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**The Italian Presence on the Balkan Front
(1915-1918)***

The decision by Britain and France to create the Macedonian front in September 1915 was severely censured in the West, chiefly by those who believed the military operations on the western fronts were crucial to the success of the war. Particularly in Italy, which had joined the Entente by the Treaty of London on 26 April 1915, reaction was strong, and political and military circles were casting a wary eye over the expediency of their own participation in the planned operation in the Balkans.

At the insistence of the French, the Italians initially agreed to co-operate with the Allies in Macedonia, circumstances permitting. But when the matter came up for discussion, although the Italian Foreign Minister, Sidney Sonnino, believed it was in Rome's interests not to stand aloof from the Allied operation, he was most reluctant to send Italian troops to Thessaloniki. However, he did not dismiss what he considered a more effective, though rather dangerous, plan: namely to respond to the Allies' desperate pleas to help the Serbs by sending a detachment into Albanian territory.

Consequently, Italy sought to combine the presence of its forces in this area with the pursuit of one of the fundamental priorities of Italian foreign policy; a priority that had emerged as early as the previous century, namely Italian interest in Albania. Meanwhile, having elicited the Allies' consent, in the Treaty of London, to Italian sovereignty over the island of Sassi, Valona, and the surrounding area, Italy now had the chance to establish a strong base on the opposite coast of the Adriatic. It thus secured both supremacy over Austria in that maritime region and

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a springboard for its own influence in the Balkans¹.

At home, Sonnino's proposal was strongly opposed by the military, particularly the Chief of Staff, General Cadorna. For both military and political reasons, the latter thought Italy should join the purely Balkan front on the Allies' side, and he had serious objections to the alternative proposal. He described the wild terrain of Albania, with its non-existent road network, as a "colossal slot machine capable of devouring whole divisions" and pointed out that it would have to be constantly supplied with men and material. An expert in his field, Cadorna considered such an operation pointless and dangerous, liable to trap the Italian troops in a rugged, inhospitable region amidst bands of uncontrolled local resistance fighters, with little likelihood of affecting the outcome of the War.

Sonnino was also aware of the dangers inherent in the Albanian terrain; but his attitude reflected less a desire to help the Allies by providing rearguard support for the Serbs than his suspicion, firstly, that the Greeks were intending to push northwards and, secondly, that the French on the Macedonian front were preparing to open up a new communications route from Monastir westwards, through Albanian territory².

Following the Serbian defeat in the autumn of 1915, the Italian Prime Minister and the Ministers of Foreign, Military, and Economic Affairs overrode Cadorna's persistent objections and unanimously decided to land Italian forces in Albania. In this way they would, theoretically, be undertaking to reinforce the Allied supply bases in the Adriatic and to oversee the embarkation of the retreating Serbs. But in actual fact they would be ensuring that the Serbian forces did not

1. Mario Toscano, *Il Patto di Londra: Storia diplomatica dell'intervento italiano (1914-1915)*, Bologna 1934, pp. 166-7. The Italians had already occupied Sasson and Valona "temporarily" (in October and December 1914 respectively) on the pretext of the anarchy that had followed Prince Vid's departure from Albania: see S. T. Laskaris, *Διπλωματική ιστορία της συγχρόνου Ευρώπης (1914-1939)*, Thessaloniki 1954, pp. 35-7; B. P. Papadakis, *Histoire diplomatique de la Question nord-épirote (1912-1957)*, Athens 1958, pp. 45-6; George B. Leon, "Greece and the Albanian Question at the Outbreak of the First World War", *Balkan Studies* 11/1 (1970), 65-80.

2. Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito, Ufficio Storico, *Le truppe italiane in Albania (Anni 1914-20 e 1939)*, Rome 1978, pp. 38-40, Carlo Baudino, *Una guerra assurda: La compagnia di Grecia*, Milan 1965, pp. 16-18.

regroup and advance through Albanian territory. In other words, the government had found an opportunity both to postpone sending troops to Thessaloniki and to further its own plans to consolidate the Italian position in Albania by barring the passage of any rival power and securing a springboard for future territorial adjustments. To this end a division of three brigades was dispatched, a total of 80,000 men³, who formed the *Corpo speciale italiano d'Albania*, led by General Bertotti.

Sonnino's instructions outlined the priorities of the Italian presence in the region: to reinforce the troops at Valona (which was to be held at all costs); to occupy Durazzo and an extensive coastal area, i.e. sufficient territory to ensure the future occupation of the Gulf of Valona; to occupy the hinterland of Northern Epirus ("temporarily" at first), and maintain an aggressive stance towards the Greeks to thwart their expansionist intentions. Helping the Serbs was of secondary importance⁴.

However, intervention in Northern Epirus was a particularly delicate matter and threatened to compromise Italy *vis-à-vis* the Allies⁵. After some speculation, the Italians proposed that it be given out, chiefly in the French press, that the areas under Greek control were destined inevitably to become Greek, but that a better solution would be to give them to one of the Great Powers, which would be able to help them more effectively in the future. It was also necessary to convince the Allies of the necessity for an operation to stamp out smuggling across the Greek-Albanian border. The best approach would be to eliminate the "hostile" Greek authorities by occupying the various districts of Northern Epirus, though it seemed advisable that this should not be an exclusively Italian initiative. However, in view of what the Italians regarded as the Allies' immoderate desire to draw Venizelos (who ardently supported Greek aspirations in Northern Epirus) into the War, the possibility of concerted action would probably have to be ruled out⁶.

Meanwhile, Austrian pressure on Albania early in 1916 gave Italy a strong pretext for refusing, at least for the time being, to send troops to

3. See n. 13 below.

4. Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito, *op.cit.*, pp. 41-3, 47, 54; Baudino, *op.cit.*, pp. 18-19.

5. For a global view of the Italian rationale regarding both Northern and Southern Epirus, see Umberto Fracchia, *Venizelos contro lo Stato di Atene*, Rome 1917, pp. 191-206.

6. Sidney Sonnino, *Carteggio*, vol. 3, Bari 1974, pp. 23-6, 28-9.

Thessaloniki. The essential thing was to maintain Valona, which was of great strategic importance since it could provide access to Monastir in future military operations⁷.

In the end, the Italians used two pretexts — the Greeks' inability to halt the Bulgarian advance, particularly after the invasion of Macedonia by hostile forces, and the need to put a stop to smuggling between Greece and the Central Powers — to take drastic measures. In August 1916, they occupied the districts of Chimarra, Delvino, Argyrocastro and Premeti, overthrowing the Greek authorities in the process. When Venizelos' Provisional Government in Thessaloniki tried to save Korytsa at least, the town was handed over to the French forces on the Macedonian front (in November 1916)⁸. In this way, the Italians presented themselves on the one hand as averting the risk of the enemy forces' joining with the Greeks to launch a rearguard attack on the Allied troops in Macedonia, and on the other as linking the Italian troops in Albania with the rest of the Allied forces on the front. Thus were carried out a series of actions which would have unforeseen political consequences for the Greeks of the region and which were made possible chiefly by the Greeks' internal disunity.

The subsequent developments were decisive. With a change of tactics, Rome now aspired to create a greater Albania to act as a barrier to Slav expansion across the Adriatic. For this reason, in Argyrocastro on 3 June 1917 the commander of the Italian forces in Albania, General Giacinto Ferrero, declared the unification and independence of Albania under the protection of the King of Italy. At the same time, the Italian forces extended their occupation to other parts of Northern Epirus, including Ioannina and Metsovo, whence they withdrew, however, in September of the same year in deference to strong pressure⁹.

7. Ministero degli Affari Esteri, *I Documenti Diplomatici Italiani* (hereafter DDI), quinta serie: 1914-1918, vol. V, Rome 1989, Nos 322, 362, 372, Sonnino to ambassadors, Rome, 15 Jan. 1916, 23 Jan. 1916, 26 Jan. 1916, pp. 225-6, 257, 265 respectively. (All dates N.S.)

8. For the fate of the "Albanian Republic of Korytsa", which the French declared on 10 December 1916, see N. Petsalis-Diomidis, *Greece at the Paris Peace Conference (1919)*, Thessaloniki 1978, p. 50.

9. General Staff: Department of Military History, *Ο Ελληνικός στρατός κατά τον Πρώτον Παγκόσμιον Πόλεμον, 1914-1918*, vol. 1, Athens 1958, pp. 156-60, 264-6; B. Kondis, *Εναισθητες ισορροπίες: Ελλάδα και Αλβανία στον 20ό αιώνα*, Thessaloniki

With Venizelos in power, and particularly after the region had been reinforced by a newly established division in Ioannina, fears that Greece would occupy Northern Epirus intensified. The Italian ambassador to Athens, Count Alessandro de Bosdari, therefore proposed as the only means of safeguarding Northern Epirus in Italian-protected Albania the dispatch of a strong Italian force that would by far outnumber the Greek troops there. The Ministry of Military Affairs apparently gave the proposal some serious thought and decided that the 35th Division — i.e. the entire Italian force on the Macedonian front — should be transferred from the Crna sector to Albania, thereby establishing an irreversible *fait accompli*. Since the Allied Balkan front now stretched from just north of Stavros on the Aegean to the port of Santi Quaranta on the Adriatic, the request could be regarded simply as a corrective move. Although the new commander of the *Armée d'Orient*, Louis Guillaumat, refused to allow the whole Italian force to be transferred to Albania, he did consent to the transfer of a few units¹⁰. Italy's insistence on retaining the territory of Northern Epirus after the war, as a pawn for use in future negotiations, meant that the occupation of the Epirus triangle was prolonged until April 1920¹¹.

In the summer of 1916, the second phase of the Italian presence on the Balkan front was carried out, namely the dispatch to Macedonia of the 35th Infantry Division, which consisted of three brigades commanded by General Petitti di Roreto. The view that ultimately prevailed in Italy was that the country's participation was essential and inevitable, for it could not afford to miss out on major events that had a direct

1994, pp. 106-10, 113-14, 118-19. For the Italians' ulterior motives with regard to Epirus, see Y. G. Mourélos, *L'Intervention de la Grèce dans la Grande Guerre (1916-1917)*, Athens 1983, pp. 112, 212-16, 220-2. The various administrative interventions in the region, as also the efforts by the Italian Vice-Consul in Ioannina to win over the considerable Vlach population of the Pindus, likewise reflected Rome's intention to create a greater Albania that would reach as far as Preveza (*op. cit.*, pp. 212-13).

10. *DDI*, vol. X, Rome 1985, No 89, Sonnino to Paris Embassy, Rome, 16 Jan. 1918, p. 63; Alan Palmer, *The Gardeners of Salonika*, London 1965, pp. 158, 169.

11. Sonnino, *op. cit.*, p. 381. For Italy's successful efforts to carry out an ambitious programme of public works (roads, bridges, harbours, airports, etc.), consolidate public order and security, introduce new methods of cultivation, improve health care, and found Italian schools with a view to spreading Italian propaganda in Albania more effectively, see A. J. Mann, *The Salonika Front*, London 1920, pp. 104-9; Petsalis-Diomidis, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

bearing on the spoils of war in an area within the fundamental aims of Italian foreign policy. Italy declared war on Germany on 28 June 1916, and the first Italian detachments landed in Thessaloniki on 11 August. The Macedonian capital also became the base of the Italian expeditionary force, the *Ufficio staccato Intendenza Albania-Macedonia* (USIAM), with its various auxiliary services.

At that time the *Armée d'Orient* was 360,000 strong, comprising 200,000 British and French soldiers, 120,000 Serbs, 10,000 Russians, who had arrived in June¹², and 30,000 Italians. By October, there were 45,000 Italians¹³. Italy responded to the Allies' appeals for further reinforcements with an unsuccessful bid to make compliance conditional on a detailed outline of their interests in the forthcoming resolution of the question of Asiatic Turkey, an issue that had remained unsettled since the Treaty of London. The diplomatic correspondence shows that the Italians were deeply concerned that the Allies might accede to Venizelos' demands in Asia Minor without their knowledge and present them with *faits accomplis*¹⁴. Furthermore, they did not believe that the operation on the Balkan front would be effective unless it were combined with a massive Russian assault from the north¹⁵.

The main Italian force stayed a few days in Thessaloniki and then advanced to the front, first east of Lake Dojran and then, in view of the assault on Monastir in November 1916, further west. Thereafter it remained in the Crna sector, in the hills near the Prespa Lakes — specifically, to the south of hill 1050 — and took part in the Allied engage-

12. For the Russian participation, see Anastasia Galiropoulou, "Η παρουσία των Ρώσων στη Θεσσαλονίκη κατά τον Πρώτο Παγκόσμιο Πόλεμο", Proceedings of the Symposium *Η Θεσσαλονίκη μετά το 1912*, Thessaloniki 1986, pp. 141-53.

13. Luigi Villari, *The Macedonian Campaign*, London 1922, pp. 42-4. The Italian forces have been estimated at 50,000, but this figure includes the members of the Italian community in Thessaloniki. According to Alan Palmer (*op.cit.*, p. 74), the Eastern Army was 320,000 strong. In July the following year, the Army numbered 192,000 British soldiers, 210,000 French, 45,000 Italians (plus 80,000 in Valona), 100,000 Serbs, 12,000 Russians, and 60,000 Greeks, half of whom were reservists. (DDI, vol. VIII, Rome 1983, No 709, Carlotti to Foreign Ministry, St Petersburg, 22 July 1917, p. 444.)

14. DDI, vol. VI, Rome 1989, No 459, Tittoni to Sonnino, Paris, 21 Sept. 1916, pp. 304-6; No 617, Imperiali to Sonnino, London, 27 Oct. 1916, p. 419-20.

15. George B. Leon, *Greece and the Great Powers, 1914-1917*, Thessaloniki 1974, pp. 445, 449.

ments in this area until the end of the war¹⁶. With the Allies' victorious advance, there were Italian forces virtually all over the Balkan peninsula. At the end of 1918, Rome requested that a brigade be detailed from the *Armée d'Orient* and sent straight to Asia Minor¹⁷.

The relations between the Italian officers and the Commander-in-Chief of the *Armée d'Orient*, Maurice Sarrail, were far from ideal, and this was not exclusively due to Italian suspicion of French policy in Greece and the Balkans. As the Italian commander said in Rome in the summer of 1917, he himself would have sent more troops to Macedonia had there been a general there to command them¹⁸. The Italians resented Sarrail's complaints about the limited Italian participation; nor did they understand why he regarded the National Defence movement with such favour, for they thought any hope of substantial support from Venizelos's army would come to nothing¹⁹. After Sarrail's departure, the Italians showed more confidence in his successor, Guillaumat, but their real concern by then was to transfer the expeditionary force to their Valona base.

Although the Italian presence on the Macedonian front was not significant, they played a substantial part in facilitating transportation, which was a major problem for the Allies²⁰. Hitherto, the army's supply depots had been either in England or in the French ports of Toulon and Marseilles; so the voyage across the Mediterranean as far as Thessaloniki took at least a week, with enormous losses from enemy submarine

16. Palmer, *op.cit.*, pp. 87-91, 193. In contrast to the Italian troops' diligent efforts to help the local Greek population — efforts that in some areas, such as the Florina region, were well received by the beleaguered inhabitants — the French authorities turned a blind eye to blatant Albanian and, particularly, Serbian propaganda in central and western Macedonia (K. Zahopoulou-Apostolidi, "Γαλλική πολιτική και ξένες προπαγάνδες στη Μακεδονία (1914-1918)", postgraduate study, Thessaloniki 1990, pp. 65-76).

17. Archivio Storico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri, series: *Affari Politici* (hereafter ASMAE) Turchia/207(1918), No 29438, Minister for War to Foreign Ministry, Rome, 20 Dec. 1918.

18. Villari, *op.cit.*, pp. 36-8, 96; Palmer, *op.cit.*, pp. 153, 158.

19. ASMAE Grecia/91(1917), Nos 572/118 and 1129/186, consul in Thessaloniki (Dolfini) to Sonnino, Thessaloniki, 29 Feb. 1917 and 1 June 1917 (confidential).

20. W. Price, *The Story of the Salonica Army*, London, New York, Toronto 1918, pp. 241-54. Reference is made to the excellent modern mountain roads the Italian engineers built along the front, as also other defensive works, in Mann, *op.cit.*, pp. 97-8, and Henry Day, *Macedonian Memories*, London 1930, p. 141.

attacks on the way²¹.

After deciding to take part in the Macedonian campaign, the Italians allowed the Allies to use Taranto to serve the needs of the front. So both Britain and France established naval bases in the harbour and large military camps near the town, and henceforth a large proportion of the supplies were carried to Taranto by rail and sent on to Thessaloniki by sea. In theory, travel time was thus reduced to a mere three days. In practice, of course, there were delays to contend with, because fear of enemy submarines necessitated extra measures. Although the supplies were transported chiefly by night (the ships seeking refuge in ports *en route* in the daytime), the losses continued, so that the need to reduce dangerous sailing time even further became a real headache for the Allies. The desired solution of using Greek territory was impossible in the early period, while Greece was neutral, and it was only after Greece joined the war (in June 1917) that the British and the French, chiefly, began to use the Patra–Itea–Bralo route, mainly for transporting troops, who completed the journey to Thessaloniki by train²².

The Italians found another solution. Using an old footpath from Santi Quaranta to the interior, they completed their occupation of the area and began to build a road from the port in the direction of Florina. At the same time, the French on the Macedonian front began a similar project in the opposite direction, once again living up to Clémenceau's description of them as the "Gardeners of Salonika". The work was completed in the summer of 1917 and went some way towards meeting the Allies' needs²³. Being anxious to avoid fuelling Italian suspicions, the

21. On average one ship was lost in the Mediterranean every day (Leon, *Greece and the Great Powers*, p. 445).

22. Villari, *op.cit.*, pp. 165-6.

23. The outlet through the gulf of Patra and Itea was chiefly used by the British and the French, for whom it had more or less the same advantages as the Santi Quaranta had for the Italians. Specifically, although the Taranto–Itea route took 48 hours, as opposed to 15 hours for the Taranto–Santi Quaranta route, in both cases the amount of time when ships were vulnerable to submarine attack was exactly the same, because the danger zone was between Taranto and Corfu and could be crossed in a night. The ship would carry on to Patra the next night, facing no particular danger between the Ionian Islands and the mainland. The journey via Itea, Bralo, and Thessaloniki took about four days; while the journey by land across Northern Epirus by car or lorry to the front or to Thessaloniki took two and a half to three days, or longer, depending on the type of transport. In other words, it took much longer for a military detachment to reach its destination this way than via the Aegean, but the latter was

French preferred to use Greek territory²⁴.

For the Italians, at any rate, it was a first-class solution and, apart from facilitating transportation (the voyage from Taranto or Brindisi to Santi Quaranta took only one night), it also served their broader purpose of expanding and legitimising their presence in the region.

At this point it will be of interest to take a look at the Italians' relations with Greece, a country they automatically regarded as a rival to their aspirations in the Balkans and the Eastern Mediterranean. The diplomatic circles in the Italian Foreign Ministry were particularly chilly, even hostile, towards the Greeks.

The powerless, divided country offered ideal conditions for the unhampered furtherance of Italian interests. What the Allies ought to be interested in, the Italians thought, was not Greece's weak, disorganised military units, but its territory. They were already making use of it and could in the same way get hold of more than they actually needed. In the circumstances, Italian foreign policy focused on the king's government and troops, and its basic aims were that Constantine should keep Greece neutral and guarantee the security of the Allied forces, that the Allies should reach a friendly settlement of their differences with him, and that they should avoid any clumsy actions that might propel the Athens government into the enemy camp. In contrast, far from being a matter of indifference to Italy, Greece's entry into the war was most undesirable and had to be avoided at all costs²⁵.

The Italians had a particular antipathy for Venizelos, whose Great-Idea-inspired plans were a threat to Rome's expansionist policy. This was why they obstinately refused to recognise the Provisional Govern-

undoubtedly a much more hazardous route. (Villari, *op.cit.*, p. 170.)

24. Jacques Ancel, *Les Travaux et les jours de l'Armée d'Orient, 1915-1918*, Paris 1921, pp. 158-9.

25. *DDI*, vol. V, No 496, Alessandro de Bosdari to Sonnino, Athens, 22 Feb. 1916, pp. 364-6; vol. VI, Sonnino to ambassadors, No 788, Rome, 4 Dec. 1916, pp. 563-4, No 803, Rome, 7 Dec. 1916, p. 575, No 907, Rome, 25 Dec. 1916, p. 659. An article by a Russian correspondent, which was sent to Moscow from London, confiscated by the British censors, and ended up in the hands of the Italian authorities, was most scathing about the Italians' promotion of their own interests both in Albania and in Macedonia, as also about their dissobliging attitude to the Greeks' participation. (ASMAE Grecia/91(1917), No 10658/4, Information Department to Foreign Ministry, Rome, 10 Aug. 1917.)

ment in Thessaloniki²⁶. The Italian diplomats in Greece took an ironic view of the Cretan statesman's declaration of war in November 1916: they considered his movement a totally amateurish, spurious affair with very little popular support, propped up chiefly by the British and French forces, and they rated its military effectiveness in the spring of 1917 as "slightly less than nil"²⁷.

So it was that at the Allied conference in Rome, in January of that year, the Italians were not disposed to yield to pressure to send reinforcements to the Balkans. In particular, France's negative stance towards King Constantine, coupled with French and British sympathy for Venizelos, increased Rome's distrust of the Allies and made the Italians question the expediency of their presence at the front²⁸.

Stubbornly refusing to concede that the Greek army was fit to fight, the Italians attributed its periodic advances at the front to bogus publicity by the Western press. As a corollary, they also dismissed it as a threat to their own aspirations. However, when the Greek army proved itself a force to be reckoned with in the Allied victory of September 1918, their attitude began to change²⁹. Henceforth, any success by the Greek forces posed a double threat: not only would it enhance Venizelos' personal prestige, but there was also the risk that the Allies would assign them to operations in areas of Italian interest, namely Albania and Asia Minor, where further Greek successes could have undesirable consequences³⁰.

One other aspect of the Italian presence on the Macedonian front concerned Italy's efforts towards commercial infiltration of the region. In this connection, the Italians established a chamber of commerce early in 1917, increased steamer communications, and attempted to win over

26. G. G. Mourellos, "Η Προσωρινή Κυβέρνηση της Θεσσαλονίκης και οι σχέσεις της με τους Συμμάχους (Σεπτέμβριος 1916 – Ιούνιος 1917)", *Mnimon*, 8 (1980-1982), 150-88; Kondis, *op.cit.*, p. 118.

27. *DDI*, vol. VI, No 741, Bosdari to Sonnino, Athens, 25 Nov. 1916, p. 534; vol. VII, Rome, 1978, No 673, *idem*, Athens, 7 Apr. 1917, pp. 497-9.

28. *DDI*, vol. VIII, No 53, Bosdari to Sonnino, Athens, 22 May 1917, pp. 35-6. See also Mourélos, *L'Intervention*, pp. 51, 99.

29. ASMAE Grecia/92(1917-18), No 720/106, Bosdari to Sonnino, Athens, 22 Apr. 1918.

30. *DDI*, vol. XI, Rome 1986, No 599, Romano Avezzana to Sonnino, Athens, 1 Oct. 1918, p. 439.

Thessaloniki's large Jewish community, which was heavily involved in the commercial life of the region as a whole³¹.

At this time, Rome became the Jews' main point of reference, and they applied either to the local consulate or to the Foreign Ministry, via the Committee of the Jewish Communities in Italy, to resolve their various problems. Being suspicious of Greek rule³², they thought the measures introduced by the government discriminatory, and they asked Italy to intervene. Matters came to a head on two occasions. The first was in autumn 1916, when the National Defence government introduced conscription for the Jews. According to Italian sources, many of the conscripts presented themselves at the Italian consulate asking to serve under the Italian commander (the situation was eventually defused by the government's decision to place them at the Allies' disposal). At the same time, another group, comprising some of the Jewish community's leading dignitaries, discussed the possibility of a change of citizenship, a subject which, it is alleged, was preoccupying thousands of their fellow Jews³³. The second occasion was during the critical period after the great fire in August 1917, when Italy gave active support to the city's Jewish population, which had been particularly hard hit. It was thought that the Greek government had decided to expropriate the devastated area and to change the city plan with the ulterior motive of forcing the Jews to depart *en masse* to the advantage of the Greek merchants. In an effort to stir the Italians' known sympathies, the Committee of the Jewish Communities in Italy wrote to the Foreign Ministry outlining the dreadful consequences of such a move. Essentially, it would mean the loss of a large population, which lived in the vital port of Thessaloniki and was very favourably disposed towards Italian political, economic, and cultural infiltration. The Committee therefore asked Rome to lobby strenuously for the withdrawal of the measures, which were a violation of private property rights.

Handwritten notes in the margins of this document indicate that the

31. Mourellos, "Η Προσωρινή Κυβέρνηση", p. 163.

32. For the various stages of their quandary, see R. Molho, "Η Εβραϊκή κοινότητα της Θεσσαλονίκης και η ένταξή της στο ελληνικό κράτος (1912-1919)", Proceedings of the Symposium *Η Θεσσαλονίκη μετά το 1912*, Thessaloniki 1986, pp. 285-300.

33. ASMAE Grecia/89(1916), No 1696/358, Dolfini to Foreign Ministry, Thessaloniki, 9 Nov. 1916.

ministry proposed that the subject be broached unofficially at first, through diplomatic channels. It was to be made clear to the Greeks that the issue could lead to official interventions; at the same time, the Jews were to be assured that the authorities would look into all the aspects of the situation and would not permit the unjust sacrifice of private interests³⁴.

Meanwhile, on the initiative of the Italian consul and the Italian military command in Macedonia, a military store (*Magazzino Italiano per approvvigionamenti militari di Salonico*) was opened in Thessaloniki on 26 March 1917. Although it was privately funded (with 290,000 drachmas donated by the Errera brothers, who were Thessaloniki Jews living in Milan, and 10,000 dr. donated by Josef Modiano), it was not merely a private enterprise. The terms of the contract signed by Guglielmo Errera, who was the owners' proxy and the manager of the store, and the commander of the 35th Italian Division stated, first, that the commander was obliged, following an agreement with his country's Ministries of Foreign, Military, and Naval Affairs, to facilitate the stocking of the store. In other words, he was to secure the essential export permits and papers granting exemption from duty for the Italian commodities as also their free transportation by requisitioned ships belonging to the state. Secondly, the owners undertook to give the Italian consul 25% of the net profits every six months, to be donated to Italian charitable foundations. At the consul's request, this amount was increased to 30% on 1 July 1918³⁵.

From the relatively plentiful correspondence in a special file in the Historical Archive of the Italian Foreign Ministry, it appears that the main motivation behind this particular move was the fact that the Allies were already running similar stores in Thessaloniki (the French had four, the British two, and the Serbs one). It was therefore considered advisable to set up a similar Italian establishment to supply the Italian soldiers' day-to-day needs in terms of foodstuffs, drink, clothing, cigarettes and tobacco, perfumery, etc., at reasonable prices. Business was conducted exclusively in Italian currency to prevent any exploitation

34. ASMAE Grecia/91(1917), Committee of Jewish Communities of Italy to Foreign Ministry, Rome, 11 Oct. 1917.

35. ASMAE Conflito Europeo/Bazar di Salonico/426(1916-1920), No 1096/148, Dolfini to Foreign Ministry, Thessaloniki, 1 June 1918.

by local money-changers. The Allied forces' demand for Italian bank-notes so that they too could use the store was viewed positively. However, a financial report issued by the 35th Division soon after the store had opened criticised the decision that the Italian soldiers should make their purchases in lire, because this had led to a devaluation of the lira on the local market. The government ought to bear in mind that the military mission was abroad, not in occupied territory, and it would be better to use the local currency. It was to be wished that the Italian store might cover all the soldiers' needs, and indeed stock only Italian goods. But since this was impossible, owing to the difficulty of exporting basic essentials from Italy, it was necessary to get round the problem for the sake of "the sacred purpose of commercial infiltration"³⁶. In other words, the basic aim was to promote Italian products and introduce them to all the soldiers of the *Armée d'Orient*, for this would be especially useful after the war.

For their part, the owners were not satisfied that this aim was being achieved. Owing to the restrictions in Italy, the quantities that eventually reached Thessaloniki were insufficient to meet the increased demand, with the result that supplies were obtained from other, Allied or neutral, countries, or even bought on the local market.

Despite the various problems, the financial results were eventually pronounced satisfactory. The takings amounted to 1,226,000 lire in the store's first quarter and 3,106,446 lire in the second half of 1917, with profits of 113,208 lire and 554,274 lire respectively, despite the fact that the store had had to remain closed for about a month, because of the catastrophic fire in August³⁷.

It is an indisputable fact that the military store served a number of ulterior motives. It was one of Rome's various ways of enhancing Italian prestige and interests abroad, especially in view of the concerted efforts of the other countries (particularly France)³⁸ to promote their

36. ASMAE, *ibid.*, report by the garrison commander, Thessaloniki, 30 Mar. 1917. The owner of the store, David Errera, agreed that drachmas should be used (*ibid.*, to the Director General of Political Affairs in the Foreign Ministry, Milan, 24 Aug. 1918).

37. ASMAE, *ibid.*, report from David Errera, n.d. [summer 1918], and Nos 1624/282 and 522/69 (confidential), Dolfini to Foreign Ministry, Thessaloniki, 23 July 1917 and 15 Mar. 1918 respectively.

38. For the special measures implemented by the French (under the supervision of

own interests. The relevant correspondence contains a range of views expressed by members of political, military, and financial circles, all proposing ways of best achieving the country's aims.

One further indication of Italy's aspirations, finally, is a top secret personal letter from the captain of the Italian ship *Piemonte* to the relevant ministries. Written in Thessaloniki in 1918, it contains some interesting information. Among other things, the captain offers the view that the Italian presence in the Balkans was not best represented by a general in charge of a single division at the front. The situation was much too complex for that. Particularly in Thessaloniki, which was considered to be the most important port in the Aegean, an outstanding individual was required, who would be capable of promoting Italian policy from a number of angles, both with regard to the Allies and in local terms. The writer concludes by pointing out the need for a special study of Italy's future relations with the port of Thessaloniki. He hopes it will be internationalised "under the aegis of Italy too, for though Italy is not one of Greece's Protecting Powers, tomorrow it might be one of the governors of the free port of Thessaloniki"³⁹.

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General Sarraïl moreover) to pave the way for future exploitation of the region, see Ancel, *op.cit.*, pp. 163-5. For the broader French political expediencies in Macedonia, see Zahopoulou-Apostolidi, *op.cit.*, pp. 46, 48-59.

39. ASMAE Grecia/92 (1917-18), B. Bertone to Naval Ministry, Thessaloniki, 2 May 1918, forwarded to Foreign Ministry, Rome, 14 May 1918.