

VITTORIO EMANUELE ORLANDO
(1860-1952)

This month's essay deals with one of the most important Italian politicians and legislators in the 20th century. He was Prime Minister of Italy during the concluding years of World War I, and was called the "Premier of Victory" for defeating the Central Powers, along with the Entente, in the war. As a member of the victorious coalition, he was one of the Big Four at the Paris Peace Conference following the war (January–June, 1919). He was also a famous constitutional law professor, who wrote a number of important books and over a hundred scholarly articles on jurisprudence during the times he was not serving in public office.



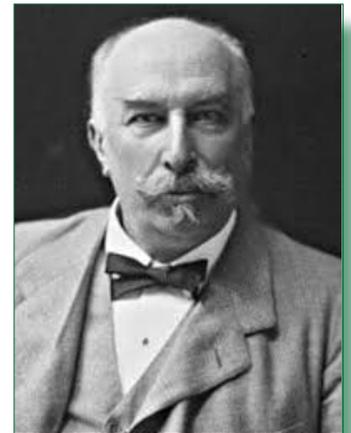
VITTORIO EMANUELE ORLANDO was born in Palermo, Sicily in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies on May 19, 1860. Like so many famous people born in the 19th and early 20th centuries in Sicily, not much is known about his early life. We do know that his father was a landed gentleman and a lawyer, and that Vittorio was born into a family of prominent lawyers. His father delayed venturing out to register his son's birth out of fear of Giuseppe Garibaldi's 1,000 patriots (called *I Mille*) who had landed in Sicily from Genoa on the first leg of their march to achieve the *Risorgimento*. We also know that he was an excellent student in his early education and that he received a gold medal for his first-grade scholarship.

He followed in his ancestors' footsteps by enrolling at the University of Palermo to study law in 1877. In 1888, he produced his first literary work, a study of Prometheus and the development of myths. This was followed by studies in anthropology and in the positivistic philosophy of Herbert Spencer, which was popular at the time. He received his law degree in 1881 with the highest honors awarded by the University.

In 1882 and 1883, he published two studies on parliamentary government and electoral reform. These allowed him to develop and articulate his Liberal political ideas that would become the hallmark of his later political career. In 1882, he became the Professor of Constitutional Law at the University of Modena, the youngest person in Italy to hold such a prestigious position. In 1885, he returned to Sicily where he became a professor at the University of Messina and, soon after, at the University of Palermo. During this period, he published important textbooks and studies on constitutional law, and in 1890 he founded a prestigious journal on public law, *Rivista di Diritto Pubblico (Journal of Public Law)*.

Following what seemed to be a natural transition, Orlando was elected to the *Camera dei Deputati* (Chamber of Deputies) in 1897, representing the district of Partinico, which was an agricultural district outside of Palermo. (He was elected continuously to this position until 1925, upon his first retirement from politics). At the time of his election, no one in the South could be elected to the Chamber without the support of the Mafia. Orlando was no exception. Since the Mafia at this time respected “men of culture” more than they did later, and Orlando had made such a name for himself as a potent intellectual liberal force, his compromises with the Mafia were minimal. He moved to Rome in order to avoid, as much as possible, the moral ambiguities that were rampant in his native Palermo. While he was in Rome, he was appointed to the Chair of Public Law at the University of Rome.

In the Chamber, Orlando’s liberalism manifested itself through all his political activities. He came to the attention of the liberal statesman Giovanni Giolitti (1842-1928) (*right*), who dominated Italian politics after 1901, serving as Prime Minister of Italy five times between 1892 and 1921. Orlando served in Giolitti’s cabinets as Minister of Education (1903-1905) and Minister of Justice (1907-1909). During this period, Orlando supported liberal legislation, judicial independence, reconciliation with the Church, and civil rights. These positions solidified his reputation as a Liberal leader in the Chamber.



Orlando’s parliamentary career illustrates a certain tendency in Italian politics that is worth noting. Since the unification of Italy in the 1860s, there had been a marked tendency for middle-class and intellectual southern Italians to seek an outlet for their ambitions in national government service. Throughout this time, the rural and impoverished southern Italy (referred to as the Mezzogiorno region), offered very few opportunities for its educated elite to rise in stature and power. Thus, the despised Sicilian or Calabrese politician, once he was established in Italian politics and society in Rome, might wish to submerge his southern identity and seek to prove himself more “national” in outlook than his northern colleagues. So, when Orlando went to the Chamber of Deputies in 1897, he was following, and would continue to follow, a well-trodden path for legislators from southern Italy.

At the start of World War I in August, 1914, Italy declared its neutrality. Orlando supported the policy, but later embraced Italy’s participation in the war. Prior to the outbreak of the war, he was asked by Antonio Salandra, who replaced the neutralist Giolitti as Prime Minister on March 21, 1914, to become Minister of Justice for a second time. He was tasked with preparing the legislation that would be necessary to govern Italy during wartime. The new laws that he drafted and pushed through the Chamber of Deputies allowed the state to invoke extraordinary draconian powers, but Orlando pledged to protect civil rights during the conflict.

During the period of Italian neutrality (August 2, 1914–May 23, 1915), debates between neutralists and interventionists shook the country. After intervention, supporters of the war demanded government repression of antiwar activists, especially socialists and Catholics. Italian Catholics had originally opposed intervention, but later accepted the war. They came under attack because of the activities of Pope Benedict XV (*right*) in favor of peace. Orlando allowed antiwar activists to conduct their activities and protected the Church's independence, which had been established under the Law of Guarantees adopted by the new Italian government on May 13, 1871 as part of the relationship between State and Church following the successful *Risorgimento*.



Italy's military commanders strongly opposed Orlando's policies. In May 1916, an Austrian offensive produced a request from the army head, Marshal of Italy Luigi Cadorna, for more troops, and this unleashed a vigorous debate in the Chamber over the question of civilian control of the military. This ultimately resulted in Salandra's fall and brought the more pliable Paolo Boselli to power as Prime Minister on June 18, 1916 at the head of a "national unity" cabinet that represented a coalition of major political factions. Orlando joined Boselli's government as Minister of the Interior and the representative of the "Left Liberals." In this position, he continued his policies of protecting Church independence and opposing attempts to suppress freedom of speech, press and association. All of these policies made him a prime target of attack by nationalists and the army, who believed that these freedoms damaged Italy's war effort.

In the spring of 1917, the Austrians took 6,500 Italian prisoners in a military counteroffensive that left the Italians reeling. General Cadorna, the head of the army, blamed Orlando and the antiwar activities in Orlando's native Sicily, especially charging that Sicilians had been involved in draft-dodging. Cadorna tightened disciplinary measures in the army and demanded immediate government action to suppress domestic subversives. Orlando charged the Minister of War, General Gaetano Giardino, with threatening to occupy the Minister of Interior's (i.e. Orlando's) office, and rumors of a military coup were rife. At a cabinet meeting on September 28, 1917, Orlando responded by denouncing Gen. Cadorna's allegations and thus forcing him to back down.

On October 24, 1917, an Austro-German offensive at Caporetto produced major Italian losses, but resistance on the Piave River thwarted the enemy objective of knocking Italy out of the war. This ignominious defeat damaged Italy's military reputation and forced Boselli's resignation and replacement as Prime Minister by Orlando, who secured a pledge from the king to

fire Cadorna. The new Prime Minister had become a strong supporter of Italy's entry in the war, and he now established a patriotic national front government, the *Unione Sacra* (Sacred Union) to govern the country.



Orlando's first act as Prime Minister was to fire General Luigi Cadorna and appoint the well-respected General Armando Diaz (*left*) in his place. He then reasserted civilian control over military affairs, which Cadorna had always resisted. His government instituted new policies, which were enforced by Diaz that treated Italian troops less harshly and instilled a more efficient military system over the army. The *Ministero per l'Assistenza Militare e le Pensioni di Guerra* (Ministry for Military Assistance and War Pensions) was established, soldiers received new life insurance policies to help their families in case of their deaths, more funding was put into propaganda efforts aimed at glorifying the common soldier, and annual paid leave was increased from 15 to 25 days. On his own initiative, Diaz also softened the harsh discipline that had been practiced by Cadorna, increased rations, and adopted more modern mil-

itary tactics that had been observed on the Western Front. All of these had the net effect of greatly increasing the formerly-crumbling army's morale.

Orlando's liberal policies won him support from Catholics and the most influential socialist leaders as well as popular support from the general population for the military effort. He addressed the grievances of the country's different social groups. For example, he increased the number of military exemptions for peasants in response to criticism by southern peasants who resented serving disproportionately in the armed forces as compared to northern industrial workers. His government pledged land reform after the conflict ended, and it established a new National Veterans' Organization and a fund to buy up land for allocation to returning war veterans. All of these successfully reconstituted national morale after the disaster of Caporetto, with Orlando even publicly pledging to retreat to "my Sicily" if necessary and resist the Austrian invaders from there, although he was also assured that there would be no military collapse to require this extreme action.

Under Orlando's support, the army recovered from the Caporetto defeat and went on the offensive. At the Battle of Vittorio Veneto (October 24–November 3, 1918) the Italians finally routed the Austrian forces and ended the war on the Italian Front a full week before the armistice on the Western Front (November 11, 1918).

THE PARIS PEACE CONFERENCE AND THE TREATY OF VERSAILLES

Soon after World War I had begun, Italy entered into a secret treaty with the Allies. Great Britain, France, and Russia signed with Italy, the Treaty of London (1915). This was an agreement to bring Italy, from its neutral position, into the war on the side of the Allies. The main lure was a promise of large swaths of Austria-Hungary to the north of Italy and to the east across the Adriatic Sea. Britain also promised to fund Italy. Italy agreed to abandon its 9-month neutrality and entered the war the next month, after the ratification of the treaty.

Orlando was one of the Big Four, the main Allied leaders and participants at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, along with United States President Woodrow Wilson, French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau and Britain's Prime Minister David Lloyd George. Although as Prime Minister, he was the head of the Italian delegation, Orlando's inability to speak English and his weak political position at home allowed the conservative Italian foreign minister, the

half-Welsh Sidney Sonnino, to play a dominant role and to alienate the other three leaders because of his intransigence and unwillingness to compromise. (One thing Orlando felt he did proudly accomplish at the Conference was his support for the Racial Equality Proposal that was introduced by Japan).



**VERSAILLES PEACE CONFERENCE,
Paris, 1919.**

*From left: Georges Clemenceau, French PM,
David-Lloyd George, British PM,
Vittorio Orlando, Italian PM.
(Photo Bain News Service)*

At the Conference, Lloyd George and Clemenceau refused to honor the London Treaty. Orlando's and Sonnino's differences proved to be disastrous during the negotiations to try to get the treaty provisions fulfilled. Orlando was prepared to renounce territorial claims for Dalmatia in order to annex Fiume (or Rijeka, the Croatian name), the principal seaport on the Adriatic Sea, while Sonnino was not prepared to give up Dalmatia for anything. Italy ended up claiming both and receiving neither, running up against Wilson's policy of national self-determination and his abhorrence of secret treaties.

Orlando dramatically left the conference early in April, 1919. He returned briefly the following month, but was forced to resign as Prime Minister on June 19, 1919, just days before the signing of the resultant Treaty of Versailles (June 28, 1919). The fact he was not a signatory to the treaty became a point of pride for him later in his life as the Treaty and its League of Nations began to fall apart. French Prime Minister Clemenceau dubbed him "The Weeper," and

Orlando himself recalled proudly: “When ... I knew they would not give us [i.e. Italy] what we were entitled to [under the terms of the London Treaty] ... I writhed on the floor. I knocked my head against the wall. I cried. I wanted to die.” (Not honoring the Treaty of London gave rise to a belief in a so-called “*vittoria mutilate*” [mutilated victory] within Italy. This played a role in determining Italian expansion between the two world wars. It also fueled the rhetoric of Italian policy to win back territories that had been previously lost to Italy, including those that had been promised in the Treaty of London but denied to it at the Paris Peace Conference. It became an important component of Italian nationalism before World War II and was a key point in the rise of Fascism in Italy).

YEARS FOLLOWING THE TREATY OF VERSAILLES

Even though Orlando was no longer Prime Minister, he remained in the Chamber of Deputies and was elected “President of the Chamber” on December 2, 1919. In so doing, this became illustrative of a more problematic political tendency than the movement of southern



Italians into national administration. This was the tendency of a large number of conservative and center politicians, including Orlando, to look favorably upon the posturing of Benito Mussolini (*left*) and his Blackshirts during the wave of labor unrest that swept post-war Italy. These politicians, whose fears were heightened by the rise of Bolshevism and the Third International, succumbed to Mussolini’s propaganda that the “emergency” warranted the formation of a “strong” government that would crack down hard on labor and the Left. Mussolini, as *Il Duce*, seized power in 1922.

When it was revealed that Mussolini had ordered the murder of the Socialist deputy, Giacomo Matteotti, in 1924, Orlando withdrew his support for *Il Duce* and went over into opposition to Fascism. In Sicily he attempted to mobilize electoral opposition to Mussolini. However, the elections were easily rigged by the Fascists and there were soon no meaningful elections to contest. Orlando then resigned from Parliament in 1925, protesting Fascist electoral fraud.

He returned to his position of the Chair of Public Law at the University of Rome, a position from which he resigned in 1931, when he refused to take a required loyalty oath to Fascism. He stayed away from politics until 1935, when Mussolini’s march into Ethiopia stirred his nationalism. He reappeared very briefly in the political spotlight when he wrote Mussolini a supportive letter for this action. But, other than this, he continued to stay away from politics.

In 1944, he made something of a political comeback. With the fall of Mussolini and liberation of Rome, Orlando became the leader of the National Democratic Union. He was elected Speaker of the Italian Chamber of Deputies, where he served until 1946, when the Chamber was officially dissolved. In June, 1946 he was elected to the newly formed Constituent Assembly of Italy and served as its President, working with other politicians on a constitution to shape Italy into a republic. He resigned from the Assembly in 1947 because of his objections to the peace treaty. In 1948 he was nominated Senator for Life and elected to the newly-formed Italian Senate, and in the same year was a candidate for the President of the Republic (a position elected by Parliament), but was defeated by Luigi Einaudi.

He returned to his teaching position at the University of Rome and his publishing activities soon after this defeat, and died a few years later in Rome on December 1, 1952 at the age of 92.

Adapted by James J. Boitano, PhD from:

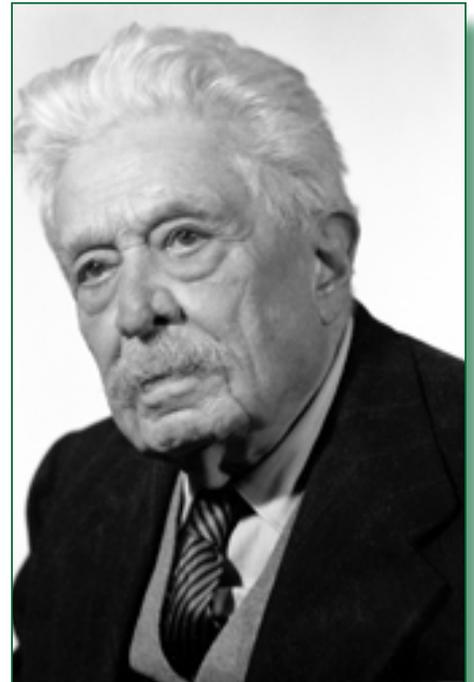
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Vittorio Emanuele Orlando, 1948