Book Reviews

Giuseppe Astuto, *La decisione di guerra: dalla Triplice alleanza al Patto di Londra*, Rubbettino Editore, Soveria Mannelli, 2019, pp. 578.

Giuseppe Astuto analyses a crucial passage of contemporary Italian history: the decision-making path that led Italy's ruling class to declare war on the Central Powers in 1915. Drawing on a wide range of diplomatic documents, archival sources and first-hand accounts, Astuto examines Italy's decision to abandon the Triple Alliance and join the Entente, with a sweeping review of Italian history from national unification to May 16, 1915, when the government headed by Antonio Salandra won a parliamentary vote of confidence after signing the secret Pact of London.

In the introduction, Astuto explains his methodological approach, observing that a preliminary examination of developments preceding 1914-1915 was necessary because the events of those critical two years stemmed from choices made in the decades immediately following the unification of Italy. The words of Vittorio Emanuele Orlando that appear in the epigraph suggest the author's analytical approach: Astuto argues, in fact, that there was an "advance decision" on Italian participation in the war (p. 13). Orlando, who represented Italy at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, declares that regarding this "great history", the "concurrence of mysterious coincidences" must be emphasized; that the convergence of cases which seem to us accidental and in any event of little importance ends up exerting decisive influence.[1] By contrast, a book written by Antonio Salandra,

[1] V.E. Orlando, *Memorie 1915-1919*, ed. R. Mosca, Rizzoli, Milan, 1960, p. 27.

Orlando avers, would have treated the "great Italian decision" as the outcome and point of convergence of decisions made in advance.[2] In Astuto's view, "the war decision" was neither predetermined nor purely the product of contemporary contingencies. His book is intended to fill a gap: "Since the pioneering works by Brunello Vigezzi, which stop at the death of San Giuliano [foreign minister until his death in October 1914] and some important conferences on the occasion of the centenary [of Italy's entry into war], there has been no comprehensive, in-depth analysis of the responsibilities of the institutional leaders (in particular, the monarchy, the government and the ruling class) and their relations with opinion movements, interventionist or neutralist" (pp. 13-14). Astuto addresses a multiplicity of problems that marked the decades preceding Italy's break with the Tripe Alliance, declaration of neutrality and subsequent intervention on the side of Entente. These developments were not the obvious outcome of previous decisions, but the result of the maturation of the geopolitical role of Italy in the Adriatic and in the Mediterranean" (p. 19).

The author highlights the role played by key political and social actors: "the monarchy, the government, diplomatic personnel, the majority and the opposition, political parties, economic strata and the press" (p. 18). The political life of post-unification Italy, like politics during the Risorgimento, was rife with divisions. In the domestic sphere, the predominant theme during the so-called Giolittian era was the revolt against Giovanni Giolitti, the dominant politician of the day, while in foreign policy the central issue of debate was the national "aspiration" to become a great power (pp. 16-17). In the years preceding the Great War, Italy underwent what Astuto calls a "political-cultural conversion," with leaders of the Liberal state having recourse to "extra-parliamentary mechanisms" and "aggressive minorities not averse to the use of violence and nationalist mobilization" (p. 17). Astuto proposes his

[2] Ibidem.

own interpretation of the link between the crisis of the Liberal state and the birth of Fascism, an issue treated by most studies of Italian intervention in the First World War and its consequences. Like others before him, he argues that the "radiant days" of popular mobilization to bring Italy into the war did not constitute "the direct premise of Fascism, but they did reveal the ongoing disintegration of an entire political system." The author, therefore, observes: "According to this hypothesis, which is very acceptable, the intervention would not be configured as an anti-parliamentary rebellion and as a coup d'état by a minority endorsed by Vittorio Emanuele III" (p. 18).

Astuto's work takes a chronological approach. The first part reconstructs Italian foreign policy and the birth of the Triple Alliance in 1882, which was "renewed until 1912," as an Italian response to the French occupation of Tunisia (p. 20). The thirty-year span of the Triple Alliance is analysed in detail. Astuto explains its drawbacks and advantages for Italy. The latter consisted chiefly in the easing of potential frictions, participation as an emerging power in the management of the continental balance of power, and an injection of German capital, which accelerated Italy's economic progress. In the last part of the volume, Astuto addresses the question of paramount important that his study poses: who was responsible for the war decision in exceptional cases? At a time of severe political and institutional crisis, King Victor Emmanuel III had unique and supreme responsibility for the destiny of Italy. The sovereign, therefore, had to decide "according to the letter of the Albertine Statute" (Italy's constitution) and respecting the choices made from the signing of the Treaty of London onwards (pp. 21-22). The Government, though it had now resigned, had made morally binding commitments that had to be honoured by the king, who thereby also safeguarded the Albertine Statute.

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