

Mobilizing the Nation: Italian Propaganda in the Great War

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Thomas Row

## Mobilizing the Nation: Italian Propaganda in the Great War

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World War I marked a watershed in the modern development of propaganda. “Total war” required an unprecedented mobilization of national resources: material, moral, and psychological. As the conflict unfolded, each of the belligerent powers turned to the “arms of persuasion” to mold public opinion and uphold morale. As the costs of the war in blood and treasure mounted, the stakes of propaganda campaigns rose correspondingly. The result was an enormous increase in the output of propaganda, a transformation of its techniques, and the introduction of new kinds of “persuasive images.” Beginning with the Great War, propaganda assumed an ever-increasing role in shaping mass opinion, a role that has had a lasting influence on the course of twentieth-century politics.<sup>1</sup>

The history of Italian propaganda in World War I is a relatively neglected subject.<sup>2</sup> Italy entered the war, initially against Austria-Hungary, in May 1915 and emerged victorious in November 1918. For Italy, the war was a crucial turning point: it produced the conditions that caused the collapse of Liberal parliamentary institutions and the rise of Fascism. Historians have, therefore, long recognized the importance of analyzing the transformation of state-society relations during the war. Propaganda is potentially an immensely revealing source for examining that relationship, for it is, in essence, a set of messages from the “state” to the “society.” It is based upon and seeks to modify certain assumptions about popular behavior.

1. Maria Masau Dan and Donatella Porcedda, eds., *L'arma della persuasione. Parole ed immagini di propaganda nella grande guerra* (Gorizia: Provincia di Gorizia, 1991). Peter Paret, Beth Irwin Lewis, and Paul Paret, *Persuasive Images: Posters of War and Revolution from the Hoover Institution Archives* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992).
2. The seminal work is Nicola della Volpe, *Esercito e propaganda nella grande guerra (1915–1918)* (Rome: Stato Maggiore Esercito, Ufficio Storico, 1989).

**Detail of Mario Borgoni's  
Prestito nazionale  
(National Loan),  
postcard, 1918.**



RICHTER

fig. 1  
G. Castiglioni, *Trento e Trieste incoronano l'esercito Italiano liberatore* (Trent and Trieste Crown the Liberating Italian Army), postcard, 1915. The Mitchell Wolfson Jr. Collection, The Wolfsonian–Florida International University, Miami Beach, Florida. Photograph by Silvia Ros.



The broad aim of this article is to provide an introduction to the subject of Italian propaganda in World War I. In the first section, I will sketch out the historical context underlying wartime state-society relations. Next, some basic elements concerning the production and consumption of propaganda will be presented. These may serve as a basic model for analyzing propaganda messages. The final part of this article will be devoted to the empirical examination of selected propaganda images from The Wolfsonian–Florida

International University and the Mitchell Wolfson Jr. Collection in Genoa, Italy. A unique strength of these collections is their capacity to support research in broad cultural and aesthetic contexts. One can, for example, study a subject across media, looking at posters, postcards, and calendars. By taking advantage of these rich resources, this essay seeks to provide a stimulating and impressionistic framework for viewing Italian propaganda during World War I, rather than a definitive history.

### Italian State and Society in the Great War

When the Kingdom of Italy went to war in 1915, it had only been a unified nation-state for fifty-four years. Though slightly older than the German empire, Italy was considerably younger than the United States of America. The movement for national unification, the *Risorgimento* (“rebirth”), had been the work of only a minority of the people, and large segments of the population remained indifferent or hostile to the state. Vast regional differences separated not only the North from the South, but differences prevailed from province to province. Class and cultural divisions were strong as well. By 1915 a process of nationalization of the masses had only just begun in Liberal Italy.<sup>3</sup>

High politics were dominated by a restricted group of “insiders”: King Victor Emmanuel III (1869–1947; ruled 1900–1946), army leaders, the prime minister, and the Liberal political class that ran local administration

3. For an overview of Italy’s war, see Mario Isnenghi and Giorgio Rochat, *La grande guerra, 1914–1918* (Milan: La Nuova Italia, 2000).

and parliament. The concepts of nationhood, patriotism, monarchy, and “great power” status were for the most part important only to this elite. In the years before the war these values spread to parts of the urban middle classes, but remained alien to a great many Italians. The central political problem of prewar Italy lay in the fact that the minority of “insiders” had to govern the majority of often alienated and hostile “outsiders.” These included Italy’s Roman Catholics, who remained outside the political system because the rupture between the papacy and the Liberal state that was opened by national unification had not yet been healed. They also included the increasing number of industrial workers, organized by the trade unions and the Italian Socialist party. Another major group was the peasantry, a considerable force in a still-agrarian country. Thus the state-society problem was a crucial one.

Italy’s decision to enter World War I brought this state-society tension to a head. A majority of Italians opposed intervention. But the variegated and highly mobilized minority of interventionists carried the day. These included the most militant nationalist segments of elite public opinion. King Victor Emmanuel III and Prime Minister Antonio Salandra (served 1914–1916) made the decision to enter the war without any significant prior consultation of parliament. Italy’s war aims, as defined in the secret Treaty of London (April 1915), were narrowly diplomatic and dynastic: Italy was to go to war against Austria-Hungary in return for major territorial gains, including Trent and Trieste — the Austrian lands with significant Italian populations.

Thus millions of Italians found themselves engaged in a war they neither understood nor sought. They were pledged to make sacrifices for a king and a country toward which, in many cases, they felt no strong bonds. While one should not exaggerate the state-society division — after all, the Italians did, in fact, pull together in the war effort — it lay at the heart of the problem of mobilizing the nation for war. The Italian state had to convince or compel soldiers to fight and die; it had to convince or compel workers and farmers to produce. In a broad sense the state had two options: either it could rely on blind obedience, backed up by coercion; or it could seek consensus, backed up with persuasion. While these options were not mutually exclusive, the emphasis placed on one rather than the other proved crucial. Within this context, the role of propaganda came to be critical, as seen in a 1915 image showing Italy’s initial war aims (fig. 1).

The first response of the Italian state and people was a cautious enthusiasm. The war was expected to be very short. Many volunteers imagined that they would soon find glory. The country was unprepared militarily and economically for war. In this situation, a large-scale propaganda effort was not a priority. Both the civil and military authorities intended to emphasize discipline and coercion. This was particularly true of the army, which,

**fig. 2**  
**Photographer unknown,**  
**General Luigi Cadorna.**  
 From *L'Italia e la sua*  
*guerra (Italy and Her War)*,  
 2d ed. (Milan: Studio  
 Editoriale Busetto, 1933).  
 The Mitchell Wolfson Jr.  
 Collection, The  
 Wolfsonian—Florida  
 International University,  
 Miami Beach, Florida.  
 Copy photograph  
 by Silvia Ros.



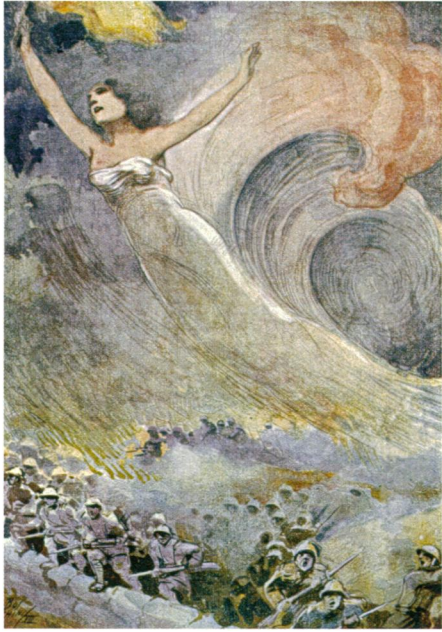
under the command of General Luigi Cadorna (1850–1928) (fig. 2) adopted a series of severe, repressive measures. Propaganda in the press, in satire, and in oratory emanated from the very active pro-intervention circles. Many of the individuals involved in these campaigns would figure in later, more organized, war propaganda.

The war did not resolve the tensions within Italian society; rather, it covered them up. As the conflict dragged on, Italy, like the other belligerent states, began to mobilize for total war (fig. 3). The large battlefield areas under military command were regimented, as was the rest of the country. The economy was rapidly reconfigured to support the war effort. Food, supplies, and currencies were controlled. Discipline was enforced in the booming war factories. The press was censored. Casualties began to mount.

It was in this context that Italy's wartime program of propaganda developed. It became necessary for the nation's leaders to enlist persuasion, in addition to discipline and coercion. Their efforts were conditioned by two strong general convictions. The first was that they had to win the war in order for the Liberal regime to survive. The second was that they could not fundamentally trust the masses, particularly the socialists, who had not been fully integrated within the Liberal system. Thus propaganda in Italy—as opposed to that in Britain, France, and Germany—developed rather slowly. It was not until 1917, when the ideological character of the war changed following the Italian army's defeat at Caporetto (enabling the Austrians to occupy much of the Veneto), that propaganda emerged as a major force. At Caporetto the Austrians and Germans broke through the Italian lines. The Italian position collapsed and the army retreated, only to regroup at the River Piave. The northeastern part of the country lay in enemy hands.

Propaganda can be many things, and there are numerous ways of understanding it.<sup>4</sup> On the one hand, propaganda can mean simply providing a certain kind of information. On the other hand, it can signify the manipulation of information to a specific end. Without entering into theoretical debate, propaganda will be considered here as the organized use of various media to attempt to shape mass psychology and, hence, behavior. From the above definition, four main questions emerge. First, what were the sources of propaganda? Second, what were the media of propaganda? Third, who were the targets of propaganda? And finally, the most difficult question, to what extent was the propaganda successful?

4. For a synthesis of theoretical perspectives, see Dan and Porcedda, *L'arma della persuasione*. A brilliant analysis using propaganda in a British case study is Nicoletta Gullace, "Sexual Violence and Family Honor: British Propaganda and International Law during the First World War," *American Historical Review* 102 (June 1997).



**fig. 3**  
**Raffaello Boschini,**  
***La Pugna (The Battle).***  
**From *L'Italia e la sua***  
***guerra.*** The Mitchell  
 Wolfson Jr. Collection,  
 The Wolfsonian–Florida  
 International University,  
 Miami Beach, Florida.  
 Photograph by Silvia Ros.

Looking ahead, we can see World War I as a first great step into the modern, industrial mass production of propaganda. The lessons learned would shape ensuing commercial advertising and political propaganda. Both would be perfected in the interwar years. Alas, the master of state propaganda would be none other than Benito Mussolini (1883–1945). In World War I, however, propaganda was in its nascent phase.

### Sources

In analyzing propaganda it is of central importance to understand its sources.<sup>5</sup> Who was sending the messages? How was propaganda actually produced and disseminated? In the case of Italian propaganda during the Great War we can make a number of broad generalizations. The propaganda effort emanated from three focal points of the Liberal state. First, there was the government itself. Here prominent politicians issued statements, made speeches,

and gave interviews. State agencies issued decrees, published manifestos, and funded private war-support groups. Government propaganda efforts tended to be traditional and limited in terms of media and message. Its overall effectiveness was questionable. The Liberal political class was not always inclined to address itself to the masses. Its members feared defeatism and subversion, and they hoped that discipline and coercion would keep the people on the home front in line.

The second center of propaganda was the army itself. Under Cadorna, the commander in chief, the distance between the leaders and the led was wide indeed. The army command felt little need to bolster troop morale. To a very large extent, it relied on iron discipline. Few efforts were initially made to provide relief centers for the soldiers. Food rations were abysmal. Given the historic rift between church and state in Liberal Italy, the army was slow to introduce chaplains and provide religious support. As the historian Giovanna Procacci has shown, Italian prisoners of war were deliberately denied aid (to discourage desertion by others).<sup>6</sup> This resulted in massive casualties. Instead, strict orders and coercion, including decimation, were the army's principal arms of persuasion. As with the politicians, the army leaders had an extreme fear of subversion. On the front, propaganda efforts initially were limited and traditional, including, for example, speeches by officers.

The third area of propaganda production was the amorphous world of civic society that was composed not only of groups of well-intentioned

5. della Volpe, *Esercito e propaganda*; and Gian Luigi Gatti, *Dopo Caporetto: Gli ufficiali P nella grande guerra: propaganda, assistenza, vigilanza* (Gorizia: Libreria Editrice Goriziana, 2000).

6. Giovanna Procacci, *Soldati e prigionieri nella grande guerra* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2000).

**fig. 4**  
**Dullio Cambellotti,**  
***Aquile nostre!* (Our**  
**Eagles!), postcard,**  
**c. 1930. The Mitchell**  
**Wolfson Jr. Collection,**  
**The Wolfsonian–Florida**  
**International University,**  
**Miami Beach, Florida.**  
**Photograph by Silvia Ros.**



citizens, but of large economic interests as well. Throughout the country, and particularly in the main cities, organizations appeared in defense of the war effort. Bolstered later by the creation of regional industrial mobilization commissions, these came to form a network of support and propaganda (fig. 4). They were able to draw upon the intellectual resources of the interventionist elite. As the war developed, industrial and financial interests took on a primary role in supporting war propaganda. The arms maker Ansaldo, for example, heavily subsidized pro-war

newspapers, including Mussolini's *Il Popolo d'Italia*, through advertising. Far and away the most important efforts concerned the war loan campaigns. In order to finance the war, Italy began to borrow money from its citizens by issuing a series of war bonds managed by the banks. The propaganda campaigns to encourage bond purchases were among the best and most sophisticated of the war (fig. 5).<sup>7</sup>

Thus the government, the army, and the Liberal civil and economic elite came together to form the nucleus around which propaganda production and distribution formed. The army, for example, had total control of press and propaganda efforts on the front. The government monopolized propaganda toward allied and neutral countries. Civil and economic propaganda appear to have worked in harmony with the state and army efforts. There was a degree of coordination among all three areas, although the specific arrangements, particularly the question of financing, remain obscure.

In sum, the sources of propaganda were the main bastions of the Liberal regime: the state, the army, the interventionist elite, and large economic interests. They had a common cause in promoting an aggressive war effort. They all had an uneasy relationship with the Italian masses, workers and peasants, socialists and Roman Catholics, men at the front and the people at home. As a general rule, they preferred discipline and coercion to persuasion. This tendency reflected the difficulties of state-society relations in Italy at the time.

The enormous Italian defeat at the battle of Caporetto in October 1917 brought about a revolution in Italian wartime propaganda. Until this catastrophe, Italian propaganda efforts had been limited in both quantity and quality. After Caporetto, a new activist prime minister,

7. Renato Breda, *Le cartoline dei prestiti di guerra 1915–1942* (Rome: Capo di Stato Maggiore, Ufficio Storico, 1992).





fig. 5  
 Giovanni Capranesi,  
*Sottoscrivete al prestito!*  
 (Subscribe to the War  
 Loan!), postcard (from  
 poster), 1918. From *La  
 Pubblicità nei prestiti  
 Italiani di guerra*  
 (Advertising for Italian  
 War Loans), vol. 1  
 (Milan: Risorgimento  
 Grafico, 1918–1919).  
 The Mitchell Wolfson Jr.  
 Collection, The  
 Wolfsonian–Florida  
 International University,  
 Miami Beach, Florida.  
 Photograph by Silvia Ros.

Vittorio Emanuele Orlando (served 1917–1919), came to power. Likewise, a new commander more sensitive to the morale of his men, Armando Diaz (1861–1928), replaced Cadorna. The country’s citizens and industries mobilized in the face of enemy invasion. The Liberal regime realized that a major propaganda effort was now needed to bolster morale both on the home front and on the battlefield. In one of the few documented studies of a propaganda organization, the historian Gian Luigi Gatti has shown how a special division — Service P — was set up within the army to provide propaganda and to bolster the morale of troops, but also to keep them under surveillance.<sup>8</sup>

### Media

A difficulty in propagandizing was that of selecting the correct medium for the correct target. The Liberal regime had various means at its disposal for disseminating propaganda, but in assessing them, we must keep in mind the character of early twentieth-century Italy. As noted, relations between the

formal Italian state (the king, the army, the civil authorities) and the people were under stress and relatively weak. This meant that the gap between the producers of propaganda and the consumers was wide indeed, and very difficult to bridge. Modern means of mass communication — radio and television — were, of course, not yet available. In addition, the population was variegated, with differing degrees of education and literacy. Although great strides had been made, illiteracy remained high, particularly in the South and in the islands. Formal Italian remained a literary language, familiar in the towns and among the elite, but most Italians spoke a regional dialect. Propaganda therefore adapted traditional means of communication to new purposes. Some new technologies, however, such as the cinema, moved to the fore. Given this context the principal media of propaganda used images, the printed word, and the human voice. I have focused my research and analysis on propaganda images, believing they remain the most accessible.

8. Gatti, *Dopo Caporetto*.

fig. 6  
(right)

Photographer unknown, Arezzo street scene with propaganda poster, 1917. From *La Pubblicità nei prestiti Italiani di guerra*, vol. 1. The Mitchell Wolfson Jr. Collection, The Wolfsonian–Florida International University, Miami Beach, Florida. Copy photograph by Silvia Ros.

fig. 7  
(far right)

Photographer unknown, Monza street scene with propaganda poster, 1917. From *La Pubblicità nei prestiti Italiani di guerra*, vol. 1. The Mitchell Wolfson Jr. Collection, The Wolfsonian–Florida International University, Miami Beach, Florida. Copy photograph by Silvia Ros.



*Posters.* The poster was, and has until recently remained, one of the basic media of communication in Italy. Large posters pasted on street corners and buildings had been central to advertising, politics, and propaganda for more than a century (figs. 6 and 7). Posters have the advantage of communicating a basic message to a large number of people, unlike other media, such as newspapers and books, that are aimed at the literate or otherwise educated. Posters were a largely urban phenomenon, but one that was highly effective in the dense array of cities and villages that constitute Italy. Already by World War I, the poster had become a significant art form, providing many of the period's most compelling graphic images. The commercial poster industry, its artists and printing plants, soon turned to war propaganda. Poster designs were reused, adapted, and transferred to other media, such as postcards. They form the corpus of the most important graphic images of war propaganda.<sup>9</sup>

*Postcards.* It is difficult to underestimate the role of the humble postcard in World War I. In the absence of widespread public telephone systems, the postcard and the letter were the only significant means of communication between the troops and their families and friends. The postcard, given its economy and brevity, was essential. Many were not able to write letters at all, let alone frequently, so the postcard was the vital communication link binding Italians. Millions of postcards circulated during the war. As a tool of propaganda, the postcard offered great possibilities, for the “picture” side could be used to present persuasive images, including satiric political cartoons. The enemy could be mocked, as in a caricature of the Emperor

9. Maurice Rickards, *Manifesti della prima guerra mondiale* (Milan: Alfieri and Lacroix, 1968); Mirtide Gavelli and Otello Sangiorgi, eds., “L'oro e il piombo: I prestiti nazionali in Italia nella grande guerra,” *Bollettino del Museo del Risorgimento* 36 (Bologna: Comune di Bologna, 1991); Marzia Miele and Cesarina Vighy, eds., *Manifesti illustrati della grande guerra* (Rome: Fratelli Palombi editori, 1996); and Gessica Bone, Loretta Righetti, and Daniela Savoia, eds., *Immagini e documenti della grande guerra* (Cesena: Il Ponte Vecchio, 2000).



— Ecco una pillola che mi rimarrà indigesta!...

fig. 8  
Aroldo Bonzagni, *Ecco una pillola che mi rimarrà indigesta!* (Here Is a Pill That Will Remain Undigested!), postcard, c. 1916. The Mitchell Wolfson Jr. Collection, The Wolfsonian-Florida International University, Miami Beach, Florida. Photograph by Silvia Ros.

Franz Josef (fig. 8), who is presented with a bitter pill to swallow — an artillery shell. Often postcards celebrated particular military regiments. For the most part these were traditional images representing the soldiers or seals of these units; sometimes they were humorous. But as the war dragged on, a full array of images appeared. Given their number and circulation, postcards became, perhaps, the most popular and important propaganda medium.<sup>10</sup>

*The Press.* Italy's press played a distinct role in wartime propaganda. Italian newspapers were, for the most part, an elite affair, intended for educated urbanites. They also were firmly grounded in regional, economic, and political interests. With the outbreak of war, the military strictly controlled access to the front, and the government began to censor or repress those newspapers that opposed intervention. At the risk of overgeneralizing, one can argue that the Italian press became a reflection of establishment propaganda for the war. Press propaganda served, above all, to hold the reading

population together. Within the wartime press, one can trace the shifting stances and positions of the various factions and interests composing the Liberal regime. The press is less useful, however, in helping us understand the realities faced by the masses of Italians at war.<sup>11</sup>

*Pamphlets.* Fliers and pamphlets were a popular way of communicating with the people. Fliers, sometimes with graphic designs, were widely distributed for such purposes as issuing directives and promoting rallies. Pamphlets were aimed at those with basic literacy and could reach a population that might not have frequent access to newspapers. The contents of pamphlets varied widely, but their main goals were to explain to the people the meaning of the war, to inculcate hatred of the enemy, and to promise a better world ahead. The Roman Catholic catechism was adopted in one, for example, as the catechism of the nation.<sup>12</sup>

10. Nicola della Volpe, *Cartoline militari* (Rome: Capo di Stato Maggiore: Ufficio Storico, 1994); and Luigi Amedeo de Biase, *Le cartoline delle brigate e dei reggimenti di fanteria nella guerra del 1915-1918* (Rome: Capo di Stato Maggiore, Ufficio Storico, 1994).

11. Mimmo Franzinelli, ed., *Giornali 1914-1918: La grande guerra* (Milan: Contemporanea, 1997); and Maurizio Pagliano, ed., *Le copertine della Domenica 1915-1918* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1975).

12. della Volpe, *Esercito e propaganda*.

*Trench Newspapers.* After Caporetto, and with the support of the special Service P, attempts were made to deliver propaganda directly to men at the front. Prior to this, officials had been wary that subversive tracts or expressions of soldier discontent would come to the fore. The solution was to launch the so-called trench newspapers, created by and for the fighting men, but still closely monitored by the authorities. *La Tradotta*, for example, was the paper of the Third Army. It was founded, in part, by an artist, Umberto Brunelleschi (1879–1949), and is a mixture of drawings, cartoons, verse, and jokes (some of them scatological). *La Tradotta*, like the other trench newspapers, gave voice to the hopes and fears of the soldiers while remaining within the limits imposed by those in command.<sup>13</sup>

*Oratory and Cinema.* In addition to printed images and texts, spoken words and moving images were important propaganda media. Oratory had a prominent role in Italian public life, where the piazza was central to all politics. With entry into the war, the interventionists had seized control of the piazza as a platform for war propaganda. Countless politicians, heroes, mutilated victims, civic leaders, and intellectuals delivered speeches during the war. Many of their remarks were later published in pamphlets and newspapers. On the front, officers and government officials also addressed soldiers. It is very difficult to assess the effectiveness of oratorical propaganda. Newspaper reports about them are not always reliable. A few accounts by soldiers are contradictory: sometimes an orator was considered effective; often the troops responded with cynicism.

The Italian film industry had already emerged on a world scale with director Giovanni Pastrone's *Cabiria* in 1914, an historic epic set in the third century B.C. Italy's entry into World War I quickly initiated a period of extraordinary growth for the film industry. Wartime films presented a whole gamut of patriotic themes, but did not represent a close-up view of the war. According to one critic, their distinctive feature was to create a sense of "distance and absence" from the conflict. State censors, who wished to see a sanitized version of the war, reinforced this tendency. Though immensely popular, Italian wartime films seldom attained the quality of the nation's prewar cinema. In fact, they tended to underscore the gap between the pro-war state and the rest of society.<sup>14</sup>

Taken together, these various media formed the arms of persuasion that were mobilized by the Liberal regime to shape opinion and mold public behavior during the war. Each medium was adapted and transformed for propagandistic purposes. Artists, journalists, writers, filmmakers, and printers all turned their talents to new purposes and targets.

13. See Mario Isnenghi, *Giornali di trincea, 1915–1918* (Turin: Einaudi, 1977); and *La Tradotta: Giornale della terza armata* (Milan: Mondadori, 1968).

14. Giovanni Nobili Vitelleschi, "The Representation of the Great War in Italian Cinema," in *The First World War and Popular Cinema*, ed. Michael Paris (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2000).

## Targets

A basic descriptive model of propaganda must, of course, take into account its targets. Whose opinion and behavior was to be shaped? Whose morale? In the case of wartime Italy, we can identify four target areas that were of particular concern to the Liberal state and its supporters. The first and most important was the battlefield. It included not only the soldiers in the frontline trenches and mountain outposts, but also those in the support trenches and supply lines in the rearguard. Moreover, much of northeast Italy was under military control as a war zone. Propaganda in this area was chiefly a military issue, and, as we have seen, the military preferred the stick to the carrot, at least until Caporetto.

The second major target was the home front, and this too was variegated and complex. Propaganda campaigns had to take into account class tensions, regional disparities, and differences between town and country. The war mobilization had clamped a lid on social conflicts, but these simmered beneath the surface. On the home front, the government, civic organizations, the press, and bankers and industrialists were most responsible for waging the propaganda war. One must also remember that the fence of censorship alternately separated and filtered the battlefield from the home front.

A third target of propaganda activity, the shaping of foreign public opinion, while a lesser priority, was nonetheless of great interest to the government. For the first few years of the war, the country tried to run a “parallel” war to that of the other allies. There was no unified command, and Italy did not declare war on Germany until 1916. But as the course of the conflict developed, and as Italy became ever more dependent on Britain and France for material and financial support, it became clear that Italy’s war effort would rely on the help of its allies. Thus the government set up a propagandistic mission through the foreign office to sway foreign opinion in its favor, in particular to gather support for Italy’s postwar territorial ambitions. When the United States entered the war in 1917, these efforts focused on securing the support of Italian Americans.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, Italy engaged in counter-propaganda against the enemy. At the front line this involved showering enemy troops with defeatist leaflets and folders. These sought, at best, to provoke desertions and, at least, discouragement. Some of this counter-propaganda was ingenious—enemy trench newspapers were, for example, recomposed with Allied messages. In the case of Austro-Hungarian troops, efforts were made to rally divisive nationalism within the ranks of this multinational empire. Other attempts at counter-propaganda were spectacular, such as the poet Gabriele D’Annunzio’s (1863–1938) renowned air flight over Vienna to drop leaflets.

15. Luciano Tosi, *La propaganda italiana all'estero nella prima guerra mondiale. Rivendicazioni territoriali e politica delle nazionalità* (Pordenone: Del Bianco editore, 1977).

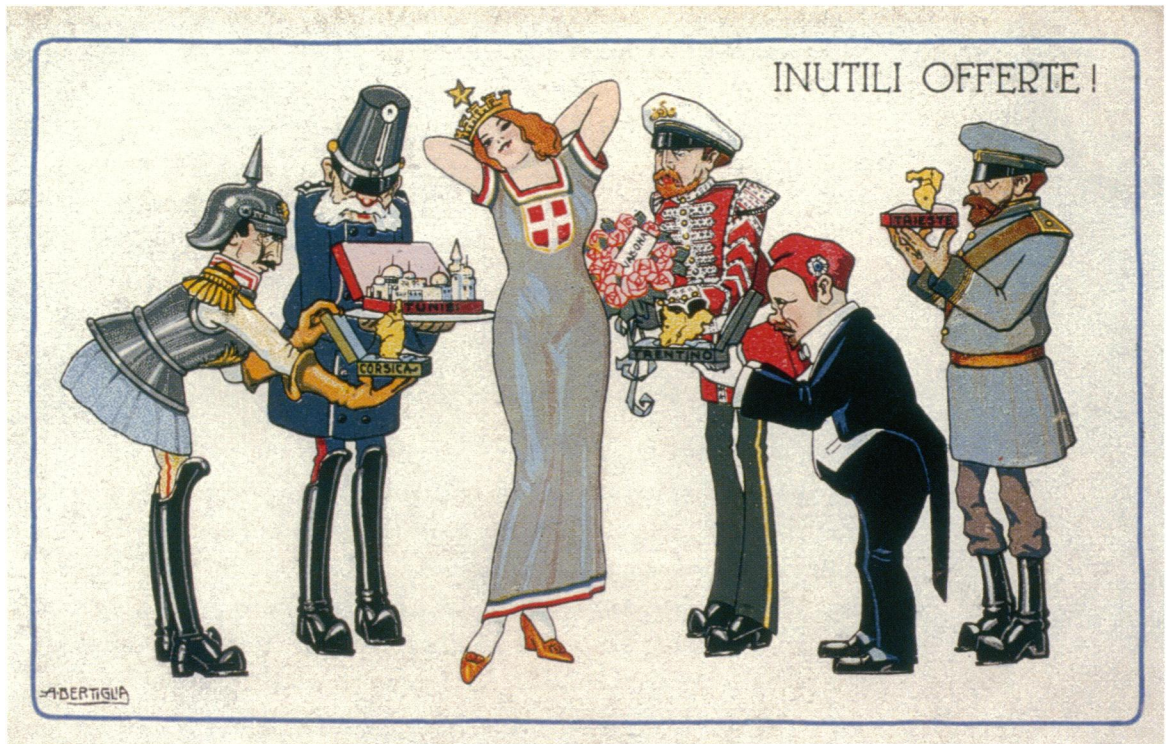


fig. 9  
**A. Bertiglia, *Inutili Offerte!* (Useless Offerings!), postcard, 1915. The Mitchell Wolfson Jr. Collection, The Wolfsonian—Florida International University, Miami Beach, Florida. Photograph by Silvia Ros.**

But what were the propagandists trying to say? Let us now turn to their messages.

### Analyzing Messages

Analyzing historical propaganda messages presents a series of enormous methodological difficulties. Propaganda exists within a short and fleeting context. For the Italy of World War I (and particularly in the absence of modern opinion polls), it is practically impossible to determine with any precision either the intentions of the propagandists or the reactions of the recipients. While there are some clues about general morale (police reports documented political dissent, for example), there is little specific data with respect to overt propaganda. My analysis of propaganda centers on understanding and contextualizing materials, rather than on assessing their efficacy. For the most part I have studied images (posters, postcards, drawings) rather than messages conveyed in newspapers, pamphlets, or films. The emphasis has been on examining as many propaganda images as possible and identifying a representative sample. Based upon that sample, certain broad themes emerge, and these provide the organization for my analysis.

**1915 and 1918: *The Old and the New.*** Between the beginning of Italy's war in 1915 and the "victory" of 1918, the visual language of propaganda steadily evolved, reflecting the increasing stakes of the conflict. What began as a limited war for the conquest of Trent and Trieste ended as a clash of civilizations. G. Castiglioni's postcard *Trento e Trieste incoronano*

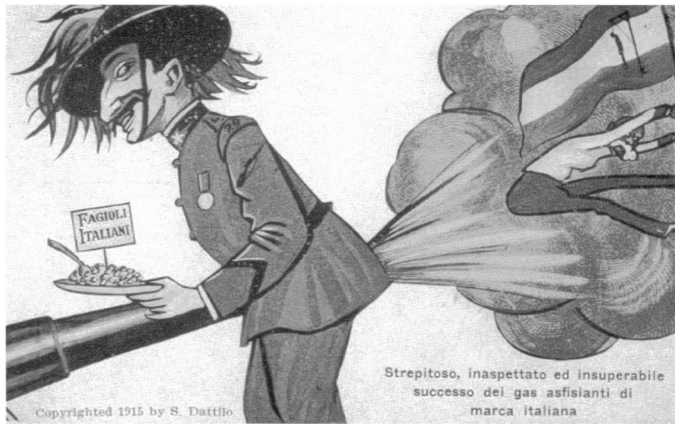


fig. 10  
**S. Dattilo, *Fagioli Italiani* (Italian Beans), postcard, 1915.** The Mitchell Wolfson Jr. Collection, The Wolfsonian–Florida International University, Miami Beach, Florida. Photograph by Silvia Ros.

was the initial image of the war: a culminating battle of the Risorgimento against the traditional Austrian enemy to recover the *terre irredente* (unredeemed lands). By 1918 this vision of the conflict had been transformed. Total war demanded a broader and more powerful justification for the nation’s sacrifice. Italy now was fighting not only for her survival but also for Western civilization against “barbarism.” Giovanni Capranesi’s 1918 postcard *Sottoscrivete al prestito!* (Subscribe to the War Loan!) shows in stark form the sharpness of this clash (fig. 5). Imploring citizens to lend financial support to the war effort, the postcard shows Italia herself, dressed in Roman armor, fending off the barbarian Teutonic invader (appearing in full Wagnerian glory) who dares to cross the Alps. Through the development of the images of propaganda we see the broadening of the war’s aims and meanings.

*A Short and Jolly War: Comic Images.* At the outset, however, most Italians either expected or hoped for a short and jolly war. Vienna was to be captured in a matter of weeks. A. Bertiglia’s postcard *Inutili Offerte!* (Useless Offerings!) dates to early 1915, the period of neutrality when the question of intervention was still hotly debated (fig. 9). It presents a comic view representative of early propaganda. Here, a young and flirtatious Italia (very different from that in fig. 5) is wooed by a series of suitors bearing gifts (Germany’s Kaiser Wilhelm II, Austria-Hungary’s Emperor Franz Josef, Britain’s King George V, France’s President Raymond Poincaré, Russia’s Czar Nicholas II). On which side would the coquettish Italia intervene? The caption does not say; and war and intervention are on a par with a flirt. In a Dattilo postcard of 1915, *Fagioli Italiani* (Italian Beans), an Italian *bersagliere* (a member of the special regiment known for its ostrich-plumed helmets) blasts away the enemy in a humorous, scatological image (fig. 10). Italian beans will beat Austrian cannons: the soldier’s fart knocks out the Emperor Franz Josef, whose flag bears the stain of the hangman. Unfortunately the realities of war, not least the horrors of gas warfare, would soon diminish the efficacy of comic images in propaganda. Stronger messages would be needed.

*l’esercito Italiano liberatore* (Trent and Trieste Crown the Liberating Italian Army) well portrays the vision of the war and the country’s war aims in 1915 (fig. 1). A valiant knight (a far cry from the reality of a muddy infantryman) smites the double-headed eagle symbolizing the Hapsburgs. In the background, gracious female figures draped in the colors of Trent and Trieste raise a laurel crown of victory over the warrior’s head. This



*"Fate tutti  
il vostro dovere!"*

LE SOTTOSCRIZIONI AL **PRESTITO** SI RICEVONO PRESSO IL  
**CREDITO ITALIANO**



fig. 11  
(opposite page)  
Achille Luciano Mauzan,  
*Fate tutti il vostro dovere!*  
(All of You Do Your Duty!),  
postcard (from poster),  
1917. From *La Pubblicità  
nei prestiti Italiani di  
guerra*, vol. 2. The  
Mitchell Wolfson Jr.  
Collection, The  
Wolfsonian–Florida  
International University,  
Miami Beach, Florida.  
Photograph by Silvia Ros.

fig. 12  
(below)  
Anselmo Barchi, *Aiutateci  
a vincere!* (Help Us Win!),  
postcard (from poster),  
1917. From *La Pubblicità  
nei prestiti Italiani di  
guerra*, vol. 1. The  
Mitchell Wolfson Jr.  
Collection, The  
Wolfsonian–Florida  
International University,  
Miami Beach, Florida.  
Photograph by Silvia Ros.

fig. 13  
(below, far right)  
George Illion, *L'Italia  
ha bisogno di carne–  
frumento–grasso &  
zucchero* (Italy Needs  
Meat, Grain, Fats, and  
Sugar), poster published  
by United States Food  
Administration, 71 x 51 cm,  
1917–1918. The Mitchell  
Wolfson Jr. Collection,  
The Wolfsonian–Florida  
International University,  
Miami Beach, Florida.  
Photograph by Silvia Ros.

*Everyone Do Your Duty.* It was not until 1917 that Italian propaganda produced its most iconic image. This was Achille Luciano Mauzan's poster for the Credito Italiano bank's war loan campaign (fig. 11). The design had tremendous success both at home and abroad, and was reproduced in countless forms (figs. 6 and 7), including a giant version thirty meters square. What accounted for this success? Mauzan found a message and a way of representing it that transcended the troubled state-society relationship in Italy. In Britain, a comparably iconic image (by Alfred Leete) showed an authority figure (Lord Kitchener) pointing at the viewer with the caption, "Your Country Needs You." In the United States, James Montgomery Flagg likewise portrayed an authoritative Uncle Sam exclaiming, "I Want You for the U.S. Army." In Italy, where many mistrusted state authority, such appeals would have fallen flat. Mauzan's design shows us not a leader, but an ordinary infantryman, an "everyman." Against the background of battle and the silhouettes of his comrades the soldier points at the viewer (like Kitchener and Uncle Sam) and demands, "All of You Do Your Duty!" In Italy, representations of "everyman" held a broader appeal than those of authority figures.<sup>16</sup>

Success bred imitation, and the Banca Commerciale (the Credito Italiano's chief competitor) soon issued a war loan poster of its own (fig. 12). Like Mauzan's design, Anselmo Barchi's poster shows us an ordinary soldier pointing to the observer. "Help us win!" he exclaims. While the two images are similar, Banca Commerciale's was a propagandistic failure (as critics noted at the time). Barchi's soldier is disheveled, his collar undone; his look betrays more panic than resistance. In contrast to the approach adopted by Mauzan and Barchi is a rare poster in The Wolfsonian's collection (fig. 13).



16. This was true also in France, where Jules Abel Faivre's noted poster *On les aura!* (We Will Get Them!) adopts a similar iconography.

fig. 14  
(right)

Mario Borgoni, *Prestito nazionale* (National Loan), postcard (from poster), 1918. From *La Pubblicità nei prestiti Italiani di guerra*, vol. 1. The Mitchell Wolfson Jr. Collection, The Wolfsonian–Florida International University, Miami Beach, Florida. Photograph by Silvia Ros.

fig. 15  
(opposite page)  
Ugo Finozzi, *Cacciali via!* (Drive Them Out!), postcard (from poster), 1918. From *La Pubblicità nei prestiti Italiani di guerra*, vol. 1. The Mitchell Wolfson Jr. Collection, The Wolfsonian–Florida International University, Miami Beach, Florida. Photograph by Silvia Ros.



Here we do see an authority figure — Italian commander General Luigi Cadorna. The message reads: “Italy needs meat, grain, fats, and sugar. Eat very little of these foods because they must go to our people, and the troops of Italy.” The explication of this poster depends upon its credit line, noted in small type at the bottom: United States Food Administration. In fact, this is a propaganda poster directed toward Italian Americans. Cadorna, a taciturn man and harsh disciplinarian, was not beloved in Italy. Nor could a people facing food scarcity be moved by an appeal to reduce consumption. Propaganda for Italians perforce differed from that for Italian Americans.



**Caporetto and Resistance.**

After the defeat at Caporetto, the country was fighting for its survival, and the Italian propaganda machine shifted into high gear. Efforts were directed toward the soldiers, whose morale had to be restored, and to the home front. Italy's banks took the lead in general propaganda production as they sought to raise funds for the various war loan campaigns. Mario Borgoni's postcard design of 1918 (based on a poster) well demonstrates the message of post-Caporetto resistance (fig. 14). A soldier embraces the tricolor flag. The enemy is near: the corner of the flag is dragged out of the frame. We see only the soldier's eyes and the bridge of his nose over his arm as he reaches back to swing his sword. He clearly conveys the idea that the nation must be defended at all costs. Another 1918 image promoting war loans—and perhaps a more effective one in a country whose masses had not yet

been highly nationalized—is Ugo Finozzi's *Cacciali via!* (Drive Them Out!) (fig. 15). Instead of the national flag, we see the Italian family. A resolute soldier, dagger drawn, moves forward. Behind the soldier, touching his shoulder, is a female figure—not Italia, but a wife and mother, baby in hand. While *la Patria* (the nation) was often an abstract motivation for resistance, the family was something concrete to defend.

**Fear and Loss.** Two of the most powerful themes in propaganda are fear and loss. Fear—of the enemy, of the “other”—can motivate aggression. Anger over sacrifice and loss can be a potent instigation to revenge and resistance. Both feelings were frequent themes in Italian wartime propaganda. Two examples by the artist Aroldo Bonzagni (1887–1918) serve as illustration. One depicts a frightened woman carrying a child (fig. 16).

fig. 16  
(right)  
Aroldo Bonzagni, *Fratelli salvatemi!* (Brothers Save Me!), postcard, c. 1918. The Mitchell Wolfson Jr. Collection, The Wolfsonian–Florida International University, Miami Beach, Florida. Photograph by Silvia Ros.



fig. 17  
(far right)  
Aroldo Bonzagni, *...Ed ora a voi, sottoscrivete!* (...And Now, It's Up to You — Subscribe!), postcard (from poster), c. 1918. From *La Pubblicità nei prestiti Italiani di guerra*, vol. 2. The Mitchell Wolfson Jr. Collection, The Wolfsonian–Florida International University, Miami Beach, Florida. Photograph by Silvia Ros.



fig. 18  
(below)  
Aroldo Bonzagni, book cover, *Gli Unni...e gli Altri!* (The Huns...and the Others!) (Milan: Rava & Co., c. 1916). The Mitchell Wolfson Jr. Collection, The Wolfsonian–Florida International University, Miami Beach, Florida. Photograph by Silvia Ros.



Leering, beastly looking Austrian soldiers surround her. Gazing desperately at the viewer she shouts, “Brothers Save Me!” The horrified viewer is left to imagine the atrocity about to occur. In another, ...*Ed ora a voi, Sottoscrivete!* (...And Now, It’s Up to You — Subscribe!) (fig. 17), we see a representation of loss. A young, decorated soldier (his dark complexion suggests that he is a Southerner) raises a crutch with his right hand, while the left crutch compensates for a missing leg. Like thousands of others, this soldier had joined the ranks of the mutilated.

Aroldo Bonzagni was one of the most interesting fine artists of his generation, and the Wolfson collections in Miami Beach and Genoa provide a representative sampling of his work as a whole. He was born in Cento (Ferrara) and died during the Spanish influenza epidemic (which infamously took more lives than the war itself). Before the war he was associated with the Futurists, moving in the most avant-garde circles of his time.

Like many of his generation, he took an active interest in the conflict and became one of its most accomplished propagandists. In addition to his painting, Bonzagni was an accomplished satirical draftsman, and it was this work that led him into propaganda. In 1915, along with Marcello Dudovich, Leonardo Dudreville, and others, he published *Gli Unni...e gli Altri!* (The Huns... and the Others!) (fig. 18)—an anti-German satire that was followed



**fig. 19**  
**Armando Vassallo,**  
*Libertas*, poster, 46 x 34 cm,  
 c. 1918. The Mitchell  
 Wolfson Jr. Collection,  
 The Wolfsonian–Florida  
 International University,  
 Miami Beach, Florida.  
 Photograph by Silvia Ros.

within Italy. The army high command developed an almost paranoid fear of “Red” subversion. Poor performance by the troops or insufficient support from the war industries was blamed on defeatism inspired by the political left. These fears, in fact, were ungrounded, yet the perceptions remained. Official attitudes toward Wilsonian liberalism were more favorable, even if they would ultimately contrast with the realpolitik war aims of the Italian state.

Propaganda images adapted to emphasize the changed ideological character of the war. They stressed its new, “positive” sense, the Wilsonian notion of a war that would make the world safe for democracy. At the same time, they came to counter war-weariness and defeatism by underlining the strength of a grand alliance. No longer was this just a national war, but a war of Allies. The American entry promised resources in men and weapons that would assure victory. In Armando Vassallo’s 1918 poster *Libertas* (Liberty), the Statue of Liberty—a resonant image for the Italian nation that had experienced mass emigration—holds her torch high, against the rising sun of freedom (fig. 19). It pronounces that the Americans are

by his own, *I Comandamenti di Dio* (The Commandments of God).

***Allies and Ideologies.*** Two events in 1917 further transformed the overall character of the war. The first of these was the Russian Revolution, which, after the Bolshevik victory, not only had strategic consequences—the withdrawal of Russia as a belligerent force—but ideological effects as well. Soviet Communism posed a challenge to the whole value system upon which the war had, until then, been fought. The prospect of revolution and peace, and of a new social and economic order, held a vast appeal for the war-weary masses. The second event was the entry of the United States into the conflict. Here, too, a new ideological system—that of Wilsonian liberalism—challenged preceding assumptions about the meaning of the war. Both the messages of Vladimir Lenin and of Woodrow Wilson resonated

# PER LA LIBERTÀ E LA CIVILTÀ DEL MONDO

**SOTTOSCRIVETE  
AL PRESTITO  
NAZIONALE =**

M. DVDOVICH

ATELIER  
BUTTERI  
TORINO



fig. 20  
(opposite page)  
Marcello Dudovich, *Per la libertà e la civiltà del mondo* (For the Freedom and Civilization of the World), poster, 100 x 70 cm, c. 1918. The Mitchell Wolfson Jr. Collection–Fondazione Regionale Cristoforo Colombo, Genoa, Italy.

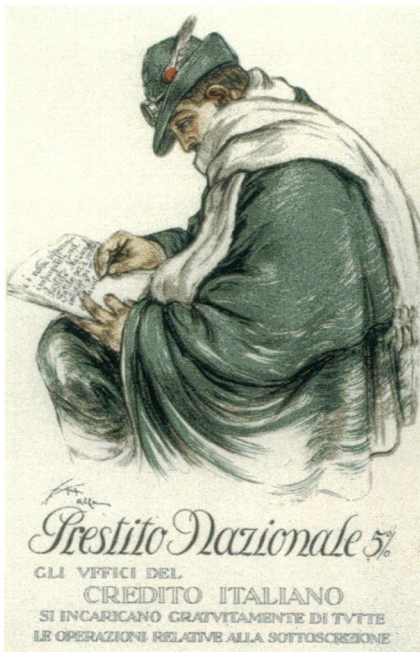


fig. 21  
(right)  
Aldo Mazza, *E i vostri risparmi...* (Your Savings...), postcard (from poster), 1916. The Mitchell Wolfson Jr. Collection, The Wolfsonian–Florida International University, Miami Beach, Florida. Photograph by Silvia Ros.



fig. 22  
(above, far right)  
Aldo Mazza, *Per il nostro interesse...* (For Our Interest...), postcard (from poster), 1916. From *La Pubblicità nei prestiti Italiani di guerra*, vol. 2. The Mitchell Wolfson Jr. Collection, The Wolfsonian–Florida International University, Miami Beach, Florida. Photograph by Silvia Ros.

coming to bring victory and freedom. Above, the flags of the Allies (excluding Russia) form a secondary halo underscoring the message. A war loan poster by Marcello Dudovich, who was one of the country's masters in the graphic arts, also depicts a brilliant display of Allied strength and determination (fig. 20). An Italian *fante*, a French *poilu*, a British Tommy, and an American GI raise their rifles in defiance against the (unseen) forces of barbarism. As the inscription notes, theirs is a crusade "For the Freedom and Civilization of the World."

*The Home Front.* Throughout the war there was a sharp distinction between the battlefield and the home front. Italy's military campaigns were for the most part in the far northeast of the country, far away, say, from the world of a southern Italian farmer. The battlefield came under the strict jurisdiction of the military command. Given the nature of trench warfare, it was a terrible and unique environment, a special universe, separated from the "normal" world. In the course of the war the home front changed too, as mobilization for total war altered traditional social relations. The connections between the home front and the battlefield were important, as problems of morale emanating from one of these, it was widely feared, would have an impact on the other.

One of the most popular propaganda campaigns directly addressed ties between the warring nation's dual fronts. It consists of two designs by Aldo Mazza for the Credito Italiano bank's war loan campaign. In the first, a young *alpino* sits writing a letter to his parents (fig. 21). The *alpini* are a special branch of the Italian army. As their name implies they are mountain troops, locally recruited for warfare in the Alps. Their distinctive badge is the peaked cap, notable for its feather. Here, the viewer sees

fig. 23  
Giovanni Greppi, *A me resistere, A tutti sottoscrivere!* (It's Up to Me to Resist, It's Up to Everybody to Subscribe!), poster, 100 x 70 cm, 1917. The Mitchell Wolfson Jr. Collection – Fondazione Regionale Cristoforo Colombo, Genoa, Italy.

another everyman, a son, shivering on the mountain battlefield while writing a letter to his parents on the home front. The message: “Invest your savings in the national war loan. Do this for your own interest, for me, and for the country.” The order of priority is revealing. Family self-interest comes first, the son second, and the country third. This is a shrewd assessment of family mentalities in a still-traditional society. Mazza portrays the other side of the story in what may be considered a companion piece (fig. 22). Here, in the warmth of their home, the father and mother examine with satisfaction the war bond they have purchased with their savings. A portrait of their son, the *alpino*, rests on the desktop. Again the message is repeated: “For our interest, for him, and for the country.”

*The Home Front: Work.* One of the touchiest social issues that arose during the war centered on the industrial working classes. Labor relations had never been easy in Italy, but the economic mobilization necessary for total war introduced new elements. First, there was the spectacular growth of war industries and the consequent demand for labor. Second, the state began to play a more active role in managing the economy and in mediating labor disputes. Fear of defeatism by the socialists (who had adopted the policy of “neither adherence nor sabotage” when Italy entered the war in 1915) was widespread in government circles. Fear of revolution increased after the Russian example in 1917. At the same time, there was a considerable amount of friction between the fighting men and the workingmen,





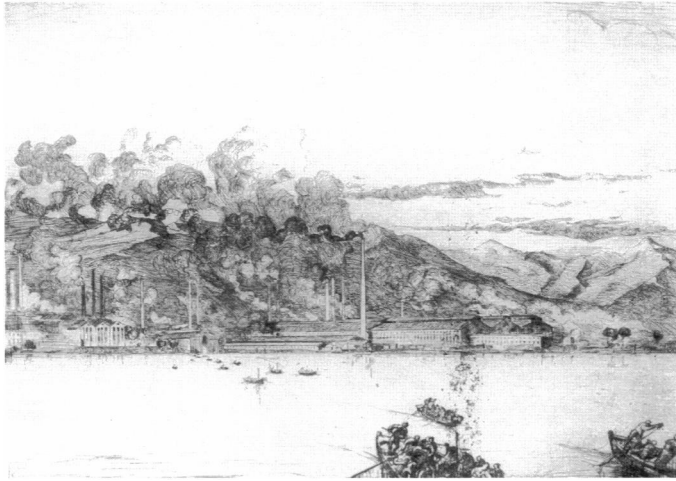
fig. 24  
 Giovanni Greppi, *Prestito per la vittoria, Operai sottoscrivete* (Loan for Victory, Workers Subscribe), poster, 66 x 94 cm, 1917. The Mitchell Wolfson Jr. Collection, The Wolfsonian—Florida International University, Miami Beach, Florida. Photograph by Silvia Ros.



the latter being accused of dodging the war. Perhaps because of this touchy issue, scenes of industrial life are extremely rare in Italian war propaganda.

The Wolfsonian collections contained the two most important propaganda images that dealt with the problem of soldier-worker relations. Both are war loan campaign posters commissioned by the Lombardy Industrial Mobilization Committee and designed by the artist Giovanni Greppi (1884–1960), whose non-propaganda work also is represented in the collections. In one we see a heroically posed soldier addressing a crowd of workers; around him are numerous war widows shrouded in black (fig. 23). His message is clear: “It’s my task to resist the enemy. Everyone should subscribe to the war loan.” The soldier and the widows (those who bear the direct costs of the war) are in the forefront. Workingmen (often suspected of defeatism) dominate the background — while a superb depiction of factories rises behind them. The rather heavy-handed implication is that the workers’ material support for the war should let them “off the hook” from the accusation of draft dodging or of having an “easy” war.

Greppi’s other image is a much subtler treatment of the same theme (fig. 24). In this design, the sharp contrast between the fighting man and the workingman is removed. Here the soldier does not strike a heroic pose with arched back, but rather is “at ease”; his contrast with the amiable workers is downplayed. Yet with his left hand the soldier points toward a billboard bearing the persuasive headline “Loan for Victory.” The message emphasizes solidarity between labor and the military. Both are contributing to the war effort, albeit in different ways. Greppi’s prewar etching of the industrial factories at Pozzuoli near Naples shows a clear link between his general artistic work and his propaganda designs



**fig. 25**  
(above)  
Giovanni Greppi, *Factories at Pozzuoli*, etching, 58 x 46 cm, c. 1900–1910. The Mitchell Wolfson Jr. Collection, The Wolfsonian–Florida International University, Miami Beach, Florida.

**fig. 26**  
(below, right)  
Umberto Brunelleschi, *Tram Conductor*, postcard, 1918. The Mitchell Wolfson Jr. Collection, The Wolfsonian–Florida International University, Miami Beach, Florida. Photograph by Silvia Ros.

**fig. 27**  
(far right)  
Umberto Brunelleschi, *Barber*, postcard, 1918. The Mitchell Wolfson Jr. Collection, The Wolfsonian–Florida International University, Miami Beach, Florida. Photograph by Silvia Ros.

patterns of male bonding were essential for military cohesion. Longings for and anxiety about women were thus a great preoccupation for the average soldier. The artist Umberto Brunelleschi created a fascinating series of postcards depicting women at work in men’s jobs. These were directed toward men at the battlefield, and all portray attractive women, chaste precursors of the pin-ups of World War II. I believe the general purpose of these images was to assuage men who were fearful that women were taking their place in society while they were away. The attractive women in Brunelleschi’s postcards appear to be “playing” at their jobs. His depiction of a “lady” tram conductor serves two purposes: first she is a “fashion model” image (pin-up), a morale booster for the troops; second, she doesn’t really suggest a threat—her tram and her pose have a fairy-tale quality (fig. 26).



(fig. 25). His vivid portrayals of smokestacks appear in all three images.

***The War and Gender: Women.*** It is clear that the war altered traditional gender roles. On the home front women took on ever more responsibility in the absence of young men. They entered the work force in increasing numbers, often assuming traditionally male jobs. The female tram conductor became a familiar trope. On the battlefield, soldiers lived in a universe of men, where





fig. 28  
 Artist unknown, *Pro patria*, postcard, c. 1917.  
 The Mitchell Wolfson Jr.  
 Collection, The  
 Wolfsonian–Florida  
 International University,  
 Miami Beach, Florida.  
 Photograph by Silvia Ros.

A more complicated image from the same series is Brunelleschi's depiction of a female barber (fig. 27). This design openly refers to what might be considered castration anxiety—and does nothing to minimize the threat. The female barber is sharpening her razor on a phallically stretched strop as she looks at herself in the mirror. Her threatening manner is reminiscent of depictions of the Old Testament heroine Judith, who saved her people by beheading Holofernes. Reflected in the background we see an alarmed and lathered male customer in the chair. Perhaps he is a draft dodger. It is hard to say, for in this image we are presented once again with the difficulties of interpreting propaganda imagery and its reception.

*The War and Gender: Men.* The question of the war's impact on male gender roles also is complicated, and firm conclusions are hard to draw from propaganda representations. Far and away the most common images were those of men as soldiers, usually assuming heroic poses. Each army, regiment, and division devel-

oped a series of postcards that celebrated or commemorated the unit. As the war dragged on, however, what might be identified as a sub-genre of male propaganda images emerged. These were depictions of sacrifice, of the fallen. For example, one postcard shows a nude youth standing within a classical tomb structure (fig. 28). He upholds the lintel bearing the inscription "Pro patria." Behind him are a pagan sacrificial altar and a stylized crown of thorns. Youth, sacrifice, *patria*—these are the themes that would become central to the later sacralization of the Great War and would strongly influence the design of its resulting memorials.

*Artists and the War.* In the course of the war, many of Italy's artists joined the effort, largely as soldiers—such as the Futurist painter Umberto Boccioni (1882–1916)—but also as propagandists. As a whole, we know little about the artists who produced propaganda images, although research at The Wolfsonian provides some clues. While many artists remain unknown, most were professional illustrators who shifted their work from creating peacetime posters and illustrations for the press to wartime propaganda. A number, including Aroldo Bonzagni, Umberto Brunelleschi, and Giovanni Greppi were "fine artists" who also produced propaganda. Their propaganda work has been little noticed in analyses of their output as a whole.<sup>17</sup>

17. Enzo Cassoni, *Il cartellonismo e l'illustrazione in Italia dal 1875 al 1950* (Rome: Nuova Editrice Spada, 1984); and *Catalogo Bolaffi del manifesto italiano. Dizionario degli illustratori* (Turin: Giulio Bolaffi editore, 1995).



**fig. 29**  
(above)  
**Giulio Aristide Sartorio,**  
*La Battaglia del Fratta*  
(The Battle of Fratta),  
offset lithograph,  
54 x 76 cm, post-1915.  
The Mitchell Wolfson Jr.  
Collection, The  
Wolfsonian–Florida  
International University,  
Miami Beach, Florida.



**fig. 30**  
(above, far right)  
**Giulio Aristide Sartorio,**  
*Trieste Miramare, Pumo*  
*e mar Timavo*, offset  
lithograph, 54 x 76 cm,  
post-1915. The Mitchell  
Wolfson Jr. Collection,  
The Wolfsonian–Florida  
International University,  
Miami Beach, Florida.

Some artists more subtly imbued their work with persuasive messages. Giulio Aristide Sartorio (1860–1932), for example, combined a deeply personal, painterly approach to the war with the needs of propaganda. Sartorio was one of the country’s most prominent artists of the older generation. In 1915, at the age of fifty-five, he volunteered for active service at the front. There he began to execute a series of paintings that were widely reproduced in prints and postcards. Sartorio’s depiction of war focused on nature and the sublime. One lithograph depicts a long line of soldiers hauling a cannon up a steep slope—but they are dwarfed by the stupendous mountain range in the background that is equally the subject of this work (fig. 29). In another lithograph, Sartorio represents a romantic landscape, with a white castle and the sea in the background (fig. 30). Only the informed viewer would know that we are looking out from a trench toward Trieste, a territorial objective never reached during Italy’s participation in the war.

### Final Considerations

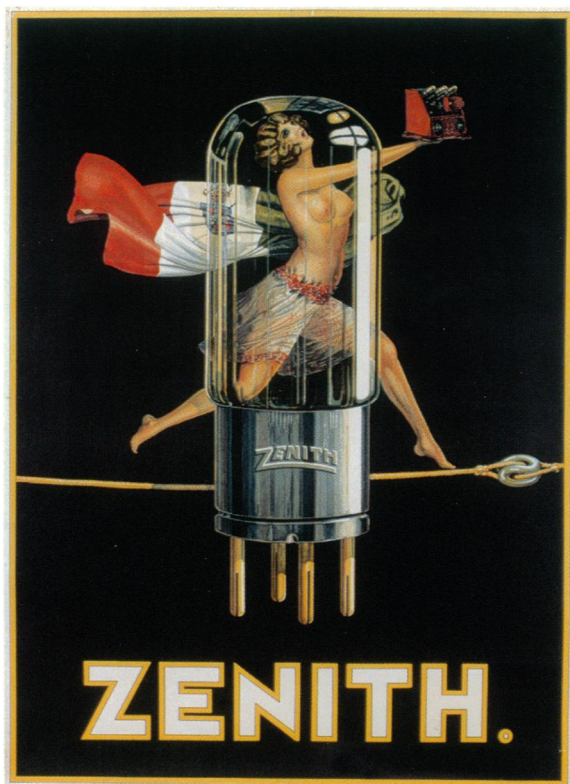
This cursory and selective view of some of the mechanisms, themes, and images of wartime propaganda can yield some general conclusions. In the course of World War I, Italy had its first experience with modern propaganda. Motivated by wartime leadership, propaganda organizations used the means at their disposal to mobilize targeted populations for war. Italy’s experience of war took place within the context of a strained and fragile state-society relationship. Wartime propaganda responded to and reflected this. Propaganda, whatever its form, was a complex web of messages sent, on a broad level, from the authorities to the people, and on a micro level, among individuals and within social groups. The images we have examined provide insight into the “ideal world” that the wartime establishment hoped to project to the nation. They reflect, in some measure, the hopes, fears, and anxieties of the leaders and the led. It was not, however, until after the war that the full legacy of Italy’s propaganda experience became apparent.

fig. 31  
(below)  
Mario Borgoni, *Prestito nazionale* (National Loan), postcard (from poster), 1917. The Mitchell Wolfson Jr. Collection, The Wolfsonian–Florida International University, Miami Beach, Florida. Photograph by Silvia Ros.

fig. 32  
(below, far right)  
Artist unknown, *Zenith*, poster, 135 x 99 cm, c. 1920s. The Mitchell Wolfson Jr. Collection, The Wolfsonian–Florida International University, Miami Beach, Florida.

On 4 November 1918 Italy signed an armistice with Austria-Hungary; the war was over, and the Italian nation was victorious. Despite the strains of conducting total war, despite the great defeat at Caporetto, the Italian state had held firm. Italy was not to collapse into revolution like Russia, nor was it to disintegrate, as did Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire. But what had the country “won”? Italy had entered the war without a national consensus on its aims; it ended the war with no unified notion of victory, as its territorial aims were only partially realized. The costs in men and material were tremendous. The war unleashed fierce social forces for change. The Liberal regime sought to maintain its hegemony in the face of challenges by a mobilized workers’ movement, a new mass Catholic Party, and militant nationalism. For four years the country was convulsed by the economic, social, and political problems of re-establishing a stable order. In the end, the Liberals failed; in 1922 they yielded to the “man of providence”—Benito Mussolini.

Fascism itself was a product of the Great War. Much of its strength as a “political religion” lay in its ability to draw upon and mobilize the symbols and myths of war.<sup>18</sup> At the heart of the matter was the nation, for which so much had been sacrificed. Italy was a country fragmented by regionalism, class, differing degrees of economic development, and varying historical experiences. The unified national state had only been created half a



18. Emilio Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996).

BRUNELLE/CHI

# L'ART ITALIEN

XIX<sup>E</sup>  
XX<sup>E</sup>  
SIECLES



15 MAI-JUIN-JUILLET

JEU DE PAUME-TUILERIES

**fig. 33**  
**Umberto Brunelleschi,**  
***L'Art Italien XIX–XX siècles***  
**(Italian Art of the**  
**Nineteenth and Twentieth**  
**Centuries), poster,**  
**156 x 118 cm, 1935.**  
**The Mitchell Wolfson Jr.**  
**Collection, The**  
**Wolfsonian–Florida**  
**International University,**  
**Miami Beach, Florida.**

century before the Great War. “Making Italians” or the “nationalization of the masses” were processes that were far from complete. In this light, the experience of the Great War was the first moment in which the entire nation had been drawn into a common, albeit tragic, struggle.

The figure of Italia, like Marianne for France, was a key representation of the nation (*la Patria*) before, during, and after the war. A war loan poster of 1918 (fig. 31) shows a classic Italia as a goddess of victory pointing the soldiers on to combat. She is wrapped in the tricolor flag, which forms her wings, while she literally holds Nike (victory) in her hands. The symbolic power of Italia continued after the war, but in some cases the images employed were less than reverential. Thus, in a Zenith advertisement poster of the 1920s (fig. 32), we see a bare-breasted flapper illuminated by a Zenith radio tube. Consumer goods, modernity, and desire had replaced the sacrifice and hardship of the war years.

Fascism restored order.<sup>19</sup> Wartime artist Umberto Brunelleschi’s great triumphal design of 1935 portrays an Athena-Italia (fig. 33), once more bearing Nike, but this time with the fasces in the background. Propaganda was of central importance to the Fascist dictatorship, and Fascist propaganda drew upon and grew from the Italian propaganda experience of World War I. Fascism inherited the legacy of the Great War and transformed it for its own totalitarian purposes. ♦

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19. Dennis Doordan, “Political Things: Design in Fascist Italy,” in *Designing Modernity: The Arts of Reform and Persuasion, 1885–1945*, ed. Wendy Kaplan (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1995), 225–255.