

Social Conflict and Control, Protest and Repression (Italy)

By [Roberto Bianchi](#)

In the years 1914-1918, Italy was the scene of periodic waves of protest against the war. The particular form the exceptional conditions took, and the mobilization were the cause and effect of social conflicts of an intensity unparalleled in allied countries. Women played an important role in the movements which updated the content of the protests, shifting the objectives from the local to the national or supranational dimension. Opposition to military intervention became the common feature of the struggles which had arisen for different reasons and which tended to coalesce in protest against the policy of civilian, rationing, industrial mobilization, and in the demands for land and work, without being able to unite politically.

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Introduction: A Country which Remained Divided

It is important to bear in mind the character of the protests, the geography and the dimension of the social conflicts, as well as the radical nature of the tumults which, in successive waves, swept over the whole peninsula between 1914 and 1918. Furthermore, the characteristics of state policies and the armed forces, the fragility of the ruling élite, and the peculiarities of the civilian, industrial, agricultural and rationing mobilization make Italian events an important case study in order to understand the First World War. The latter is an event which, if it is to be interpreted in its global

dimension, has to take into account the peculiarities of every country involved.^[1] It is also significant that the greater involvement of the people in the life of the nation anticipated the post-war crisis marked by the irruption of the masses on to the public scene and the sunset of the liberal state.

In Italy, which had entered the war in May 1915, there was never anything like the "Community of August", which characterized the general mobilization in the metropolises of the European empires in 1914.^[2] This was confirmed by the confidential surveys "On Public Morale" carried out periodically for the Ministry of the Interior between 1915 and 1918, which depict a country recalcitrant to go to war, above all in the countryside, which was very distant from the reasons for interventionism and the patriotic rhetoric.^[3] The adherence and the opposition to the war tended, to a great extent, to correspond with the class structure and the varying "rates of nationalization" in the country; major sectors of the rural population, but also of the working class and artisans, lacked the sense of belonging to the homeland – apart from some significant exceptions.^[4]

The horizontal fractures were aggravated by vertical rifts in society, in the upper economic and political echelons. The kingdom was forced to coexist both with the awkward presence of the Vatican – from whose summit, Pope Benedict XV (1854-1922) opposed the war^[5] – and the interventionist activism of the two main Masonic currents. The latter were as influential in directing the public morale, especially in the intermediate sectors, as they were in competing against each other.^[6]

Also for these reasons, in Italy, compared to allied countries, the forms of state intervention quickly became – under the direct impetus of the King and of the High Command – very authoritarian, pervasive and libercidal, and were more reminiscent of the characteristics of the total mobilization put into force in the Central Empires than that implemented in the countries of the Entente.^[7]

The war and the sense of isolation experienced by the interventionists necessitated the construction of exceptional conditions based on forms of control and repression of dissent which were violent and only partially effective. The conflict involved everyone in the life of the nation, including the masses of men and women who had until then been distant, or excluded, from it, giving rise to a tormented and highly conflictual public opinion. The conflict also heightened social tensions - shifting them from the local to the national level, in a continuous clash with the state and its local bodies – and accentuated the fragmentation of society into opposing interest groups. Moreover, it renewed the old contradictions between town and country, as well as fuelling hopes of social and moral regeneration, new utopias and old millenarian ideals. It also generated unprecedented forms of subversive political violence, practiced by action squads, which erupted subsequently in the post-war period. Finally, the conflict created the premises for a democratization of the kingdom (which failed), and for the collapse of the liberal system and the rise of Fascism (which took over the government four years after the armistice).

The Graph and the Framework of the Protest

After the "red week" of June 1914 – which had erupted following the repression of anti-war demonstrations – and the clashes in the weeks preceding the intervention, the period 1915-1918 was entirely marked by a thick web of anti-war protests. These consisted of writing on walls and shouting, improvised demonstrations and leafletting, as well as fundraising and collecting signatures for petitions to municipal administrations. There were also more or less transient work stoppages and political meetings, and processions in the countryside for bread, land, work and peace. A web, spun on the stories of [soldiers on leave](#), and against whose background assaults on bakeries and riots in the markets emerged on several occasions; occupations of town halls and invasions of land; peace marches which could involve valleys or entire provinces; uncoordinated and violent uprisings; organized strikes and marches in cities; street fighting with barricades and the use of firearms; and insurrections. The intensity of these events was unparalleled in other Western countries.^[8] Often, but not always, these protests coincided with social conflicts which had arisen in the militarized industry and the countryside dominated by agricultural mobilization. In the latter instance, these struggles, characteristic of the trade unions – despite having decreased significantly in relation to the pre-war period – never stopped completely. In fact, in many cases they were resolved with less unfavourable outcomes compared to the unrest in the first decade of the century.

In renewing the old content of the protests, often under the guidance of women, these mobilizations tended to incorporate diverse social sectors and go beyond their original causes and motivations. They ended up turning against the state and its local bodies, but also against merchants and war-time profiteers, as well as individual interventionists and political figures considered responsible for the catastrophe of war.

If we wanted to represent the intensity and spread of the protests on a graph, the curve would follow the course of a slightly irregular sinusoid, with a peak at the time of the intervention. There would then be an immediate reduction following the general mobilization (thanks to the repression, the absorption of unemployment in the mobilized industry, the measures for sharecroppers and tenants, and the launching of subsidies for the families of those recalled into service). An upturn in spring 1916 would be succeeded by a new and more intense surge the following winter and the peak of summer 1917, until the [retreat of Caporetto](#). However, the resumption of mobilization in the second half of 1918 never reached the preceding intensity. The peak reached in the year of the [revolutions in Russia](#) would instead have been easily overtaken in 1919, when a violent debate on the appraisal of the war in the new context of the attempted coups d'état, political clashes and social conflicts which ushered in the so-called "red biennium" began.^[9]

Social Conflict and Control, Protest and Repression

Opposition to the war was the common denominator of all the various protests, which were otherwise inconsistent and sometimes conflicting, aiming at challenging specific aspects of the industrial,^[10] agricultural^[11] and rationing^[12] mobilization. The anti-war opposition reconnected with the old themes of social conflict, against the backdrop of a civil mobilization^[13] which had changed

the role of the state and its peripheral bodies. The result was that the new financial importance and broad powers of manoeuvre given to the municipalities made them, not surprisingly, constant targets of economic and social demands.

The first actions against the war happened close to the Italian intervention, and were specifically directed against the mobilization of the army. These episodes of spring 1915 have still not been fully and systematically studied, but we know of numerous and violent demonstrations against the departure of the soldiers, which were soon silenced and punished with exemplary harshness.^[14]

The repression struck sections and newspapers of the Socialist Party (the only one in Western Europe which had not supported the war), anarchist circles (the majority had remained opposed to the intervention, despite important divisions), trade union headquarters (later involved, to a certain extent, in forms of co-management of the industrial mobilization) and even churchmen considered Germanophiles.^[15] Discontent could therefore only be expressed through individual actions, writing on walls, leaflets, and anonymous letters; for many months, since the summer of 1915, the prevailing feeling was resignation.^[16] Only at a later stage were there new and more intense protests against the departure of the soldiers, as in 1917, when the class of 1899 and the men previously exempt because of their shortness were called to the front.^[17]

As the conflict became protracted, the necessity of keeping a firm grip on the home front also forced the reluctant Italian authorities to build a new "moral economy,"^[18] capable of penetrating kitchens and markets throughout Italy. It was based on a network of autonomous bodies of consumption set up in close communication with the municipal authorities. The latter, against the background of a multiplication of the powers of the state and its organs of government, became go-betweens, managers, and the actual executors of ordinances, circulars and decrees which forbade, ordered, instituted, punished and regulated, in some cases on behalf of the prefects. With the war, the way of conceiving and managing local government changed. The concrete experience of civil mobilization showed the potentialities offered by the progressive institutionalization of integrated systems of public and private bodies. Although they were capable of adapting to specific situations and local needs, they were difficult to coordinate and render homogeneous on a national scale even in an exceptional time like that of the war. It was not by chance, therefore, that the issue of rationing and the policies of the municipal administrations gave rise to the most frequent and intense protests, from 1916, which had women – and sometimes soldiers on leave – as the main protagonists, accompanied by boys and, to a lesser extent, elderly people.^[19] These mobilizations could involve broad urban and rural social sectors, joining protests which arose in factories or in the countryside.

In rural areas and small towns, many demonstrations erupted on the occasion of the distribution of subsidies for the families of those recalled to military service: until well into 1917, to request the granting or increase of these subsidies, and, in the last year of the war, to reject them in the hope of accelerating the end of the war.^[20] Above all, countless demonstrations broke out in the countryside and cities against rising prices, the black market and the increasing scarcity of goods. All of these

factors, together with the mismanaged requisitions in the countryside, were signs of an infringement of the balances imposed by the rationing mobilization and the new moral economy. The resulting opportunities for protest, from the most diverse centres, tended to converge at the town halls, also striking the houses of notables, owners and warmongers, like the many teachers deeply involved in [propaganda](#) for school [children](#).

1917 was the most critical year, with a resumption of land occupations and demands for the implementation of civic uses mainly in the centre and south (in Lazio, the first recorded episodes occurred as early as the beginning of the war). There were trade union struggles in the areas of day labourers, for example in the rice fields of Lombardy and Piedmont, but there were also demonstrations and marches for peace in share-cropping areas, generally considered the most peaceful.^[21]

The most marked instances of labour unrest took place above all between the spring and summer of 1917, with strikes and clashes which culminated in the August Turin riots. As in the [February Revolution in Russia](#), the revolt in Turin was also triggered by a rationing protest in which the militarized working class and other social sectors quickly became involved. The general strike swept over this capital of Italian industry. The demonstrators, protected by barricades, tried to assault the bourgeois centre starting from the most working-class suburbs. But, unlike the Russian February (and the [German November 1918](#)), the troops sent to quell the disturbances did not sympathize with the protesters, as would be the case two years later, in various parts of Italy; in a few days, the insurrection was put down at the cost of dozens of deaths, and hundreds of injured, trials and convictions.^[22] The revolt in Turin was the high point of the protests during the war, but it had been preceded by months of labour unrest which had involved thousands of militarized workers.

The geography, extent, character and objectives of these struggles still need to be systematically reconstructed. It is certain that spontaneous strikes tended to become organized and, on many occasions, fuse with protests against the war and rationing mobilizations. Generally, the working-class struggles demanded an adjustment of wages to the cost of living, whose rise was only partially recorded by the indices calculated by the Central Statistical Office, which did not take into account the prices on the black market. This was a deep-rooted problem and, in fact, it sparked a debate on salaries which, from the post-war period until recent years, would tend to set the working class against the impoverished middle class and the "infantry-peasants." Despite the wage certainty (mostly based on production), the workers' living conditions generally grew worse in the years of the conflict, with a decrease in the national average of real wages of about a third.^[23]

It is true that the data supplied by the official statistics of the Ministry of the National Economy show a halving of industrial strikes, and a reduction in their average duration (-70 percent) as well as in the number of strikers (-40 percent) compared to the pre-war period. And yet, bearing in mind the concrete forms assumed by the industrial mobilization and the progressive expansion of the war zone to the northern regions, it should be stressed that for each year of the war there was an average of 450 strikes and approximately 150,000 strikers, with a total of over 780,000 working days lost.^[24]

This evidence of widespread discontent in the "other army", which had difficulty accepting the political or trade union projects capable of unifying the divided views of the protests which punctuated the kingdom. However, the margins of manoeuvre were scant or non-existent; socialists, anarchists, revolutionary leaders as well as reformists were silenced or sent to the front.

At the same time, by the third year of the conflict, the wartime propaganda was directed at all sectors of society; finally equipped with men, women, tools, and adequate financial resources, it had become more refined. The promise to give land to the peasants in the case of victory contributed to delaying the hopes of general redemption and the millenarian utopias that were as widespread at the front as in the heart of the country itself.^[25]

The defeat at Caporetto in autumn 1917 made the Italian war defensive; it highlighted the gap between large sectors of the population and military intervention, and forced the country to adopt a more committed total mobilization. Of prime importance was the start of a more intensive rationing mobilization, which was definitively moralized. It changed from merely problem for the police to a matter of general and primary concern for the nation at war. Caporetto also resulted in a reorganization of the highest political and military echelons, of the forms of propaganda, and the rationalization of the forms of repression and social control. All these factors contributed to drastically decreasing the anti-war demonstrations for several months, at least until late spring 1918. At that time, protests reappeared in the markets, there were strikes in the war industries, unrest among the white-collar middle class, and peasant mobilizations.^[26] These places and subjects of the social conflict - with the armistice, the slow return of the veterans and the rapid, and disorderly, demobilization of the economy and trade - would form the backbone of the most intense post-war struggles.

Conclusion

From the point of view of the history of social conflict, and in particular of peasant struggles, the wartime period cannot, therefore, be considered a parenthesis, bearing in mind that with peace "the course of the unrest resumed exactly where it had been interrupted by the war."^[27] Rather, it should be noted that in the years of the great conflict, particularly 1917-1920, a transformation in the forms of language and the goals of the protests took place. Also of great significance was the change in the specific importance of the actors and above all the actresses, extras and protagonists of these forms of participation in public life. This meant the involvement in the life of the nation of social sectors otherwise placed on the margins of power, of its centres and its local bodies, and also of the control of the squares and public spaces. The presence and, especially, the threat of riots were an integral part of the brief history of the Kingdom of Italy, with the typical, lingering features of the popular uprisings of the *ancien régime*, whose repertoires were renewed with the war and, above all, in the post-war period. The war years had a profound impact on the history of the forms of protest and social mobilization which, by the end of the conflict, would have acquired unprecedented and more typically 20th century features.^[28]

At the same time, although the Great War of the Italians had forced the inclusion of the whole population in the national life, the country emerged torn apart.^[29] As an acute, not neutral, observer would write in 1921: "the national war, the first war, that is, in which all the Italian people had fought in a single army, had dissolved that unity which the Risorgimento had artificially created through the rigid discipline of a centralizing administration." Conducted "in the atmosphere of a civil war", the war had divided "the Italian people down to their deepest provincial and municipal roots", breaking "the light crust of uniformity which so-called Unity had created."^[30]

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Notes

1. ↑ Cf. The Cambridge History of the First World War, a trilogy edited by [Jay Winter](#): at the moment, the first volume has been published in French: Becker, Annette (ed.): *La Première guerre mondiale*, vol. I, *Combats*, Paris 2013 (see in particular the chapter by Labanca, Nicola: *Le front italo-autrichien*, pp. 287-318); the second and third volumes will deal, respectively, with *états* and *Sociétés*.
2. ↑ Cf. Procacci, Giovanna: *L'Italia nella Grande Guerra*, in Sabbatucci, Giovanni / Vidotto, Vittorio (eds): *Storia d'Italia*, 4. *Guerre e fascismo 1914-1943*, Rome-Bari 1997, pp. 3-99. Regarding the Community of August cf. Leed, Eric J.: *No Man's Land. Combat & Identity in World War I*, Cambridge 1979.
3. ↑ Cf. Vigezzi, Brunello, *Un'inchiesta sullo stato dello spirito pubblico alla vigilia dell'intervento*, in Id., *Da Giolitti a Salandra*, Florence 1969, pp. 321-322; De Felice, Renzo, *Ordine pubblico e orientamenti delle masse popolari italiane nella prima metà del 1917*, *Rivista storica del socialismo*, 6/20 (1963), pp. 467-504; Procacci, Giovanna, *L'Italia cit.*, p. 17; Ead., "Condizioni dello spirito pubblico del Regno": i rapporti del Direttore generale di Pubblica Sicurezza nel 1918, in Giovannini Paolo (ed), *Di fronte alla grande guerra. Militari e civili tra coercizione e rivolta*, Ancona 1997, pp. 177-247.
4. ↑ One of these was the working-class quarter, Oltretorrente, of Parma, subsequently well-known for its anti-Fascist barricades in 1922, which in 1915 sided with the pro-interventionist revolutionary syndicalists and clashed violently with the supporters of neutrality. Cf. Becchetti, Margherita, *Fuochi oltre il ponte. Rivolte e conflitti sociali a Parma (1868-1915)*, Rome 2013, pp. 254-269.
5. ↑ Cf. Menozzi, Daniele, *Chiesa, guerra, pace nel Novecento*, Bologna 2008, pp. 15-47.
6. ↑ Cf. Conti, Fulvio, *Storia della massoneria italiana. Dal Risorgimento al fascismo*, Bologna 2003; Id. (ed), *La massoneria italiana da Giolitti a Mussolini*, Rome 2014.
7. ↑ Cf. Latini, Carlotta, *I pieni poteri in Italia durante la prima guerra mondiale*, in Menozzi, Daniele / Procacci, Giovanna / Soldani, Simonetta (eds), *Un paese in guerra. La mobilitazione civile in Italia (1914-1918)*, Milan 2010, pp. 87-103; Procacci, Giovanna, *Warfare-welfare. Intervento dello Stato e diritti dei cittadini (1914-18)*, Rome 2013, pp. 166-174.
8. ↑ Cf. Ead., *L'Italia cit.*, p. 59.

9. † Cf. Rochat, Giorgio, *L'Italia nella prima guerra mondiale. Problemi di interpretazione e prospettive di ricerca*, Milan 1976, pp. 7-19.
10. † Cf. Tomassini, Luigi, *Lavoro e guerra. La "Mobilitazione Industriale" italiana 1915-1918*, Naples 1997.
11. † Cf. Soldani, Simonetta (ed), *Donne senza pace. Esperienze di lavoro, di lotta, di vita tra guerra e dopoguerra (1915-1920)*, in *Annali dell'Istituto "Alcide Cervi" 13* (1991), pp. 13-147.
12. † Cf. Dentoni, Maria Concetta, *Annona e consenso in Italia 1914-1919*, Milan 1995; Bianchi, Roberto, Bocci-Bocci. *I tumulti annonari nella Toscana del 1919*, Florence 2001, cap. 1: *La questione annonaria tra guerra e smobilitazione*.
13. † Cf. Fava, Andrea, *Assistenza e propaganda nel regime di guerra (1915-1918)*, in Isnenghi, Mario (ed), *Operai e contadini nella Grande guerra*, Bologna 1982, pp. 174-212.
14. † Cf. ACS, DGPS, AGR, 1915, bb. per provincia; ivi, *Prima guerra mondiale (Conflagrazione europea)*, b. 68.
15. † Cf. Ambrosoli, Luigi, *Né aderire né sabotare 1915-1918*, Milan 1961; Canale Cama, Francesca, *Alla prova del fuoco. Socialisti italiani e francesi di fronte alla prima guerra mondiale*, Naples 2007; Menozzi, Daniele, *Chiesa e città*, in Id. / Procacci, Giovanna / Soldani, Simonetta (eds), *Un paese cit.*, pp. 269-274.
16. † Cf. Procacci, Giovanna, *Dalla rassegnazione alla rivolta. Mentalità e comportamenti popolari nella Grande Guerra*, Rome 1999, p. 56-58.
17. † Cf. Del Negro, Piero, *Le leve militari dall'Unità alla Grande guerra*, in *L'esercito italiano dall'Unità alla Grande guerra (1861- 1918)*, Rome 1980, pp. 431-465. *The departure of the boys of 1899 sparked riots, such as the one which occurred in central Tuscany: cf. Bianchi, Roberto, Donne di Greve. Primo maggio 1917 nel Chianti: donne in rivolta contro la guerra*, Rome 2005.
18. † Regarding the use of this category for the XX century cf. Thompson, Edward P., *Customs in Common*, London 1991, pp. 259-351; Bianchi, Roberto, *Voies de la protestation en Italie. Les transformations de la révolte entre XIXe et XXe siècle*, *European Review of History* 20/6, 2013.
19. † Cf. Procacci, Giovanna, *Dalla rassegnazione alla rivolta cit.*
20. † Cf. Soldani, Simonetta, *Donne senza pace cit.*, pp. 31-35.
21. † Cf. Serpieri, Arrigo, *La guerra e le classi rurali italiane*, Bari 1930, pp. 265-284; Procacci, Giovanna, *Dalla rassegnazione alla rivolta cit.*, pp. 220-232; Bianchi, Roberto, *Il fronte interno alla prova. Le opposizioni alla guerra a Prato e in Toscana*, in Menozzi, Daniele / Procacci, Giovanna / Soldani, Simonetta (eds), *Un paese cit.*, pp. 105-132.
22. † Cf. Spriano, Paolo, *Storia di Torino operaia e socialista. Da De Amicis a Gramsci*, Turin 1972, pp. 416 ss.; Carcano, Giancarlo, *Cronaca di una rivolta. I moti torinesi del '17*, Turin 1977.
23. † Cf. Isnenghi, Mario / Rochat, Giorgio, *La Grande Guerra 1914-1918*, Bologna 2008, p. 304. Regarding the debate about salaries cf. at least Melograni, Piero, *Storia politica della grande guerra 1915-1918*, Bari 1969; Camarda, Alessandro / Peli, Santo, *L'altro esercito. La classe operaia durante la prima guerra mondiale*, Milan 1980; Bettini, Maurizio, *Orari di lavoro nell'industria italiana, 1907-1923*, in Giovannini, Paolo (ed), *Di fronte alla grande guerra cit.*, pp. 11-59.
24. † Cf. Ministero dell'Economia Nazionale, *I conflitti del lavoro in Italia nel decennio 1914-1923*, Rome 1924, p. 315; «*Annuario Statistico Italiano*», seconda serie, vol. VII, 1916, p. 297; *ibid.*, vol. VIII, 1919-1921, p. 395; Tomassini, Luigi, *Lavoro e guerra cit.*, p. 184; Di Girolamo, Piero, *Produrre per combattere. Operai e mobilitazione industriale a Milano durante la Grande Guerra 1915-1918*, Naples 2002, pp. 176 ff.; Labanca, Nicola, *Zona di guerra*, in Isnenghi, Mario / Ceschin, Daniele (eds), *Gli italiani in guerra. Conflitti, identità. Memorie dal Risorgimento ai nostri giorni*, vol. III, *La Grande Guerra: dall'Intervento alla «vittoria mutilata»*, vol. 2, Turin 2008, pp. 606-619.

25. ↑ Spread in 1916, the slogan of land to the peasants was widely disseminated in the last year of the war. Cf. Lorenzoni, Giovanni, *Inchiesta sulla piccola proprietà coltivatrice formatasi nel dopoguerra*, XV Relazione finale. *L'ascesa del contadino italiano nel dopoguerra*, Rome 1938, p. 202; Serpieri, Arrigo, *La guerra cit.*, p. 83. Simona, Colarizi, *Dopoguerra e fascismo in Puglia (1919-1926)*, Bari 1971, p. 12, attributed the "formula" to Salandra.
26. ↑ Cf. Dentoni, Maria Concetta, *Annona e consenso cit.*, p. 85; Procacci, Giovanna, "Condizioni dello spirito pubblico del Regno" cit., p. 188.
27. ↑ Vivarelli, Roberto, *Storia delle origini del fascismo. L'Italia dalla grande guerra alla marcia su Roma*, Bologna 1991, vol. 2, p. 738; but cf. *ivi*, p. 101.
28. ↑ Cf. Bianchi, Roberto, *Pace, pane, terra. Il 1919 in Italia*, Rome 2006.
29. ↑ Cf. Gibelli, Antonio, *La Grande guerra degli italiani 1915-1918*, Milan 1998, p. 11; Procacci, Giovanna, *Dalla rassegnazione alla rivolta cit.*, p. VII; Fabbri, Fabio, *Le origini della guerra civile. L'Italia dalla Grande Guerra al fascismo, 1918-1921*, Turin 2009.
30. ↑ Missiroli, Mario, *Il fascismo e la crisi italiana*, in De Felice Renzo (ed), *Il fascismo e i partiti politici italiani (1921-1923)*. *Testimonianze del 1921-1923*, Bologna 1966, p. 299.

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