

thrust of his arguments. This book is a rewarding read for scholars of international relations, military historians, Habsburg historians, and anyone interested in how states use their available tools to meet their security needs.

Marco Mondini, *Il Capo: La Grande Guerra del generale Luigi Cadorna*. Il Mulino: Bologna, 2017, 388 pp.: 9788815272843, €26.00 (pbk)

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The late Sir John Keegan was no admirer of British generals of World War I. They were, he once wrote, a ‘hideously unattractive group’ whose published diaries revealed ‘hearts as flintlike as their faces’. Had he chosen to do so, he might well have added General Luigi Cadorna to his list. Commanding the Italian Army in the field between May 1915 and November 1917, Cadorna fought 11 indecisive battles on the Isonzo before presiding over the calamitous defeat at Caporetto on 24 October 1917, after which he quickly lost his job and was kicked upstairs to sit as Italy’s member on the newly created Supreme War Council. Vilification swiftly followed. He made the first, and most long-lasting, contribution to the destruction of his own reputation by putting his name to an infamous war bulletin published on 28 October 1918 in which he accused his army of collapsing as a result of cowardice and treachery. An official enquiry into Caporetto in 1919 dug his professional grave. Many of the senior officers who appeared before it followed Cadorna’s lead and claimed that defeatism was widespread on the eve of the battle. General Di Giorgio (subsequently War Minister 1924–1925), for one, emphasized the ‘extra military’ character of the defeat (though he afterwards changed his mind).² The commissioners chose to think otherwise. They charged Cadorna with overseeing a military defeat whose causes were technical but also, and particularly, moral. Completely ‘lacking in self-criticism’, he had presided over a command system characterized by bullying, whole-sale dismissals of senior officers often for no good reason, and the application of brutally harsh discipline (the enquiry identified 729 death sentences that had been carried out, but did not add the decimations and summary executions which also marked Cadorna’s time in command of the Italian armies). In retirement, Cadorna produced several volumes of memoirs justifying his conduct of the war. He died, aged 78, in 1928.

Cadorna, English readers will gather, is a highly controversial figure. The Right continues to defend him fiercely in print, the Left to denigrate him and even expunge his memory from the public scene: in 2011, the mayor of Udine, where he had his wartime headquarters, took his name off one of the city’s squares. A useful ‘narrative-biography’ by the journalist Gianni Rocca, about which Mondini is perhaps a little ungenerous, does exist, but Cadorna was undoubtedly in need of a good modern scholarly analysis.³ Mondini has provided it.

2 Luca Falsini, *Processo a Caporetto. I documenti inediti della disfatta* (Rome, 2017), pp. 37, 42.

3 Gianni Rocca, *Cadorna. Il generalissimo di Caporetto* (Milan: Mondadori, 2004 [1985]). Mondini describes the book as ‘brilliant, totally a-problematic (and today decidedly unserviceable)’. Mondini, p. 12.

Mondini's biography falls into two more or less equal parts. The first, which takes Cadorna from his birth in 1850 to the outbreak of the war, explains how the 'mental furniture' that Cadorna carried into the war came to be. On the one hand, he was very much a product of his background – not, Mondini tells us, at the heart of the Piedmontese military elite, but the son of a General, Raffaele Cadorna, who had overseen the taking of Rome in 1870 before being summarily dismissed when the Left came to power in 1877. From his father's experiences in the wars of the Risorgimento, Cadorna took away the belief in a 'single guiding mind' in war (p. 59), the recognition (amounting almost to an expectation) that incompetent individual commanders could cause disasters, and the belief that the army he chose to join was riven by personal and professional rivalries.

Mondini does not probe Cadorna's psychological make-up very far – though he certainly does not duck his subject's many unappealing qualities, describing him variously as solipsistic, schizophrenic, misanthropic, and 'maniacally suspicious' (p. 247) of any discussion – but Cadorna was surely much influenced by the sudden decanting of his father. Perhaps his 'granite certainty' of being in the right (p. 214) masked a deeper insecurity. For reasons that still remain to be fully explored, Cadorna certainly nursed a visceral loathing of Freemasons, who he was convinced were out to undermine and destroy him. And he was opinionated almost to the point of insubordination, as his correspondence with the pre-war chief of the Italian general staff, General Alberto Pollio, shows quite clearly.

Cadorna was a product of his place. He was also, as Mondini shows, a product of his time: not just a soldier who, like his contemporaries, believed in the necessity of harsh discipline, but also one who, like almost all his European contemporaries, believed in the efficacy of the offensive. Here, exhibit 1 for the prosecution is Cadorna's 'red book' (so called because of its binding), *Attacco frontale e ammaestramento tattico* ('Frontal attack and tactical training'), published in February 1915. Many historians have taken it as an almost mindless paean to the *offensive à outrance*. Mondini re-positions it as not much more than a re-edition of old regulations (written by somebody else) which 'remains today misunderstood' (pp. 170-1) and an encapsulation of what his military attachés in Paris and Berlin were telling him: that success was possible for frontal attacks. This lets Cadorna off a hook on which numerous historians, foremost among them Giorgio Rochat, have hung him: that he was getting very accurate reports about the stalemate that trench warfare was producing, but took no notice of them. It is certainly the case, as Mondini shows, that Cadorna did slightly modify his apparently whole-hearted endorsement of the offensive on the eve of the war (pp. 165-6), but his defence of this aspect of his subject's career will probably not win over all of Cadorna's critics.

Cadorna became chief of the Italian general by pure chance when Pollio died on 1 June 1914 and led Italy's armies into the war 11 months later. Mondini's account of the 30 months that followed bears out the charges levelled at his subject by the commission of enquiry. Cadorna ran the war from an isolated headquarters – the *sancta sanctorum* – where a handful of colonels held divisional and corps commanders at bay. He sacked 600 officers, among them 176 generals, and terrorized his subordinates, as a result of which many launched hopeless attacks simply because they did not dare do otherwise. He

discounted any idea of an Austrian *Strafexpedition* in 1916 because it made no sense to him (though he later reacted with energy and effectiveness). At Caporetto, his command failures – inadequate reserves, the lack of rearward lines of defence, and a command headquarters that never had a grip on the battle – were the multipliers of misfortune when, in the words of the latest historian of the battle, ‘a couple of tactical episodes . . . led to the breaking of the front and transformed it into the cause of a rout’.⁴ The accusations made against Cadorna by the commission of enquiry into the causes of Caporetto were, Mondini concludes, ‘for the most part justified’ (p. 294).

Summing up Cadorna’s life and career, Mondini sees ‘a typical exponent . . . of the culture, the ambitions and the obsessions of his generation’. Neither particularly clever nor particularly inept, he was a soldier in a continent ‘crowded’ with professional soldiers who all shared, more or less, ‘the same [professional] formation, the same defects and the same incapacity to understand modernity, with its technological novelties and its revolutions’ (pp. 311–2). This may not sound a particularly controversial conclusion – but in some ways it is. For one thing, it speaks to a particular conception of Italian military culture which not everyone will accept. For another, work is now being done to exonerate Cadorna from some of the more detailed charges of technical inadequacy and incapacity.⁵ Debate will undoubtedly continue. For the moment, though, and probably for some time to come, Mondini’s biography has supplanted everything that came before it. Will an astute publisher commission a translation so that English-speaking historians can measure Cadorna against Joffre, Haig, Nivelle, and other Great War luminaries? I very much hope so.

Victor Davis Hanson, *The Second World Wars: How the First Global Conflict Was Fought and Won*, Basic Books: New York, 2017, xxi + 652 pp.: 9780465066988, £29.34 (hbk) maps, photographs

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The daunting historiography of World War II in some ways shows a pendulum-like movement. That also applies to one of the most frequently asked questions about the most destructive conflict in human history: Was its outcome inevitable? In other words, were the Axis powers destined to loose from the start? For long, the answer to that question seemed obvious, historians and other academics simply pointing at the huge difference in numbers of troops and industrial power of the Allies compared to the Axis countries.

However, halfway through the 1990s, Richard Overy published his justifiably acclaimed *Why the Allies Won*, in which he – generally speaking – stated that the answer to the above question was not that straightforward at all and that ‘God does not always

4 Nicola Labanca, *Caporetto. Storia e memoria di una disfatta* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2017), p. 108.

5 ‘Luigi Cadorna, luci di un comandante controverso’ and ‘Cadorna visto da generali, politici, giornalisti e storici del suo tempo’, special edition of the *Rivista militare*, 2017, pp. 2–14, 15–32.