

Ufficio Marconi, Agreement between the Italian Government and Guglielmo Marconi for the use of radiotelegraphy and radiotelephony in Italy and its colonies. Roma: Printing and Publishing House E. Manna, 1915. Biblioteca Museo Nazionale Scienza e Tecnologia Leonardo da Vinci

This pamphlet, housed in the Biblioteca Museo Nazionale Scienza e Tecnologia Leonardo da Vinci, documents the relations between the Italian government, Marconi's Wireless Telegraph Company (MWTC) and Marconi himself at the beginning of World War I. There is no mention of the author on the cover, just an institutional heading: "Ufficio Marconi, via del Collegio Romano, N. 15, Roma". The consultation of national and international catalogue portals reveals that only ten other copies exist in Italy, in addition to the one at the Museum. One copy is located outside Italy at the Marconi Archives in Oxford (OBL MS Marconi 212). The seemingly impersonal and institutional reporting style of the publication actually reflects the deep interconnection between private and public interests that was established at the beginning of the 1900s during the institutionalisation of a new means of communication namely 'wireless telegraphy'. In those years Marquis Luigi Solari (1873-1957) headed the Ufficio Marconi. Historically recognised as the official biographer of the inventor, Solari was an officer in the Regia Marina Italiana (Royal Italian Navy) and also the manager of the business affairs of the English company in Italy. In contrast to other countries, the MWTC did not have a subsidiary branch in Italy at the time (see Pietrangeli, *infra*). It was Solari who managed the business relations on behalf of Marconi, who wished to maintain a personal connection with his home country (Raboy 2016, 211), as evidenced in similar material for commercial and institutional communication published by the MWTC in England (to be located in OBL MS Marconi 1212, 1391-2). The Biblioteca Museo Nazionale Scienza e Tecnologia Leonardo da Vinci also preserves a pamphlet containing an interesting interview with Solari in which, from the light and confidential tone, we can appreciate the traits of an enthusiastic promoter of the Marquis' new technology (Ghelli 1906).

How Marconi Shaped the Italian Wireless Policy

The Berlin Conferences of 1903 and 1906

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1 Introduction. The International Dimension of Wireless Telegraphy

Wireless telegraphy came into being at the end of the nineteenth century and, in many aspects, was immediately perceived as a means of international communication. From a political point of view, telegraphic waves could not be confined to national borders meaning international regulations were drawn up relatively quickly, so much so that international legislation often preceded national laws (Giannini 1920, 14). Moreover, wireless technology was seen by governments as an instrument for international communication, and its control became vital for countries such as the United Kingdom, Germany, France, and later the United States (Headrik 1991). From an economic point of view, large private companies, such as the British Marconi Company, the German Telefunken and the French Société Générale, competed to acquire dominant positions firstly in the European markets, then globally. The wireless telegraphy market was, in other words, supranational. Lastly, wireless technology was international also in terms of users. Amateur radio enthusiasts, whose importance grew in many European countries and the United States in the 1910s, were focused on communicating with each other and listening to public content such as transmissions from the Eiffel Tower (Rikitianskaia et al. 2018).¹

This chapter is a revision of Balbi 2012.

¹ The transmissions broadcast from the Eiffel Tower were bulletins of telegraphic information that became popular among expert users at the beginning of the 1900s (Balbi 2017, 3). The symbolic role of the tower in European wireless telegraphy, which has today become the symbol of Paris, and France too, is clearly explained in Rikitianskaia 2024.

One of the indications of the international dimension of wireless technology could be the initial attempt to draw up legislation at an international level. Two conferences organised in Berlin in 1903 and 1906 were strategic for at least two reasons. On the one hand, a series of common and international rules were established regarding wireless communication, and a path was laid out for a shared understanding of this new medium. On the other, the central theme of these conferences was the political and economic attempt to break down the monopoly held at the time by the Marconi Company, a British company mainly linked to the United Kingdom and Italy (Tomlinson 1945; Hugill 1999) [fig. 1].²

Perhaps the most important strategy was the so-called 'non-intercommunication policy'. For many reasons (political, economic, technical, patent protection, etc.), the Marconi Company refused to communicate with other wireless companies set up in the meantime. This created 'diplomatic' misunderstandings. For example, when the Kaiser's brother was returning to Germany after a trip to the United States, he was unable to communicate

with either side of the Atlantic because he was travelling aboard a boat equipped with Slaby-Arco apparatus and the Marconi stations refused to communicate with the ship (Douglas 1989, 119). The non-intercommunication policy turned out to be not only a commercial strategy adopted by a private company, but also acquired a political importance. It was seen by the United States, France and Germany as an attempt by the United Kingdom to maintain its monopoly on telecommunications which it had achieved by using underwater cables. Obviously, these countries aimed to free themselves from British control of communications (Friedwald 2000, 441-62).

Other than the United Kingdom, there was another nation that, for different reasons, was standing against other countries to protect Marconi's international monopoly: Italy. Drawing on some unpublished sources, this chapter seeks to identify the political, economic, technical and social reasons that compelled, or in some cases obligated, Italy to adopt a strategy of diversification and isolation, placing the country at the centre of the international debate on wireless communication.

2 Italy at the International Conferences in Berlin, 1903-06

In early August 1903 the *Preliminary Conference on wireless telegraphy*, opened in Berlin with delegates coming from Germany, Austria, Spain, the United States, France, Hungary, Russia, the United Kingdom and Italy [fig. 2].

The meeting was organised by Germany to discuss the regulation of the international wireless telegraphy market and to facilitate competition between various private companies, instead of allowing the dominant positions of a few companies to crystallise. Germany and France, who supported large wireless enterprises such as Telefunken

and Compagnie générale de télégraphie sans fils, maintained that it was too early to determine the superiority of one technical system over another: it would hinder technical innovations and go against fair competition, as can be read in the *Preliminary Conference* (1904). The United Kingdom and Italy, on the other hand, protected the dominant position and Marconi's economic interests. Italy, in particular, made a notable diplomatic effort. The most effective delegate was the marquis and naval officer Luigi Solari, who at that time worked at the Ministry of

² The Wireless Telegraph and Signal Company Ltd. in 1897, subsequently becoming Marconi's Wireless Telegraph Company Ltd. in 1900, and commonly referred to as the Marconi Company.

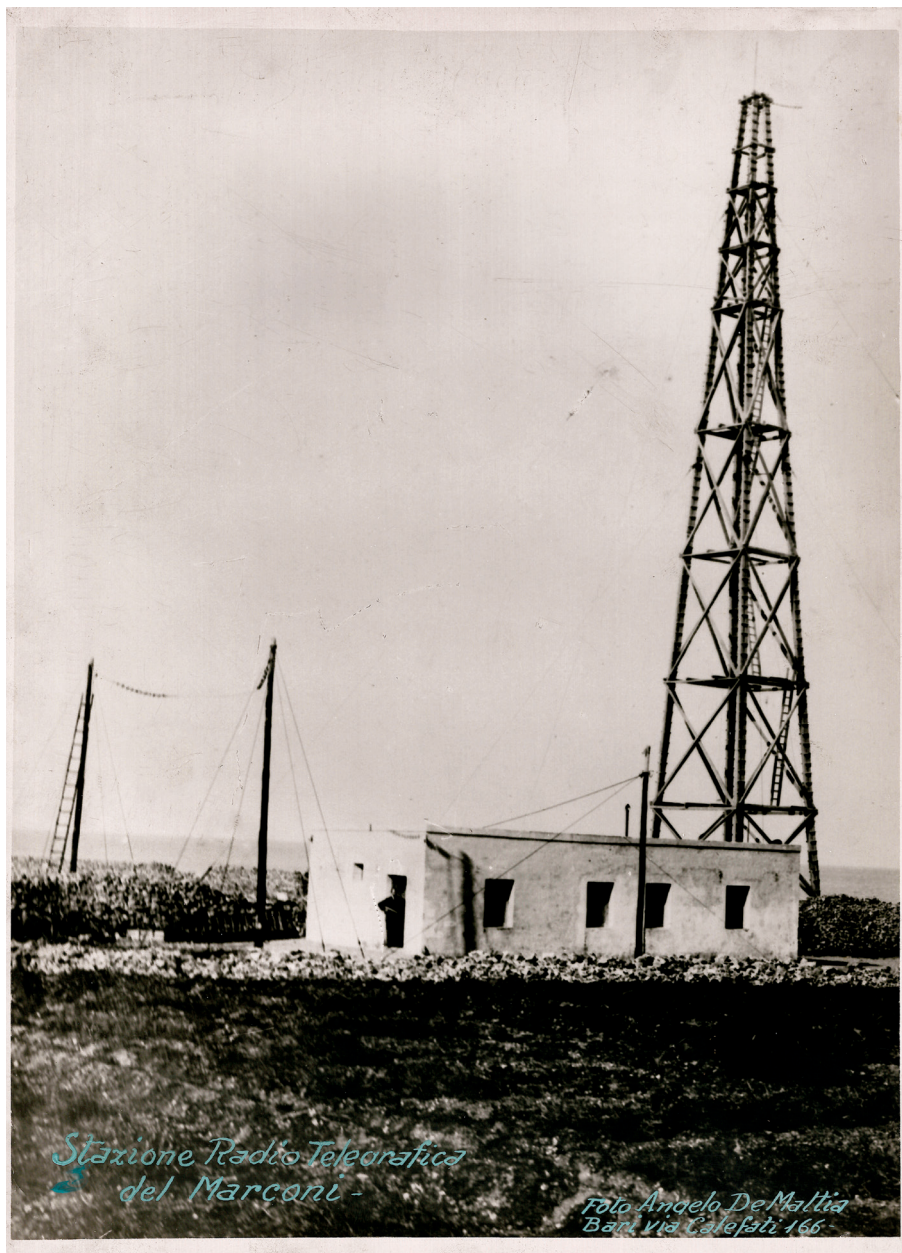


Figure 1

"On the seven seas Marconi gives unrivalled wireless service". Newspaper cutting with advertisement in 1919 from the Marconi International Marine Communication Co. Ltd, important maritime branch of the Marconi Company, taken from the company's advertising register. Oxford, OBL MS Marconi 1390

Figure 2

"Marconi Radiotelegraphic Station, Bari. The 6th external photo depicts a magnificent landscape within the middle of which the whole Station can be viewed, with a large antenna on one side and two other smaller ones at the back, which [sic] are for the transmission of Hertzian waves", reads a handwritten note on the back of this undated image, present along with others in the Museum Archive. A stamp by the author, Angelo De Mattia, informs us that he is a Specialist in photography of Apulian monuments" (ASMUST, Archivio Fotografico)



the Navy and was appointed in 1903 by the Ministry of Post to manage the commercial wireless stations. He argued that a free market would provoke many difficulties due to fragmentation and the lack of standardization of wireless telegraphy systems at practically every level: organisational, military, scientific and technical, given the presumed incompatibility between the various systems. According to Solari these difficulties would have forced the international community to choose "the temporary adoption of a single system" (*Preliminary Conference* 1904, 10-11). The 'million dollar' question was: which one? Obviously the one that

At the present proves itself to be the best as regards range of communication, as regards the development of the international service, and as regards efficient organization. [...] On the choice of this system, I desire to declare that I have not an incontrovertible preference for a given system. I have followed, it is true, the magnificent experiments of Mr. Marconi across Europe and across the Atlantic. [...] But if another system offered advantages superior to those afforded by the Marconi system, I would be very happy to request the new inventor to put his work at the disposal of my country. (*Preliminary Conference* 1904, 11)

Using a rhetorical trick, Solari was implicitly suggesting that Marconi's system should be the only system selected by the international community because, at the time, it was the only one capable of crossing the Atlantic and had a strong and extensive, international organisation.

A second Italian delegate, Fedele Cardarelli, Chief of Division of the Ministry of Post, maintained that, to guarantee technological efficiency a designated commission would have to evaluate the equipment quality at the various companies and, after this evaluation, chose the most advanced system (*Preliminary Conference* 1904, 17). Another rhetorical device aimed at promoting

Marconi's equipment, at the time considered to be the most efficient.

The third and fourth Italian delegates, Rear Admiral Carlo Grillo and Commander Quintino Bonomo, worked for the Ministry of the Navy. They sustained that a wireless telegraphy system in competition with various private companies, and thus with differing apparatus and systems, would not work. It was not treated as a secondary opinion because at the time the Italian Navy was one of the institutions, if not the institution, that had carried out the greatest number of experiments with wireless telegraphy systems. The fact that the military ministries, and the Navy in particular, were aiming to promote and establish monopolies, instead of supporting fair competition, had long been a characteristic of the Italian approach to telecommunications. The War and the Navy Ministries preferred monopolies because it was easier to manage them in case of conflict and, for the same reason, they supported Italian monopolies as they were more reliable. In the mid-1800s the Ministry of the Navy had already facilitated the establishment of a monopoly on undersea cables owned by Pirelli (Fari 2006). In 1903, in Berlin, it backed Marconi for the same reason.

The United Kingdom proposed adopting an intermediate solution, requesting compensation for all the companies that had already set up a commercial system, like the Marconi Company, "for example by a higher tax for every communication exchanged with a ship provided with an installation of a different system" (*Preliminary Conference* 1904, 15). The Italian delegates proved to be rather ambivalent regarding this proposal. On the one hand, Solari initially refused to consider compensation as a solution and continued to recommend the single system (26). On the other, Grillo claimed to believe it was "indispensable to grant indemnification to the companies which at present have stations in operation" (15). In any case, the preliminary radiotelegraphy conference in Berlin in 1903 was a partial failure because Italy and

the United Kingdom did not ratify the final agreement.

Three years later, again in Berlin, the second radiotelegraphic conference was organised with the participation of many countries. The main topic was once again free communication between ships and ground stations, and on that occasion, the United Kingdom immediately declared itself in favour of intercommunication, regardless of the system applied. In exchange, it asked that some governments be granted the possibility of establishing radiotelegraphic stations that were not required to meet this obligation (*Documents* 1906, 50). As a result, Italy was left in an isolated position at this conference due to its policy of refusing intercommunication and, for this reason, it radically changed approach. The Italian delegate Giuseppe Colombo:³

recognises the significance for international relations of the principle of free radiotelegraphic intercommunication between different radio systems. As the Italian government is *obliged* to uphold the conditions agreed

with Mr. Marconi and his Company, the Italian delegation is unable to find any other way to propose changes than to find an agreement between the two parties. [...] Furthermore it will recommend that the Italian government discuss with Mr. Marconi any eventual changes deemed to be necessary or appropriate for the purposes of reaching an international agreement. (51; transl. by the author, italics added)

At the Berlin conferences, Italy acted as the international advocate for the Marconi Company. All the proposals put forward, even those that seemed unrelated, aimed to protect its dominant position, maintain its privileges on the international market and discourage fair competition. Why did Italy adopt this bold and, at the same time, dangerous policy, given that it was leaving itself an isolated position? What were the reasons for putting forward or applying this strategy in the international arena? What were the links between Italy and the Marconi company?

3 I am Marconi your God. Three Strategies of Influence

3.1 Free, But Only Marconi

In February 1901 Guglielmo Marconi offered his patents free of charge to the Ministry of War and the Navy for military use “desiring that *his* Country use his invention *before any other*” as the Ufficio Marconi wrote in 1915 (3, transl. by the author, italics added; Giannetto 1995, 19). With the passing of law 127 on 5 April 1903

the Italian Parliament decided to set up an ultra-powerful radiotelegraphic station in Coltano (near Livorno) to communicate with South America and in particular Argentina, where many Italians had emigrated in the previous century. To ratify the law, an agreement was drawn up between Marconi and the Italian government,

³ Giuseppe Colombo (1836-1921) was a key figure within the Italian scientific, technical and industrial communities, with important institutional (he was among the founders of the Politecnico di Milano, national member of Lincei), political (President of the Chamber in 1899-1900, Minister of Finance in 1891 and of the Treasury in 1896, a senator from 1900) and commercial roles (founder of the Italian Edison Company with which he gave important impetus to the Italian electrical industry) (Cambria 1982).

stating that there would be no attempt to use any equipment other than Marconi's for commercial purposes for 14 years.⁴ Essentially, a few months before the first Berlin Conference, Italy decided to seal a deal with the Marconi Company, an agreement that was as economically beneficial as it was tyrannical. On the one hand, it could freely use the patents, but on the other it could only use Marconi's devices. The logic of *do ut des* (I give so that you may give) was driving Italian politics, as was also evident in parliamentary debates, when again in February 1903, the clause of non-intercommunication seemed "to pose a serious obstacle to our next radiotelegraphic communications with other European countries"; in any case "considering the indisputable costs incurred by Guglielmo Marconi and his company, namely in freely relinquishing all of his present and future patents to the Italian government, it would seem unjust to associate his equipment with those of his competitors".⁵

This was one of the principal strategies used by Marconi to tie Italy both to himself and his company. On 5-10 May 1904 Guglielmo Marconi signed a new agreement with the Ministries of Posts and the Navy confirming the two cornerstones of his strategy: the Italian government could freely use his patents and even reproduce his instruments (Art. 1), but at the same time the Italian radio stations could only agree to communicate with other stations equipped with Marconi apparatus for a 14-year period beginning on 13 February 1903 (Art. 2).⁶

This explanation can be found in the document preserved at the Museum:

The Italian government agreed to exclusively use the Marconi system for commercial services (while maintaining complete freedom for military services) and to prevent, except in cases of emergency, commercial communication between its Italian and colonial stations using systems different to Marconi's. This was to ensure that the advantages granted to the Italian government by Guglielmo Marconi did not benefit industries competing with Marconi's own company, industries that had largely infringed upon Marconi's patents. (Ufficio Marconi 1915, 3; transl. by the author)

Marconi, probably aware he was in violation of regulations, defensively described the choice of the Italian government as a free one. We know that this was not the case: it was 'blackmail', or an imposition on a national government, by a company that was international at the time [figs 3a-b].

This agreement was upheld for seven years, and it was only modified on 5 and 9 February 1911. To allow Italy to attend the Radiotelegraphic Conference in London, Marconi permitted both Italian ships to intercommunicate with ships equipped with any apparatus when located in foreign waters and Italian land stations to exchange radio telegrams with French and German ships equipped with apparatus other than Marconi's.⁷

Marconi decided to modify the contract with the Italian government after lengthy negotiations, and in the agreement, he describes his point of view as follows:

⁴ AP, CD, Italian Parliamentary Proceedings, Chamber of Deputies, Legisl. XXI, Sessione II, *Impianto in Italia di una grande stazione radio-telegrafica sistema Marconi per corrispondenza con l'America del Sud*, 14 February 1903, 4-5. See in particular Articles 10 and 14.

⁵ Italian Parliamentary Proceedings, Chamber of Deputies, *Discussione del disegno di legge: Impianto di una stazione radio-telegrafica ultra potente (sistema Marconi)*, 20 February 1903, 5703 and 5706, transl. by the author. <https://storia.camera.it/regno/lavori/leg21/sed340.pdf>.

⁶ Archivio del Ministero della Marina (hereafter MMA), 1912-13, cart. 283, fasc 1. Regarding this agreement and its influence on Italy's international wireless communication policy, see also Paoloni 2006, 194.

⁷ MMA, 1912-13, cart. 283, fasc 1.

L'avn. Comm. Enrico Stelluti-Scala, Ministro delle Poste e dei Telegrafi, ed il Comm. Guglielmo Marconi, per sé e per chi per esso, hanno stipulato e sottoscritto la seguente convenzione =

Art 1°

In base all'art° 5° della Convenzione in data 19 Maggio 1903 stipulata fra il R. Governo ed il Comm. Marconi, è accordata al detto Sig. Marconi la concessione dell' impianto e dell' esercizio di una stazione radiotelegrafica a Bari per corrispondere con altra analoga che a sua cura sarà impiantata nel Principato del Montenegro.

Art 2°

La stazione di Bari sarà costruita a spese ed a rischio del Comm. Marconi, al quale saranno devolute le tasse contemplate dall' art 5° sopracitato

Art 3°

La concessione è data per anni dieci con decorrenza dal giorno della entrata in esercizio della stazione, ed al termine della concessione stessa tutto l' impianto potrà passare, dietro sua richiesta, di

Convenzione in data stipulata fra il R. Governo ed il Sig. Marconi, importo risultante dall' esame periodico dei registri contabili per telegrammi trasmessi da Bari alla stazione corrispondente della Costa Montenegro -

Art - 12°

Il R. Governo si impegna a collegare a sue spese la stazione radiotelegrafica di Bari con l' ufficio telegrafico centrale di quella città, ed a non permettere d' installazione di altre stazioni radiotelegrafiche ad una distanza da Bari minore di 100 chilometri.

Roma 19 Dicembre 1903

Kellwa hls
G. Marconi

In 1909-1910 the Italian Government, due to pressure from the French and German Governments in favour of their national systems, requested that Guglielmo Marconi permit the Italian stations to communicate with French and German ships, even if equipped with systems different to Marconi's [...]. This significant modification, requested to benefit foreign systems, was accepted by Marconi and confirmed in the additional Agreement on 6 February 1911. [...] Mr. Marconi was willing to make such a concession permitting the Italian Government to ratify The Berlin Convention and thereby participate in the London Conference [in 1912]; he simply highlighted the damages that could be caused to him and his Companies as a result of such new concessions. (Ufficio Marconi 1915, 3; transl. by the author)

But the debate and tensions with the Italian government had in reality been going on for some time, dating back to the early 1900s and the radiotelegraphic conferences in Berlin. In the 1903 conference Carlo Grillo, solicited by the French delegation to negotiate with Marconi and modify the agreement in favour of international wireless communications, promised to concentrate all his efforts on achieving this goal (*Preliminary Conference* 1904, 38).

In fact, the Italian government sought to modify the agreement, pointing out that a change of idea would be desirable also for Marconi himself, for three reasons. The majority of delegates in Berlin had requested it and therefore it was a widespread objective; in granting this modification to the Italian government Marconi would win the approval of the other governments; in allowing intercommunication the Marconi Company could easily

demonstrate its technical superiority and would therefore acquire a "spontaneous general consensus" on using "the Marconi system only".⁸

Guglielmo Marconi himself replied by letter in January 1904. He refused to change the contracts with the Italian governments for at least four reasons. Firstly, allowing apparatus designed by different companies to intercommunicate was, in his view, technically impossible and, should it be possible, it would create legal and commercial difficulties. Secondly, in doing this Marconi would be endorsing the violation of his own copyright insofar as the other systems were deemed to be simple copies of Marconi's - this concept was again repeated in 1915, as we saw earlier. A third reason that prevented Marconi from accepting the request of the Italian government lay in the fact that there were agreements drawn up with other parties (for example, with the British company Lloyd's and the British Navy) which included the clause of non-intercommunication and Marconi could not give preference solely to Italy. Finally, again according to Marconi, not one Marconi Company client up to that moment had asked to modify the contract: this meant that the clause of non-intercommunication was in the favour of public interest.⁹

In 1905 Guglielmo Marconi unexpectedly proposed the termination of his contract to the Italian Ministry of Post and Telegraphs, due to the "unfavourable opinion expressed by a section of the Italian press". Obviously the revocation of the signed contracts meant that also "the Italian government, as well as the Marconi Company and himself, would be relieved from any obligations whatever under the said agreements".¹⁰ The Ministry of Post declined the proposal, above all because it would have involved giving up the free use of Marconi's patents and

⁸ OBL MS Marconi 212,7, letter from the Ministry of Italian Marine to Guglielmo Marconi, 11 September 1903.

⁹ OBL MS Marconi 204,6, letter from Guglielmo Marconi to Ministry of Italian Marine, January 1904.

¹⁰ OBL MS Marconi 393,1, f. 216, meeting of the Board of Directors, 19 October 1905.

therefore having to relinquish Italy's favourable position at the time. In a 1906 letter the managing director of the Marconi Company, Cuthbert Hall, underlined that withdrawing from the contracts without consulting the shareholders was a risky move, which could put Marconi in person and Hall himself "in a very awkward position if the Government had closed with the offer". However, it turned out to be a calculated risk because, as Hall verified, "it [the Italian government] to close with the offer and therefore we did not, I suppose, give so much consideration to the matter as we should have done if there had been any chance of acceptance".¹¹ In other words, Marconi had proposed that the Italian government withdraw from the 1904 agreement, knowing that it was not in a position to accept at that moment in history. As we have already said, the Italian government was unable to modify these agreements until 1911, at which point the non-intercommunication policy was essentially abandoned by Marconi himself. But these same agreements strongly influenced the ways in which Italy could operate on the international stage, and, for example, Italy was unable to sign the final protocol of the Berlin Conferences, either in 1903 or 1906. During the preliminary conference, the Italian delegation agreed to submit the proposals contained in the final protocol to its government but

declared to be unable to sign due to "agreements made with Mr. Marconi" (*Documents* 1903, 87).

These agreements contained at least two elements that tied Italy's hands in an international context. Marconi required the Italian government to keep secret any information relating to wireless telegraphy infrastructures and equipment (but the first article of the international convention compelled the sharing of this information in all other countries). Moreover, Italy could not give its permission for intercommunication without Marconi's authorisation because it was the only country at the international meeting contractually bound to him on this matter. Even if negotiations took place for a new agreement between 1903 and 1906, nothing had changed at the second Berlin Conference and the Italian delegate had to declare that

These contracts' conditions are opposed to the fundamental articles we are discussing in this Convention. [...] we cannot execute them before our contracts expire or before the other part agrees on modifying the existing contracts. [...] This line of conduct may seem more justified considering that M. Marconi has made an exception in favor of his motherland, reserving the free of charge use of his invention. (*Documents* 1906, 96)

4 Conflicts of Interest

Italy was also tied to the Marconi Company due to a longtime feature of Italian politics which also emerged in the history of telecommunications: conflicts of interest.¹² Influential figures close to Marconi were at the same

time part of Italian politics. The most striking case was probably that of Luigi Solari. In 1901 the Ministry of the Navy enrolled Solari to reestablish a friendly relationship with Guglielmo Marconi, after Marconi had moved

¹¹ OBL MS Marconi 205, 6, letter of Hall to Marconi, 12 November 1906, 9.

¹² See, for example, the conflicts of interest between politics and business during the nationalisations of the telephone networks in 1907 (Balbi 2011). In general, regarding Italian political-economic 'style' in telecommunications, see Balbi, Fari, Richeri 2014.

to Great Britain to found his company at the end of the 1900s. Solari succeeded remarkably well and immediately found himself in an intermediary position because he was both a Navy representative and a friend and collaborator of Marconi (Cavina 2009, 135). Solari's ambivalent role was also recognised by the management of the English Marconi Company which aimed to 'use him' to negotiate wireless communication with Italy. Solari was so valuable that, in February 1906, when Marconi was debating the imminent Berlin Conference with the Italian government, Hall found himself in doubt about or not to inform the Italian government about contracting Solari:

I do not see that we can say that we have actually signed an agreement with Solari, because if the Government by any chance took exception to the arrangement we should be rather in a quandary. I think some communication ought to be sent, however, as otherwise of course it is quite open to the Department to say that, in the absence of any formal notification from you and us, they cannot recognize him as authorized to act for us.¹³

Sources indicate that Solari was paid by the Marconi Company from 1903 and officially hired by the company in 1905. This means that in 1903 he officially participated as one of the Italian delegates who worked for the Ministry of Post and, informally, as one of Marconi's representatives, or at the very least his role and his conflicts of interest were clearly evident. His conduct during the Berlin Conference in 1903 was equally clear and he was among those who refused any other solution apart from adopting a single system, obviously Marconi's. In the following years, Solari became Marconi's right-hand man in Italy, managing the Ufficio Marconi, which handled the



Figure 4 Official portrait of Luigi Solari (Bassano Ltd., 02/05/1924), copy without a background for company communication purposes (OBL MS Marconi 687). The original is located at the National Portrait Gallery in London

affairs of the Marconi Company in Italy, and later even went on to become his official biographer [fig. 4].

Another example of conflict of interests was the relationship between Hall, the managing director of the Marconi Company, and Colombo, the Italian delegate

¹³ OBL MS Marconi, letter of Hall to Marconi, 10 February 1906.

at the Berlin Conference in 1906. The two constantly kept in touch during the conference and Hall sought to reassure Colombo that Italy would not remain isolated, "suggesting" that the Italian government complain to the British government regarding its "volte face"¹⁴

The link between the Marconi Company and the Italian delegates at the international conferences demonstrates

at least two relevant aspects. Firstly, a closer relationship between the British company and the Italian government, and in particular the Naval Forces (while relations between Marconi and the Ministry of Post were still tense); secondly, the fact that Marconi was able to propose, and at times, dictate Italian policy at international level.

5 Marconi's Image

A third reason that helps to explain Marconi's influence over Italy involves Marconi himself, both as an inventor and as a symbol of Italian pride. Even though he had moved to London to patent wireless technology and capitalize on his patents, Guglielmo Marconi was born in Bologna, he felt Italian his entire life and, above all, continued to be a very popular figure throughout the country and also in the Italian imagination.¹⁵

The articles in popular Italian magazines and newspapers often glorified his 'magical' inventions as examples of 'Italian genius'.¹⁶ He inspired writers and poets and many of them, such as his friend Gabriele d'Annunzio, composed pieces about him and his wireless telegraphy.¹⁷ He was awarded many Italian honours, such as that of senator in 1914, president of the National Research Council (CNR) in 1927, and president of the Royal Academy of Italy in 1930. Marconi was also able to establish influential relationships with members of Italian high society, such as kings and queens, members of parliament, and heads of various ministries and banks. Lastly, and more generally, for a long time Marconi embodied Italy's image around

the world, and for this reason, often held political positions in the first half of the twentieth century (Martelli 1995; Paoloni, Simili 1996).

However, the most relevant contribution perhaps of Marconi's Italian popularity to his British enterprise can be identified as the 'legend of the inventor' that surrounded him for his entire life (Fava, Ortoleva, Testaceni 1996). The aura of genius originally overlooked by his own country and being forced to emigrate to realise his ideas (*nemo propheta in patria*; no man is a prophet in his own land), ironically helped him to gain support and a certain freedom to act in Italy.

For example, during the parliamentary debate on the creation of the first Italian high-power wireless telegraphy station in 1903, many politicians expressed total confidence in Marconi. Even when his choices seemed debatable, such as with the non-intercommunication policy, the parliamentarians "ask [...] not to impose any technical conditions on Marconi", convinced that he has "always found a way to overcome all difficulties, so he will find a way to win over anyone who opposes

¹⁴ OBL MS Marconi 205,1, letter of Hall to Marconi, 17 October 1906 and 30 November 1906.

¹⁵ Regarding the Italian life of Marconi, see Valotti 2015.

¹⁶ Numerous news cuttings are available on the website of the Fondazione Guglielmo Marconi <http://www.fgm.it>.

¹⁷ Many of these poems are preserved in OBL MS Marconi 40, 5.

this station".¹⁸ As we are often told by all of the identical types of biography on genii, heroes and inventors, for Marconi too it was not easy to realise his ideas and he was opposed by various enemies. In particular, the main antagonistic roles in these accounts were played by the German and French private companies who copied his inventions from the start and subsequently aimed to enter the wireless telegraphy business. The Italian delegates at the international conferences highlighted this many times, maintaining that the inventor of wireless technology should have merited special consideration from the international community. In Italy, many commentators defended Marconi as a victim of economic and political attacks by Germany and its companies: we recall, for example, that the 1903 conference took into consideration "only the radiocommunications between ships and the coast, at a limited range, [and] completely

ignored the issue of long-range stations" simply because at the time Marconi was still "without competition" in transatlantic radio telegraphy and "it probably didn't suit opponents of the single system to consider this argument" (Villarey 1903, 5).

Finally, according to many observers, Marconi was extremely generous to his home country, because he allowed the Italian government to use his equipment at no cost. This aspect of Marconi's image, namely the respect and particular consideration for his home country was precisely crafted by Marconi himself and by his biographer Luigi Solari.¹⁹

How could we not allow this champion of 'Italian genius', this victim of international competition, this generous son of Italy to use his country and his home government as a sort of defence lawyer, engaged to protect the interests of Marconi at an international level?

6 Conclusion. Centritalia

The influence of Marconi and the Marconi Company on Italian radiotelegraphic policy was long-standing. It remained significant not only during World War I and when Marconi lost the assignment of wireless telegraphy in 1923, reacting furiously against Mussolini's government, but also in the 1930s and 40s when he instead played a leading role in developing radio broadcasting in Italy and elsewhere.²⁰

The first two international conferences on wireless communication analysed in this chapter allow us to comprehend something special and unique about the

relationship between Marconi and his home country. On the one hand, the Italian delegates found themselves in an uncomfortable position: they had to fight against the majority of other countries and defend the policy of non-intercommunication desired by Marconi to honour the agreement signed between the Italian government and Marconi himself. On the other hand, however, perhaps for the first time in the history of telecommunications, Italy found itself at the centre of international politics and negotiations: the *diktats* of Marconi, in other words, turned Italy into an exemplary case study for international wireless policy.

¹⁸ Italian Parliamentary debates, 20 February 1903, 5704 and 5707.

¹⁹ See, for example, Solari 1940, in which Marconi's respect, benevolence and deference to Italy is fanatically recalled.

²⁰ Regarding the role of the Marconi Company and Marconi on Italian radiotelegraphic, radiotelephonic and radio broadcasting policy, see Sangiovanni 2024.

At the same time, they unintentionally revealed, how crucial Italy was for the British Marconi company itself. By simply observing a map of the radiotelegraphic stations around the world, we understand how, in the first decade of the 1900s, Italy was one of the Marconi Company's most important clients [fig. 5].²¹ But Italy became something more to the British company on an international level. It was the country on which the Marconi management could count, even more so than England itself where the company had its headquarters. Italy was the country that helped the Marconi Company most, and defended it on the international scene. It was the last to sign the Berlin Conference protocol in 1911 when Marconi decided to modify his agreement with the Italian government. In 1906, when the Marconi Company realised that England would no longer defend its non-intercommunication

policy, the company management considered moving its business, as Hall seems to imply in this letter to Marconi:

I note that you are concentrating your attention almost exclusively upon Italian business, and the development of the Marconi system in Italy, particularly for Italian Government (Naval and Military) purposes. It is not unnatural that the principal extensions and development of the Marconi system should in future be primarily in relation to Italian Naval interests. These facts ought to receive wide publicity in the Press.²²

In conclusion, Marconi's *diktats* to Italy could be reinterpreted as part of a broader strategy, aimed at making the country itself the gravitational centre of its business affairs, and more generally of its international image.

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²¹ See OBL MS Marconi 581, 4 and the map in OBL MS Marconi 401 here reproduced.

²² OBL MS Marconi 205, 1, letter of Hall to Marconi, 22 November 1906, 3.

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