

The Italian Wars

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The period of the so-called Italian Wars is certainly one of the most important and least known of the history of our land (Italy). For nearly half a century, from the invasion of Charles VIII in 1494 until the peace of Cateau-Cambresis which ended in 1559 the long struggle between France and Spain for supremacy in Europe, foreign armies overran the whole country from the Alps to Naples, ancient and famous cities were besieged and sacked (remember Rome as an example), seignories and principalities fell or changed hands, bloody battles were fought. However, even Italian Renaissance scholars sometimes have difficulties in clearly understanding the alternating military events, and prefer to focus their attention on the great personages who lived and worked in those 'stormy' years.

The epoch of the Italian Wars gave birth to artists such as Leonardo da Vinci, Raffaello, Michelangelo, Benvenuto Cellini, historians like Machiavelli and Guicciardini, great poets like Ludovico Ariosto. It's necessary to remember, though, that these great men of art, culture, poetry acted in the context of the political and military events of the Italian Wars, and their works were deeply influenced by them. It's enough to consider the writings of Machiavelli and Guicciardini, to consider the stormy relationship between Michelangelo with that great "warrior Pope", namely Julius II Della Rovere, to the verses dedicated by Ludovico Ariosto to the arquebus, new and deadly arm, which he described as "maledetto" ("accursed") and "abominoso ordigno" ("abominable device").

The upheaval in the Peninsula provoked by decades of nearly uninterrupted wars, as we said, was enormous. The artillery of Charles VIII of Valois, King of France, disseminated terror by their numbers, and their devastating effects, especially against the walls of the cities that refused to open their gates to these invaders from the other side of the Alps. The ferocity of the battles, the habit of the Swiss and the German Landsknechts to not preserve prisoners' lives, provoked horror and reprobation. The increasing use of portable firearms, put in discussion for the first time the role of cavalry on the battlefield and started a deep revolution, also in a democratic sense in European military science (as cavalry was a prerogative of aristocracy). At the same time, it became clear that the Italian seignories, small and divided amongst themselves, were not able anymore to successfully oppose to armies of the "big powers" of the era: Spain, France and the Holy Roman Empire.

After the battle of Fornovo (1495), the last one where a completely Italian army would tackle a foreign monarch, it seemed that the foreign danger had passed, but Charles VIII's successor, Louis XII, had never renounced his aims on the South of Italy (which he claimed as a legitimate Angevin heir) and on the Duchy of Milan, governed then by the Sforzas (through his direct descent from Valentina Visconti). First in the summer of 1499, and then in the spring of 1500, a French army entered Italy to overthrow the Sforza seignory. Ludovico il Moro, the man who was commonly indicated as the responsible for calling the French into Italy, paid the penalty with his Duchy: captured at Novara while trying to escape disguised as a Swiss soldier, he was sent as a prisoner to France, where he sadly died, some years later, in the Castle of Loches, in Turenne.

The first French dominion of Lombardy lasted twelve years, yielding peace to this region, while nearly all the rest of Italy was aflame with fighting. In the south, up to 1504, the French and the Spanish

confronted each other for the possession of the Reign of Naples, which, in the end, remained in Spanish hands, transforming from then, for 200 years, into a "Viceroyalty", dependant of Madrid. In central Italy, the vermilion star of Cesare Borgia, the "Valentino", the dissolute son of Pope Alexander VI, dawned and set. Machiavelli took inspiration from the Valentino to write one of his most famous works, the "Prince". After seizing, with deception and treachery, the largest part of the small seignories of Central Italy, with the help of his father and King Louis XII of France, the "Valentino" saw his dreams fade away with the sudden death (it was said, obviously, caused by poison) of Pope Alexander VI.

His successor to the papal throne was Giuliano della Rovere, who named himself Julius II, an old and tough fighter, determined to defend and increase the temporal power (and also the earthly dominions) of the Church and contemporarily to oppose to the expansionist aims of the foreign Powers in Italy. In 1509, Julius II officially adhered to the League of Cambrai, stipulated in December 1508 by the emperor Maximilian of the Hapsburgs, Ferdinand the Catholic, King of Spain, and by Louis XII (who had just put down the Genoa revolt) to contrast Venetian expansion. The Serenissima, utterly beaten at Agnadello (14 May 1509) risked to losing all its land possessions, but the Pope, finally worried by the increasing French power, swiftly altered alliances and gave birth to the so-called Holy League, with Venice, Spain and the Empire. "Throw the Barbarians out" (the French, in this case), the bellicose Julius II would declare, but, by this time, expelling a foreign invader from Italy was possible only by opening the gates to another foreign landlord. Louis XII had a brilliant victory at Ravenna (11 April 1512) against the Spanish allied with the Pope, thanks to the military genius of Gaston de Foix, who also died during the battle. However, his army was compelled to retreat in front of preponderant enemy forces, reinforced by as many as 20,000 Swiss mercenaries, recruited in the Cantons of the Swiss Confederation. After uselessly trying to resist at Pavia, the French army recrossed the Alps and Maximilian Sforza, first son of Ludovico il Moro, entered Milan, where he was received with incredible manifestations of joy. Under the heavy guardianship of the Swiss, the seignory of Maximilian Sforza survived only three years. Although a first attempt by the French to conquer it back was repelled near Novara (6 June 1513), the Swiss Confederates were soundly beaten at Marignano two years later (13-14 September 1515) by another army coming from France, this time commanded by the new French king, François I Valois-Angouleme. Maximilian Sforza lost his Duchy and was sent to France, where he died about 10 years later, in golden captivity.

The second French domination in Lombardy lasted only a few years. In 1519, Charles of the Hapsburgs, king of Spain from 1516, became Holy Roman Emperor of the German Nation. Now anxious about the menace weighing on his kingdom, François I resorted to arms once again. As usual, the main theatre of operations was Italy, where France on the one side, allied with the Republic of Venice, confronted a league composed of Spain, the Empire and the Pope. The Spanish-Papal allies seized Milan in November, 1521, and two subsequent French expeditions sent by the king of France to regain the capital of Lombardy ended in disaster, with the defeats of Bicocca (1522) and Romagnano Sesia (1523). Finally, in autumn 1524, François I decided to personally invade Italy at the head of a powerful army. Inferior in numbers, Charles V's army left Milan and nearly all of Lombardy without a fight, leaving a strong garrison in the city of Pavia, which the French troops besieged from October, 1524. After several months, an Imperial relief army came close to the city. At dawn of 24 February 1525, near the big Parco Visconteo which stretched from Pavia to the Certosa, the French and Imperial armies clashed in a short and confused battle, which ended in the complete rout, and capture on the field, of the King of France.

Notwithstanding this defeat, which endangered the very existence of the French kingdom, and one year of harsh imprisonment in Spain, François I, as soon as he was freed, restarted his personal war against Charles V. In May, 1526, he stipulated at Cognac a league with those Italian States, which most felt the weight of Spanish dominance upon them: the Papacy, Venice and the same Francesco II Sforza, second son of Ludovico il Moro, just placed on the throne of the Duchy of Milan, once again by imperial arms. It was a new, unusual "Holy League", supported by the super-Christian king of France against the Catholic King of Spain, Charles V! First, tragic consequence of this resumption of hostilities was the coming into Italy, in November 1526, of a new Imperial army, composed of thousands of German Landsknechts, which, after some hesitation, made its way to Rome, "pursued but not molested" by the League army. By the first days of May 1527, the Eternal City, which refused to open its gates to Charles V's soldiers, was assaulted and submitted to an horrendous sack, which terrorized and upset Christianity for the brutalities and the sacrileges which took place. The pope himself, Clemente VII, barely survived by taking shelter in Castel Sant'Angelo, where he was compelled by the victors to stipulate an humiliating truce, which, as a first step, envisioned his immediate departure from the League. Two months after the Sack of Rome, a French army, once again commanded by viscount Lautrec, came to Italy and again marched towards Lombardy. Antonio de Leyva, governor of the Duchy of Milan, rallied his few forces in the capital, leaving nearly unguarded the rest of the Duchy. The city of Pavia, defended only by a weak imperial garrison, was seized, and brutally sacked, by the French army, which, afterwards, headed south, in a late and useless attempt to "free" Rome. Lautrec's army decimated by disease, dissolved at the gates of Naples, while besieging it in the summer of 1528. Another French army, this time commanded by François de Bourbon, count of Saint-Pol, was utterly defeated in June, 1529, at Landriano in the Milanese country, by de Leyva's Spanish forces. The defeat of Landriano, and the ensuing treaty of Cambrai, are the last important events of the Italian Wars, together with the siege and surrender of Florence, which opened its gates to the Imperial troops in August, 1530, returning it to the Signory of the Medici.

In November 1535, Francesco II Sforza died and Milan became in all respects a Spanish province. The following military campaigns waged by François I and by his son and successor, Henry II, did not substantially change the situation. The peace of Cateau-Cambresis, signed on the 3rd of April 1559, where France renounced to all its claims on Naples and Lombardy, may be really considered the last, definitive victory of Charles V of the Hapsburgs and the confirmation of Spanish supremacy in Italy for many years to come.