

INTRODUCTION

Sidney Sonnino was one of modern Italy's most important public figures, particularly in the generation before fascism. To students of Italian history, he is best known in two roles: as leader of an authoritarian movement at the turn of the century, which some see as a portent of fascism, and as the Foreign Minister who presided over Italy's entry into World War I. However, his importance reached far beyond this. In the 1870s, he pioneered discussion of Italy's social problems, with a classic study of Sicily and the so-called Southern Question. In the 1880s, he was one of the first, and most influential, proponents of colonial expansion in Africa. In the mid-1890s, as Treasury and Finance Minister, he enacted fiscal and banking reforms which rescued Italy from financial crisis and laid the foundations for its subsequent economic take-off. After 1900, he was one of the two most important Liberal politicians, vying for leadership with Giovanni Giolitti, and becoming, in the process, the latter's most trenchant loyalist critic.¹ In 1906 he led a short-lived government, which some contemporaries saw as the crucial missed opportunity to consolidate the Liberal regime in the pre-fascist era. During World War I, he directed Italian foreign policy, being the longest-serving Foreign Minister of any of the belligerent nations. Finally, with Prime Minister Orlando, he led Italy's delegation to the Paris Peace Conference, where he became the chief opponent of Woodrow Wilson's vision for the post-war world.

Sonnino, then, had a long and important public life. One historian has characterized him as "the most cultured and intelligent" conservative in the Liberal era.² Yet he is a neglected figure. While there are studies of

¹ I will use the term 'loyalist' throughout the text to denote those who fundamentally accepted the Liberal regime established at unification and consolidated in the years immediately thereafter.

² S. Romano, *Giolitti: lo stile del potere*, Monza 1989, p. 211. Stuart Woolf, in his review article "The Moralists of Italian Politics", *Times Literary Supplement*, December 21, 1973, p. 1569, notes how Sonnino "dedicated himself exclusively to politics, in which he displayed a technical competence rivalled only by Giolitti and a moral rectitude and breadth of culture unrivalled by any".