4 Crispi at the Helm

When Francesco Crispi began his first term as premier in August 1887, the British embassy in Rome warned London that the new incumbent 'may be considered as somewhat “wild” in his ideas of foreign policy, at all events as compared with the Foreign Ministers of European states with whom he has to deal'. Italy’s foreign policy, which he conducted as minister of foreign affairs until the fall of his second ministry in 1891, was shaped by adventurism and by an overpowering Francophobia; in 1885 the French raised duties on grain and animal imports, and in March 1888 Crispi introduced a high general tariff in retaliation, starting a trade war which lasted a decade. When not trying to start a shooting war in Europe, Crispi was convinced that one was about to break out. Under his hand, the links between Italy and Germany tightened.

As Crispi came to power Italy entered a decade of instability. An agricultural crisis was compounded by the collapse of a speculative building boom in 1888 which in turn affected the banks. Deficits mounted and economy became the order of the day after 1890, with the military being forced to bear their share. At the same time industrial strikes and agrarian agitation began to increase. An alarming political dimension was added to these seismic shocks as, in the early 1890s, the nascent socialist party set out to persuade labour that it must undertake a political as well as an economic struggle if it was to improve its position in Italian society. By the time that Crispi entered his third premiership in 1893 he faced the spectre of mounting numbers of workers’ syndicalist associations, both socialist and Catholic. To a man of Crispi’s disposition, red and black threats were equally alarming. To the army they represented a new and unwelcome extension of its responsibilities.

Manoeuvres held during the summer of 1887 as Crispi was settling into office emphasised Italy’s strategic vulnerability. Military and naval exercises along the Tyrrhenian coast showed how easy it would be for France to land troops in central and southern Italy, and cut rail and telegraphic communications in the peninsula. Rumour was at least as potent as analysis in stimulating Crispi to action, and after less than two months in office, he heard from Berlin of an understanding between France and Switzerland over the occupation of districts to the north of Savoy in the event of a war between France and Italy. He rushed to
Bismarck and on 2 October – according to his own version of events – the two men agreed to create an Italo-German military convention.

Two weeks after his return Crispi wrote to the chief of the German general staff, Helmuth von Moltke, inviting him to outline a scheme of accord. Bismarck swiftly intervened and at his direction von Moltke replied that the issue was too delicate for communications to be anything other than oral. The German attitude was one of wary caution: their military attaché in Rome reported at the end of October that it was far from clear how genuinely the Italians wanted military co-operation. Thus the war plan drawn up by von Moltke in November mentioned military involvement by Italy only in the context of an attack on Lyons. However, Berlin clearly scented military advantage in Crispi’s approach, for at the end of the month the German ambassador in Rome, Solms, began to try to persuade Italy to deploy troops alongside Germany in the main theatre rather than wasting them in fruitless peripheral operations.

Crispi had already suggested to von Moltke that two Italian officers go to Berlin to discuss closer strategic co-operation and accordingly Lieutenant-Colonels Dabormida and Albertone – Cosenz’s past and present military secretaries – went to Germany on 24 December to begin conversations. Russian military manoeuvres along the Austrian frontier provided a backdrop which Bismarck skilfully highlighted. Despite reassuring noises from the Russian military attaché in Vienna, the German chancellor heightened tension by urging that Austrian troops be moved into Galicia. That the crisis was being orchestrated was clear to Rome from the reports of the Italian military attaché in St Petersburg, who continually reassured his superiors that no untoward troop movements were taking place in Russia despite Italian press reports to the contrary.

On 27 December the Italian delegation proposed that, in the event of a war with France under the terms of the Triple Alliance, Italy should furnish six army corps to co-operate directly with German troops on the Rhine. This offer, which came as something of a surprise to Berlin, necessitated making Austrian railway lines available to transport Italian troops direct to the western front. Berlin approached Vienna about transport co-operation and simultaneously suggested that the conversations be widened to include Austrian representatives. Austria was at first unwilling to take part in three-way conversations, but came to realise that Italian troops operating on the Rhine would free German forces for a campaign in the east. On this basis she consented to put three railway lines at Italy’s disposal from the tenth day of mobilisation, each