means that nationalism and the search for prestige, to a certain extent, overlapped.

Once the most reasonable alternative hypotheses have been dismissed, status anxiety appears to be the most likely explanation for the Italian intervention in the war. Here, the argument of the article is compelling, particularly when the focus is on the anticipation in Italian calculations of the post-war order, which assumed victory for the Central Powers. This scenario is based on the premise that the king, Sonnino, and Salandra foresaw that the triumph of Germany would mean that Italy would be subject to the ensuing German rule. In that scenario, Italy would have lost the hard-won prestige of being a Great Power in European diplomacy and would have been fated to play a subordinate role within a German continental hegemony. Conversely, the anticipation of an *Entente* victory offered a more balanced arrangement, in which Italy could preserve its standing as an 'equal' power in a system with only three centers (Great Britain, France and Italy). This expectation, along with the position Italy was anticipating in the hierarchy of status, appears to be the key factor.

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<sup>9</sup> Brunello Vigezzi, *L'Italia di fronte alla prima guerra mondiale. L'Italia neutrale* (Milano: Bruno Mondadori, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> Elisa Gentile, *La Grande Italia. Ascesa e declino del mito della nazione del ventesimo secolo* (Milano: Mondadori, 1997).

<sup>11</sup> Sergio Romano, *La quarta sponda. La guerra di Libia, 1911/1912* (Milano: Bompiani, 1977); Nicola Labanca, *La guerra italiana per la Libia* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> Brunello Vigezzi, *L'Italia di fronte alla prima guerra mondiale. L'Italia neutrale* (Milano: Bruno Mondadori, 2017); Gian Enrico Rusconi, *L'azzardo del 1915. Come l'Italia decide la sua guerra* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2005); Antonio Varsori, *Radio maggio. Come l'Italia entrò in guerra* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2015).

Yet, while the analysis reveals status anxiety to be a determinant in Italian decision-making, the line of reasoning seems to contradict the first-image perspective. In fact, the more the question of the future prospects of Italian positioning in the aftermath of war becomes compelling, the more considerations regarding the balance of power reappear and a strict first-image explanation dwindles. The king, Salandra, and Sonnino were obviously the *individual* agents making the decision, but in their reasoning, or *systemic* effects, seem to have mattered the most. Not because the international balance of power or the distribution of material capabilities in themselves could determine the Italian decision. Rome had the opportunity to choose between different options but did so in light of the general architecture of European politics. Comparing the prospects of the post-war balance of power (and the relative Italian position in it) is crucial for demonstrating the Italian interest in preserving Italy's status in the European system. Nevertheless, it also demonstrates that status is a *relational* concept. Prestige is meaningless when measured in absolute terms. It makes sense only in relation to what peers gain or lose. That was what the Italian government and the king assessed in deciding for war in May 1915. Individuals made the ultimate decision; they evaluated the upcoming status of their country, but with the future European balance of power in mind.

To summarize, Italy participated in the war because, since the earliest years of the Kingdom of Italy, Italian political leaders had understood that if there were a general war in Europe, and if Italy remained neutral, it would forfeit its status as a great power, which Italy should legitimately aspire to, notwithstanding its economic and military weaknesses.<sup>13</sup> Simply put, great powers take part in major 'decisions' that determine the international political order; by abstaining from participating in a general war, Italy would have acknowledged that it was not a great power. The latter was a decisive element that all the *interventisti* agreed on. Being aware of Italy's military and economic weaknesses, however, Italian political leaders, from Visconti Venosta to Giolitti, with the exception of Crispi, constantly worked to avoid the danger of the outbreak of a general war in Europe. The point was to escape a tragic dilemma: participating in the war for the sake of prestige, hence jeopardizing national security (given its weakness) versus opting for neutrality to safeguard the country's security but compromising its status. The outbreak of war in 1914 confronted Italy with this very dilemma.

The Italian government decided to take the risk of a war while trying to work out a way to reconcile Italy's prestige and security. Then it opted to abandon neutrality to bolster Italy's prestige, while pursuing to that end the establishment of Italian hegemony in the Adriatic Sea. Clearly, this 'prestigious' hegemonic agenda was premised on waging war against the Central Powers, given that it implied the seizure of geopolitical positions such as Trieste, Istria, the coastal region of Dalmatia, and Albania, something that Austria-Hungary would definitely not have accepted. When it comes to national security, severe strategic constraints (the vulnerability of Italy's coastlines, its dependency on the import of raw materials from abroad) made it inconceivable, in the eyes of Italian decision-makers, to enter a war against France and Great Britain, whose navies would certainly have dominated the Mediterranean. Furthermore, the victory by the Triple Entente seemed the most desirable for Italy's security in that, as the authors point out, it would likely result in a post-war political order that would be less 'unpleasant,' in terms of the balance of power, than a *Pax Germanica*.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Vigezzi, "L'Italia dopo l'Unità: liberalismo e politica estera", in Id., *L'Italia unita e le sfide della politica estera. Dal Risorgimento alla Repubblica* (Milano: Unicopli, 1997); Enrico Decleva, "Il compimento dell'unità e la politica estera", in *Storia d'Italia. 2. Il nuovo Stato e la società civile*, ed. Giovanni Sabbatucci and Vittorio Vidotto (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1995), 113-215.

<sup>14</sup> Elio. D'Auria, "Sindey Sonnino, la politica estera e la questione adriatica nei "Documenti Diplomatici Italiani"", in Pier Luigi Ballini, ed., *Sonnino e il suo tempo (1914-1922)*, (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2011), 151-250.

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