2 A Policy for Defence

Rome had been proclaimed the capital of Italy in March 1861, but the opportunity to incorporate it into the new state did not occur until August 1870, when war broke out between France and Prussia. The king and some of his more conservative generals were certain that France would win and wanted to intervene on her side to extract Rome from a grateful neighbour. The early battles indicated that things might not work out as they supposed; then, on 1 September, the armies of Napoleon III were crushed at Sedan. On 4 September came news of the birth of the Third Republic and the next day General Raffaele Cadorna was authorised to take Rome. Slowly, and with considerable difficulty, he assembled an army. The artillery opened fire on the walls of the city at 5.15 a.m. on the morning of 20 September. The battle was brief and almost bloodless, for after a breach had been battered at Porta Pia the papal forces surrendered. The last of the wars of the Risorgimento was over by 10.10 a.m.

Unified Italy’s fragility and vulnerability posed problems for her soldiers and her statesmen. An anti-clerical regime faced the threat of a ‘black’ reaction inside Italy and intervention by Catholic powers on the Pope’s behalf. The ruling conservative Right also had to contend with the forces of republicanism, personified inside Italy by Garibaldi and posted outside in the shape of the Spanish and French republics. Repressive internal fiscal policies helped spark riots which emphasised the lack of domestic unity and provided an immediate purpose for the army: alarm that parties ‘opposed to the existing political state of Italy’ might stir up trouble led the war minister to issue orders in August 1871 preparing the regional military commands to support public order. Although these alarms were short-lived, strikes in 1872 and 1874 bore clear witness to the volatility of the Italian social order. And from Rome politicians of every stripe watched nervously as property taxes in the south tripled between 1860 and 1877. The army’s role as a tool of domestic order had a high priority for politicians.

The Right chose to seek security not by force but through an unassertive foreign policy. ‘We are not rich’, foreign minister Visconti Venosta remarked in 1872, ‘we are not strong’; and Nigra, Italy’s ambassador to France, spoke for many when he remarked three years later that ‘a war, whatever its outcome, would be for newly-created Italy a disaster’. When, in 1876, the Left came to power it brought with it an
urgent desire that Italy count for something more among the great powers. The army's role changed accordingly.

In the debates of the 1870s all parties agreed that a ready and effective military force was essential 'if not to gain, then at least to conserve and hold Italy's position among the powers of Europe'. The Franco-Prussian war challenged Piedmont's traditional manpower policy by suggesting that quantity was more important than quality. In resolving this question, the Italian high command united to block a reformist war minister from the Right. Military conservatism, and an innate lack of confidence in their soldiery, also led the military to adopt a defence policy which hinged on extensive – and expensive – fortification. Even so, the soldiers expected their enemy to break into Italy across the land frontier; the most favourable outcome they could envisage was victory in a great defensive battle in the Po Valley.

The French defeat in 1870 raised the central issue of whether the newly united nation should stick to the Piedmontese model or look to Prussia for its example. There was no easy consensus on what had brought the Prussians victory. Liberal reformists and the Left explained success in terms of the effectiveness of the *levée-en-masse* and the value of popular energy, properly harnessed; conservatives highlighted the principles of obedience which were characteristic of the semi-feudal Prussian state; soldiers emphasised the importance of Prussian organisation and pointed to the influence of the general staff. Issues which had previously gone undiscussed, such as the abolition of substitution, now forced their way on to the political agenda as politicians and soldiers reassessed the value of the Piedmontese model.

It fell to Cesare Francesco Ricotti-Magnani to oversee reform. Born in Novara on 3 June 1822, Ricotti had spent his cadet years at the military academy in Turin and had then joined the artillery. He had taken part in all the wars of the Risorgimento from 1848 onwards, as well as fighting with the Piedmontese contingent in the Crimea, and had done his first stint at the war ministry in 1864. Though not the first choice as minister – the king would have preferred Bertolè-Viale – he was to prove energetic and far-sighted during his six years in office.

Ricotti faced a situation in which category II recruits were rarely called out for military training, and those in category I were often called to the colours late or sent home early. This was a direct consequence of the pressure to balance the budget, which for the army had shrunk from 250 million lire a year between 1861 and 1865 to 160 million between 1867 and 1872. Faced with severe financial limitations and considerable