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Published to coincide with the centenary of the battle of Caporetto, arguably the worst-ever defeat suffered by the Italian army, *Il capo. La grande guerra del generale Luigi Cadorna* is a thorough biography of the man who commanded the army at that historic defeat. Until that battle, which nearly knocked Italy out of the First World War, Luigi Cadorna (1850–1928) had been the most renowned and publicly revered member of a military family which included his father, Raffaele, the man who had captured Rome for the newly unified Italy in 1870, and his son (Raffaele Jr.), who would play a key role during the period of Italian co-belligerency with the Allies in 1944–45.

While early works on Luigi Cadorna tended to be either highly hagiographical[1] or influenced by the Fascism-inspired nationalist narrative that wished to attenuate the polemics on Caporetto and portrayed both Cadorna and his successor, Armando Diaz, as demiurges of Italy's final victory in the First World War,[2] the first author to produce a critical biography of the Generalissimo was Gianni Rocca.[3] Rocca's work opened the path to an entirely different interpretation of Cadorna's personality, professional skills, and style of command. In the last thirty years, most studies on the First World War judged Cadorna (“Il Capo,” as his subordinates called him) as an unimaginative commander who stubbornly depleted his infantry units by mounting repeated frontal attacks against well-entrenched Austro-Hungarian forces on mountain terrain—resulting in catastrophic losses for minimal gains. Cadorna was also described as a military leader unsympathetic to his men—more than a thousand of whom were executed by Italian firing squads throughout the war, following Cadorna's instructions to his subordinates to enforce discipline. While in many instances correct, virtually all such works lacked an in-depth analysis of the domestic and international context within which Cadorna ascended to supreme military command and fought the First World War.

Mondini’s book, which won a well-deserved national prize (Friuli Storia), provides that context, explaining how it influenced or exacerbated some of Cadorna's faults; but it also reassesses some criticism on the Generalissimo. Mondini reveals that Cadorna was barely consulted by the Italian government when, after nearly a year of neutrality, it decided to break away from the Triple Alliance with Germany and Austria-Hungary and join the Allies (Britain, France, and Russia) in exchange for territorial compensations in the “unredeemed lands”—Italian territories under Habsburg rule—and elsewhere. Thus, the Generalissimo was called to improvise an offensive war against Vienna at very short notice. In terms of
professional skills, Mondini stresses that most commanders in the war, including Helmuth Johann Ludwig von Moltke, Franz Conrad von Hőtzendorf, Joseph Joffre, and John French, performed no better than "Il Capo" and showed no greater flexibility either in strategy or in tactics. On the other hand, Cadorna was an energetic organizer, who managed to lead and coordinate an unprecedented (in Italy) number of men in arms—some three million. Some of his enemies, including General Krauß, who fought Cadorna on the Isonzo, considered the Generalissimo “the greatest of the Italians.”[4] The author also points out that some of Cadorna’s tactical dogmas were in fact influenced (or at least reinforced) by the reports of the Italian military attachés on the western front. Mondini concludes that the military elite that fought the First World War was essentially uniform across Europe in terms of training, strategic approach, and military doctrine.

Nonetheless, the author correctly identifies some peculiarities in Cadorna’s way of exercising leadership that handicapped the overall performance of the Italian army and even Italy’s war policy. For most of the war, unlike his European counterparts, Cadorna refused to create a modern headquarters, with a large operations bureau that would analyze operations in detail, learn lessons, and assist him in making grounded plans. Despite its size, Cadorna’s headquarters in Udine was filled with adulators and yes-men—a consequence of Cadorna’s egotism, paranoid centralism, and the perceived competition of other Italian generals. Again, unlike most commanders-in-chief in the other belligerent countries, Cadorna curtailed the information corps in his headquarters: these were crucial in releasing information to the politicians, the press, and the public and thus in maintaining a rapport between the fighting military elite and the rest of the nation—even the Allied nations. The latter were typically little informed of the peculiarities of the Italian front and did not understand why the Italians repeatedly failed to gain a decisive breakthrough against an enemy that the British and French considered far less insurmountable than the German army. Furthermore, Cadorna’s exceptionally harsh discipline and the common practice of rotating high-ranking officers (and usually firing them whenever they were suspected of criticizing the Generalissimo) prevented the Italian officers from fraternizing with their men. In parallel, Cadorna progressively extracted from the government exceptional powers—some openly called him a military dictator—while at the same time refusing civilian supervision. A combination of Cadorna’s costly and largely unsuccessful offensives on the Isonzo front and his elitist dismissal of the strategic role of propaganda in strengthening the army’s morale led to widespread war-tiredness in the Italian ranks by late 1917, when an Austro-German counteroffensive struck at Caporetto.

Mondini describes that battle through the eyes of Cadorna himself, thanks to the author’s scrupulous study of the proceedings of the Commission of Enquiry on Caporetto. “Il Capo,” who was brought before the commission as the man responsible for the debacle, did not limit himself to defending his own actions and military judgment but took the chance to express his views of Italian society, as well as the intellectual and political spheres, while recalling his ascendance and military glory—and lamenting his more recent downfall. As Mondini comments, Cadorna approached his experience before the commission almost as a psychological therapy.

Overall, Mondini’s biography of Cadorna is balanced, informed, and at the same time readable and accessible to nonspecialists. The portrait of “Il Capo” that emerges from it is that of a multifaceted man, arguably the most powerful figure in Italy between the Italian intervention of 1915 and the Caporetto disaster two years later—a man who frequently trampled over other Italian political and military figures alike while commanding the greatest-ever Italian army in the greatest war yet seen. Cadorna considered that army the product
of too young and undisciplined a people and never truly trusted his men, despite the ordeals he led them through. Mondini’s work is therefore an important contribution to our understanding of the Great War on the Italian front and an in-depth analysis of the role that General Cadorna played in it, and of his fascinating—albeit eccentric and problematic—personality. *Il capo. La grande guerra del generale Luigi Cadorna* is being translated into English for Cambridge University Press and into German for De Gruyter.

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