

1 Context

Turning a friend into an ally might appear to be an easy job. The case of Britain and Italy at the outbreak of World War I shows how uneven and contested such a process really is. Anglo-Italian friendship was an obvious element of European international relations in the *Belle Époque*. Britain had sponsored Italian unification in 1861, which was subsequently consolidated mainly thanks to the *Pax Britannica*; furthermore, the two countries had strong commercial ties; they shared the same liberal values and seemed to have close colonial and Mediterranean interests.

When World War I broke out, it appeared that Anglo-Italian ties would play a crucial part in determining Italian choices in foreign policy. The conflict was ignited on 28 June 1914 by the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, in Sarajevo. Austria-Hungary accused its neighbour, Serbia – a rival in Balkan affairs – of having aided the assassins, and sent an ultimatum demanding humiliating concessions. When Serbia rejected it, Austria-Hungary declared war. The domino-effect was quick. Russia, feeling obliged to protect a fellow Slav nation, begun mobilisation, spurring a declaration of war by Germany, Austria-Hungary's main ally, on 1 August. This implied war with France, which Germany declared on 3 August. Italy refused to follow suit, proclaiming its neutrality. The war involved Britain on 4 August, when Germany's famous Schlieffen plan, designed to knock France out of the conflict in a few weeks before concentrating on Russia, led German forces to violate neutral Belgium. A British Expeditionary Force (BEF) landed in France on 12 August, whilst the French launched their own offensive in Alsace-Lorraine. This was driven back with enormous losses on both sides. The main German thrust towards Paris was halted on the Marne River between 6 and 12 September, after which a series of clashes northward led to the First Battle of Ypres in October, and the stabilisation of the western front from the English Channel to the Swiss border. Both parties dug in, seeking shelter from devastating machine gun and artillery fire: trench warfare had begun.

Britain applied its usual maritime strategy – one that had been successful against Napoleon a hundred years earlier: a blockade of the Central Powers to strangle their economies. The Germans responded with a counter-blockade thanks to the new submarine weapon, challenging British supply routes. In the meantime, Austria-Hungary failed to defeat Serbia, whilst Russia's invasion of East Prussia blundered into disaster at the battles of Tannenberg (26–30 August) and the Masurian Lakes (7–14 September). Austro-Hungarian offensives in the east against Russia nonetheless failed to capitalise on German victories. Russian weakness encouraged an Ottoman intervention on the side of the Central Powers, opening a new front in the Middle East and North Africa. The war raged in the oceans and European colonies as well, with French and British forces kept in check by inferior German troops in Africa for a couple of years – in East Africa, for the duration of the conflict – whilst German possessions in the Pacific were soon occupied by troops of British dominions Australia and New Zealand. As winter closed in, a new Austro-Hungarian offensive in Serbia was shattered, together with the widespread expectation that the conflict would last a few months.

In this context, secret talks on possible Italian intervention took place. In the summer of 1914, such talks were dominated by Anglo-Italian conversations that seemed to lead to a quick shift on the part of Italy from its allies of the Triple Alliance to the Triple Entente. But soon less obvious factors burst onto the scene causing the negotiations to drag on for nine months. Arguably, the talks succeeded only when Britain took the lead in the Entente diplomatic action. From an analysis of Anglo-Italian relations during Italy's neutrality, therefore, we can draw some general conclusions about the problems facing alliances at war when dealing with neutrals and attempting to involve them in the conflict. First, deep-rooted stereotypes can have a greater impact on diplomatic action than is generally appreciated, and the role of individuals can be crucial in bridging differences and influencing national policies. Second, there is a fundamental difference between the war aims of belligerent countries – focussed on the immediate need to end the war successfully and as quickly as possible – and those of neutrals willing to enter the fray – focussed on the terms of their participation and the fulfilment of those terms. Third, the impacts of economic warfare and of political espionage in influencing neutrals are often overlooked aspects that can ultimately prove more effective than traditional diplomatic instruments. Finally, alliances are rarely born overnight and, however good the relations between two countries, they are not generally based on ideals and shared values, but on convergence of interests and on the art of compromise.