ITALY, PIEDMONT AND FRENCH ANTI-HABSBURG STRATEGY, 1690–1748

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One of the main problems when dealing with history is that most people do not understand what to do with it. The so-called magistra vitae is reduced to a mere collection of facts and figures originating from different interpretations, closer to philosophy than to a rational and practical analysis with concrete aims. Many years ago, a young student objected: “Why should we learn this stuff? It is only a large amount of dead stories about dead people, what do they have to do with us?” This question reveals a wider problem: most people perceive history as a sort of gentlemanlike hobby and do not realize this is not the case. The result is an impressive amount of works dealing with minimal details of history, which have no real impact, are of no utility and which give people the idea that history is a useless thing. We can however, learn many lessons from the past. We shall use French strategy in Italy in the sixty years from 1690 to 1748, as a case study. The French perspective is the traditional and more common view but if we take an Italian point of view, there are some surprises.

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Traditionally Cardinal Richelieu is credited as the original planner of the French grand strategy in the early 17th century; implemented during the Thirty Years War and successfully pursued by his successor Mazarin until the Treaty of the Pyrenees in 1659. It is still unclear how much of this strategy was originally developed by King Henry IV and which was

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1 A good survey of Richelieu’s political views may be found in Hilaire Belloc, Richelieu (Milano: Dall'Oglio, 1962); Karl Burkardt, Richelieu (Torino, 1945); Cesare Giardini, Il cardinale Richelieu, (Milano: Mondadori, 1970); Aldous Huxley, L’eminenza grigia – biografia di padre Giuseppe, segretario del cardinale Richelieu [original title Grey eminence] (Milano, 1966); Traité de paix dit des Pyréénées entre le Roi de France et le Roi d’Espagne, signed in the Ille des Faisans on 7 November 1659, in Solaro della Margarita ed., Traités publics de la Royale Maison de Savoie avec les puissances étrangères depuis la paix de Chateau Cambresis jusqu’à nos jours, 6 vols., (Torino: Stamperia Reale, 1836), Vol. II.
Richelieu's creation. What is important is the general line stated at that time. France was encircled by the Habsburgs. When not considering the English Channel and the Mediterranean, French borders were more or less parallel to the Rhine, the Alps and the Pyrenees. It was foolish to attack Spain through the Pyrenees, it was not a good idea to try to pass the Rhine under Spanish troops' eyes, and it was not a good idea to do the same across the Alps.

The real strategic problem facing France was the extent of the Habsburg domains. Spanish supremacy remained firm; its power was based in Italy, and centered on the Kingdom of Naples. Naples consistently provided Spanish Habsburg with great quantities of money and manpower. When needed, more troops could be concentrated in Naples from Sicily and occasionally Sardinia. They would march northward along the Adriatic coast, but normally took ship in the Tyrrhenian Sea. After an intermediate stop in the Stato dei Presidii – the “State of the Garrisons” – on the Tuscan coast, they landed near Genoa and marched along the Ticino river to the Alps. Passing through Grisons–Swiss-owned Val Tellina, they reached the Rhine–Danube watershed. If they had to go to Low Countries, they marched along the Rhine Valley. If they had to reach Austria or central or eastern Germany, they marched along Danube Valley. This was the so called “Cammino di Fiandra” – literally “the Path of Flander” – better known in English as “The Spanish Road”. It was the vital strategic artery of the whole Spanish military and political system and this was the objective that probably Henry IV and surely Richelieu wanted to sever.

Practically every French campaign in Italy during the Thirty Years War was tasked to cut the Spanish Road, and all failed. No success in Valtellina to closing the entrance to Switzerland; no success against Genoa to cut the Spanish landing point in Finale; no success in Piedmont to cut the land...