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THE PATH TO REHABILITATION, THE ITALIAN NAVY'S ROLE IN THE AFTERMATH OF WORLD WAR II

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Abstract

This essay examines the role of the Italian Navy in facilitating Italy's transition from an enemy to an ally of the Anglo-American powers during and after World War II, emphasizing its strategic and diplomatic contributions. The study adopts a historical approach, drawing on primary documents and secondary sources to evaluate how the Navy influenced Italy's international repositioning, particularly during the co-belligerence period (1943-1945) and subsequent peace negotiations. The central question is whether the Navy's contributions were sufficient to reshape perceptions of Italy from a defeated adversary to a cooperative power. The findings demonstrate that the Navy's alignment with the Allies – through logistical support, operational missions, and collaboration in joint operations – mitigated Allied naval burdens in the Mediterranean, earning recognition from the Anglo-Americans. However, post-war peace negotiations imposed significant reductions on Italy's naval forces, reflecting continued distrust, particularly from France and the Soviet Union. Despite these limitations, the essay concludes that the Italian Navy played an influential role in fostering trust with the United States and the United Kingdom. This trust proved pivotal during Italy's admission to the Atlantic Alliance in 1949, marking the completion of its transition to a valued Western ally. The Navy's contributions thus served as a foundation for Italy's reintegration into the international system, underlining its importance in shaping Mediterranean security within the emerging Cold War order.

Keywords: Italian Navy, co-belligerence, post-World War II negotiations, Atlantic Alliance, Mediterranean security

Introduction

This essay does not seek to investigate the role of the military in Italy's domestic transition from monarchy to republic following the end of the Second World War. Instead, it aims to assess their contribution, particularly that of the Italian Navy, in the strategic and diplomatic country's shift from being an enemy to an ally of the Allied powers, particularly the Anglo-Americans.

The Treaty of Peace ratified by the Italian Parliament in September 1947 marked a crucial moment in Italy's international standing. However, it was neither the beginning nor the end of a transition. On the contrary, it represented a step in the process that had already begun in September 1943, when the Italian government, after the fall of the Fascist regime in July, accepted the terms of the short and long armistices – commonly known as *the* armistice – presented by the Anglo-Americans. The armistices started a period of co-belligerence during which Italy, though not as a formal ally of the United Kingdom and the United States, cooperated with them in their Mediterranean campaign and even beyond. Those years after the end of the War were a time of adaptation for Italy, as peace negotiations focused – directly or indirectly – on its new international role.

A number of questions arose at the time. Should Italy be treated as a defeated enemy or as a cooperative power? Should it be punished, or encouraged to become an active participant in the newborn international system? The answer, hence the conclusion, of this process came only in 1949, when Italy joined the Atlantic Alliance as a founding member. Over these transitional years, the Italian Navy played an influential role, both in diplomatic and military fields.

The Second World War and Co-belligerence

On the political front, the Italians were aware that, as Prime Minister Winston Churchill already put it, they had "to work their passage back." Actually, the Navy, like the Army and the Air Force, placed great reliance on the assurances given by the Anglo-Americans at the end of the Quebec Conference held in August 1943. On one hand, the Final Communiqué underscored that the United Kingdom and the United States did not "visualize the active assistance of Italy in fighting the Germans" once the armistice would have been signed. On the other hand, it also stated that "the extent to which the

terms will be modified in favor of Italy will depend on how far the Italian Government and people do, in fact, aid the United Nations against Germany during the remainder of the war."

Once the short armistice was signed on September 8th, an agreement between the Italian Minister of the Navy and Naval Chief of Staff, Admiral Raffaele De Courten, and the Commander-in-Chief of the Allied Naval Forces in the Mediterranean, Admiral Andrew Cunningham, put the Italian fleet at the disposal of the Allies. However, the ships continued to stay under Italian command, to fly the Italian flag and were not confiscated. Whether this represented an advanced form of co-belligerence or not remains a matter of debate. Anyway, in the following months, the Italian Navy undertook several missions for the Allies in the Mediterranean and the Atlantic Ocean as well, including transporting troops and materials, escorting convoys and merchantmen, conducting training operations, and minesweeping along the Italian coast. The Navy also engaged in more than fifty joint special operations. For example, in January 1944, Italian ships conducted reconnaissance and survey activities along the coast between Anzio and Nettuno in preparation for the Allied landing that occurred a few days later. By June of the same year, the Allied Command requested the Italian Navy to attach its Paratroop-Divers group to a special Allied saboteur unit, resulting in more than fifty missions together, including the landing in Venice in April 1945. Of all the Navy personnel, nine out of ten sailors abode by the terms of co-belligerence. Strategically, all that meant that the Allies could significantly reduce their naval forces in the Mediterranean, concentrating them on other fronts.

Over these two years, the Italian Navy suffered huge losses, with 35% of its ship tonnage lost and more than 3,000 men killed. The naval strength had been reduced to approximately 270,000 tons – a decrease of more than 50% compared to its level at the time of the entry into the war in 1940.

The Italian Navy's Diplomatic Effort

The Anglo-Americans, by the end of the hostilities, assumed that the Italians might overestimate the significance of their contribution at the peace table. In a document prepared in October 1945, indeed, the Italian Navy requested not to be subjected to any limitations or reductions in light of the commitment demonstrated after the armistices, as if it were an ally. In fact, this was an initial and rather bold statement, especially considering the attitude of the British, which, understandably, still kept a certain degree of distrust due to the Italian challenge to their Mediterranean paramountcy between 1940 and 1943. Nevertheless, the British shared with the Americans the view that the Italians did play their cooperative role with consistency during the co-belligerence. Mostly, both believed in the necessity not to weaken Italy too much in signing the peace,

as it might be an influential player in defending Mediterranean routes in a changing balance of power as a new international scenario started emerging.

Admiral Cunningham acknowledged that the Italians had served the Allies with loyalty and integrity, and as a result, it deserved to be treated with generosity at the peace negotiations. In his speeches at the House of Commons, Churchill often emphasized the importance of the Italian contribution to Allied naval operations. Similarly, the U.S. Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Chester Nimitz, and the U.S. Secretary of the Navy, James Forrestal – later the first U.S. Secretary of Defense – recognized the efforts of the Italian sailors after the war. In essence, despite opposition from the British Foreign Office, the Italian Navy's aspirations to be admitted by the Anglo-Americans as an influential force in the post-war Mediterranean – and, by extension, Italy's potential to be regarded as a friend, if not an ally – were not entirely unfounded. This aligned with the broader aspirations of the Italian government at the diplomatic table that Rome might be regarded as a friend, if not an ally.

However, the United Kingdom and the United States were not the only counterparts for Italy. There were also the Soviet Union and France, which had their own agendas. As a rising superpower, Moscow approached the peace with Italy with two goals in mind: first, to expand Soviet influence in the Mediterranean, where it sought access to warm-water ports – an everlasting goal for Russian foreign policy; and second, to get a portion of the Italian fleet, as actually agreed with the Anglo-Americans at the Tehran Conference in 1943. These aspirations were further bolstered by the Soviet recent grasping of Germany's advanced Type XXI submarines. On its part, France saw the negotiations as a chance to avenge the "stab in the back" of 1940 and to address the humiliation of the scuttling of its fleet at Toulon two years later. Thus, the fate of the Italian naval stance, and more importantly, Italy's position in the new international order, depended on several factors, with four major powers shaping the outcome – each pursuing its own interests and agendas.

In the broader strategy of the Italian government to make its voice heard, the Navy played an increasingly important role, including through military-to-military channels. As consultations among the Big Four began, Admiral De Courten reached out to his British and American counterparts to win their favor. He also attempted to get support from the French and the Soviets, but without success. Even more importantly, the Italian Navy scaled back its initial requests, and prepared a comprehensive document with its "Considerations regarding the Italian Navy with reference to the Peace Treaty". This memorandum, approved by the government and presented to the Big Four, outlined how the Italian fleet should be treated in light of the Potsdam Communiqué of 1945, which recognized Italy's potential status as a member of the United Nations. The Italian Navy's premise was "to put on the balance" the negative and positive elements that demonstrated "the differentiation" between the former Fascist regime and the Italian

people. The Italian Armed Forces, for their part, sought "to redeem a guilt which was not theirs" during the co-belligerence, aligning with "popular sentiment." It was now time for Italy to reclaim its "place among the Democratic Nations."

Four key points were identified as the foundation for peace. First, the document called for "adequate recognition of the moral values that inspired the Italian Navy" during the co-belligerence. Second, it emphasized the Navy's contribution to the Allied cause and interests, including the offer "to participate with all available means in men and material in the Allied war effort". The proof was the declaration of war against Japan in July 1945 preceding the Soviet Union and the willingness to deploy battleships in the Pacific. Third, it stated that it would be morally unjust to confiscate any of the ships that had served alongside the Allies. Fourth, it stressed the importance of avoiding punishment of the Italian people, who regarded the Navy as a symbol of national prestige, strength, discipline, and order.

According to the Italian Navy, the new international security architecture also needed careful consideration. The peace treaty must be seen not merely as a settlement but as a foundation for Italy's future admission into the United Nations Organization. As a consequence, the principles enshrined in the UN Charter could not be ignored. Among these, there were the inherent right of self-defense for every nation and the obligation to contribute to collective security, which required each member to provide forces for common defense.

Regarding self-defense, the Italian Navy emphasized that "the naval force necessary to ensure the self-defense of Italy must be predominantly composed of vessels of a defensive nature," that is ships designed for coastal patrols and escorting merchantmen in the open sea. It was also important to consider Italy's strategic situation, particularly the division of the fleet across three different sea basins and the vulnerability of its coastlines where landing operations could be easily conducted. As for collective security, the Navy argued that participation within the framework of the United Nations Organization, and the possible formation of an international force, demanded "an appreciable contribution", especially if UN naval forces were to operate in the wider Mediterranean or beyond.

Thus, the Italian Navy sought the capacity to defend its territory independently while being able to deploy an effective force for UN operations. To do this, it aimed at maintaining a fleet with a strength of 170,000 tons, including training ships – it already represented a reduction of more than 35% from its level at that time. The core would consist of those "modern and efficient cruisers and light craft" still in service, as well as small-tonnage submarines to ensure the security of naval bases and to conduct anti-submarine training. Additionally, two modern battleships would be incorporated into the UN forces, while two or three other battleships would be employed as training vessels. As a compensation, Italy was prepared to accept limitations on refitting ships, personnel, installations, auxiliary craft and even the number of its naval bases.

The Peace Treaty

Meanwhile, as the international climate evolved and the Soviet Union increased its pressure over the Turkish Straits, the United Kingdom increasingly agreed with the United States that Italy could serve as a potential barrier against Soviet threats. However, it would be an exaggeration to say that the Anglo-Americans fully aligned with Italy at that time. From their perspective, maritime defense was necessary for the Italian territory, but it did not require battleships. Yet, they recognized the political importance of these vessels and understood that depriving Italy of them not only would impact the morale of sailors and public opinion but also would bolster Soviet influence – a concern that even the French shared now. Conversely, for Moscow, allowing Italy to retain a couple of battleships was seen as a tool to rekindle the former Anglo-Italian naval rivalry in the medium-longer term, thus trying to weaken the British role in the Mediterranean. Nevertheless, none of the Big Four saw sufficient justification for Italy keeping its most advanced battleships for a potential contribution to UN forces, particularly since Italy was not yet a member.

Besides, the British and Americans did recognize the need for the Italians to maintain modern cruisers and light craft, particularly escort vessels. In contrast, the Soviet Union and France argued that Italy should be left with only outdated cruisers. Finally, the Four agreed on banning submarines, aircraft carriers and assault ships.

The Peace Treaty presented by the victorious powers in January 1947 was deemed unjust by the Italian government. The military clauses were seen as too punitive by the Armed Forces as well, including the Navy. As a consequence, Admiral De Courten resigned in protest. As the Navy put it, "The naval clauses are, in their entirety, morally and materially extremely severe, unjust, and immoral; they have not taken into account the conduct of the Navy at the time of the armistice, nor the contribution it made to the Allies. Moreover, they did not consider the arguments we presented at the Peace Conference, which were truly based on principles of justice and understanding". Ultimately, Italy had no choice but to sign the treaty.

Considering the naval clauses of the treaty, the final tonnage permitted was set at 115,000 tons, a reduction of more than 30% from what Italy had requested. The Big Four stripped the Italian Navy of its most advanced battleships, allowing the retention of only two outdated vessels from the First World War era and forbidding Italy from constructing, acquiring, or replacing any of them. In terms of cruisers and light craft, the Big Four reached a compromise, permitting Italy to retain only four cruisers, two of which were quite old. Any units deemed excess were either placed at the disposal of the victorious powers or destroyed and scrapped for metal. The Soviets and French were eager to get their share, while the Anglo-Americans chose to renounce theirs. Moreover, no vessel was to be laid down until 1950, the Navy's personnel were nearly halved, and several islands and bases in the Central Mediterranean were to be demilitarized. Finally,

Italy was prohibited from possessing aircraft carriers, submarines, torpedo boats, or specialized assault craft.

When comparing the initial requests with what the government ultimately had to accept, one can say that the Allies did treat Italy as a defeated nation. There is indeed truth to this assessment. Diplomatically, many of the interests emphasized by the Italians were not recognized, including those concerning colonies and the Eastern border with Yugoslavia, and the country was faced with a diktat. In terms of naval power, Italy was left with a fleet that was only partially able of fulfilling coastal defense across three different basins. In the meantime, the participation in UN operations became almost unfeasible in the event of admission. It seemed that the efforts during the co-belligerence had been in vain, and the "passage back" came at a cost that was too high.

However, this conclusion is somewhat controversial, as it overlooks the broader international context, at least in the naval field. Unlike Germany and Japan, Italy faced neither the dismantling of its fleet nor the demilitarization of its main naval bases, being allowed to retain a core from which it could rebuild its maritime power in the years to come. In June 1947, the Italian Navy itself recognized this, even if as the "only positive aspect" of the Treaty. On a national level, the Navy was left as the branch of the Armed Forces in the better condition. Consequently, although the recognition of co-belligerence was more limited than the Italians had hoped, it was indeed acknowledged. More importantly, Italy now had the two most powerful naval forces at its side: the United States and the United Kingdom.

The Beginning of the Cold War

Actually, the importance of the Navy's role for Italy's international standing became more evident with the onset of the Cold War. While diplomats were discussing the peace terms, on a military level the Italian Navy developed increasingly close ties with the U.S. Navy. This was a proof that American sailors regarded their Italian counterparts as truly reliable partners, sometimes even bypassing the British. For example, Italian naval assault units trained with the Americans, continuing the collaboration initiated during the co-belligerence. This growing naval cooperation was further underscored in 1948 when Italian officers visited the USS Midway to study its design, anticipating the possibility that Italy might one day get its own aircraft carrier.

This brings us to the third and final phase of Italy's international transition. During the negotiations for the creation of the Atlantic Alliance, the strategic importance of including the Italians was a key topic of discussion among the United States, France, and the United Kingdom. Italy's participation as a founding member was seen important not only politically, but also for Mediterranean security, as the Anglo-Americans had already envisioned at the peace table. However, while the three governments shared this perspective, they did so with different nuances. Alongside the French, who desired

the Italian entry to protect their metropolitan territory (including Algeria), the role of the Americans was decisive in tipping the balance towards the admission of Italy as a founding member. In March 1949, the U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson, in a memorandum to President Harry Truman, noted that while "the arms limitation clauses […] strictly limit the size of Italy's military establishment," it still had "the third largest navy in Western Europe." The Italian fleet, along with its "surplus of trained seamen," was seen as a critical asset for protecting the Mediterranean, a region vital to the West.

Conclusion

Italy's co-belligerence and the role of the Navy had two main long-term consequences. First, it fostered a sense of trust with the Anglo-Americans, mainly with the United States, that is the main great power; second, it laid down the foundation for a strategic relationship based on military integration and shared goals. Despite the setback of the Peace Treaty, the capabilities of the Italian fleet, its wartime experience and the potential to play a substantial role in the Mediterranean security were highly valued in Washington, London and even Paris. This made the Navy an influential tool in admitting Italy into the Atlantic Alliance. Of course, this was not the only military asset Italy could offer – consider, for example, the manpower of the Army or the importance of the national territory for U.S. military bases – but it held a good degree of influence. Thus, although Italy initially envisioned its new international role in the framework of the United Nations, at the end of the day it found its place within the Atlantic Alliance, completing the transition from a defeated enemy to a valued ally also thanks to its Navy.

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