

The Italian military presence in Anatolia (1919-1922)

The chronicle of an Italian disenchanted expansionistic attempt

Michael Malinconi

More than a century ago, a young Italy, still exhausted from the sacrifice plaid in War World I, occupied militarily the southern Anatolic peninsula. The operation revealed the future Italian Mediterranean strategies: clumsy, without a clear aim, doomed to failure and to a non-honourable withdraw without gains.

Premises

The Ottoman Empire's destiny after WWI appeared regulated by many agreements between the Allies during the war:

- The Treaty of London (1915), in which Italy negotiated, as a reward for its intervention beside the Triple Entente, as well as the regions of Trentino-Alto Adige, Venezia Giulia and few territories of Dalmatia, even the port of Antalya and its contiguous territories with important coal basins. As stated by Article 9 of the Treaty:

“Generally speaking, France, Great Britain and Russia recognise that Italy is interested in the maintenance of the balance of power in the Mediterranean and that, in the event of the total or partial partition of Turkey in Asia, she ought to obtain a just share of the Mediterranean region adjacent to the province of Antalya, where Italy has already acquired rights and interests which

formed the subject of an Italo-British convention. The zone which shall eventually be allotted to Italy shall be delimited, at the proper time, due account being taken of the existing interests of France and Great Britain. The interests of Italy shall also be taken into consideration in the event of the territorial integrity of the Turkish Empire being maintained and of alterations being made in the zones of interest of the Powers. If France, Great Britain and Russia occupy any territories in Turkey or in Asia during the course of the war, the Mediterranean region bordering on the Province of Antalya, within the limits indicated above, shall be reserved to Italy, who shall be entitled to occupy it”¹.

- The secret Sykes-Picot Agreement between France and Great Britain (1916) that stated their own influence areas in the Middle East and in Anatolia.
- San Giovanni Moriana's Agreements (1917) between France, Great Britain and Italy that recognized to Italy rights on a large part of South Anatolia, including Izmir, Antalya, Konya and Mersina. The agreements had to be submitted to the Russian approval but never was, due to the Bolshevik Revolution and to the Russian withdrawal from the war, with the consequent English and French claim to consider the agreements nulls. Taking advantage even of the United States President Woodrow Wilson's idealism that said itself adverse to any detachment from Constantinople of any region inhabited by Turkish people, the English government declared fallen the 1917's agreements and to not fell tied to any duty, except for Article 9 of the Treaty of London. In Italy, where was growing the idea of a “mutilated victory”, the public opinion was afraid to see disappointed even this article of the Treaty of London.

Signing the Mudros Armistice (1918) the Ottoman Empire declared the cease of the hostilities with the Allies and accepted the conditions advanced by the winning powers. Article 7 of this Treaty is the most important for our analysis: “The Allies have the right to occupy any strategic point in the event of any situation arising which threatens the security of the Allies”². In other words, a blank sheet that could be interpreted in many ways.

The dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire was discussed at the Paris Peace Conference (January 1919 - January 1920), as well as the situation of the other loser nations. The firm opposition of the French and English delegations to Italian territorial aspirations in Anatolia and the Greek pressure for its own part of booty convinced Italy's Foreign Minister Sydney Sonnino that only a military action on the

¹ Text of the *Treaty of London (1915)* in Great Britain, *Parliamentary Papers*, London, 1920, LI Cmd. 671, Miscellaneous No. 7, 2-7.

² *Mudros Agreement: Armistice with Turkey* (October 30, 1918) in Germany History, in Documents and Images (GHDI), Volume 6. Weimar Germany, 1918/19–1933.

Anatolian coasts, without the knowledge of the Allies, could help the country's position in the negotiations.

After a study of the possible landings (chosen in the ports of Antalya, Bodrum and Kuşadası) and the knowledge that previous conflicts between the local population, that preferred any occupation force that wasn't Greek, and Greek emissaries could help the arrival of the Italian troops, the only thing missing was an opportunity.

The occupation of Antalya

In the night between the 27 and the 28 of March 1919, a bomb burst in the Christian district of Porta Nuova, in Antalya. The Italian Command judged the situation as critic for the lack of minimum guarantees of public order and the strong alarm within the local population.

With these premises, on March 29 the Chief of the Naval Station in the Dodecanese Islands, following the instructions of Sonnino, ordered the landing of two sailors' companies, soon substituted by Army Corps. The operation was justified in international offices as an action in order to defend the public order and the locals. From this moment on, the international community began to formulate many and repeated requests of departure that remained unheard.

Instead, other Army troops landed in April and began to penetrate the interior of the region along the railroad Antalya-Burdur, with the intention to get to Konya, where other Italian troops were dislocated in substitution of English ones, as part of the international occupation force. The attempt failed due to the English diplomatic pressure, but the Italian troops occupied the railroad. Furthermore, Sonnino felt necessary to dislocate Navy units in front of Kuluk, Bodrum, Marmarice and Macri so to be able to occupy them quickly in case of a Greek advance on Izmir.

The situation in Paris

Meanwhile on April 24 the Italian Prime Minister, Vittorio Emanuele Orlando, decided to withdraw the Italian delegation from the Paris Peace Conference as a sign of protest after conflicts with the President of the United States Woodrow Wilson on the definition of the Italian oriental border. The delegation came back to the table of negotiations only on May 7.

In Paris was taking place a tough game. Great Britain, queen of the balance of power and interested in maintaining the role of referee in the Middle East field, feared an Italian possible expansion, that with Libya and the Dodecanese was raising as a second rival in the Mediterranean. Recognizing other Italian possessions would have been an annoyance. In this view London used the Greek expansionism, i.e. a

small power easily controllable, in an anti-Italian function, in the same way as it used the Arab nationalism in an anti-French function. Greece, represented by its Foreign Minister Eleutherius Venizelos, was interested in creating the myth of 'the Great Idea': the annexation to the Greek State of all the territories with Greek ethnic population in Asia Minor. With the English approval and taking advantage of Italy's delegation absence, on May 6 Greece got the permission from the Supreme Council of the Allied Powers to intervene in the Anatolia's Aegean coast. The predilection for Greece between the Council had a strategic explanation for the English and French, an idealistic explanation for the Americans. On May 15, 1919, the Greek army occupied Izmir, Aydin, Magnesia, Kassaba, Ayalik ed Edemieh. In Izmir, already guarded by an international force, Greek troops were acclaimed by the Greek population but when a Turk nationalist fired a gunshot in order to kill a Greek soldier the situation degenerated. The Greek troops fired, insulted, plundered and beat the Ottoman garrison and even the Turkish population causing over 400 deaths.

The other landings

After the Allies' permission to the Greek occupation, the Italian command rushed up the operations for the landings in other coast cities. The landings in Kuşadası and Kuluk represented the answer to the Greek occupation of Izmir, instead the intervention on Bodrum, Macri and Marmarice were justified as a public order measure.

On May 11, at the first light of day, a sailor's company, soon followed by an army's company, landed in Bodrum. The weak complaints of the *Caimacam*, the governors of Provincial Districts, were mitigated as the days went through and the small ottoman authority made itself clearer. On the contrary the population sympathized so with the Italians that took place an anti-Hellenic demonstration and, once finished, the Mufti with the city's notables handed to the Italian commander, Francesco Sartoris, a written protest which synthetized the outcome of the demonstration and confirmed that was the Turks' firm will that the Greeks leave their country, reminding the principle of auto determination.

As soon as the landing in Bodrum was confirmed, it was given the order of boarding for the other units. So, in the night of May 11 Italian units landed also in Marmarice and Macri, and on May 14 Kuşadası. Due to the exiguity of the units it was impossible to extend the occupations at east of Antalya. General Armando Diaz, Chief of Staff of the Army, communicated at the dislocated units that "the political meaning of our occupation consists more of ours troops presence that of its entity"³.

The unauthorized occupations provoked strong complaints in Paris, where Prime Minister Orlando justified them as reasons of public order and answers to the population's requests. The occupations, in

³ AUSSME, E-3, b. 3, f. 3/3 a, telegramm of Diaz of 14/05/1919

reality, were motivated by Sonnino's desire to create a state of force that could let Rome support from a strong position its aspiration in the East. The motivations were exclusively political. With it, he aimed to safeguard Italy's position as a great power in front of the other powers' acquisitions for the maintenance of the Mediterranean equilibrium. He aimed to build a proportionality of acquisitions in front of the English and French ones, already ensured in Syria, Palestine and Mesopotamia. Despite Sonnino's project the Entente's position, peeved by the aggressive Italian initiative, was always more taking shape against Rome's territorial aspirations. If the Turks demanded the Italian protection, the English authorities favoured the Greek advance. While the Greeks were concentrating troops and spreading propaganda according to which the Italian action was temporary, the Turks were forming gangs and promising massacres. Between them, the Italian contingent with its neutral vest and its small number of men, appeared weak to both parts. Also, while the Greek contingent (50 000 men) was concentrated in the proximity of Izmir, the Italian contingent (2-3000 men) was spread between Antalya and Kuşadası, a field long almost 400 km. In the meanwhile, the penetration in Anatolia continued: up to June 26 Italian troops had reached Söke, Milas, Tekkè, Kurfali, Bergaz, Ephesus.

The requests that in June the Chief of the Expedition, General Giuseppe Battistoni, advanced to the Italian Supreme Council give us a clear view of the logistic problems on the field: first of all, an increase in the number of men on the field, in order to contain the greek expansion but also to appear more credible at the Turkish eyes. Moreover, the Expedition Corp was put together in order to occupy certain ports on the coasts, but the new developments involved the necessity to advance towards the interior, action that would have involved a strong troop increase. Battistoni also proposed the institution of an Italian cabotage line Istanbul- Kuşadası- Kuluk- Rhodes, due to the difficulties of the ottoman authorities to maintain safe communications with Izmir, and so with Istanbul; a rearrangement of the ottoman gendarmerie, that was cooperating in the maintenance of the public order; a censorship against the Greek propaganda; the improvement of naval services Italy- Rhodes- Anatolia; the reactivation of the telecommunication cables Rhodes- Marmarice- Kos- Bodrum, construction of which was abandoned after the Italo Turkish war; works of public interests. All this proposals were frozen due to the Government change and the appointment in July of Lieutenant General Luigi Bongiovanni as Chief of the Expedition, in place of General Battistoni, that had political divergences with the Supreme Command (Battistoni pressured to support Turkish revindications against the Greeks).

In 1919 Italy was going through a radical reordination of the Army, released from the war not in good conditions, that meant also a strong dismissal, reducing the number of men from 1 578 000 to 600 000. For this, if the expedition in Anatolia in spring was projected as a strong signal to the intransigency of the Allies, moreover with doubtful outcomes, in the summer the strategy was to rationalize the presence. In this optic, without the resources to dislocate new units in Anatolia, the War Committee on July 11 decided to unite under only one command, named the East Mediterranean Italian Expedition Force, the

Expedition Force in Anatolia and the Occupation Force in the Aegean, responsible for the Dodecanese and Scutari and of the part of Constantinople assigned to the Italians during the international occupation of the city.

Nitti's Government

Around mid-June the Italian Government lost the Parliament's trust following the ruinous withdraw of the Executive at the Peace Conference, so the Orlando's Government was replaced by one led by Francesco Saverio Nitti as Prime Minister, a radical very careful to the economic aspect in foreign policy, and Tommaso Tittoni as Foreign Minister. Tittoni sought a rapprochement towards the Allies and in this optic stopped any other claim to further expeditions and sought to fix a demarcation line between Greek and Italian areas, fundamental assumption to begin a negotiation on possible common borders in Albania and Anatolia. Also, he made clear that in the projects of the new government there wasn't territorial aspirations but economic results and furthermore he guaranteed that no more landings would have occurred.

In the meanwhile, Tittoni, trying to approach Venizelos and calibrate concessions and benefits, ordered to his troops to not interfere in the clashes and to grant protection to the Greek population. The order was received with no little irony, considering that all the Meandro region was in flames and massacred by the Greek troops. The Greek Army could also count on the Greek communities' support in Anatolia. Indeed, groups of civilians, mainly bourgeois, part of the Hellenic minority, helped regular Greek units in lootings, village fires and civilian's massacres. This mix between regular troops and sorts of bandits, overruled their assigned areas and got involved even in isolated skirmishes with Italian troops.

The Tittoni-Venizelos Treaty

Tittoni's diplomatic opening action towards Greece and his strengthen action towards the Allies were not late to give its fruits. On July 29, 1919, Tittoni signed with Venizelos a secret Treaty (called Tittoni-Venizelos) with which both countries recognized their respective areas of influence and occupation in Anatolia and guaranteed reciprocal support in their respective expansionistic desires: Italy would have supported Greek revindications in Thrace and North Albania, Greece instead would have supported the Italian request of a mandate in Albania, the annexation of Vlorë and would have renounced to her claims in Asia Minor. In addition, Rome would have given her islands in the Aegean Sea to Athens, except Rhodes. The agreement was crucial. For the Greek government meant the first acknowledgment of its territorial aspirations, without the need of a confrontation with the Turks. For the Italian government meant the legitimacy of its presence in Anatolia, the possibility to create an influence area on the east

coast of the Adriatic Sea, a wide territory in Albania and Asia Minor with outlets on the Black Sea, Sea of Marmara and on the Mediterranean. The treaty, that had to remain secret, was published in August by Greek journals, putting Italy in a serious situation with the Empire. Situation that Italy tried to improve with reassurances and the use of medical services for the population.

Mustafa Kemal's uprising

Between the spring and the summer 1919 the Turkish nationalist uprising, direct consequence of the power vacuum inside the Empire and its dissolution, led by the hero Mustafa Kemal, began clashes, mainly against the Greeks. In little time the old centre of the Ottoman Empire found itself between an Asia Minor in the hands of the Turkish nationalism and an unpopular government without power. Tittoni, as well as London and Paris, saw in Kemal a diplomatic card, hoping to exchange the Italian support to his revolutionary movement for the recognition of the Italian occupations in Anatolia. But Kemal was himself in a difficult situation: how could he hire power and become the real interlocutor in front of the Allies and at the same time encourage the revolution?

The Treaty of Sèvres

In February 1920 the Paris Peace Conference was articulated in a series of treaties with the single war loser nations. The Ottoman Empire signed the Sèvres Treaty. After the Anglo-French decision to not dismember Turkey for political reasons, the Treaty established an international control of the Straits, the concession of the Bosphorus to the Turkish government, the cession of Thrace to Greece, the formation of autonomous entities for Armenia and Kurdistan, and the formation of special political and economic orders for the Sultan's territories not inhabited by Arabs. The territory between Kuşadası and Antalya was recognized as an Italian economic area of penetration. The Treaty also stated the Italian possession of the Dodecanese (in a second treaty granted to Greece to respect the Tittoni-Venizelos Agreement), and the Greek occupation of Izmir and contiguous territories.

The withdrawal

In autumn the Italian government, driven by budgetary reasons and by the will to reduce at the minimum missions abroad, diminished the contingent in East Mediterranean.

The clashes between Kemalist bands and Greek troops continued, often with the Greeks having the worst. In the Italian sector the local population participated in the uprising mainly creating committees with the purpose of providing funds and weapons to the rebels, for this the English and the Greeks

pressured to stop these associations. The Italian command was again in the middle of an impasse: obey the English or follow their instructions of neutrality. It chose the second option, at least officially. But the promiscuity with which Italian troops operated at a very close tie with Turkish troops (by 1920 Kemal's armed bands began to create regular troops) and the hostility towards the Greek government led more than one time to an unorthodox conduct, directly urged by Rome: laxness in controls, weapons' redelivery, sending ad hoc, always indirectly, for the benefit of the nationalists. As the nationalist faction advanced the Italian support made itself more direct, arriving even to arming and training Kemal's forces near Antalya⁴.

In mid-1920 the difficult economic situation of the Italian State made necessary the abolition of all the Italian internal garrisons, reducing the contingent to 1 500 men in Anatolia and 500 in Rhodes and Dodecanese's. Clear was also the intent to abstain itself from the always more frequent clashes between Greeks and Turks. In June 1921 the garrison in Antalya was evacuated. The internal situation in Anatolia was taking over and the impossibility to resist to an enemy's assault, Greek or Turkish, made itself more clear day by day, forcing the Italian command to a more quickly evacuation. The last Italian units left Kuşadası between the 27 and the 29 of April, 1922. On October 11 was signed the Armistice of Mudanya between Turkey and Italy, Great Britain and France stating the end of any type of hostilities between the parts, the return of Thrace and Adrianople to Turkey and the recognition of the Turkish sovereignty on Istanbul and on the Dardanelles' Straits. The Sèvres Treaty was substituted by the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) in which Turkey confirmed to Italy the possession of Rhodes and the Dodecanese's Islands, as a sort of repayment for all the delusions suffered on dry land and, for the first time, the Italian sovereignty in Libya but didn't granted any influence area in Anatolia.

The Italian force in Konya

Konya was a fundamental location for the railroad for Baghdad and became soon a place of interest for the Allies that occupied it with an English force. In April an Italian force replaced the English one. Its duty was to protect the railroad Konya- Kütahya- Eskişehir, a segment long more than 350 km. In the summer the diplomatic situation changed so the Italian unit in Konya found itself in the ambiguity of not knowing who obey: the International Command or the Italian Expedition Command. The situation remained the same until the withdrawal of the unit in March 1920, a decision took mainly due to the expensive costs of the supervision and of the supplies.

⁴ Smith Michael, *Ionian Vision: Greece in Asia Minor, 1919-1922* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999.

Conclusions

WWI with its unconcealed imperial and colonial intentions drove Italy to Asia Minor with the desire to complete the Dodecanese's garrison and impose a widespread national presence in East Mediterranean. The promises made in war time legitimized this desire, the Peace Conference criticized the logic behind it and tried to stop its developments. So, the Expedition Corp was thought by Sonnino as an act of force, that was supposed to make the other powers involved accept the fact as accomplished. Nitti's policy and the post-war demobilisation conditioned since from the beginning its shape, while Kemal's rise revolutionized its action. The Corp, despite the men's and resources' shortage, was able to handle critic situations in a territory defeated and in the grip of an internal upheaval, as well as to not fell in the easy temptation to fall in an open conflict with the Greeks or the Turks.

The Italian attempt to get possession of a part of the Anatolian peninsula, at the end, turned up to be clumsy and ruinous. Italy landed in Anatolia with the clear purpose to conquer but with the rise of the Turkish nationalism the only way to do it was with another conflict (far away, fated to a defeat and at the bottom useless) that she could not afford.

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ISSN 2531-6931