

REVIEW ARTICLE

Summary Executions in Italy During the First World War: Findings and Implications

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This article has two related aims. First, it examines the most up-to-date studies relative to Italian military justice during the First World War, and seeks to set them in the context of the historical debate since the late 1960s. Secondly, and more specifically, it focuses on recently uncovered evidence regarding staggeringly high numbers of previously unknown summary executions in the Italian army. It explores the significance of these findings for understanding the character of the Italian military justice system as well as that of the war conducted by Italy's ruling élites between 1915 and 1918.

Leopoldo Paloni's recent volume entitled *Storie Giudiziarie della Grande Guerra* (Paloni 2005) brings forth documentation relative to military justice in Italy during the First World War. Paloni can stake a claim to a certain degree of originality by virtue of the manner in which his book juxtaposes sources from court martial proceedings and the article of the military penal code upon which the consequent conviction or acquittal was based. However, as useful as it is, Paloni's book is limited by its failure to offer anything other than a rather confusing conceptual framework in which to comprehend the significance of what is presented. Against what he refers to as 'commonplace' understandings regarding the severity of military judges and, indeed, of Luigi Cadorna, the commander of Italian forces, Paloni underlines what he sees as the moderate and soul-searching role of the former and the 'kind heart' of the latter when compared to contemporary colleagues like Luigi Capello, Andrea Graziani or French counterparts such as Joseph Joffre and Robert Nivelle (Paloni 2005, pp. 15–18). Affirmations of this sort are, however, difficult to reconcile with the statistics to which Paloni's work makes no reference. In this sense, his book represents something of a step backwards in relation to Enzo Forcella and Alberto Monticone's *Plotone d'esecuzione*, a volume of similar kind published almost 40 years ago (Forcella & Monticone 1968). The latter broke radically with what to

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that point in time had been a somewhat uncritically patriotic interpretation of Italy's role in the Great War. In particular it uncovered the profound contradictions and arbitrariness inherent in the system of military justice and showed how 15 per cent of all mobilized citizens, and 6 per cent of men called to arms, had been reported to a military tribunal. There were 350,000 resulting trials of which 210,000 led to convictions. No other First World War army matches these numbers. More alarmingly, using data supplied by Giorgio Mortara (1927, p. 26), Forcella and Monticone brought to light the fact that around 750 Italian soldiers had been shot by firing squad. Once again this figure compares most unfavourably with the already high number of 600 men who met their deaths by similar means in the French army (which, however, had been twice the size of Italy's), the still drastic 351 executions which took place in the British army and the approximately 48 death sentences thought to have been carried out in the German army (Offenstadt 1999).

Paloni's work also fits uneasily into a strain of recent studies, which, in a more epexegetic approach to the documentation available, bring Forcella and Monticone's research up to date, and with somewhat dramatic implications that would tend to belie Paloni's unrevealing stance. Further proof of the anomaly of the manner in which the Italian state treated its own men emerged in the 1990s, when Giovanna Procacci revealed that out of approximately 600,000 Italian POWs, about 90,000 of the 100,000 who died in captivity had needlessly lost their lives as victims of hunger, exposure and deprivation. This was because the Italian government, in alliance with the military command, equated prisoners with deserters and, in order to discourage further desertions, blocked the sending of relief convoys and even Red Cross parcels from prisoners' families and duly advertised the plight of Italian captives. As a comparison, deaths of French detainees are thought to have been just under 19,000, though these include men injured in battle before surrendering. Italian deaths due to illness in German camps were 5.46 per cent of total prisoners, exceeded only by Serbian victims (5.81 per cent) and weighing in just above the Russians (4.61 per cent) and well ahead of the Americans (0.73 per cent), Belgians (1.9 per cent), British (2.08 per cent) and French (2.41 per cent) (Procacci 1993, chapter 3). Bruna Bianchi's mammoth endeavour some time later also approached the archive documentation in a novel manner, building up a series of statistics based on limited samples, and thus furnishing valuable insights into the chronic social bias informing the Italian military justice system and the devastating effects of this on the labouring classes (Bianchi 2001).

But above all, it is Marco Pluviano and Irene Guerrini's volume on the recourse to summary execution (Pluviano & Guerrini 2004) that offers the most stirring reinterpretation of the character of the punitive measures taken against Italian soldiers during the First World War, and it is this study which will form the core of the present review. Guerrini and Pluviano's claim is that 300 or so cases of summary execution can be scientifically verified as having occurred in the Italian army during the 1915–1918 campaign. The evidential repertoire underpinning their labour is staggering indeed. It primarily embraces the September 1919 report of the military advocate general, Antonio Donato Tommasi, found in the Museo del Risorgimento in Milan, and a number of other relative 'attached documents' (*allegati*) uncovered in the Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito. Further sources were found in the Archivio Centrale dello Stato in Rome and the Archivio del Museo Storico

Italiano della Guerra di Rovereto. Non-archival material includes the parliamentary acts, the socialist daily *Avanti!*, judicial periodicals, primary and secondary works related to military justice and, finally, published works on the Great War in Italy. The husband and wife team sift through this monolith of information with the most profound meticulousness, where possible resorting to a method of cross-checking of written and oral sources so as to arrive at the nearest approximation to the truth.

One may wonder as to the historical import of the deaths by summary execution, given that they pale into insignificance when weighed against the 600,000 Italian men who died directly on the battlefields or else of wounds or war-related illness. But the figures need to be assessed in the broader context of the system of Italian military justice and its peculiarities. One school of thought, of which Forcella and Monticone are arguably the contemporary historiographical envoys, and to which Procacci can be said to subscribe, seeks to explain this generalized severity in terms of a strong-fisted response on the part of the Italian state to an army and society always on the verge of insubordination and even revolt. Another current, at the vanguard of which is Giorgio Rochat, Italy's foremost military historian, is less convinced of this. For Rochat, while, to be sure, insubordination and protest were present in the Italian army as elsewhere, the fact of the matter is that, with the one exception of the Catanzaro brigade in June–July 1917, this never actually spilled over into open revolt or widespread mutiny, such as was experienced in France in April 1917. On this view, the defeat at Caporetto was caused not by willing disbandment of the men, but by the chronic inefficiency of Italy's commanding officers. Many of the presumptions surrounding the inferior results of the Italian forces in the Great War derive, therefore, from Anglo-French chauvinism vis-à-vis Italy, and also from a tendency among the Italian left to impose on the Italian army a widespread tendency to revolt, which did not in fact characterize the Italian campaign. In Rochat's opinion, a First World War army's efficiency has to be measured in terms of its overall performance in the war of attrition, and on this score the Italian forces passed the test. Rochat bases his thesis on the fact that even though examination of the convictions for 'desertion' in Italy reveals a rather high official count of over 100,000, in reality only about 3,000 charges were brought against men who had (or so it was presumed, since this has never actually been proved) surrendered voluntarily to the enemy. In this regard, it should be remembered that in the Italian army failure to reply to two consecutive roll calls, equivalent to an absence of just 12 hours, was considered desertion. Most 'deserters' were in fact men coming back from leave a few hours or a few days late. Moreover, the vast majority of the other 93,000 convictions for desertion were for soldiers who had left their unit while this was stationed not in the front lines but in the rear. In short, it can be argued that the 100,000 convictions for desertion attest more to the innate severity of the disciplinary regime than to the lack of cohesion and obedience in the army (Rochat 1997; 2000; Rochat & Isnenghi 2000, pp. 243–248, 367–400; 2005–2006). This line of reasoning has found further corroboration in Bruna Bianchi's aforementioned study relative to the character of desertion in the Italian army. Analysis of a sample of 1,300 cases of voluntary departure by ordinary soldiers shows that over 64 per cent was for family reasons, that 52 per cent of cases was for no more than ten days and that 61 per cent of instances resulted in the 'deserter's' voluntary return to duty. As Bianchi argues, there is little evidence here for an

orchestrated desire to desert and, indeed, 72 per cent of the files examined reveals that the accused were men whose previous conduct was defined by their superiors as either good or excellent (Bianchi 2001, chapter 2).

Hence unbridled insubordination on the part of the men does not appear to explain either wholly or satisfactorily the peculiar nature of the Italian military discipline statistics in relation to those of other belligerent nations. It is this standpoint that, at any rate, forms a key organizational concept of Pluviano and Guerrini's study. Their chapter 1 is dedicated to a clarification of the legal edifice on which the summary executions occurred. The death penalty was abolished in Italy in 1889 by the Zanardelli Code, which was, however, limited to the civilian sphere. Attempts at similar reforms in the army dragged on for 25 years until they were finally buried by the outbreak of the European war in 1914. Italy thus entered the conflagration in May 1915 with a military code dating back to 1869. This in turn differed little from its previous incarnation of 10 years earlier, which itself had undergone very minor modifications with respect to its predecessor of 1840 (Rivello 2004), to a period, that is, which predated even the ambiguously democratic articles of the Piedmontese monarchic-liberal Albertine Statute of 1848. Military commanders were wholly a law unto themselves and could resort to four levels of discipline without fear of interference from civilian spheres. These included war tribunals (normally linked to the major units such as an army corps, and the most favourable as far as a soldier's rights were concerned), extraordinary tribunals (where the soldier's rights began to disappear, in as much as these courts were subjected to the pressure of the commands which had convoked them), executions without trial for which documentation was necessary and, finally, execution without trial for which, due to the exceptional circumstances in which they occurred, no documentation was *de rigueur*. Pluviano and Guerrini highlight the ambiguities of Article 40 of the military penal code which was cited for the third of the above levels of justice, but also for the fourth level, since the Article did 'not exclude' the possibility of execution without the condemned man having the right to defend himself. At level four it was given greater legal substance by reference to point No. 3 of the 'Norms for combat' (*Norme pel combattimento*) introduced in 1913, and by a series of circulars issued by Cadorna during 1915. These were No. 1 of 24 May, No. 422 of 9 July and No. 3525 of 28 September. The first emphasized the need to impose discipline with 'inflexible rigour'; the second codified 'severe repression and healthy exemplarity'; whereas the third actually 'legitimated' summary execution. Despite all this, Pluviano and Guerrini argue that the wartime interpretation of Article 40 remained illegal, since any pretence to 'legality' was made possible only by virtue of the 1913 'Norms' which, however, were subordinate in the legal-hierarchical scheme of things to the military penal code in which summary execution had never been explicitly mentioned (Pluviano & Guerrini 2004, chapter 1).

It was when faced with the devastating consequences of these military laws that the 1919 Commission of Inquiry into the defeat at Caporetto, dealt with by the authors in chapter 2, claimed that it had 'reason to believe that there exists serious and specific responsibility for the arbitrary use of the death penalty beyond the limits outlined by the penal code and by the Norms for Combat themselves'. The Commission thus assigned the aforementioned Tommasi the task of ascertaining the truth. Pluviano and Guerrini point out that the undertaking could have been apportioned to a less

enlightened personality. Tommasi was in favour of punishing excesses in the application of military justice and of imposing legal limits on such acts for the future. Moreover, as a jurist, he was convinced that orders were not to be blindly carried out by commanders, who, rather, should have been both willing and able to assess their evident illegality and act accordingly. But Tommasi agreed with the wartime application of Article 40, merely questioning the manner in which, as he saw it, it was sometimes arbitrarily applied. It is also noteworthy that he never managed to convict one officer for what, by his own definition, amounted to 'homicide for excessive observance of legal dispositions' (Pluviano & Guerrini 2004, chapter 2). Indeed, the entire military justice system was heavily biased in favour of officers. As Mortara's figures showed (Mortara 1927, pp. 21, 27), trials and convictions for soldiers above the ranks of corporal or sergeant were far fewer in relative terms compared to those for privates: there were 2,680 trials of officers with 1,733 acquittals and 947 convictions. In short, 6 per cent of all non-officers were sent to trial, whereas the same was the case for only 1.3 per cent of officers. Of the non-officer soldiers tried, 68 per cent were found guilty whereas 65 per cent of officers were acquitted. Bruna Bianchi's analysis of an archival documentation sample of 3,096 proceedings against officers up to 31 October 1919 shows that there were 894 convictions, of which 55 per cent amounted to sentences of less than one year's imprisonment and only 12.5 per cent of over 5 years. Four life sentences were meted out as were 20 death penalties, of which 3 were carried out. As with the ordinary soldiers, the majority of officers were charged with desertion (69 per cent) and, once again like the soldiers, this was mainly for family reasons. But while, as we have seen, such acts were deemed extremely grave when committed by a private, they were considered normal and acceptable for officers who were almost invariably granted attenuating circumstances by judges, including reference to the most recent findings of psychoanalysis relative to the effects of modern industrialized warfare on a man's morale (Bianchi 2001, chapters 1 and 4).

Tommasi's documents, which account for 152 of the 300 acknowledged deaths, form the nucleus of Pluviano and Guerrini's volume. The most significant chapter is the third, in which the authors examine case by case the executions that Tommasi felt were justified on the basis of the documentation available to him. However, of the 17 incidents examined by Tommasi, the authors, using supplementary documentation, or else giving another reading of the evidence, call into doubt 12 of them. So, for example, on 5 June 1917, four men were shot for revolt in the Tuscany brigade during the tenth battle of the Isonzo. The brigade had lost over 2,000 men in the fighting between 23 and 28 May and on 31 May was sent to the rear where it would stay until offensive operations recommenced on 17 August. But between 5 and 16 June it was transferred to Monfalcone and on the night between 4 and 5 June several soldiers refused to march, encouraging others to do the same. The four leaders were identified and summarily executed, justly according to Tommasi. But Pluviano and Guerrini note that this finding contradicted the parameters which Tommasi himself had established as an interpretative grid. This is because no danger had been created for the ongoing cohesion of the unit in battle (since at that stage it was in the rear), and proof of the lack of 'extreme circumstances' is evidenced in the fact that the execution took place 24 hours after the act of indiscipline had occurred (Pluviano & Guerrini 2004, pp. 61–62).

On the basis of the case they build, Pluviano and Guerrini cannot but give a negative interpretation of the character of the First World War. Indeed, the authors affirm in their conclusion that summary justice 'certainly does not appear by chance' in a war conducted by Italy's ruling élites whose reactionary strategy was 'more socio-political than military' (Pluviano & Guerrini 2004, pp. 272–273). Their preface to a recently published Italian soldier's testimony reaffirms this in that, like the soldier himself, they see in the threats or carrying out of summary execution not so much the insanity or unwonted cruelty of any given officer as much as the individual crystallization of a generalized preconception as to how social relations should and did work (Bertazzoni 2005). In this regard, Pluviano and Guerrini's thesis both corroborates and is in turn reinforced by previous and more recent studies which have pointed to the First World War as posing the basis for the genesis of Fascism and the totalitarian state (Isnenghi 1970; 1977; Procacci 1983; Ventrone 2003; O'Brien 2005). But for precisely this reason one gets the impression that the authors oscillate, at times unconvincingly, between total condemnation of the system of summary execution and a concession to the effect that some such shootings were in fact formally legitimate. Not only do they find at least some of Tommasi's decisions to have been 'justified', but they state quite clearly in their conclusion that 'even the most convinced anti-militarist cannot ignore the fact that there were episodes of justice without trial made inevitable by the context and by the behaviour of the victims themselves' (Pluviano & Guerrini 2004, p. 268). Here, however, is opened up a whole can of conceptual worms of a politico-deontological character, since the question of whether or not disobedience is legitimate in a war conducted against the social and political interests of the men who are being disobedient is a moot one indeed. If, as the authors clearly believe, the whole war was strictly speaking 'illegal', then surely any type of engagement with Tommasi's methodology becomes futile and, indeed, falls foul of the logic of the very system which, as socialists such as Genuzio Bentini and Giacomo Ferri pointed out in September 1919, the advocate general substantially failed to challenge and effectively propped up (Pluviano & Guerrini 2004, p. 43).

To conclude, if one were reluctantly to find fault with this volume it would be in relation to the fact that, firstly, it perhaps discriminates excessively in favour of what is 'official' documentation over the non-substantiated cases which it examines, in particular those reported in 1919 by the socialist daily *Avanti!* (but not only). A handful of these incidents is provided in chapter 12, though the authors stress that not only could the material in question fill an entire book, but that it also points to a potential doubling of the already drastic figures. The author's preference for what is methodologically demonstrable is, however, comprehensible, even if, by their own admission, the final figure of over 300 documentable deaths by summary execution they present is itself effectively inadequate from a scientific point of view. At any rate, hopefully Guerrini and Pluviano will one day publish these accounts so that interested scholars can assess their nature for themselves. Secondly, the book easily weighs in at heavier than two doctoral theses in terms of both form and content. The longer treatment is in many respects justified and the word-laden folios of the main body are occasionally broken up by well-placed and extremely useful photographs and maps. However, much like the already cited volume by Bruna Bianchi, which demands excessive patience from even the most sympathetic of readers, a mammoth effort is

required to get through the compact mass of the text. Finally, while both an index and bibliography are provided (neither of which is always assured by Italian publishers), the former is limited to names, whereas the number of themes treated by Pluviano and Guerrini surely merited an analytical index with both categories and subcategories. Nevertheless, theirs is a brilliant and groundbreaking study, driven along by a positive scholarly minuteness, combined with the authors' unabashed intellectual militancy and a radical commitment to the victims of these horrendous and wholly unjustified summary executions.

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