

I. The Lost Victory – Facts and Fiction

by

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The idea of the so called ‘Lost Victory’¹ was born few months after the end of the First World War, in the winter of 1919, deeply influencing public opinion with a potent negative myth that was soon adopted by the emerging Fascist movement as one of its favourite propaganda tools. The poet Gabriele D’Annunzio, an outspoken patriot, war-monger and, according to Austrian war propaganda, the unchallenged leader of Italy’s intervention against the former allies of the Triple Alliance, was the creator of the myth. On 24th October 1918, on the eve of the last offensive against the Austro-Hungarian Army, D’Annunzio published a poem entitled ‘Preghiera di Sernaglia’ (‘Sernaglia Prayer’), in which Italians read the words ‘mutilated victory’ for the first time².

1. Historical survey

The idea of Italy’s erstwhile allies France, Great Britain and the United States to take away the prize of victory from Italy in 1918 has a far more complex background and a further-reaching legacy than D’Annunzio’s poem alone. From the foundation of the nation until the First World War, Italian public and political life was dominated by the awareness of being the ‘last of the Great Powers’ and the ambition to belong among its European counterparts. Strong ambitions led Italy to seek success in foreign policy and military adventures abroad, such as the race for colonies in Africa. A large section of the Italian ruling class, with its politicians traditionally educated in the classics, could not abandon the idea of becoming masters of a new imperial nation, even though they were well aware of the country’s historical backwardness. With almost the entire working class still devoted to agriculture, a lack of strategic raw materials and a very small middle class, the young nation nevertheless was one of the Great Powers in Europe and shared the same cultural and political ambitions as other nations, particularly a specific ‘mania for expansion’, according to the Catholic liberal politician Stefano Jacini³.

After the *Risorgimento*, the turning point in Italian international relations came with the rise to power of the political liberal left. Prime Minister Agostino Depretis

¹ Ital. *Vittoria Mutilata*.

² ROBERTO VIVARELLI, *Storia delle origini del Fascismo: L’Italia dalla Grande Guerra alla Marcia su Roma*, 3 vols. (Bologna 1965, 1990, 2012) I (Bologna ²1991) 473.

³ MARK THOMPSON, *The White War. Life and Death on the Italian Front 1915–1919* (London 2009)

joined Italy to the Triple Alliance with imperial Germany and Austria-Hungary, the initial treaty of which was signed in 1882. The Nationalist public opinion hastened to achieve the goals of a Great Power. Outside the long shadow of France, Italy pursued colonial power in the Horn of Africa, but suffered a humiliating defeat against the forces of the Ethiopian Empire in 1896. The Ethiopian adventure showed all the inadequacies of the ruling class from diplomatic, political and military points of view. After the social turmoil following the defeat of Adowa (Adua, Adwa), in the first decade of twentieth century the new nationalist movement, a minority powerfully supported by the press and by the military-industrial lobbies, was persuaded that the destiny of Italy was to take part in a great European war, which was expected and considered unavoidable. The colonial race was renewed in 1911 by Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti, a reformer who intended to outflank his nationalist critics with a war against the Ottoman Empire and the Libyan invasion, a gamble that also led to the occupation of Rhodes and the Dodecanese islands. Notwithstanding the deployment of large military forces and the success claimed, the Libyan affair ended in a stalemate, with the Italian Army being unable to crush the resistance of the hostile Libyan tribes. The consequences went further than expected, given that the Libyan campaign encouraged the nationalists of the Balkan states to wage war against the Turks in 1912.

2. The State of the Art

The debate on foreign policy in liberal Italy is crucial to understanding Italy's participation in the First World War and the Peace Conference at Versailles, from disappointment with which the myth of the Lost Victory emerged. The attitude of Italy towards its wartime allies originated from mutual misunderstandings in the decades before the Great War and in the post-war era. Historiography outside Italy has rarely taken Italy's role in the outbreak of the First World War very seriously. Among the various assessments, there was the opinion that Italian diplomacy was on a lower moral level than that in other countries. It was the famous historian A. J. P. Taylor who implied that Italian foreign policy was essentially dishonest. These views undoubtedly stemmed from a sound leftist who hated Mussolini's Italy in the 1940s and whose criticism aimed at Fascist foreign policy. Even after the First World War Norman Kogan, an American political scientist, came to the same conclusion as Taylor, according to which Italian foreign policy was different from that in other countries in that sprang from the 'amoral familism' lying at the roots of Italian society⁴.

The work of Austrian professor Alfred Francis Pribram, A. J. P. Taylor's teacher, is considered to be more influential among those who deeply criticize Italian foreign policy abroad. Pribram considered the Triple Alliance to be nothing but an arrangement that brought gain to Italy and loss to Austria-Hungary, a statement that the Italian point of view cannot deny. Indeed, the Triple Alliance partnered Italy with two Great Powers, offering a good shield against France at a time when Italian relations with Paris

⁴ NORMAN KOGAN, *The Politics of Italian Foreign Policy* (London – New York 1963).

were quite poor. On the other hand, the issue of what Austria-Hungary gained from the Triple Alliance continues to present a valid subject for discussion: it is undeniable that the true alliance was between Germany and Italy, because the two nations were not rivals in the struggle for dominance in Europe. The Australian scholar Richard Bosworth fully reflected the negative attitudes towards Italy in his 1979 essay, 'Italy, the least of the Great Powers'⁵. In the preface to 'Italy and the Approach of the First World War', edited in 1983, he wrote: 'Often in the European history courses of Anglo-Saxon universities and in the English-language historiography, Italy has been accorded a minor role. Some acknowledgement of Garibaldi, Cavour and Mazzini, a few bad jokes about Mussolini: and that has been enough.' Bosworth undoubtedly loved his research topic and endeavoured to demonstrate that Italian history deserves 'fuller consideration'⁶. In Italy, scholars have paid no attention either to hostile assessments of Italian foreign policy or to the nationalist myths augmented by Fascism. The writing and study of diplomatic history was often tied to the State, and the links between the State and history-writing did not disappear after the fall of Fascism. After 1945 national historiography faced the cultural and political legacy of Fascism and was divided into supporters and critics of the liberal State and its foreign policy. The conservative liberals, a small group of historians more associated with the great topics of the *Risorgimento* and the First World War, were all involved in defending liberal Italy from the charge of having been the cauldron from which Fascism erupted. Their approach was developed during a period of a few professorships in contemporary history that lasted until the 1960s, so that international history was usually taught in law faculties, largely dominated by traditional Catholic and liberal culture. Inevitable emphasis was devoted to legalism, with a special attention to treaties. Progressive history-writing, influenced by the political Left (socialists and communists) from different ideological points of view, criticized the foreign policy of both liberal and Fascist governments. The hegemonic influence of Marxist ideology and the political role played by the dominant opposition force, the Italian Communist Party (PCI) in the House of Deputies and the Senate contributed to focusing historical research on domestic policy, including the development of socialism and the struggle against Fascism. These attitudes changed radically after the dramatic collapse of Communism all over Europe in 1989. A new interest spread among European scholars towards critically appraising the First World War and its consequences. In 1993, James H. Burgwyn published his work on the myth of 'Mutilated victory'⁷. Italian scholars devoted themselves to studies on foreign policy and international relations as a special branch of contemporary history, separated from the traditional law degree⁸. The doctoral school on the History of International Relations, with the

⁵ R[ICHARD] J. B. BOSWORTH, *Italy – the Least of the Great Powers: Italian Foreign Policy before the First World War* (New York 1979).

⁶ RICHARD BOSWORTH, *Italy and the Approach of the First World War* (London–Basingstoke 1983) VIII.

⁷ JAMES H. BURGWYN, *The Legend of the Mutilated Victory. Italy, the Great War and the Paris Peace Conference, 1915–1919* (= Contributions to the study of world history 38, Westport, Conn. 1993).

⁸ MARINA CATTARUZZA, *L'Italia e il confine orientale 1886–2006* (Bologna 2007); the author gives a complete survey of the Adriatic Question from its origins to the present day. Closely related to the 'mutilated victory' is the ultimate collection of sources with a large critical foreword: MARINA CATTARUZZA, *L'Italia e la Questione adriatica Dibattiti parlamentari e panorama internazionale 1918–1926* (Bologna 2014).

University of Lecce as its head, gathered scholars and students from the best universities all over Italy to introduce a new approach to studies in diplomatic history and the history of international relations, closely linked to cultural and economic history.

3. The Treaty of London and its consequences

The ambition to become a Great Power and the desire to fulfill this role among nations led to Italy's decision to enter the Great War in 1915. Italian nationalism was double-faced, forged by a mixture of irredentism and imperialism. Irredentism, the cultural heir of the *Risorgimento*, spread early in 1866, when Italy failed to capture the port of Trieste before the peace settlement with the Austrians, who had already suffered their decisive defeat by the Prussians in the battle of Königgrätz (Hradec Králové)⁹. The irredentists aimed to 'redeem' South Tyrol, Trieste, Gorizia, Istria and Dalmatia by direct annexation to the Kingdom of Italy. Christian overtones had strongly characterized the political language and propaganda of the patriots during the *Risorgimento* and were adopted in the final decades of the nineteenth century by the nationalists, whose cause must be considered a secular religion. By 1915, irredentism had become obsolescent and less attractive than modern nationalism, but it remained the basic credo of the Italian ruling classes and an effective argument frequently used by warmongers¹⁰.

In 1910, Leonida Bissolati, a socialist and later an interventionist, is reported to have declared that 'no serious person (...) even suggests the plan of a war with Austria in order to regain Italian lands'¹¹. The neutrality proclaimed in August 1914 was undoubtedly the correct decision, given that the war declared by Austria-Hungary against Serbia was not a defensive one according to the Triple Alliance Treaty, whose clauses provided for assistance to a signatory if attacked by two or more Great Powers, and benevolent neutrality if a signatory, having been threatened, was driven to declare war itself. More cynically, in 1909 a left-liberal politician had made a statement on Italy's membership of the Triple Alliance that properly reflected the feelings of patriots and nationalists: the alliance with Austria had to be preserved until the day Italy was ready for war¹². From the very beginning of its neutrality, Italy was divided between neutralists and interventionists, the latter fewer, but stronger because of the powerful support of the press. Italy was driven to war by a *minorité agissante*, led by Prime Minister Antonio

⁹ LÁSZLÓ BENCZE, Königgrätz. A testvérháború vége [The End of a Fratricidal War] (Budapest 1991). Bencze pays no attention to the role and the military contribution of the Kingdom of Italy to the Prussian war against the Habsburg Empire. Even bearing in mind that Italy met with a resounding military failure, the Habsburg army was nevertheless obliged to divide its operational forces between a northern (Bohemian) and a southern (Italian) war theatre: that was precisely what they were expected to do according to the strategic visions of the Prussian general staff.

¹⁰ BOSWORTH, Italy and the Approach 57.

¹¹ BRUNELLO VIGEZZI, La neutralità italiana del luglio-agosto 1914 e il problema dell'Austria-Ungheria; in: Clio. Rivista di Storia I (Napoli 1965) 54–97, here 84.

¹² FRANCESCO PAPAFAVA, Dieci anni di vita italiana 1899–1909: cronache, 2 vols. (Bari 1913) II 757.

Salandra, a right-liberal and a nationalist, and Baron Sidney Sonnino, the newly appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs after the death of Marquis Antonio di San Giuliano. The policy pursued by San Giuliano of keeping Italy neutral must be understood as necessary, considering that public opinion was largely anti-Austrian. San Giuliano launched a twin-track course of diplomacy, which lasted for nine and a half months, in order to join the fight only when victory was certain. The choice to go to war against the former ally of the Triple Alliance, Austria-Hungary, seemed to be the best one in order to achieve all the imperial goals of the nationalists: the annexation of all 'Italian' territories still owned by the Habsburg Monarchy, mastery over the Adriatic, a sphere of influence in Albania, the Eastern and Southern Balkans and colonial expansion.

The Entente could easily grant the Italians a large price for entering the war on its side, simply because the British, the French and the Russians would not be forced to pay with their own blood and territories to compensate Italy for its war effort. Since the beginning of secret negotiations with the Entente, the Italian claim to Dalmatia had been the sticking point making it difficult to reach an agreement. Prime Minister Salandra and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sonnino were fully aware that Italy's vital interests were not at stake: sooner or later Trentino would fall into its hands and Isonzo would become the north-eastern border, whilst a compromise with Austria over Trieste would be possible. Vital interests, however, required mastery of the Adriatic, and from this point of view Trento and Trieste were only the first steps on the road towards Istria, Dalmatia and control over Albania once **the neutralization** of Cattaro (Kotor), the stronghold of the Austro-Hungarian navy on the southern coast of the Adriatic, **had been neutralized**.

Opposition came from the Russians, who were afraid of a future Balkan war between Italy and Serbia, if the Entente accepted all the Italian claims. These were classical political-territorial goals, pursued by a diplomatic élite well represented by aristocrats like Duke Guiseppe Avarna (Italian Ambassador in Vienna), Marquis Guglielmo Imperiali (Ambassador in London), San Giuliano, and Baron Sonnino¹³. Their cultural limits were their Euro-centrist mindset. They simply underestimated the USA and did not pay any attention to the growing role of Far Eastern nations in politics and the global economy. When a compromise over Dalmatia was proposed to the Russians on 10 April 1915, according to which the Dalmatian coast south of Split was to be neutral under Serbian rule, Italy's shift towards the Entente became irreversible.

The Treaty of London, signed on 26 April 1915, promised the Italians all the Habsburg territories they had claimed and even more, with the exception of the harbor city

¹³ LUCIANO MONZALI, *Riflessioni sulla cultura della Diplomazia italiana in epoca liberale e fascista*; in: GIORGIO PETRACCHI (ed.), *Uomini e nazioni. Uomini e Nazioni. Cultura e politica estera dell'Italia del Novecento* (Udine 2008) 24–43, here 29. Count Avarna showed a deeply conservative stance when he claimed the Royal Government's right and duty to protect national interests among the Great Powers. His attitude was influenced by the deep mistrust of public opinion, which he considered short-sighted and unable to face the problems related to foreign policy; 2. August 1914, the Royal Italian ambassador to Vienna, Count Avarna, to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Count San Giuliano. DOCUMENTI DIPLOMATICI ITALIANI (DDI), Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, Roma 1954: V. Serie, vol. I, Nr. 11/ T. Gab. s. 955/97 (5) 7–9, here 8.

of Fiume. Nationalist historiography in the 1930s considered the Treaty of London to be a diplomatic error inspired by politicians whose ambitions were usually continental, an approach which almost curbed the Mediterranean–African call of Italian imperialism¹⁴. On the contrary, modern historiography finds fault with the missed denunciation of the Triple Alliance and underlines the lack of a *casus foederis* between Austria and Italy¹⁵. In May 1915 Italy entered the war against Austria-Hungary alone. That move was the first demonstration that the Italian ruling class intended the war to be their own national war, inspired by ‘sacred egoism’ (*sacro egoismo*) without any consideration for the general objectives of the Alliance. The London Treaty itself was rigid and no-one tried to adapt foreign policy to the new circumstances created by the war. The legend of ‘mutilated victory’ emerged as a result of the clash between the unchanged clauses of the Treaty and the rapid changes in the international order.

4. Contradiction and failure: The Italian Delegation at Versailles in 1919

After the victorious end of the war in November 1918, Italian diplomacy and the Italian government made a great political plunder: they failed to recognize the major developments originating from the war itself. In 1915, Italy had joined the Entente in a rather traditional coalition war. The Russian Revolution and the entry of the United States into the war changed the character of the war significantly, transforming it into a crusade for liberal democracy and national self-determination. During the war, Baron Sonnino acted as the minister of a regional power, evincing a strong underestimation of nationalist movements and a complete indifference towards world-wide questions, including the economy¹⁶. The Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs failed to understand the revolutionary nature of the Great War.

In November 1918, the Italian government did not for a moment consider the Treaty of London to be the limit of its war aims. Prime Minister Vittorio Emanuele Orlando was determined to put an end to the internal political confrontation between legal and actual Italy, a kind of civil war that lasted through the decades of national unification into the nineteenth century. Soon after the truce had been signed with the Austro-Hungarian military delegates at Villa Giusti, Orlando declared that Italy’s victory had to be considered one of the greatest that history had ever recorded, and repeated himself in his address to Parliament, when he claimed that this victory seemed to overshadow all others in recorded history. Victory was undeniable, but had been achieved by huge sacrifices in manpower and the industrial mobilization of resources.

¹⁴ MARIO TOSCANO, *Il Patto di Londra. Storia diplomatica dell’intervento italiano 1914–1915* (Bologna 1934).

¹⁵ GIORGIO PETRACCHI, *L’Italia nella politica internazionale dalla Grande Guerra alla Grande Depressione*; in: FEDERICO ROMERO, ANTONIO VARSORI (eds.), *Nazione, interdipendenza, integrazione: la relazioni internazionali dell’Italia 1917–1989*, 2 vols. (Roma 2005, 2006) I (2005) 27–57.

¹⁶ ROBERTO DE QUIRICO, *Italy and the Economic Penetration Policy in Central-Eastern Europe during the Early First Post-War Period*; in: *The Journal of European Economic History* 30/2 (2001) 291–318, here 303f.

The Prime Minister's words were intended to prime the country to demand even more. This way, Orlando took his first step towards raising public hopes that were already running high. The other side of the question was what might happen if the nation were denied the fruits of such an achievement. The democratic interventionist Bissolati was the only member of the cabinet to propose that Italy should renounce all the elements of the Treaty of London that clashed with President Woodrow Wilson's Ninth Point – 'A readjustment of the frontiers of Italy should be effected along clearly recognizable lines of nationality'. Specifically, Italy should not demand German-speaking South Tyrol and Dalmatia with its Croat majority. Nationalists all over Italy soon forced Bissolati to resign, along with three other ministers: they could not accept the idea of a peace settlement based upon a new international order and the League of Nations and the decline of the old diplomacy facing the new foreign policy pursued by President Wilson and the Bolshevik revolutionaries. The Italian borders with the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes were not to reflect nationality, but rather the new balance of power in the Adriatic. The government was trying to excite public opinion against the principle of national self-government because Orlando and Sonnino were afraid that Wilson might bury the ancient concert of the European Great Powers at the very moment Italy could finally become part of it. Having defeated its ancient enemy, the nation could at last recover from the 'Custoza and Adowa complex': the deep sense of inferiority and national frustration enduring from the humiliating defeats of 1866 and 1896. This was the reason why they supported the idea of diminishing the power and territorial size of Austria-Hungary without destroying the monarchy. When the Peace Conference opened its gates, the Italian delegation paid little attention to the creation of a new world with new principles in foreign relations. Even though Prime Minister Orlando was ready to recognize that events had overtaken the Treaty of London and a realistic settlement for the eastern Adriatic could not ignore nationality, he accommodated his Minister of Foreign Affairs, who seemed to be interested only in gaining all the territories the Treaty of London had foreseen with the addition of Fiume, whose Italian population had proclaimed annexation to Italy at the very end of the war¹⁷. Such an attitude clashed with the new situation in Central-Eastern Europe and met the opposition of President Wilson, who was hostile to clandestine diplomatic agreements like the London Treaty. Wilson himself had warned the Italians that their Adriatic claims were unacceptable at their first meeting in Paris on 21 December 1918¹⁸. Orlando had reacted accordingly, but was by no means disposed to disclose the truth about President Wilson's opposition to Italian demands, while Sonnino, 'the evil genius' among the Italian delegates¹⁹ according to Harold G. Nicolson, stubbornly refused to hammer out a compromise. In

¹⁷ This opinion was also shared by HENRY KISSINGER, *L'arte della diplomazia* (Milano 2004) 170; engl.: *Diplomacy* (New York – London – Toronto – Sydney 1994).

¹⁸ MARIA GRAZIA MELCHIONI, *La vittoria mutilata. Problemi ed incertezze della politica estera italiana sul finire della Grande Guerra: ottobre 1918 – gennaio 1919* (= Edizioni di Storia e di Letteratura, Roma 1981) 165 f.

¹⁹ MARGARET MACMILLAN, *Peacemakers: The Paris Conference of 1919 and its Attempt to End War* (London 2001) 388–414.

April 1919, the Conference addressed the Adriatic question. From the very beginning of the settlement, the Italian Prime Minister justifiably presented the losses his countrymen had suffered, 689,000 soldiers out of a population of 35 million²⁰ as compared with Great Britain's 662,000 casualties out of a population of 46 million. All of this was instrumental to the rendering of accounts. The north-eastern border was to extend beyond the Isonzo Valley, the Julian Alps, the Carso, Trieste and Istria to a depth of 40 kilometers from the coast. This would give Italy even more Slovene territory than had been promised in 1915. Fiume was claimed in the name of self-determination and the promised segment of Dalmatia in the name of Italy's strategic security: almost a million non-Italians (including the German-speakers of South Tyrol) would be trapped inside the Italian kingdom.

It is noteworthy that the Italians did not agree with Wilson about the principle of collective security²¹ nor with the French about the comparison between their Eastern questions: the Rhine line for France and the Adriatic for Italy. Acting this way, they brought themselves to a dead end: on the one hand, there were the Allies, who could not accept all the Italian claims, and, on the other, over-excited Italian public opinion, fed with illusions and assumptions. Wilson made it clear that parts of Istria, Dalmatia and Fiume all had to go to the Yugoslavian kingdom. The answer of the Italian Prime Minister was theatrical, arguing that nothing would be more fatal to the peace of the world than denying him Fiume. The crux of the issue was that it was impossible for Italy to have both the Treaty of London and other territories as well. When President Wilson appealed directly to the Italian people²², the Italian delegates left the peace conference in order to reinforce their authority in front of Parliament and public opinion, thus making their second huge diplomatic and political blunder. Orlando and Sonnino resolved at last to return to Paris, but they realized that the allied attitude towards Italy had worsened: the role of Italy had become less influential than ever. This ultimate step in the creation of the myth of 'mutilated victory' resulted from the politicians' inability to reach a satisfactory compromise between Italy's maximum national claims and the good-will of the allies. When the Italian delegates saw that Italy could not have everything that it desired, they found it more convenient to support public opinion at home in thinking that the allies had shown themselves to be selfish and ungrateful to a nation that had made enormous sacrifices, suffering the greatest human losses for common victory.

²⁰ The actual figures of Italian casualties from May 1915 to November 1918 did not reach the height of 600,000, according to the most recent research of the Department of Economics and Statistics (DIES) of the University of Udine. See ALESSIO FORNASIN, Corrado Gini's contribution to estimates of Italian military deaths in the First World War; in: *Genus. Rivista di Demografia* LXXI/ 2–3 (2015) 73–79.

²¹ ITALO GARZIA, *L'Italia e l'origine della Società delle Nazioni* (Roma 1995) 98.

²² During his visit to Rome on 3 January 1919, Wilson had been given no opportunity to address the crowds. The Italians did not know how deeply Wilson believed in his mission of peace. On the one hand, the president, well informed about Italian claims, carefully avoided from any approach to the Adriatic Question, on the other, no attempt was made by the Italians to negotiate with their guest about Italy's eastern border. See DANIELA ROSSINI, *Wilson e il Patto di Londra nel 1917–1918*; in: *Storia Contemporanea* XXII/3 (June 1991) 473–512, here 506.

5. A hard Myth to eradicate

The legend of the ‘lost victory’ originated from the deep sense of frustration the Italians felt in 1919 faced by the Great Powers at the Peace Conference: it was a frustration that derived from the exaggerated expectations that the Great Powers failed to meet in the view of the majority of Italian politicians and patriots. The myth’s origins should be recognized in the historical weakness of the new nation. Paradoxically, the negative myth of the ‘mutilated victory’ was built on the foundation of an undeniable victory by a ruling class who won the war, but lost the peace, showing itself inadequate and short-sighted in building up a new order in Europe. The most perceptive critic of Orlando and Sonnino’s behaviour is considered to be Count Carlo Sforza, who as foreign minister in 1920 negotiated a more equitable solution to the eastern Adriatic dilemma. The consequences of the Italian attitude at the Peace Conference in Paris were far greater than supposed: Italian strategy dealt a fatal blow to Italy’s liberal system, already badly mauled by the enormous wartime efforts. By stoking the appetite for unattainable claims, Orlando and Sonnino encouraged Italians to despise their victory unless it led to the annexation of a small port on the other side of the Adriatic with no historical connections to the motherland. The sense of jeopardized identity and wounded pride finally produced an explosive compound. In truth, victory was mutilated by Italy’s own leaders. The further exploitation of the myth by Fascism became the rallying cry leading to the Second World War and lasting until the end of the Cold War.

