



Grupo de Investigación
Historia Militar



The Regia Marina during the First World War

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The World before First World War

The First World War was a global war due to the colonial nature of European powers and the involvement of extra-European countries such as Japan and United States (1917). Hence, despite the conflict erupted for a crisis in Europe – more specifically, in the Balkans – it quickly became global, spreading even in the colonies.

Aside some colonial disputes, from 1870 to 1914 Europe experienced a long time of peace thanks to a perfect balance of power. More precisely, between 1870-1890, the European balance of power was characterized by Bismarck's policy of isolation of France – essential, according to the Prussian statesman, to keep the peace in the continent. After the end of the “Bismarck age”, the European balance of power shifted towards a bipolar opposition between the Triple Alliance and the French-Russian alliance. In the context of the European balance of power, England remained a free player, but when it joined the French-Russian alliance (July 1914), a new block of power (the Triple Entente) became a threat for the other (Triple Alliance). Indeed, the two alliances (Triple Alliance and Triple Entente) were characterized by strong rivalries due not only to opposite ambitions in the continent, but also to a rivalry in the colonial expansion¹.

The Italian Kingdom and its vulnerabilities

Despite its membership in the Triple Alliance, Italy was the most fragile European power, and, to some extent, the most “insecure”. The Italian Kingdom feared two main powers: France and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The latter was a “natural” enemy of Italy since Trento and Trieste – two Italian towns by a cultural point of view – were under Wien's control. France, on the other hand, represented an enemy since its colonial interests in the Mediterranean Sea and Northern Africa competed with the Italian ones. France aimed to extend its dominion on Northern Africa, until the British-controlled Egypt, conquering Libya. Competition for control of North Africa – exemplified by the French invasion of Tunisia (1881) - worsened the hostilities between the two powers.

From a geostrategic point of view, a possible ground invasion could be prevented by two factors: the Alps, and – if these weren't enough – the Italian Army, that could have stayed “in being” in the Po Valley, ready to fight back any offensive of the transalpine power. The Italian Achilles heel was the peninsula's long and undefended coastline, which was suitable for amphibious landings. In order to prevent them, Italy needed a navy able to command the Tyrrhenian Sea – in case of war with France – and destroy enemy transports and their troops on board².

Rivalries with France became predominant in the Italian foreign policy. For thirty years (1870-1900), Italian foreign policy focused on the French threat. To counter France, Italy relied on the alliance with the German Empire and the more “unnatural” alliance with the Austro-Hungarian Empire (1882), the so-called Triple Alliance. Afterward, Italy also sought – without success – naval support in the Mediterranean from Britain, leveraging the latter's periodic clashes with France³.

Fearing the possibility of a war with France, Italy spent the thirty years between 1882 and 1912 trying to negotiate some naval cooperation with Germany and Austro-Hungary, aiming to counter the French

¹ Eric. J. Hobsbawm, *Age of extremis. The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994). Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers. Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*, (New York: Random House, 1987).

² Francesco Zampieri, «Italy, 1861-1914: did the sea build a State and an Empire?», in AA.VV., *The Sea in History. Modern World*, (London: Boydell & Brewer, 2017).

³ Mariano Gabriele-Giuliano Friz, *La politica navale italiana dal 1885 al 1915*, (Rome: Ufficio Storico della Marina Militare – USMM, 1982).

Navy. Nonetheless, even with the Triple Alliance, the *Regia Marina* was weaker than the French Navy. Furthermore, the Italian effort to get naval cooperation from the allied Germans and Austrians was, for long time, frustrated, due to both the opposition of Berlin and Wien and the growing tension between Germany and Britain.

In case of war with France, Italy feared to be defeated in the Mediterranean. From its new naval base in Tunisia – Bizerte -, France would have been able to land its forces on Sicily, conquering the island and gaining the command of the Western Mediterranean; contemporarily, its Russian ally would have been engaged against Austrian and Italian fleets in the Eastern Mediterranean⁴. French naval writers – often cited among Italian naval thinkers – had repeatedly speculated about landing French troops in Sicily to provoke an uprising of the poor local population against the Italian government⁵.

Given that France already controlled, with its protectorate in Tunisia, the southern shore of the Sicilian Channel, the additional control of the northern shore would have meant, for Paris, an undiscussed supremacy in the Mediterranean.

Between the end of the 19th century and the first decade of 20th century, the Italian strategic balance experienced a significant decline due to the improving Anglo-French relations. Several factors – such as the mounting competition in the North Sea between London and Berlin, the empowerment of Franco-Russian alliance, the increasing power of the French Fleet, the focus on Suez, and the desire to contain Russia in the Black Sea – led the two powers to resume their relationship⁶.

The Italian Schizophrenic Foreign Policy

With the eyes on its perceived vulnerability, from 1890 to 1914 Italy adopted an ambivalent foreign policy. While maintaining its alliance with Germany and Austro-Hungary, Rome – due to the inattention of its allies – progressively aligned its foreign policy with Britain and France⁷. So, between 1896-1905, Franco-Italian relations improved. Nonetheless, Italy did not quit the Triple Alliance, and kept obtaining a military commitment of its allies in the Mediterranean. Finally, after twenty years of diplomatic effort, on 5th December 1900, the powers of the Triple Alliance signed their first naval agreement, a clear success for Italy. This agreement was renewed in June 1913 and was, for Rome, even more favorable. The German and Austro-Hungarian navies agreed to subordinate their forces in the Mediterranean to the *Regia Marina*. The naval strategy would have been offensive: Wien's navy would have left the Adriatic to join the Italian navy off eastern Sicily⁸.

Despite the naval agreement with the German and Austro-Hungarian Empires, Italy maintained the dialogue with France, improving the relations with its neighbor. Finally, Rome and Paris agreed that each would remain neutral in the event of a war between the Triple Alliance and the Franco-Russian alliance.

But why did Italy adopt the above-mentioned “schizophrenic” foreign policy? A significant reason is the progressive estrangement between Italy and its allies of the Triple Alliance derived not only by

⁴ The balance of power in the western Mediterranean and the Tyrrhenian Sea always favored France, which could expect assistance from the Russian fleet, guaranteed by the 1892 military convention, which evolved into a stable alliance, signed in January 1894, but not announced until June 1895.

⁵ Anonymous, *Défense de l'Italie contre une invasion française*. Extrait du *Journal des Sciences Militaires*, Août-Septembre 1882, Paris, Librairie Militaire de J. Dumaine.

P. C. «I nostri obbiettivi navali e la stampa francese», *Nuova Antologia*, vol. XLI – series II, nr. XIX, 1 October 1883, 501-524.

Commandant Z-H. Montéchant, *Les guerres navales de demain*, (Paris: Librairie Militaire, Berger-Lévrault e C., 1891), 108-114.

Cristoforo Manfredi, *L'Italia deve essere potenza terrestre o marittima?* (Rome: Edizioni Forum di Relazioni Internazionali, 1996), 55.

⁶ Paul Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German antagonism, 1860-1914*, (London: Allen & Unwin, 1980).

⁷ The international intervention in Crete represented the evidence of a progressive alignment of Italy with France and Britain.

E. Alberini, *La Marina italiana a Creta. Il potere marittimo in funzione della politica estera (1896-1899)*, (Rome: USMM, 1998).

⁸ Mariano Gabriele, *Le convenzioni navali della Triplice*, (Rome: USMM, 1969).

the erosion of trust, but also by the considerable difference between the Italian and Austrian interests in the Adriatic region, an area forgotten by Italy during the years of its commitment in the Triple Alliance⁹. Indeed, after the signature of the Triple Alliance, a “cold” peace in the Adriatic ensued between the Italian Kingdom and the Austro-Hungarian empire. Although Italy considered France the main threat and, consequently, focused on the defense of the Tyrrhenian Sea, its security also depended on the control of the Adriatic Sea.

Despite the membership in the Triple Alliance and the related naval agreements, relations between Italy and the Austro-Hungarian empire deteriorated as disputes in the Balkans escalated. So, planning for a possible naval war in the Adriatic Sea became necessary. In January 1904 and 1909, the *Regia Marina* and the *Regio Esercito* carried out some studies about joint warfare in the Adriatic Sea¹⁰.

In 1908, in the aftermath of Austro-Hungary’s annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina, relations between Rome and Wien further deteriorated.

During the First Balkan War (1912-1913), Wien’s speculation about a possible occupation of Scutari and Durazzo – on the Albanian coast – provoked a new crisis for the Italian-Austro-Hungarian relations; the crisis was resolved only with the birth of the Albanian state. Consequently, in August 1914, when the First World War erupted, Italy declared neutrality, due to the violation of the alliance terms by Wien, which went on an offensive war without consulting Rome. Immediately, the Italian army occupied Saseno Bay (30 October 1914) and Vlore (25 December 1914).

The military situation in the Adriatic basin

In the first decade of the 20th Century, following the deterioration of the relationship with the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Italy accelerated the improvement of its Adriatic naval defenses, building new gun batteries to protect the Venetian lagoon and basing torpedo boats at Ancona¹¹. Simultaneously, the *Regio Esercito* redeployed some forces from Italy’s western coast to the eastern one, and fortified the entrances to the Valtellina and Isonzo valleys.

From a maritime and geostrategic point of view, the Dalmatian coasts and islands – combined with mines, submarines, and torpedo boats – favoured the Austro-Hungarian command of the Adriatic Sea. In the middle and upper Adriatic Sea, Italy had only two inadequate naval bases: Ancona and Venice. The naval base in Venice was exposed to the risk of a blockade, and it was adequate to host just torpedo boats and submarines, while Ancona could – temporarily – host main forces, but it had no links with the Italian main strategic centres. Between Venice and Ancona, Porto Corsini could host only torpedo boats and MAS¹².

Despite the inadequacy of its naval bases, Italy was more favoured than the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the closure of the Strait of Otranto in Southern Adriatic. Such a closure was more achievable for whoever controlled the southern access – represented by Brindisi and the facing Albanian coast – of this basin. In the Southern Adriatic, Italy could count on Brindisi, that could host only second line forces (light cruisers, destroyers and submarines) and that was without defences. Brindisi was the only Italian naval base in the Southern Adriatic, and it was important to close the Strait of Otranto.

Due to the great distance between Venice – the Italian main naval base in the Adriatic – and Brindisi (380 nautical miles), a reciprocal defence between these two bases was impossible. In case of the Austro-Hungarian conquest of Venice, the Northern Adriatic would have completely fallen in the Austro-Hungarian hands.

In the Ionian Sea there was another essential naval base: Taranto. The decision to build a naval base in Taranto was presented to Parliament in 1871, but the project obtained its funds only in 1882. If the

⁹ Riccardo Nassigh, *La Marina italiana e l’Adriatico, il potere marittimo in un teatro ristretto* (Rome: USMM, 1998),

¹⁰ Jon K. Hendrickson, *Crisis in the Mediterranean. Naval Competition and Great Power Politics, 1904-1914*, (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2014), 51-81.

¹¹ Claudio Zanlorenzi (a cura di), *I forti di Mestre. Storia di un campo trincerato*, (Verona: Cierre Edizioni, 1997).

¹² Enrico Cernuschi and Vincent P. O’Hara, «Italy: Regia Marina», in Vincent Patrick O’Hara-William David Dickson (Edited by), *To Crown the Waves. The Great Navies of the First World War*, (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2013), 178-212.

naval base of Taranto was useful for operations in the Ionian Sea and the southern Adriatic, it was not relevant for the operations in the middle and upper Adriatic¹³. Nonetheless, the Austro-Hungarian empire considered both Taranto and Brindisi a threat, and tried to build a new opposing naval base on the Albanian coast.

In the Northern Adriatic, the Austro-Hungarian Fleet owned the main base of Pola and the secondary base of Trieste; Sibenik, in the middle eastern Adriatic coast, was another important base for torpedo boats and destroyers.

In the Southern Adriatic, the naval base of Kotor (Cattaro) was more important than Sibenik, because it was characterized by deep waters and by a very defensible bay. However, the Montenegrin revanchism worried the Austro-Hungarian naval base. At the same time, the Montenegrin control of Mount Lovcen, overlooking Kotor, threatened the Austrian naval base¹⁴. By the Italian perspective, the Austro-Hungarian naval base at Kotor was a deadly threat; consequently, Rome supported Serbia against Wien¹⁵. With the aim to neutralize Kotor, Italy studied a possible military intervention in Albania to occupy Vlore and Saseno Bay. In the event of a war, the control of Vlore, Saseno Bay, and Brindisi would have allowed the *Regia Marina* to blockade the Austro-Hungarian fleet in its bases.

From Pola, the Austro-Hungarian navy could threaten the two Italian naval bases of Venice and Ancona, while projecting its power against the Italian coasts, preventing the reaction of the *Regia Marina*. Pola controlled the SLOCs from and to Venice and could protect the two main merchant ports of Trieste (60 nautical miles at east-northeast of Venice) and Fiume¹⁶.

To Shape the Maritime Battlefield

During the war, the *Regia Marina* spent about 90 million Lire to adapt its naval bases to new requirements. Works concerned the adaptation of naval bases, providing these with excavations, building of new breakwaters, piers, dry docks, slipways, etc.

In the Southern Adriatic, the *Regia Marina* completed a renewal of Brindisi naval base, adapting it to support the warships¹⁷. In Taranto, the Italian navy concentrated its battle force of dreadnoughts and pre-dreadnoughts. This bulk of force remained in being until the end of the war, ready to intercept the Austro-Hungarian fleet if that would have tried to trespass the Strait of Otranto.

Contemporarily, from Brindisi and Valona the light forces would have tried to intercept the enemy forces exiting from Kotor.

Very important works were completed in the Venetian lagoon with the excavation of a new canal, connecting the sea to the naval bases. Outside the Ancient *Arsenale*, but very close to the old factories, during 1915 the Italians completed a new dry dock for the dreadnoughts.

Throughout the war, the Italians completed some very impressive works along the Venetian littoral, from the Po River to the Isonzo River. The goal was the building of an internal main waterway for the logistical sustain to the *Regio Esercito* committed in the north-eastern front, on the contact-line

¹³ With the aim to close the Adriatic Sea in the event of a war against the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the *Regia Marina* envisioned the occupation of Preveza, Vlore, Durazzo, and Corfu (controlled by the Ottoman Empire and Kingdom of Greece) to form a system of naval bases, but the Italian weakness and a possible international opposition precluded this plan.

¹⁴ Vico Mantegazza, *Il Mediterraneo e il suo equilibrio*, (Milano: Treves, 1914), 200.

¹⁵ After the defeat of Montenegro (January 1916), Kotor became the permanent naval base of the Austrian-German submarines operating in the Mediterranean and for the cruisers of Vienna.

¹⁶ Zvonimir Freivogel, «Austria-Hungary: Die Kaiserliche und K oenigliche Kriegsmarine», in Vincent Patrick O'Hara-William David Dickson (Edited by), *To Crown the Waves. The Great Navies of the First World War*, (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2013), 7-50.

¹⁷ Ufficio del Capo di Stato Maggiore della Marina (Ufficio Storico), Cronistoria documentata della guerra marittima italo-austriaca (1915-1918). La preparazione dei mezzi e il loro impiego, Fascicolo IV, *Difese costiere e loro sviluppo durante la guerra*, (Rome: USMM, 1919 (2015)).

of the Isonzo River. Using these waterways, supplies and soldiers were relatively not exposed to the Austro-Hungarian naval bombings¹⁸.

Two opposing strategies and initial actions

On 26th April 1915, Italy joined the Triple Entente and, on 10th May 1915, the *Regia Marina* signed a Naval Agreement with the new allied navies. The agreement gave to the Italians the complete direction of the naval warfare in the Adriatic. The *Regia Marina* obtained a British naval Division composed by four battleships and four light cruisers, and 12 destroyers; the French navy guaranteed the support of numerous torpedo boats, submarines and minesweepers¹⁹.

On 24th May 1915, Italy joined the war with the Triple Entente (France, Britain and Russian Empire). Trento and Trieste were the main important strategic objectives for Italy; contemporarily, Italy wanted to improve its strategic condition in the Adriatic Sea. So, the war between Rome and Wien would have been a war on both land and sea.

Despite the allied aid, the Italian geostrategic disadvantage in the Adriatic remained evident, and the Austro-Hungarians were free to operate without contrast. Wien's warships were able to bomb the Italian coasts, with the aim to provoke the intervention of the Italian fleet and engage it, exploiting its strategic advantage. Indeed, the Italian ships would chase the enemy warships until the Croatian coasts; there, however, they would have been attacked by the enemy's submarines and mines. As a matter of fact, destroyers, submarines, and mines improved the spectrum of the Austrian sea denial, and that prevented the Italians to occupy some Dalmatian islands. A potential Italian forward base on the Dalmatian coasts would have represented a key position to operate against the Austro-Hungarian coast. However, the Italians were never able to seize key positions neither on the Dalmatian islands nor on the Croatian coasts.

Consequently, the Italian strategists preferred to concentrate the bulk of the Italian fleet in the Southern Adriatic – at the entrance of this narrow sea – adopting a strategy of fleet in being²⁰.

This fleet was based in Taranto – in the Ionian Sea – while the scouting forces were based in Brindisi (in the Adriatic Sea). The scouting forces would have operated in forward scouting missions; at the same time, they would have been ready to report the departure of the Austro-Hungarian fleet from its ports, giving to the Italian battleships sufficient time to move from Taranto and to intercept the enemy's ships. Therefore, this decision gave to the Austro-Hungarians the freedom of manoeuvre in the central and northern Adriatic.

The Austrians always refused a decisive naval battle and chose a strategy based on fleet in being – pivoting their geostrategic advantage – and limited their actions to sporadic coastal bombardments of the Italian towns.

On 24th May – and, again, 18th June, 17th July, 23rd and 27th July, 2nd August 1915 – the Austro-Hungarian Navy bombed the Italian Adriatic coasts. The Italian light forces couldn't intercept the enemy's forces before their return to Dalmatian naval bases. Despite the relative security of the Austro-Hungarian SLOCs, the Imperial Navy lost some destroyers (*Lika*, *Triglav*, *Wildfang*) and submarines U-12, UC-12 e U-30.

On 24th May 1915, the Austrians bombed the entire Italian Adriatic coast: Venice was bombed by three hydroplanes. Ancona was the most bombed Italian town during the 24th of May 1915. The same day, in the lower Adriatic, the Italian destroyer *Turbine* fought against superior enemies' forces, being able to fix the Austro-Hungarian forces until the arrival of the other Italian forces.

After this shock, with the aim to defend the Italian coast, the *Regia Marina* introduced in service 10-12 armed trains, running alongside the Adriatic coast and acting as mobile coastal defences. Each

¹⁸ Ufficio del Capo di Stato Maggiore della Marina (Ufficio Storico), Cronistoria documentata della guerra marittima italo-austriaca (1915-1918). La preparazione dei mezzi, Fascicolo VI, *Miglioramenti nautici ai porti, canali navigabili ed altre opere di pubblica utilità compiute dalla R. Marina durante la guerra*, (Rome: USMM, 1919 (2015)).

¹⁹ Lawrence Sondhaus, *The Great War at Sea. A Naval History of the First World War*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 131.

²⁰ Ezio Ferrante, *La Grande Guerra in Adriatico*, (Rome: USMM, 1987).

train was equipped with naval artilleries: some trains could be equipped with 8-76/40 anti-aircraft guns; other trains – destined for anti-ship warfare – were equipped with 4-152/40 anti-ship guns and 2-76/40 anti-aircraft or with 4-120/45 anti-ship guns and two 76/40; the armament was completed with some Machine guns (6,5 mm); the crew was composed by 5 officers, between 10 and 15 petty-officers, and 50-70 seamen. In only 40 seconds, the train could stop its travel and open the fire against the enemy warships²¹.

On 3rd February 1916, the armed trains were able to prevent the naval bombardment of Ortona by the light cruiser *Sankt George*; on 15th February, the armed trains prevented an aerial attack against Rimini and on 5th November they heavily damaged two of three enemies' ships that bombed S. Elpidio a Mare.

During the war, the coastal defence was improved with 119 coastal batteries for a total of 542 medium calibre guns; other 334 batteries with a total of 702 guns were installed on the Thyrrhenian coasts²².

The Fight Between Admirals

On 26th August 1914, the Italian Navy instituted the *Armata Navale*; Admiral Luigi Amedeo of Savoy Aosta, Duke of Abruzzi, was charged the Commander in Chief (CinC). The Duke of Abruzzi was inspired by Mahan's suggestion of the decisive battle, but at the end of 1915, it was evident that the strategy chosen by the CinC was failed. Indeed, despite audacious actions against the enemy's coasts (naval bombing, aggressive patrols, etc.), the Austro-Hungarian Navy still refused the decisive battle, pivoting its geostrategic advantage and selecting a fleet in being strategy.

On the contrary, during the first months of war, the *Regia Marina* had lost some important and modern warships such as the two moderns cruisers *Garibaldi* and *Amalfi*, completed in 1909. Furthermore, the *Regia Marina* was shocked by the internal divisions among admirals about the best strategy to adopt. The internal crisis became particularly evident when the Minister of the Navy, Vice Admiral Leone Viale, resigned on 24th September 1915. Right after, on 12th October 1915, even the Chief of Naval Staff, Vice Admiral Paolo Thaon di Revel, resigned. Finally, the Commander in Chief, Admiral Duke of Abruzzi, was heavily criticized by its colleagues and allies. Admiral Thaon di Revel asked for the office of Commander in Chief of Venice and of the maritime north-eastern front, becoming the pivot of the Italian strategy in the upper Adriatic.

During the first months of war, in the Italian conduct of naval warfare several vulnerabilities emerged:

- the lack of adequate escort and insidious ships such as torpedo boats;
- the lack of aeronaval cooperation;
- the lack of secrecy for the naval operations, as demonstrated by the sabotages of the two battleships *Benedetto Brin* and *Leonardo Da Vinci*.

During the first months of war, the only significant naval battle in the Adriatic occurred on 29th December 1915. An Austro-Hungarian raider force (scouting vessel *Helgoland* and a flotilla of 5 destroyers) bombed the Albanian port of Durazzo – from which the *Regia Marina* was involved in the withdrawal and rescue of the Serbian army – sinking a Greek freighter. The reaction of coastal batteries pushed the Austro-Hungarian warships into the mine barrage, provoking the loss of one of the five destroyers. The Austrians ordered the exit of their battlefleet anchored at Kotor, but only an armoured cruiser, one escort, 4 torpedo boats and other little boats joined the raider force.

The Italian and allied forces joined the battle and were able to sink two Austro-Hungarian destroyers, and to damage the scout vessel *Helgoland* and the destroyers *Balaton*, *Csepel* e *Tatra*. During the battle, the Italian scouting vessel *Bixio* was targeted.

Finally, the battle was favourable to the Allies (two enemy destroyers were sunk and two were heavily damaged) but the desired decisive naval battle did not take place. The Duke of Abruzzi was very

²¹ Francesco Fatutta, *Treni armati. Contributo ad una storia dei treni armati della Regia Marina*, (Rome: Rivista Marittima, 2002).

²² Ettore Bravetta, *La Grande Guerra sul mare. Fatti, insegnamenti, previsioni*, (Milan: A. Mondadori, 1925), 201.

frustrated in its strategy and the «battle» of 29th December 1915 demonstrated the lack of coordination among warships, aircrafts and submarines²³.

Change of strategy and commanders

Due to the ineffectiveness of naval warfare in Adriatic during 1915, the Italian General Staff and Allies decided to change strategy. During 1916, the Italians were able to perform their first incursions in the enemy ports. Consequently, the naval warfare in the Adriatic became a “guerrilla warfare”. While the Royal Navy performed the ineffective battle of Jutland, the *Regia Marina* started the “strategy of the battle into the enemy ports”. Between 6th February and 22nd December 1916, the *Regia Marina* completed 36 naval missions against the Austro-Hungarian ports: attack, counterattack, bombing and violation of enemy ports. Admiral Thaon di Revel was the proponent of this new strategy: «We found the most decisive weapons for this naval war, a weapon well adapted to the courage of our men»²⁴.

On 7th February 1917 – due to the fights between the Italian admirals and the pressure of the Allies – Duke of Abruzzi resigned, and the Command in Chief was assigned to Admiral Paolo Thaon di Revel. He decided to maintain the strategy of the fleet in being in Taranto, but he supported the development of insidious vessels such as the MAS (*Motoscafi Armati di Siluri*) and expanded the Naval Aviation.

The Otranto’s Barrage and the effectiveness of underwater naval warfare

With the intent to “bottle” the Austro-Hungarian and German submarines operating from Kotor, the Allies completed a floating and underwater barrier in the Southern Adriatic, closing the Strait of Otranto (70 kilometres). Despite an impressive number of tools employed to perform this barrage, between July 1916 and February 1918, the German and Austrian submarines were able to sink the major part of the allied and neutral merchant ships in the Mediterranean: so, the Otranto barrage was ineffective. Some historians wrote that the barrage could deter a more aggressive underwater campaign by the German and Austrian submarines. It is impossible to express a decisive sentence on the effectiveness of the Otranto’s barrage, but it is evident that this barrier represented a real obstacle for the Navies of the Triple Alliance. On September 1918, the allied navies aligned in the Strait of Otranto 31 destroyers, four torpedo boats, six sloops, 52 fishing vessels converted in minesweeper, 101 drifters, 41 little boats, 36 US anti-submarine vessels, and 8 submarines.

During the entire war, 10 German submarines were sunk into or outside Pola, Trieste, Fiume and Kotor; after 28th October 1918, with the abandonment of these bases, only 4 German submarines and 8 Austro-Hungarian were sunk in the Adriatic and in the Strait of Otranto.

The Austro-Hungarian performed a series of missions against the barrage: 5 in the 1915, 9 during 1916, 10 during 1917. In all these occasions, the results were very modest²⁵.

Conversely, the effectiveness of the Otranto’s barrage against the surface ships was demonstrated by the “naval battle” of 15th May 1917. Some Austro-Hungarian scouting ships attacked the drifters at 10 miles from Otranto and, contemporarily, some destroyers raided the merchant ships close to Valona. Despite the sinking of one freighter and some drifters, the Austro-Hungarian warships were attacked by the bulk of the Allied naval forces with the damage of three Austro-Hungarian scouting ships.

The Italian Victories against the Austro-Hungarian fleet

For about eighteen months of war, the *Regia Marina* suffered heavy losses: the enemy submarines sank the armoured cruisers *Amalfi* and *Giuseppe Garibaldi* (1915), while the battleships *Benedetto*

²³ Ezio Ferrante, «Le operazioni navali in Adriatico 1915-1918», *Bollettino d'Archivio* Anno XXII, June 2008, 127-135.

²⁴ Ivi, p. 140.

²⁵ Stéphan Jules Buchet-Franco Poggi, «Gli sbarramenti del Canale d'Otranto durante il primo conflitto mondiale», *Bollettino d'Archivio* anno XXII – settembre 2008, 417-470.

Paul Halpen, *The Battle of the Otranto Straits: Controlling the Gateway to the Adriatic in World War I*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004).

Brin and *Leonardo da Vinci* were sunk by internal explosions (the latter, due to a sabotage); the battleship *Regina Margherita* was sunk due to an accident.

To rebalance the naval warfare, Thaon di Revel encouraged the actions with the MAS and a more aggressive strategy in the Northern Adriatic, emphasizing the cooperation between the *Regia Marina* and *Regio Esercito*, after the withdrawal from Caporetto. Off the Venetian lagoon, on 16th November 1917, the Italians were able to perform an effective daily attack of MAS against the *Wien* squadron that was bombing Cortellazzo. The aim of the Austrians was to heavily hit the right flank of the *Regio Esercito* and to shape the battlefield for a hypothetical landing. The decisive reaction of the Italian naval batteries and of the MAS made the Austro-Hungarian plan ineffective.

On 9th December 1917, the port of Trieste was attacked by the Italian MAS 9 and 13, under the command of Lieutenant Luigi Rizzo. The attack was a success: the Austro-Hungarian battleship *Wien* was sunk, and this action convinced the Austro-Hungarian Navy to transfer its other warships into Pola. With this action, the *Regia Marina* retaliated the bombardment of Cortellazzo and the defeat of Caporetto.

Encouraged by the success of the attack against Trieste, the Italians performed another brilliant action: on 10th February 1918, three Italian MAS (96-95-94) were towed by torpedo boats until the Bay of Buccari, where they attacked four enemy steamships; due to the failure of torpedoes, the steamships weren't sunk, but that action demonstrated the courage of the Italian sailors. Onboard MAS 96 there was also the poet Gabriele D'Annunzio – an officer of the *Regio Esercito* – who abandoned three bottles containing a message for the Austro-Hungarian: the message presented the action as a vengeance of the Battle of Lissa, a tremendous defeat for the *Regia Marina* in 1866.

The MAS were built by the S.V.A.N. (*Società Veneziana Automobili Navali*) shipyard in Venice; by the first half of 1917, that company was tasked to design a tool that could trespass the floating barriers protecting the naval base of Pola. Indeed, the Austrians have started to protect their naval bases with more capable barriers. The project developed by the SVAN was represented by four “jumping boats” (*Grillo, Cavalletta, Locusta and Pulce*) completed in the March 1918. These boats were equipped with tracks to climb the floating barriers in the ports. Between April and May 1918, these new assault boats tried some attacks against the Austrian ports, but the most important attack was conducted on 14th May 1918: the *Grillo* was able to trespass Pola's external barriers and to enter into the port, but the Italian seamen got caught by sentinels and they were captured; however, before they surrendered, they were able to sink the secret jumping boat²⁶.

On 10th June 1918, off Premuda, the MAS 15 and 21 of Lieutenant Commander Luigi Rizzo were able to stop the Austro-Hungarian battleships exiting from Pola with the task to attack the Otranto's barrage. In this occasion, the dreadnought *Szent István* was sunk by the MAS, frustrating the Austro-Hungarian Navy. For about six months, from the sinking of *Wien* to the sinking of *Szent István*, Luigi Rizzo was able to sink 25.635 tons of enemy warships, gaining the admiration of the Allied Admirals (the British Admiral Beatty and the US Admiral Sims).

The last actions of the war

On 2nd October 1918, due to the Allies' pressures, an Italian division of armoured cruisers, with the protection of dreadnought *Dante Alighieri*, some British cruisers, and an escort of US anti-submarine warships bombed the Austro-Hungarian positions at Durazzo. The allied warships opened the fire from a distance of 12 kilometres and they destroyed depots and equipments; the allied warships sunk the steamship *Stambul*, some landing crafts, and damaged heavily the steamship *Graz*. The Austro-Hungarian Navy renounced to intercept the allied formation: once again – the third time, after the actions of 29th December 1915 and 15th May 1917 – no decisive naval battle occurred!

Twelve days after the attack, the Italians occupied Durazzo and advanced until San Giovanni di Medua and Dulcigno. The war was changing in favour of the Italians.

²⁶ Franco Prosperini, «Genesi e sviluppo dei M.A.S. Attività operativa in Adriatico (1916-1918)», Bollettino d'Archivio Anno XXII – September 2008, 257-332.

Between 31st October and 1st November 1918, two courageous Italian frogmen performed a successful attack against Pola naval base; using a new underwater tool named “mignatta” – a modified torpedo, driven by two frogmen – the Italians sank the battleship *Viribus Unitis* and the steamship *Wien*. One of the two frogmen was the Lieutenant Rossetti, the “mignatta”’s designer. The “mignatta” delivered a warhead of 175 kg of TNT, able to detonate after 6 hours.

Despite the two frogmen got caught by the enemy and jailed in the *Viribus Unitis*, they were able to sink the battleship, ending the history of the Austro-Hungarian Navy and signing one of the most glorious pages in the history of the *Regia Marina*.

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