The Decision of Italy

By Louis C. Fraina

JULES GUESDE, in an interview eight months ago with De Ambris, the Italian revolutionary Socialist, declared that the intervention of Italy was desirable and indispensable for two reasons:

1.—The war would be shortened, which would mean an immense saving in human life.

2.—In case of a victory of the Allies, which Guesde considers certain, Italy could strengthen the influence of the democratic countries—England, France and Belgium—and serve as a counterweight to the influence of Russia.

Guesde was substantially right, but the situation is much more complicated. What makes Italian intervention a complex problem is the fact that Italy is *waging a war of aggression* as much as Germany and Austria.

Technically, Italy's position is unassailable. The treaty of the Triple Alliance was defensive, not offensive; Austria-Hungary violated the treaty by issuing an ultimatum to Servia without consulting Italy; and Italy did not receive the "compensations" provided for by the treaty in the event of the very situation produced by Austria-Hungary's action. Bethmann-Hollweg's charge that Italy violated her treaty obligations is unjustifiable, and hypocritical as well, considering Germany's violation of the treaty guaranteeing Belgian neutrality.[1] Bethmann-Hollweg's denunciation of Italy for refusing to accept Germany's word as guarantee of Austrian promises—a denunciation approved by Ebert for the Reichstag Social-Democrats—is a typical expression of German governmental hypocrisy. Desolated Belgium shows the worth of the German word and German honor.[2]

The Triple Alliance was not terminated when Italy "denounced" it in May; it was *de facto* terminated when Austria and Italian interests clashed in the Balkans, and when France and England allowed Italy to seize Tripoli. As early as 1901 Italy came to an agreement with France and England concerning the Mediterranean. This event was decisive; open rupture became simply a matter of expediency.

Never popular in Italy, the Triple Alliance was virtually forced upon her by the weak and criminal Crispi, who was as clay in the hands of Bismarck. It met only one requirement of Italy—temporary peace with Austria. Bismarck was cynical about the whole dirty business. Fifteen years ago the temporary necessity to Italy of the alliance passed away; Italy realized that Germany and Austria were violating her interests and using her as a means for Pan-Germanic aggression. Italy saw the danger; the triumph of Pan-Germanism meant the end of Italian aspirations in the Adriatic. Italy betrayed her allies by making a secret agreement with France and England. Germany was routed by the use of methods of her own. Italy's diplomacy was unclean, but successful.

The demands upon Austria constitute the real crime against international comity. They are substantially an attempt to economically smother Austria by seizing the chief sea-ports through which Austrian commerce flows. Italy's demands imply depriving an industrial nation of an indispensable economic necessity, outlets to the sea, as flagrant an act of aggression as Austria-Hungary's depriving Serbia of a sea-port on the Aegean. This exposes Italy's chief motive: *the economic isolation of Austria, and the control of the Adriatic and the Aegean,* —imperialism. The ruling class felt its interests menaced by staying out of a war that will decide colonial destiny for many years to come.

Within recent years Italy has developed a well-defined imperialist policy. Her imperialists urge a necessity for colonial expansion similar to that of the Germans—a large and growing population.[3] Interwoven with this is the desire of the northern Italian bourgeoisie for commercial expansion and economic aggrandizement. This bourgeoisie and its government, unlike the German, have failed miserably to develop internal resources, and they look for easy profits in imperialist expansion. *It is an imperialism not of an over-developed industrialism, but of an industrialism scandalously under-developed;* and which, without the capacity or the virility to develop resources at home, covets the profits of imperialism. The colonial imperialism of Italy is perhaps much more governmental than industrial; the government itself as such would profit tremendously by a colonial empire.[4]

In the Balkans Austria and Italy clashed: the one

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[1] "Every government takes solely its own interests as the standard of its actions, however it may drape them with deductions of justice or sentiment." Bismarck, *Reflections and Reminiscences.*

[2] Interpellated by a Socialist deputy in the Reichstag, in 1913, on whether in the event of war with France, Germany would respect Belgian neutrality, von Jagow, under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, replied: "Belgian neutrality is guaranteed by international conventions, and Germany is resolved to abide by those conventions." Paul Vergnet, *France in Danger.*

[3] "If Italy had a colony of her own into which to pour the excess of her prolific and laborious population, it would today be an empire of forty millions; her industrial and commercial forces would be greater." Federico Garlanda, *The New Italy* New York: Putnam. (This book was written in 1904.

[4] "Italy found herself a debtor country, with heavy interest charges to meet, with the economic conditions unfavorable, and, consequently, with a national budget constantly in arrears. . . . The statesmen anticipated that the revenue from the customs, plus the indirect results of its [colonial] trade with Italy herself, would not improbably suffice to produce a credit balance in the national exchequer." Roland G. Usher, *Pan-Germanism.*

menaced the economic interests of the other.[5] Italy has been systematically "penetrating" Albania, Scutari and Epirus financially and economically—an economic conquest preparatory to a political conquest. This move had a double purpose: checking Pan-Germanic development in the Balkans and securing strategic naval and economic points for Italy's control of the Adriatic and the Aegean. The control of the Adriatic and the Aegean, naval and commercial, would inevitably mean the control of the Mediterranean, and the development of an Italian over-seas empire in North Africa and Asia Minor.

The desire for Trieste itself is primarily imperialist, not *irredentist*. Trieste, the chief sea-port of Austria, is a potential rival of and menace to Venice commercially. A thriving Trieste, the outlet of a developing industrialism in the Austrian interior, makes impossible Italian commercial supremacy in the Adriatic.

Irredentism, the aspiration to recover the Italian-speaking provinces of Austria, was an incidental if powerful factor in the decision of the Italian government. The influence of *irredentism* is potent among the masses of the people, a national democratic issue arousing popular passion and enthusiasm. The *irredentist* claims to Trente and Trieste are just. The population is Italian, has remained Italian in spite of centuries of alien rule and oppression. Austria has treated the Italians worse than any other of her subject races,—a calculated policy of terrorism. The Italian sentiment in these provinces is vastly stronger than the French sentiment in Alsace-Lorraine.

But Italy does not covet Trent and Trieste alone; she covets Fiume and the Istria peninsula (which embraces the Austrian naval base at Pola) *and a large part of Slavic Dalmatia, including Zara and Sebenico and their hinterland, and many of the adjoining islands.* The desire for Dalmatia (a wedge thrust deep into Slavic territory), is a weapon of potential aggression against the Balkans,—unless the terms of peace adjust matters equitably and reconstitute the Balkan Confederation.

The immediate purpose of Italy is to crush Austria as a Mediterranean power. Imperialism is monopolistic, and Italy scarcely relishes the prospect of a new rival. But Russia is fighting primarily for Constantinople and the Dardanelles, the possession of which would make her a Mediterranean power capable of challenging Italy's supremacy. It now appears that, in the event of Allied victory, Russia may be deprived of the stakes, being given a concession in the form of neutralizing Constantinople and the Dardanelles. It would be a calamity if England, France and Italy resume the old European game of "bottling up" Russia. Every check-mate of Russian effort to secure an outlet to the Mediterranean in the past produced new wars. Is the tragedy to be repeated? England and France are probably wiser: will Italy act stupidly? Stealing Austria's ports will compel her to become a part of the economic and political unit of the German Empire; denying Russia an outlet to the sea will mean new alignment, new aggressions, possibly new wars. The democratic Allies should check-mate any reactionary schemes of Russia, but grant her necessary economic demands.

Italy's intervention, accordingly, is fraught with potential danger. The immediate influence is beneficial. The defeat of the central European Powers is brought measurably nearer: and whatever new menaces arise will not be as formidable as the Pan-Germanic menace. None of the Allies desire the hegemony of Europe or world dominion. Italy simultaneously strengthens the democracy and imperialism of the Allies; but the circumstance that the majority of the Italian people is fighting for irredentist and democratic aspirations strengthens the democratic purposes of the Allies and may compel their government to stress democracy in the terms of peace. And France and England, whose consent is necessary to Italian supremacy in the Mediterranean, will surely induce Italy to modify her aggressive and excessive demands in Dalmatia and the Balkans.

The war will produce tremendous internal changes, particularly if Italy is victorious; the synthesis of these changes being a more pervasive, more vital national unity.

Italy is economically divided against itself. It has neither a solid economic or political unity. North and South Italy are economically,[6] politically and culturally arrayed against each other. Industry and agriculture are undeveloped; semi-feudal conditions and psychology persist pertinaciously; North and South seek to control the government for sectional advantages. All this hampers national growth, is itself an expression of retarded national growth, and makes impossible a larger and more solid national unity. The situation is strikingly similar to that in the United States prior to the Civil War.

Italy's intervention should accomplish the work the Civil War accomplished for the United States. North and South will be brought closer together, develop a new national unity. The war, particularly if successful, will react favorably upon economic development; and if unsuccessful, its losses

[5] In that typical piece of diplomatic special pleading, the official statement to the neutral nations of her reasons for declaring war upon Austria, the Italian government emphasizes the fact that Austria-Hungary's course toward Servia was "a direct encroachment upon the general interests of Italy, both political and economical, in the Balkan peninsula," and "was prompted by a desire to decrease Italy's economical and political influence in that section."

[6] "The industry of the North can compete at home with German and French competitors only with a high protective tariff. Italy's predominance in the foreign market is exclusively agricultural and to the advantage of the South. But here the South meets the retaliatory tariffs of France, Switzerland and Germany. The present Italian government rests, then, on the impoverishment of the South to which the North sells at increased rates and which it compels to sell under adverse conditions." Arthur Livingston, *The Attitude of Italy*, New Review, October, 1914.

will compel the people and the government to develop their internal industrial and agricultural resources. This means economic unity, a new and mightier Capitalism. Out of the murk and murder and treachery of the war will issue a New Italy,—democratic, progressive, powerful.