Italy in Two World Wars: Strategy, Society, and Survival

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Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** Setting the Stage: Italy’s Place in Europe, 1914–1940
- **Chapter 2** Choosing Sides: From Neutrality to Belligerency in Both Wars
- **Chapter 3** War Aims, Grand Strategy, and National Myths
- **Chapter 4** Making War: High Command, Institutions, and Civil–Military Relations
- **Chapter 5** Mobilizing the Nation: Conscription, Industry, and Autarky
- **Chapter 6** Frontlines I: The Alpine and Isonzo Theaters, 1915–1918
- **Chapter 7** Frontlines II: North Africa, the Balkans, and the Mediterranean, 1940–1943
- **Chapter 8** Technology and Logistics: Railways, Fuel, and Firepower
- **Chapter 9** Fighting at Altitude and at Sea: Mountain Troops, Navy, and Air Power
- **Chapter 10** Allies and Patrons: Entente Support and Axis Dependency
- **Chapter 11** Home Front I: Work, Welfare, and Gender
- **Chapter 12** Home Front II: Prices, Rationing, and Informal Economies
- **Chapter 13** Propaganda, Censorship, and the Battle for Consent
- **Chapter 14** Faith and Nation: The Vatican, Chaplains, and Concordats
- **Chapter 15** Occupation and Empire: Libya, Ethiopia, and the Balkans
- **Chapter 16** Breaking Points: Caporetto (1917) and Cassibile (1943)
- **Chapter 17** Violence Within: Discipline, Decimation, and Civil War
- **Chapter 18** Law and the Leviathan: Emergency Powers and the Carceral State
- **Chapter 19** The Costs of War: Budgets, Debt, and Inflation
- **Chapter 20** Prisoners, Deportations, and Displacement
- **Chapter 21** Mourning and Memory: Monuments, Rituals, and the Fallen
- **Chapter 22** From Trench to Piazza: Veterans, Associations, and Social Conflict
- **Chapter 23** Fascism at War: Trajectory, Radicalization, and Defeat
- **Chapter 24** Aftermaths: Settlements, Purges, and the Birth of the Republic
- **Chapter 25** What Italy Learned: Strategy, Society, and Survival in Comparative Perspective

Introduction

This book compares Italy’s experience in the First and Second World Wars to explain how a middle-ranking European power confronted total war—twice—and survived with its society transformed and its political order remade. It treats the two wars not as discrete catastrophes but as connected crucibles in which strategic ambitions collided with geographic limits, industrial capacity, and the volatile chemistry of mass politics. By placing battlefronts alongside breadlines, and command decisions beside parish relief and factory floors, the chapters that follow trace how wartime pressures reshaped Italian institutions and popular life from the Dolomites to the dockyards, and from the Piazza San Marco to the Po Valley.

Three threads run throughout. The first is strategy: how leaders defined war aims, managed alliances, and attempted to translate scarce means into decisive results. In World War I, Italy’s offensives on the Isonzo and the Alpine front revealed both operational ingenuity and brittle logistics; in World War II, Mediterranean designs contended with dependence on German industry and oil. The second is society: how mobilization altered families, workplaces, and communities, and how propaganda, rationing, and welfare sought—often unsuccessfully—to secure consent. The third is survival: how the state and its people endured setbacks such as Caporetto in 1917 and the armistice of Cassibile in 1943, improvising new forms of control and resistance that carried Italy from liberal constitutionalism through fascist dictatorship to republican democracy.

Methodologically, the book integrates battle analyses with mobilization studies and social histories. Archival orders of battle and staff memoranda are read alongside factory records, parish bulletins, police reports, and personal diaries to reconstruct the relationships among front-line action, supply chains, and civilian resilience. Economic indicators—prices, wages, and debt—are paired with qualitative testimonies to reveal how shortages, black markets, and mutual aid reshaped everyday life. This mixed approach allows us to see why decisions taken in Rome or at Comando Supremo resonated so powerfully in workshops in Turin, fishing communities in Puglia, and mountain villages in Trentino.

A central concern is the trajectory of fascism under the strain of war. The aftermath of 1918, with demobilized veterans, inflation, and the violence of the biennio rosso, created openings for a movement that promised order and national renewal. Yet fascism’s gamble on empire and autarky bound Italy to a second, larger conflict for which its economy and institutions were ill-prepared. Wartime radicalization, occupation policies, and collaboration exposed the regime’s contradictions; the combination of military defeats, partisan resistance, and royal defection precipitated

civil war and collapse. Tracing this arc clarifies how the passage from dictatorship to the 1946 referendum emerged from choices made under the duress of total war.

Equally significant are the experiences of those who returned from the fronts—or never did. Veterans' reintegration, contested pensions, and the politics of remembrance forged new social hierarchies and collective identities. Organizations of ex-servicemen influenced elections, shaped welfare policy, and sometimes served as recruiting grounds for paramilitary mobilization. Women's wartime labor and voluntary networks—often mediated by Catholic associations and municipal relief—altered gendered expectations and laid foundations for postwar civic activism, even as many were pushed back toward domestic roles after demobilization. These human stories anchor the macrohistory of campaigns and cabinets in the daily calculus of survival.

Comparative framing structures the book. Rather than recounting two wars in parallel, each chapter juxtaposes analogous problems—coal, rail, munitions, mountain warfare, alliance management, famine, propaganda—and follows them across 1914–1918 and 1940–1945. This design highlights both repetition and rupture: the persistence of geographic constraints and bureaucratic habits; the new technologies and ideologies that changed the terms of combat and consent; and the cumulative effects of a first war's unfinished business on the second war's choices and outcomes. Key inflection points—Caporetto and 1943—serve as mirrors that reflect how institutions learn, forget, and fracture.

The argument that emerges is cautious but clear. Italy's leaders repeatedly sought strategic stature disproportionate to the country's industrial base and energy resources. Survival, therefore, depended less on achieving sweeping victories than on managing scarcity, preserving social cohesion, and navigating asymmetric alliances. When these elements aligned—even briefly—Italy could defend its interests; when they diverged, shocks cascaded from the front to the home front. The ultimate political consequence was transformative: the monarchy's discrediting, fascism's defeat, and a republican order that institutionalized lessons about militarism, executive power, and citizenship learned at severe cost.

Finally, a word on scope. While the narrative centers on 1914–1918 and 1940–1945, it necessarily follows consequences into the immediate postwar years: the 1919–1922 crisis of liberalism; the 1943–1946 resistance, purge, and referendum; and the longer work of remembrance and reconstruction. The chapters are designed to be read sequentially, but each addresses a discrete theme, allowing readers to trace specific questions—strategy, society, or survival—across both conflicts. Taken together, they aim to show how Italy fought, endured, and ultimately remade itself in the crucible of two world wars.

CHAPTER ONE: Setting the Stage: Italy’s Place in Europe, 1914–1940

In the decades preceding the two world wars, Italy stood as a paradox at Europe’s southern rim: a nation recently unified yet perennially unfulfilled, whose leaders imagined great-power status while the country struggled to acquire the material and social foundations for it. The period from 1861 to 1914 had produced a constitutional monarchy, expanding railways, and notable pockets of industrial modernity, yet the peninsula remained marked by stark regional disparities, a narrow industrial base, and social hierarchies that a liberal political system struggled to bridge. For a state that entered European politics with the 1882 Triple Alliance alongside Germany and Austria-Hungary, the gap between ambition and capacity became a constant source of strategic calculation and national anxiety. The stage was set not by dramatic declamations alone, but by the incremental realities of geography, demography, and economy.

Geography exerted a subtle but relentless influence on Italy’s strategic imagination. The long peninsula flanked by the Tyrrhenian and Adriatic Seas offered opportunities for maritime commerce and, potentially, for naval power, but it also exposed communications along vulnerable coastal corridors. The Alps formed a formidable northern barrier, complicating any overland military mobilization toward Central Europe while promising control of key passes. Within the peninsula, the Apennines created an east-west divide, making north-south integration a perennial challenge. Rail lines, though expanding steadily after the 1860s, concentrated in the industrial triangle of Milan-Turin-Genoa, with less dense networks in the south and on the eastern littoral. These physical constraints forced planners to weigh rail capacity, mobilization timing, and the costs of projecting force beyond the Alps and across maritime frontiers.

Demography compounded the geographical constraints. With a population of roughly 36 million by 1914, Italy’s birth rate remained high by European standards, particularly in the countryside, but urbanization was uneven, and the Italian army’s pool of manpower, while sizable, was unevenly educated and fed. Rural poverty in the Mezzogiorno and in parts of the Center drove emigration on a massive scale—millions left for the Americas and other destinations between 1880 and 1914. Remittances from emigrants helped balance the national accounts but also signaled limited domestic economic opportunities. Italy’s military planners could count on mass infantry formations, but the quality of training, logistics, and industrial support lagged behind the standards set by France, Germany, and Britain. This made the army’s famed Bersaglieri and Alpini units symbols of excellence within a broader force that

still relied heavily on numbers.

Economically, Italy was a late industrializer. The so-called industrial triangle was a genuine powerhouse of textiles, engineering, and shipbuilding, but beyond it lay large swaths of subsistence agriculture and small-scale craft production. Heavy industry depended on imports of coal, iron ore, and machinery, which strained foreign currency reserves and made Italy vulnerable to international price swings. The Bank of Italy managed gold reserves and currency stability, but the state's fiscal position was delicate, with periodic crises and reforms aimed at balancing budgets. By the second decade of the twentieth century, Giovanni Giolitti's era of liberal governance emphasized pragmatic reform and limited social welfare, seeking to integrate labor through legislation rather than confrontation. Yet strikes, socialist activism, and the rise of Catholic popular organizations revealed a society negotiating modernity with a mix of optimism and tension.

Culture and identity, meanwhile, were shaped by the post-unification project of making Italians. The statuto of 1848 remained the constitutional bedrock, but the state sought to build national cohesion through schools, conscription, and public rituals. Figures like Giuseppe Verdi served as emblems of national spirit, while literati from Gabriele D'Annunzio to Luigi Pirandello offered contrasting visions of modernity, sentiment, and critique. Education expanded, but illiteracy, especially in the south, persisted. The Catholic Church, whose relations with the state had been strained since unification, maintained a powerful social presence through parishes and networks of mutual aid. This cultural landscape, both diverse and dynamic, would be vital to the mobilization of mass sentiment and the construction of wartime narratives.

On the international stage, Italy's position remained ambiguous. The Triple Alliance committed Italy to defensive support in case of war with France, yet the terms were subject to interpretation and Italy's strategic interests often diverged from Vienna and Berlin, particularly over the Balkans and maritime access. Italy's colonial ambitions, manifest in the late 1890s in Africa, led to the disaster at Adwa in 1896 against Ethiopia and, later, the conquest of Libya and the Dodecanese in 1911–1912. These campaigns boosted national prestige but did little to improve the structural weaknesses of the economy. They did, however, imprint a sense of imperial destiny on public discourse and create constituencies—military officers, nationalists, industrialists—who would advocate for expansionist policies in the coming decades.

The early twentieth century witnessed the rise of organized political movements that strained the liberal order. Italian Socialist Party (PSI) growth reflected working-class aspirations, especially in the industrial north, while Catholic organizations mobilized voters around social questions after the 1913 electoral law expanded the franchise. Nationalist associations, including the Italian Nationalist Association founded in 1910, promoted an aggressive vision of national glory and empire. In this ferment, the liberal state attempted mediation, sometimes succeeding and sometimes facing open

confrontations such as the 1911–1912 Libyan war, which polarized opinion but ultimately consolidated a certain consensus on expansion. The political system's adaptability would be severely tested once a European war broke out.

By the summer of 1914, Europe's alliance systems created a combustible mix. The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand ignited a chain of mobilizations that Italy watched from a formal position of neutrality, citing the alliance's defensive character and Austria-Hungary's aggressive posture as reasons to stay out. The debate in Rome was fierce: Giovanni Giolitti urged caution and negotiation, while a new generation of leaders, including Prime Minister Antonio Salandra and Foreign Minister Sidney Sonnino, weighed whether neutrality or intervention could better serve national interests. Public opinion, fractured between neutralists and interventionists, reflected Italy's social and ideological diversity. The stage was set, but the script remained unwritten.

Italy's decision to remain neutral in 1914 was not an act of passivity but a strategic calculation with domestic and international dimensions. The Triple Alliance bound Italy to Vienna and Berlin, but the terms were contested. Rome argued that Austria-Hungary's war against Serbia was aggressive rather than defensive, releasing Italy from obligations. Meanwhile, the Entente powers—France, Britain, and Russia—offered inducements and assurances. Sidney Sonnino's diplomacy probed for gains on the Adriatic and in the Alps without committing prematurely. In the countryside and cities, public meetings, newspaper debates, and parliamentary arguments revealed a nation weighing the costs of war against the promise of national fulfillment.

The period of Italian neutrality, lasting from August 1914 to May 1915, became a laboratory for political maneuver and popular mobilization. Nationalists lobbied for intervention to realize the irredentist dreams of Trentino, Trieste, and Istria. Socialists, while divided, largely opposed a war they saw as capitalist and imperialist. The Catholic press, cautious and conscious of the Vatican's peace-oriented stance, urged restraint. Meanwhile, the economy felt ripples of the global conflict: exports and imports fluctuated, industrial orders mixed, and the government struggled to manage prices and employment. As the diplomatic negotiations intensified, the atmosphere in Italy's piazzas grew charged, with both neutralists and interventionists staging demonstrations.

The Treaty of London in April 1915, negotiated secretly with the Entente, promised Italy substantial territorial rewards in the event of victory: Trentino and South Tyrol up to the Brenner Pass, Trieste, Istria, and parts of Dalmatia, alongside colonial concessions. These pledges would later become sources of grievance and diplomatic friction. The pact's terms provided a concrete framework for intervention, framing war as the path to national unification and strategic depth. Yet the promises were ambitious, and their fulfillment depended not only on victory but on the interplay of military performance and postwar bargaining. The discrepancy between promise and

reality would shadow Italy’s wartime experience.

On May 24, 1915, Italy declared war on Austria-Hungary, though not against Germany initially. The move shocked many who had favored neutrality, but it reflected the convergence of elite judgment and public sentiment, if not universal consensus. The Italian army mobilized rapidly, with reservists summoned and units deployed toward the Isonzo front. The expectation of a short war, swiftly won by massed infantry assaults, was widespread. The first shots and the first casualties quickly dispelled illusions. The transition from diplomatic negotiation to combat was abrupt, and the country’s institutions had to adapt to a reality more complex and grueling than the rhetoric of intervention suggested.

Domestic politics under Salandra’s administration shifted toward wartime management, with emergency measures and executive authority expanding. The press was brought under tighter control, and the government sought to balance the needs of the front with those of the home front. Industrial production pivoted toward munitions and war materials, though the capacity to supply a modern army was limited. Labor relations were tense, as strikes and unrest challenged both productivity and national unity. The Catholic Church, maintaining its diplomatic neutrality through the Vatican, offered pastoral support while urging moderation. The liberal state, with its parliamentary debates and institutional checks, began to bend under the pressures of total war.

By 1916, the war had settled into attritional campaigns along the Isonzo and in the Alps, with repeated offensives yielding limited territorial gains at high cost. The strain on logistics, medical services, and morale became evident. The Battle of Asiago in the spring saw an Austrian offensive testing Italian defenses in the mountains, demonstrating the vulnerability of extended supply lines and the need for mountain expertise. The Alpini units, trained for high-altitude combat, earned their reputation through endurance and adaptation. The home front felt shortages and rising prices. Families received news of the fallen, and communities organized relief, while the state struggled to provide consistent support.

In 1917, the year of Caporetto, Italy’s war effort faced its most severe crisis. The collapse on the Isonzo front after the Austro-German offensive revealed deep weaknesses in command, training, and troop morale. The disaster forced a reorganization of the army, with General Armando Diaz replacing Luigi Cadorna, and a renewed emphasis on defensive tactics and troop welfare. The home front, shaken by the defeat, experienced food shortages and rising discontent. The Bolshevik Revolution in Russia offered hope to some pacifists and radicals but heightened fear among conservatives. Within this turmoil, the Italian state had to rebuild military cohesion and maintain social stability to avoid collapse.

The final campaigns of 1918, culminating in the Battle of Vittorio Veneto, restored

Italian morale and secured the front. While the Isonzo and Alpine theaters had defined much of the war, the late offensives relied on improved logistics, Allied coordination, and the integration of reinforcements. The armistice with Austria-Hungary in November 1918 marked victory in the theater, but the peace negotiations that followed—particularly at Versailles—brought disappointments. The gap between the Treaty of London's promises and the final settlements sowed frustration. The myth of the "mutilated victory" would later be exploited by political movements, shaping interwar debates on Italy's role and identity.

When Mussolini's fascist movement rose in the postwar years, its rhetoric drew upon the tensions of 1915–1918: the glories of front-line sacrifice, the bitterness of perceived diplomatic betrayal, and the social unrest of demobilization. Fascism offered a synthesis of nationalism, order, and modernization, promising to resolve the contradictions that the liberal state had struggled to manage. By the late 1920s, the regime consolidated power, and by the late 1930s, its foreign policy increasingly aligned with Germany's. In 1939, Italy joined Germany in the Pact of Steel, committing to a strategic partnership that would soon be tested by a broader European conflict.

Italy's path to the Second World War accelerated with the invasion of Ethiopia in 1935–1936. The war showcased Italy's military-industrial mobilization and the brutal application of air power and chemical weapons, yet it also highlighted vulnerabilities: dependence on imported fuels, the need for infrastructure in East Africa, and the international backlash that deepened isolation. The League of Nations imposed sanctions, prompting autarky rhetoric and economic reorganization. The conquest of empire raised expectations at home—jobs, prestige, and resources—while straining the state's capacity to manage long-distance logistics and governance. The Ethiopian experience, both celebrated and contested, reinforced Mussolini's conviction that Italy was a great power destined for expansion.

In 1936, Italy intervened in the Spanish Civil War on the side of Franco, deploying the Corpo Truppe Volontarie and the air force's Aviazione Legionaria. The campaigns provided a testing ground for tactics and equipment but also revealed logistical constraints and the costs of sustaining expeditionary forces. Mussolini drew closer to Hitler, and by 1937–1938, the Rome–Berlin Axis solidified, despite lingering tensions over the Balkans and the Mediterranean. Italian diplomacy attempted to balance independence with alliance commitments, but economic and strategic dependencies grew. The stage was increasingly set for a war that would demand more than Italy's institutions had yet demonstrated they could deliver.

By 1939, the regime's propaganda emphasized imperial destiny and military readiness. Economic policy promoted autarky and rearmament, with special focus on iron and steel production in the Ilva plants and the development of synthetic fuels. The navy planned for a Mediterranean dominance symbolized by battleships and fast cruisers, while the air force envisioned modern bombers projecting power across Africa

and Europe. Yet behind the spectacle lay persistent shortages of raw materials, uneven industrial capacity, and the need to ration fuel. The public was mobilized through youth organizations and mass events, but the social fabric remained complex, with Catholic networks and local traditions tempering the regime’s reach.

The European crisis of 1939–1940 confronted Italy with a stark choice. Despite the Pact of Steel, Mussolini declared non-belligerency in September 1939, arguing that Italy was not yet prepared for a general war. This period of “non-belligerence” saw frantic efforts to stockpile raw materials, improve air defenses, and organize industry. Diplomatic calculations weighed the benefits of staying out against the risks of abandoning Germany and potential territorial losses. The balance of advantage shifted in spring 1940 with Germany’s rapid victories in the West. Mussolini, seeking a share in the spoils and fearing isolation, entered the war on June 10, 1940, committing Italy to a conflict whose scope and demands would soon surpass earlier expectations.

As Italy crossed the threshold into war in 1940, the geopolitical position had been shaped by the legacies of 1915–1918 and the experiences of interwar imperialism. Geography remained a constant: the peninsula’s long coasts, the Alpine barrier, and the distances to North Africa and the Balkans required careful logistical planning. Demography provided manpower but limited industrial depth. The economy, partially reoriented by autarky, still relied on imports crucial for war. Politically, the fascist state claimed unity and dynamism, yet underlying tensions persisted. The stage was set anew, with the lessons of the first conflict echoing through institutions and public expectations, as Italy prepared for another struggle for strategy, society, and survival.

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