

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 150

“Caporetto”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

In May 1915, when Italy entered the Great War at the urging of Britain and France, it had been possible to hope that the balance of power had now shifted decisively against the Central Powers. David Lloyd George, for one, believed that the Austrian military, already stretched to defend their frontier with Serbia and hold off the far larger Russian Army in Galicia, would collapse under the burden of defending yet another front line. Italy joined the Great War with an army of 36 divisions, a far more formidable force than the mere six divisions of the British Expeditionary Force in France, at least on paper.

And yet, after two years of fighting, during which the Italians threw their numerically superior army against the Austrian defensive lines again and again in bloody offensive after bloody offensive, the strategic situation remained unchanged, except that both sides were nearing exhaustion. The Italian front might just come down to who collapses first.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme.]

Episode 150. Caporetto.

Italy is a nation with a long and distinguished military history. I trust I don't need to remind you of the military accomplishments of the Romans over the millennium between 500 BC and AD. The Roman Empire eventually fell of course, but Italians remained prominent in military history long afterward. The Republic of Venice was a major power in the eastern Mediterranean for over five centuries. The Venetians helped sustain the Byzantine Empire, then helped tear it down when they became the first enemy ever to capture the fortress city of Constantinople. Venetian armies and especially navies maintained control of crucial outposts and trade routes against much larger Arab and Turkish empires. Renaissance Italian armies were on the cutting edge of

new gunpowder weapons such as the arquebus and the cannon, as well as new techniques of fortress construction to resist those new weapons.

Italy was Napoleon's playground during the Napoleonic Wars, but French Revolutionary ideals of liberalism and nationalism helped spark the *Risorgimento* and Italian unification, as we saw in episodes 22 and 23. The small kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia successfully challenged Austrian domination of the peninsula and grew into the Kingdom of Italy. This new Italian kingdom became a colonial power in Africa, participated in the alliance against the Boxer Uprising in China, and seized Libya and the Dodecanese Islands from the Ottoman Empire, episodes 15, 23, and 66. The Italian Navy boasts six dreadnought battleships.

But all is not well in Italy. The project of "making Italians" out of the peoples of the peninsula remains incomplete. In particular, southern Italy, the former Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, has not caught up after being held back by centuries of feudalism and despotism. Italy is still mostly an agrarian economy, particularly in the south where poor, illiterate peasant farmers struggle to feed their families and are more likely to dream about emigrating to America than about the greater glory of the Kingdom of Italy. The story is told that back in the Napoleonic era, the then-King of the Two Sicilies was brought a proposal from his military chiefs on redesigning the army uniform as a way of boosting morale. The King is said to have replied, "Dress them in red, blue, or green—they'll run away just the same."

The liberalism and nationalism of the 19th century was supposed to change that. Patriotic nationalism was supposed to be a better motivator than loyalty to some Habsburg, but this notion had not fully infused the new Kingdom of Italy. Italy's first adventure in Ethiopia ended in the humiliating defeat of the Battle of Adwa. The war against the Ottomans gained Italy new territories but had left the nation already war weary, divided, and indebted when she entered the Great War less than two years later.

Italy was officially a constitutional monarchy with a parliament, but an illiteracy rate above 40%, and much higher in the south, mitigated the advantages of democracy. Liberals and nationalists looked to the Great War as an opportunity to bring Italy together and stir the national spirit by completing the work of the *Risorgimento*. But Italian socialists opposed this expansionist war as a distraction from the real work of making life better for those *already* citizens of Italy. These socialists mostly represented the interests of workers in the industrial north. No one represented the farmers of the south, as usual. They could be forgiven for doubting whether unification and liberal democracy had done anything at all to improve *their* lives, and further doubting whether the war in the Alps would make anything better in Palermo or Naples.

But the political leaders of Italy persisted in this belief that war and the victory and territorial gains that would follow would help unite Italians, despite the fact that even before the Great War began, there was ample historical evidence, from Ethiopia and Libya, to the contrary. But they

kept on, much as her military leaders kept on ordering frontal assaults against entrenched enemies, and there was already way too much of *that!*

The Kingdom of Italy had inherited the military traditions of Piedmont-Sardinia, including its expertise in artillery and fortifications. And I suppose it's worth noting that in the early 19th century, Piedmont-Sardinia had the only officer corps in Europe that allowed Jews admission to its ranks. The Italian Army of the Great War still had an officer corps that was mostly educated northerners, who also dominated the artillery and engineer units, as well as Italy's elite Alpine units. But the infantry soldiers in the trenches were mostly southerners who served with little enthusiasm and were looked down upon by their northern officers for their illiteracy, their lack of education, and their rustic accents.

The Italian state was still in debt from the war with the Turks, and it was British money that funded Italian military operations in the Great War. The economic stimulus of the war did expand the Italian industrial base. Italy manufactured thousands of airplanes, dozens of warships, tens of thousands of artillery guns, and tens of millions of shells during the war. The war also sparked inflation, as it was doing in most places, but factory salaries in northern Italy kept up with rising costs of living. The incomes of the farmers in the south, not so much.

Italy began the war with serious shortages of arms and ammunition with which to fight. She could mobilize 36 infantry divisions, but those divisions only had 120 modern artillery guns among them. In that regard, Italy resembles no other country so much as Russia, its soldiers poorly trained and poorly equipped.

If the rank-and-file Italian soldiers resemble their Russian counterparts, their commander, Luigi Cadorna, resembles no one so much as his opposite number across the Alps, General Conrad. Like Conrad, Cadorna was a respected military theoretician who had little practical experience. He was a strutting martinet of a man who married Conrad's gift of making the wrong decisions over and over again and then blaming his own soldiers when it doesn't work with the haughty northern Italian tendency to look down on the uneducated southerners. I've already noted Cadorna's remarkably harsh command. A staggering 6% of all Italian soldiers who fought in the Great War were subjected to some form of disciplinary punishment, a figure that far exceeds any other army of the period.

We've also seen how geography isn't helping the Italians any. The front line runs through the Alps, the most rugged terrain in Europe, which allows the Austrians to hold their side of the line with only about half the number of soldiers on the Italian side.

The most promising offensive terrain is at the far eastern end of the line, at the Isonzo River. The problem is, this is also the most obvious place to attack, and therefore the place where the Austrians will be best prepared. It is also an extended position, forcing the Italians to use long supply lines that follow the line of the Alps into the northeast, making them potentially vulnerable to an Austrian counterattack from the north.

None of this will stop Cadorna from ordering offensives into the Austrian lines along the Isonzo River over and over again, frontal assaults into entrenched enemies armed with modern weapons. How many times will it take before people learn not to do that? These assaults didn't work along the Isonzo River any better than they did anywhere else they'd been tried, but Cadorna kept trying, and when it didn't work, he kept blaming his soldiers. Perhaps a few more firing squads will help motivate our troops. As you know, 1915 saw the First, Second, Third, and Fourth Battles of the Isonzo. 1916 will see the Fifth, Sixth, Seventh, Eighth, and Ninth.

By early 1916, the civilian leaders of the Italian government began getting tired of all this bloodshed and Prime Minister Salandra suggested to Cadorna that perhaps Italy needed a War Cabinet like the one in Britain, a committee of ministers who would consult with him on the conduct of the war. Cadorna haughtily replied that he answered only to the King, Victor Emmanuel III. When the minister of war criticized Cadorna's conduct of the fighting, it was the war minister who was forced to resign.

The year 1917 opened with more of the same, with the Tenth Battle of the Isonzo River in May. At the cost of over 150,000 casualties, the Italian Army pushed the front line east from the river and to within fifteen miles of the port city of Trieste. Which was pretty good by Great War standards, although it would be just as accurate to say that two years of bloody combat had gotten the Italian Army halfway to its first objective.

August 1917 saw the Eleventh Battle of the Isonzo River, in which the Italians suffered another 150,000 casualties. They gained little ground, but did succeed in nearly shattering the much smaller Austrian force arrayed against them. Unfortunately for the Italian Army, the offensive came close to shattering it as well.

The Italians had already met with the British and French commanders at Allied war councils and requested that British and French troops be sent to the Italian front to lend a hand. You can imagine how these requests were received by the British and French militaries. They reacted in much the same way that Falkenhayn used to react when General Conrad would ask him for German troops to help the Austrians hold off the Russians. Roughly like this: "Dude, your job is to draw enemy forces away from *our* armies, not draw our forces away from the *real* enemy." After much discussion, an agreement was reached. The Italians would be on their own as regarded the Austrians, because let's face it, if you can't even hold off the *Austrian* Army, then you deserve whatever you get. Even the Serbian Army could manage that much.

But, the Allies were willing to make one important exception. If *German* military units began appearing on the Italian front, well, that would be different. We've already seen how Germany's central position and its advanced network of railroads has allowed the German military to move large numbers of soldiers quickly and efficiently from one front to another, allowing them to surprise the Allies with a sudden local numerical superiority pretty much anywhere they want, anytime they want.

Remember that the sudden appearance of Germans in Galicia in 1915 quickly rolled back the Russian advance there, episode 101. Later that same year, Germans appeared in the Balkans and the year-long standoff between Austria and Serbia turned into a Serbian collapse soon thereafter, episode 111. A surprise offensive on the Italian front, spearheaded by the Germans, was not beyond the realm of possibility. It would in fact be perfectly consistent with the Allies' previous experience.

Well, that's why the top brass get paid the big bucks—to anticipate a possibility like this and be prepared for it. In this particular case, the British and the French declined to send troops to the Italian front right now, but they did give the Italians a promise. If and when the Germans turn up on your front, we'll be there to help.

The truth was that the British and French governments were getting pretty darn fed up with the Italians. As I indicated at the top of the episode, they'd had good reason to hope back in 1915 that the entry of Italy into the war would be a tipping point in the military balance between the Allies and the Central Powers. But the reality did not live up to expectations, and here we are two years later, with the Italians asking for help.

The Allies had other reasons to be impatient with Italy. Even as the Italians were burning through Allied money and supplies and asking for further assistance, they were also sending Italian soldiers into southern Albania without consulting with their allies, a move that everyone in London and Paris saw as having nothing to do with larger Allied strategic considerations and everything to do with Italy's territorial ambitions in the Balkans.

Also, as you remember from episode 141, I discussed the new Austrian Emperor, Kaiser Karl, and his secret peace initiative of 1917. That initiative isn't going to pan out; in fact, it only got as far as it did because the Allies were under the mistaken impression that Karl was dangling an offer of a separate peace that would leave Germany isolated, when in fact all Karl was actually offering was to help pressure Germany to enter peace talks. But in the course of these talks, Karl asked the Allies to guarantee the pre-war Austrian borders in any peace agreement. Karl was happy to talk about German territorial concessions in Poland and Alsace-Lorraine, but no Austrian concessions, please.

This presented the British and the French with something of a quandary, since the 1915 London Pact that had brought Italy into the war had promised the Italians significant Austrian territories that to the Italians represented the completion of the *Risorgimento* project of uniting all Italians within the borders of the Kingdom of Italy, the most important of these territories being the Tyrolean Alps and the port city of Trieste and the Istria peninsula.

But that was more than Kaiser Karl was willing to barter away. Particularly Trieste, a predominately Italian-speaking city that also happens to be Austria's most important seaport. Strike that. Trieste is Austria's only important seaport, and Pola, on the southern tip of the Istria Peninsula, is Austria's shipbuilding center and her only naval base. The difference between

Austria keeping Trieste and Pola after the war versus ceding them to Italy is the difference between Kaiser Karl holding onto a slim hope of his Empire remaining a Great Power in the postwar world versus no hope whatsoever.

The Allies tried pressing the Austrian Emperor. He was willing to bend so far as to offer a portion of the Tyrolean Alps, but no farther. When the British and the French raised this topic with the Italians, they were incensed. The Kaiser's offer amounted to less than the Austrians had previously offered Italy two years ago to remain neutral! And Karl would not budge at all on Trieste, which to Rome was as Italian as minestrone, as roasted peppers in olive oil on freshly baked bread, followed by a nice green salad with garlic and balsamic vinegar, as *pasta e fagioli*, as chicken *cacciatore*, as eggplant *parmigiana* with a side of tortellini alfredo, and rounded off with a nice tiramisù for dessert...

You know, I gotta stop recording these podcasts just before lunch...

Anyway, the British and French got out the map that Sykes and Picot had made, the one in which they had divvied up the territories of the Ottoman Empire between the British, French, and Russians, and carved out a nice juicy piece of pork loin—I mean, of western Anatolia, along the Aegean coast, close to those islands Italy had won in her war with the Empire four years ago. Take this piece of Turkey—I mean, well, yes, I do mean this piece of Turkey. Take this piece of Turkey in exchange for surrendering your claim on Trieste and the Istria Peninsula.

This sounded not at all reasonable to the Italians, who wondered what part of *Risorgimento* didn't their allies understand? It isn't about grabbing random pieces of territory on an entirely different continent just for the glory; it's about Italian nationalism and bringing the Italian people together under one flag. The people in Trieste are Italians, mostly. The people in Smyrna, not so much.

This Italian stubbornness irritated Paris and London. It wasn't as if the Italians were contributing all that much to the war effort, but now that we have the opportunity to pry Austria away from Germany and force an end to the war, the Italians are claiming a veto? Tell them to get lost and cut the deal with Austria, already.

But more moderate voices prevailed. In the British view, it was these promises of post-war territory that were holding the alliance together. If the Allies double-crossed Italy, would Serbia lose faith? What about Russia? With the increasing domestic pressure the Russian government was feeling to end the war, a loss of trust in her allies might just be the last straw and you might see Russia walk away, too.

No, it was deemed too risky to backtrack on the promises made to Italy, and in the end the secret negotiations with Kaiser Karl went nowhere anyway, but this dispute underscores how disappointed the other Allies have become with the Italians.

[music: Vivaldi, *Cello Sonata in E minor*]

From the other side of the line, though, the situation in the Alps looked much different. Kaiser Karl saw the Italians as a threat, and the two Italian offensives this year, the Tenth and Eleventh Battles of the Isonzo had pushed the Austrian Army almost to the breaking point. On August 25, while the eleventh Italian offensive was still on, Kaiser Karl wrote to his brother Emperor, Wilhelm, to say, “The experience we have acquired in the eleventh battle has led me to believe that we should fare far worse in a twelfth. My commanders and brave troops have decided that such an unfortunate situation might be anticipated by an offensive. We have not the necessary means as regards troops.”

This analysis was quite correct. The Italians had made only small gains in their eleven offensives, but they had succeeded in crossing the Isonzo River in two places: at the town of Gorizia, toward the south, and farther north at the town of Caporetto. In these two sectors, Italian units had reached the high ground on the Austrian side of the river. These units, of the Italian Second Army, were crammed into forward positions on the east side of the river, poised for the next offensive, but there were precious few troops in the rear, which would prove the Italians’ undoing.

That’s because between these advanced positions, the Austrians still held the high ground above the Isonzo valley, overlooking the town of Tolmino, a glaring weakness in the Italian position. Cadorna must have been aware of it, but he must have judged the Austrians lacked the means to exploit it.

Karl’s request was that German units take over some Austrian positions on the Russian front in order to free up Austrians who could be redeployed to the Italian front, thus beefing up the Austrian lines until they were capable of taking advantage of the exposed Italian position.

Hindenburg and Ludendorff hated this idea, of course, but soon came around when they realized that Austria really was in danger of collapsing. Recall that this is September 1917. The Provisional Government—I should say, the Kerensky government—in Russia has already been rocked by the Kornilov affair and is taking heat from the Bolsheviks for not ending the war. The Germans are on the offensive along the Baltic coastline, using those fourteen divisions Hindenburg and Ludendorff had saved by shortening the front line in the West. Romania is all but beaten. It’s reasonable to hope that Russia is in the last stages of collapse. But if Austria collapses first, it would all be for naught. The pressure would be off the Russians and the Romanians and any hope of victory in the East would evaporate.

Ludendorff still didn’t like it very much and would complain vociferously. But it seemed inevitable that Germany was once again going to have to bail out the Austrians. Only, Hindenburg agreed with Ludendorff that taking up a larger share of the Eastern front was not the best option. It didn’t take a genius to figure out that once Austrian soldiers moved out of those trenches and German soldiers moved in, the Austrians wouldn’t be coming back and the

Germans would be stuck defending many more kilometers of front line in the East. What good was it shortening the Western Front if we're just going to be lengthening the Eastern Front?

It would be better, the duo decided, simply to provide German troops for the Italian front, to allow this offensive Kaiser Karl was talking about, an offensive to disrupt the Italian position, throw them back across the Isonzo, and buy the Austrians some time to take up better defensive positions and fortify them properly. The German units would then be withdrawn, to return to the Eastern Front and be used against the Russians.

German commanders studied the Italian positions and decided they liked the region around the town that the Italians called Caporetto. It was Karfreit to the Germans. Today, it is known as Kobarid and lies in modern Slovenia. And so, although the coming German and Austrian offensive is sometimes known as the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo, it is more commonly referred to as the Caporetto Offensive or the Battle of Caporetto. The Germans chose this point because there was a good road that ran through the town, bridged the Isonzo, and ran like an arrow into the heart of the Second Army position.

It wasn't that the Italian command didn't recognize that the Second Army could be vulnerable. The problems with his deployment were brought to the attention of the commander of the Second Army, Luigi Capello, but Capello was reluctant to take a defensive posture. He wanted to keep his army poised to attack and dismissed those concerns. He figured that if the Austrians did attack, the Second Army would simply unleash its offensive capability and throw the enemy back. It also wouldn't help the Italians any that Capello would be bedridden with a fever on the day the offensive began.

That day was October 24. The Germans were in position at Tolmino, where the Central Powers still held ground west of the river. These Germans were stormtroopers, battle hardened veterans of the Western Front, experienced in the latest techniques of modern warfare, techniques the Italians had not previously encountered. The assault began at two in the morning with a carefully timed gas attack that launched hundreds of canisters of chlorine and phosgene gas simultaneously into the Italian trenches facing the main assault.

Now, Italian troops were equipped with gas masks, but they weren't as good as the ones used on the Western Front. The protection they offered only lasted two hours, and if it's two in the morning now, that means it's still going to be dark when your mask fails. What would you do? To underscore the point, the Germans followed up with a hurricane barrage, a bombardment more intense than anything seen before on this front, from powerful guns that had been positioned so stealthily the Italians had no clue they were there. When the Germans advanced, they did not make the kind of broad infantry charge the Italians were used to. They relied on stormtrooper tactics, advancing rapidly in columns through weak points in the front line, aided by a heavy fog that lay over the battlefield.

The Italian Army was caught completely by surprise. Italian doctrine still clung to the obsolete principle that her soldiers should hold every inch of ground, regardless of how much it was worth. The Italians blew up the bridge across the Isonzo at Caporetto, but prematurely, trapping two divisions on the east bank of the river, while other bridges were left standing. German and Austrian attacks disrupted Allied command and control. Italian artillery fell silent. Soldiers couldn't contact their commanders and vice versa.

Two days into the fighting, General Cadorna reluctantly ordered the entire Italian Army, about one and a half million soldiers, to retreat to the Tagliamento River, more than twenty miles behind the previous front line. This is astonishing speed by Great War standards. The Germans and Italians in two days undid two years of Italian gains and advanced deeper into Italy than the Italians ever had into Austria. On October 28, German and Austrian troops marched into the city of Udine, which had hosted Cadorna's headquarters just four days earlier.

Over a quarter of a million Italian soldiers, mostly from the Second Army were surrounded and captured. Hundreds of thousands more were routed, retreating in disarray, having lost contact with their commanders. Hundreds of thousands of Italian civilians followed the retreat, a flood of humanity pouring southwest toward Venice.

The Tagliamento River was not wide enough to hold off the attackers, and the Central Powers crossed the river on November 2, forcing the Italians to withdraw farther. They would try again to establish a defensive line, this time on the Piave River, about thirty miles deeper into Italy. The involvement of German forces in the offensive triggered the Allied agreement, and British and French units began moving into Italy, an Allied force that would ultimately amount to five British and six French divisions. Their commanders doubted that the Italians could hold the line at the Piave and deployed their own units 60 miles farther back, at the line of the Mincio River.

Happily, their pessimism was unjustified. The Italians were indeed able to hold the Piave line. The Germans and Austrians found themselves advancing much faster and farther than they had expected and their supplies couldn't keep up. It's worth noting that by this time, November 1917, food shortages in Germany and Austria had gotten so bad that even soldiers weren't getting enough to eat. A German lieutenant named Erwin Rommel, who will be awarded the *Pour le Mérite* by Kaiser Wilhelm for his actions in this offensive, was particularly vocal about the demands being made on his soldiers even though they weren't even being fed properly.

Even so, the Battle of Caporetto was the worst military disaster in Italian history. The Italian Army lost about 40,000 soldiers killed or wounded, which are modest losses by Great War standards, and certainly less than the 70,000 Germans and Austrians killed or wounded, but these figures don't begin to tell the story. Remember to add in the 265,000 Italians taken prisoner and about 30,000 who took the opportunity to desert. The Italian Army lost about two-thirds of its artillery and machine guns, and the enemy is now in the heartland of northern Italy, less than twenty miles from Venice.

The very name “Caporetto” became a synonym for failure and disaster in Italy, and the defeat badly tarnished the reputation of the Italian military, for the rest of the twentieth century and on into our own day, really. And some blame for that poor reputation has to be cast upon General Cadorna, who publicly blamed the defeat on the cowardice of his own soldiers, a statement that sent Italian wartime censors scrambling to keep it out of the newspapers. They couldn’t keep it out of foreign newspapers, though, and within days, German airplanes were dropping propaganda leaflets on the retreating Italian soldiers declaring that “your General has dishonored you. He insults you to save himself.”

The defeat led to the fall of the government of the now 80-year-old Paolo Boselli, who became prime minister back in 1916 after the embarrassment of the Austrian offensive in the Alps of that year, episode 123. The interior minister, a relatively spry 57-year-old Sicilian landowner named Vittorio Emanuele Orlando, would take over as PM, while also keeping his interior ministry portfolio.

Caporetto finally made it politically feasible to do what the Italian government have been yearning to do for years now: sack General Cadorna. You’ll recall that the last time a civilian politician tried to get rid of Cadorna, he found his own career ended instead. But not only had Cadorna been in command during a military catastrophe, but his continued insistence on shifting the blame made his sacking not only feasible, but necessary. The new Italian Chief of Staff would be the 55-year-old General Armando Diaz, a Neapolitan of Spanish ancestry. It was under Diaz’s command that the Italians set up their new defensive position behind the Piave and ended the German and Austrian advance.

Diaz was a good choice to rebuild the shattered Army. You can think of him as an Italian version of Philippe Pétain. Like Pétain, he was regarded as a friend to the common soldier, a general who would not callously throw their lives away in battle, nor court martial a soldier for not keeping his cap on straight. You know, like Cadorna. Also like Pétain, Diaz would promise his soldiers better treatment and more legal rights and would raise morale by pressing for government land grants to war veterans, many of whom were impoverished, landless peasant farmers.

Cadorna, meanwhile, would continue to blame everyone but himself for the disaster. In addition to accusing his soldiers of cowardice, he would blame the labor unions and the socialists for hurting morale with their calls for peace. After the war, an Italian government inquiry would review the battle and would place the blame squarely on Cadorna, who would continue to protest his innocence and would participate in the popular postwar pastime of writing a memoir to establish that everything that went wrong during the Great War was someone else’s fault. Such memoirs would be all the rage across Europe in the 1920s.

The example of Russia may have helped convince Cadorna that the socialists were to blame. Keep in mind that the Bolsheviks in Russia seized power in the October Revolution just as the Italians were in the middle of their retreat to the River Piave, and like the Bolsheviks, the Italian

socialists were indeed staunch opponents of the war. The year 1917 saw a number of strikes in Italy, like everywhere else in Europe, and many large-scale anti-war demonstrations, mainly in Milan, some of which had turned violent. Still, there is no evidence, even in historical hindsight, that socialist agitation had convinced many Italian soldiers to quit fighting, in the way Bolshevik agitation had done in Russia.

Yet the problems facing the Italian war effort do echo the problems the Russians have had to face: shortages of arms and equipment, along with poorly educated and unmotivated soldiers who were mostly poor rural farm workers. The Italians also faced a huge desertion problem, just like the Russians. I already mentioned that some 30,000 soldiers routed at the Battle of Caporetto simply deserted, joining the over 100,000 Italian deserters already at large. Again, these were mostly poor rural farm workers. They were needed back home, and most of them went back to their rural farming communities, where their families and neighbors were happy to hide them from the authorities, in exchange for their labor in the fields.

Given all the similarities, you might wonder, is Italy ripe for a socialist revolution along the lines of the Russian example? But this will not be the case. Not quite yet, anyway. For one thing, the sight of Austrian soldiers marching back into the territory of Lombardy-Venetia, which the *Risorgimento* had wrested from Austrian control fifty years ago aroused in Italy the kind of patriotic fervor that the previous offensive war to seize a few scraps of Austrian leftovers could not muster. If there was any upside to the Battle of Caporetto, this was it.

We'll have to stop there for today. Thank you for listening. I'd also like to thank Clinton for making a donation, and thanks to Brent for becoming a patron of the podcast. If you have a few bucks or quid to spare and would like to convert some of your filthy lucre into unblemished karma, come and visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com, and while you're there, feel free to post a question or comment. You can also reach out over Facebook or Twitter. I'm still trying to figure out what Instagram is...

And I hope you'll join me next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we consider the case of the most famous spy of the Great War, perhaps the most famous spy of all time. Only, if she was a spy, she wasn't a very good one, and most likely she wasn't a spy at all. The Eye of the Day, next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. Speaking of Italian socialists, I think it appropriate that we take a minute to check in on the now 34-year-old Italian journalist Benito Mussolini. Last time we checked in on him, he had broken with his fellow socialists in supporting Italy's entry into the Great War, which moved the Italian Socialist Party to expel him. Mussolini enlisted in the Italian Army and served with dedication for nine months in the front lines, earning a promotion to corporal, before a grenade injured him. He was discharged in August 1917 and was therefore a civilian during the Battle of Caporetto.

He returned to work as editor of his newspaper, which was partially funded by Italian arms manufacturers, who were getting paid good money from the British to make arms for the Italian war effort and didn't want to see their business ruined by a bunch of dirty socialists, which made Mussolini's zeal for the war, often expressed in his newspaper using socialist and pseudo-socialist arguments, very valuable to them.

Mussolini's gifts for political agitation were also useful to the British. Although it wouldn't become public until the year 2009, British intelligence began paying Mussolini a stipend of £100 per week during this period, which works out to about US\$10,000 per week in today's money. That ain't chump change, but then the British valued his newspaper's lively writing, its reliably pro-war reporting, as well as Mussolini's work in organizing Italian war veterans to "persuade" anti-war demonstrators in Milan to end their protests. This "persuasion" generally involved violence.

One wonders if the British will come to regret investing in Mussolini and his unusual brand of politics.

[music: Closing War Theme]