



BOMBING AND AIR WAR ON THE ITALIAN FRONT 1915-1918

By A.D. Harvey

During the First World War, air operations were on a much smaller scale on the Italian front than in France and Flanders. Italian fighter pilots claimed to have shot down fewer than one-tenth the number of enemy aircraft officially credited to German fighter pilots operating over the Western front.¹ Nevertheless, the air war over the Isonzo and the Adriatic had several features that suggest the desirability of revising standard accounts of the evolution of air warfare that are based on the experiences of the British Royal Flying Corps and the German Luftstreitkräfte farther north, particularly with regard to the use of bombing aircraft. In 1911, the Italians had been the first nation to employ aircraft in warfare, during the course of their invasion of Libya — then part of the Ottoman Empire.

On 1 November 1911, Lt Giulio Gavotti dropped four bombs, each weighing two kilograms, on Turkish positions at Ain Zara and Tagiura.² Subsequent bombing attacks were denounced by the Ottoman government as contravening the Geneva Convention. In 1913, the Italian army's aviation battalion was placed under the command of a staff officer named Giulio Douhet, who has some claim to have been the only senior officer of the First World War era to have any real vision concerning the application of air power. Douhet made sure that the Italian government placed an order for several examples of the giant trimotor bomber designed by aviation pioneer Giovanni Caproni.

When war broke out in August 1914, Italy, at that time joined in a defensive alliance with Germany and Austria-Hungary, remained neutral and Douhet began writing commentaries on the war for the Turin newspaper 'La Gazzetta del Popolo'. He read with interest press reports of the first bombing raids by single German aircraft, warning on 12 December 1914:

Against the enemy that moves on the surface it is sufficient for safety to be in the rear of the battle line; against the enemy that is master of space there is no safety except for moles. Everything which is to the rear of the army and which makes it live is threatened and exposed; supply convoys, trains, railway stations, magazines, workshops, arsenals, everything.³

Douhet and his colleagues seem to have been less interested in the first air-to-air combats. By the time Italy abandoned its pre-war alliance and declared war on Austria-Hungary on 23 May 1915, several German aircraft had already been shot down by British and French two-seaters, in which the

observer was armed with a machine gun, and the French pilot Roland Garros had notable success in a single-seater Morane monoplane equipped with a machine gun fixed to fire through the arc of the propeller.⁴ During the first six months of the Italo-Austrian conflict, however, both sides confined themselves mainly to using unarmed planes on reconnaissance missions, partly because the additional weight of a machinegun and ammunition was found to be disadvantageous when flying over mountainous terrain. However, the Austro-Hungarians communicated their resentment for their former ally by bombing Ancona and Venice with naval flying boats during the first days of the war. In addition, on 24 October 1915, four Austro-Hungarian aircraft raided Venice. Though causing no loss of life or limb, the raiders destroyed an important fresco

Giulio Douhet

