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The State and Social Control in Italy During the First World War.

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The history of the First World War has not received much attention in Italy until recently. The war has often been considered a parenthesis, or, in the best of cases, the crucible of events which followed - that is, the disturbances of the post-war period and fascism. Moreover, for a long time, historiography did not detach itself from the patriotic interpretations of the war (which were fostered by fascism) and consequently emphasised only the democratic and Risorgimento aspects of the war (i.e. a war to fight the Austrians, for the liberation of oppressed minorities, etc.). This war was then compared with the Second World War of the fascists. Approaches changed only in the 1960's, when the first critical works appeared, concentrating on cultural, political, and economic aspects of the first war in Italy, but it is only very recently that a few studies have been made of social developments and, in particular, of the composition of the working class, of working conditions in the factories, and of the social policies of the state. It is on this last theme - on the ways in which the state used its power, on the measures of social control adopted both to prevent and to repress dissent, and to achieve consensus - that I shall concentrate in this paper. I want to try to describe the way in which, during the war, traditional authoritarianism was combined with a new way of exercising power - typical of the phase of organised capitalism - and how the old and the new kinds of authoritarianism gave rise to policies which in Italy assumed marked repressive and restrictive features.

Before looking at these aspects of state intervention, I want briefly to remind people of the context. At the

outbreak of the war Italy was notably backward economically in respect of the other principal western countries. The war thus provoked a frenetic acceleration in her economic development; changes which had occurred elsewhere across several decades took place in Italy in a confused and chaotic fashion in the course of just three years. In social terms this expansion provoked lacerations far deeper than in other western states. Moreover, in the months before the outbreak of war there had been widespread working class agitation, and, in June of 1914, even an attempt at popular insurrection (Red Week) which has effected large areas of central Italy. The political situation was equally precarious. There was no patriotic 'convergence' of opinion in Italy as in other countries. The liberal and Giolittian majority, which had governed since the first years of the century and even attempted a cautious reformism, was against the war. It had been replaced shortly before the start of the conflict by the conservative right, headed by Antonio Salandra, the main representative of the old landowning groups. This current, which was favourable to Italian entry in the war, was supported during the months of neutrality by the nationalist right, spokesmen of the more powerful industrial and financial groups, and by certain elements of the democratic and revolutionary left (e.g. Mussolini). But the socialist party and the unions did not join the patriotic coalition, unlike in other belligerent countries. And even the catholics, while not refusing to support the government, expressed certain reservations about the war determined by their religious beliefs. The social and political situation which the government had to contend with

was far more complex and unstable than in countries like Britain, France, or Germany.

To achieve social peace a dual strategy was employed in Italy. On the one hand traditional methods of repression were used, such as the limitation of various rights (political freedom, right of association, freedom of the press, etc.), a hardening of penalties and the entrustment of extensive civil powers to the military authorities. On the other an attempt was made to institutionalise class conflict through the abolition of the right to strike and the imposition of mechanisms of arbitration. And even the Italian government attempted welfare provisions, but only on a very limited scale and very late on. These measures - of which those concerning the working class were both innovatory with respect to previous experience and anticipatory of the future - were used conjointly during the course of the war. However, it is possible to identify two fairly clearly defined phases, which in fact correspond to the general progress of the war. In the first phase, which runs from entry in the war (24 May 1915) to the end of 1916, repressive measures prevailed, while in the second, which takes in the last two years of the war (but which can itself be divided; before and after Caporetto, 24 October 1917) such measures were combined with policies of conciliation in the industrial arena and with other efforts to gain consensus for the war.

The first phase is characterised by the implementation of Salandra's political project. This was based on the premise of a short and victorious war which would re-establish the domination of his own conservative political line.

His objectives were the strengthening of the executive at the expense of the legislature, the political isolation of the socialists through the use of widespread repression, the defeat of the Giolittians, and the re-establishment of public order and the controlling of social conflicts by harsh measures which relied on the decisive intervention of the army. It was, in short, the authoritarian political line which the right had attempted to follow at the end of the nineteeth century, and which had been defeated by the more democratic politics of Giolitti.

The first step in Salandra's plan was constituted by the passage, at the moment of entry into the war, of a law which placed all legislative authority in matters of defence, public order, and the economy, in the hands of the executive. In point of fact this increase in powers was in part an inevitable consequence of the need for rapid decisions; it also reflected the increase in the functions of the state. One must also remember that, even in the past, the executive had had a dominant role in Italy (a classic 'second comer') where the parliamentary system was certainly not as strong as in Britain and France. But the war accentuated these characteristics to such a degree as to create a new system of political mediation between the executive and the various interest groups - a new system from which parliament was effectively excluded. The Italian parliament exercised almost no control of government activity during the war, and was called increasingly infrequently, equalling the unenviable record of Austria and Turkey.

Using its powers, the government passed a series of

regulations based on the legislation of the state of seige applied at the end of the nineteenth century, which had the effect of restricting - indeed virtually abolishing - all civil liberties, including the right of opinion. At the same time the powers of the military were expanded; as we shall see, all factories of a certain size were placed under military control. Moreover the great majority of offences envisaged were to be dealt with under military legislation and by military magistrates. The military also had absolute power in the so-called war zones, which at first were just border areas and a part of the east coast, but which in the course of the conflict - often not for military reasons, but for motives of public order - came to include most of northern Italy, where Italian industry was concentrated. In the war zones the legislation was extremely severe; besides the restrictions which were common to the rest of the country, freedom of correspondence was abolished as was freedom of movement and the right to strike (even in some factories which were not controlled by Industrial Mobilisation). The number of offences punishable by the military legal code was also increased.

Even in the areas which were not war zones this exceptional legislation was applied with extreme harshness. Judges - whether military or civilian - were continually encouraged by their superiors (Supreme Command, War Ministry, Ministry of Justice) to give exemplary sentences.

This repressive action was so apparent that it seemed to contemporaries (including certain legal experts) totally out of proportion to the real needs of the situation and often motivated by a desire to persecute. This was the

favourite method adopted by the Italian government in order to keep the peace, and, as has been said, it was the dominant method during the first phase of the war. In the hope of a rapid end to the conflict, the government was more concerned to prevent demonstrations of discontent than it was to increase the level of consensus for its policies. Such a consensus, in the opinion of Salandra, would come with victory.

The same decisions are also evident in the examination of the way the state attempted to maintain social control in the sphere of industry. This was intially based on new disciplinary regulations and only in a subsequent phase were conciliatory measures adopted. The intervention of the state in this area was quite novel and is of particular interest.

As in other belligerent countries, in Italy the state created a special organisation for regulating industrial production and controlling industrial disputes through arbitration bodies. Immediately on entry to the war an undersecretariat for Arms and Munitions was created, initially part of the War Ministry, successively an independent ministry, under the control of a military figure, General Alfredo Dallolio. Labour problems were entrusted to a section called Industrial Mobilisation (Mobilitazione industriale) which was formed by a central committee and by many regional committees, in which specific commissions, composed of army officers, industrialists, and representatives of the workers (usually picked by the industrialists), had the job of dealing with disputes which had arisen within the factories under their control. The number of these factories increased constantly; at the end

of the war the Industrial Mobilisation controlled all factories above a certain size in all industrial sectors (1976, with 903,000 workers). In the factories placed under M.I. work was obligatory, in the sense that workers could not strike, neither could they leave their place of work for any reason (moving to another job, health or family reasons, etc.) without the prior permission of a regional committee, which rarely granted it if the industrialist was not in agreement. With respect to other countries, where unions succeeded in gaining a certain amount of flexibility in this area, the situation in Italy was more rigid; abandoning the workplace was made the equivalent of desertion. In cases of disability for reasons of health, the normal solution was to send the worker to the front.

Discipline in the factories controlled by Industrial Mobilisation was left entirely in the hands of the military. Workers, including women and children, were subject to the military penal code and to military courts. In Italy, unlike other countries, discipline was determined directly by army officers inside the factory, who decided on punishments, and, in the more serious cases, on whether a worker should be sent to the military court or directly to the front. To determine the gravity of the offences, the hierarchy within the factory was made the equivalent of military hierarchy; thus even a minor act of indiscipline towards a superior (for example a foreman) could be punished with great severity. Penalties (fines, imprisonment, consignment to the trenches) were almost always extremely severe in relation to the offence, even in cases where the offence was not the direct responsibility of the worker (for example, low

productivity because of the poor quality of raw materials, late entry in the factory because of the lack of public transport or because of the endless queues outside the bread-shop, etc.). Since officers supervising the factories enjoyed great freedom of action, the severity of repression differed from place to place, but even within the same factory offences were punished differently at different times. The totally arbitrary nature of repression probably made life even harder from a psychological point of view.

Conciliation was in the hands of regional committees. An attempt would be made to reach an agreement between the parties and then, in the event of failure, a formal decision would be taken by the regional committee. Appeals could be made to the Central Committee. Conflicts resolved by local bodies passed from 122 in 1915-16 to 1284 in 1917-18. These conflicts concerned almost exclusively the level and structure of wages and only marginally problems of hours or of discipline. Wages was in fact the one area where employers, given their huge profits, were prepared to make concessions. It was also in this area that the unions made their greatest efforts.

This forced labour in factories normally occurred in conditions far worse than in other major West-European countries. Common features were long hours with compulsory overtime (reaching 16-18 hours a day), low wages, usually based on piece work and - despite increases - always below the level of the rise in the cost of living. Conditions were sometimes so bad that in certain cases soldiers sent to work in the factories requested to be sent to the front.

These extremely harsh working conditions, to be found

in almost the whole of Italian industry, resulted from the principal objective of the extraordinary rapid and haphazard industrial growth, which was to reach maximum productivity through intensive exploitation of the work force. This policy, which did no more than intensify the traditional approach of Italian industry (a second comer) was intensified and encouraged by the heavy demand for products required by the state. The Italian state favoured private industry more than was the case elsewhere; besides providing raw materials at a political price, and, at the same time, placing no controls on the prices of products, the administration never imposed either financial or technical controls on industry, nor did it introduce special taxation on profits as other countries did. The public deficit was met mainly through inflation. Industry was also favoured by the social policy of the state: the control of labour through military discipline, the forbidding of strikes and of resignations, a large number of military personnel sent to the factories and paid much less than the average wage, the freedom to impose obligatory overtime and ever increasing piece rates (it was to these, rather than to rationalisation, that Italy owed increased productivity). This situation makes obvious the extent of the power of economic groups within Italy and their influence in controlling government policy. A confirmation of that influence is provided by the fact that many industrialists were employed directly in government, some becoming ministers.

The enormous industrial profits (which provoked a parliamentary enquiry after the war) did not make industria-

lists any more disposed to a policy of concessions. The only area in which they did not strongly oppose pressures from workers or government was that of wages; increases were in any case cancelled by inflation and could be recouped through an increase in piece rates. But as far as the organisation of work was concecerned, industrialists were never prepared to accept interference. Obviously the Industrial Mobilisation (IM) imposed a restriction of liberties, but certainly less than in France, Great Britain, or Germany. At first industrialists had mistrusted the organisation of production by the state, but soon they appreciated the advantages and asked insistently to be placed under the IM. However, in the last phase of the war, there were some disagreements in relation to the IM, mainly linked to state interference in the relationship between industry and the banks, and to certain controls on production and working conditions which the government announced its intention of effecting. It is highly likely that the behaviour of the industrialists influenced the government decision to demobilise the IM very quickly in the first months after the war.

The extent of the power of the industrialists was also a result of the weakness of the unions during the war. Italian unions had much less power than in Britain, France, or Germany, where unions had openly decided for national solidarity. In countries where unions gave their support to the war effort, governments - and sometimes industrialists - were very careful not to alienate such an important ally. In Italy, a part of the union organisation (that linked to the extreme left, and to the anarchists - the strongly

antimilitarist <u>Unione sindacale italiana</u>) was immediately hit by repressive action and virtually disbanded. Moderate socialist unions, and in particular the metalworkers' union (FIOM), agreed to collaborate with the IM despite their declared opposition to the war. But their entry into the Central Committee of the IM occurred only in the final phase of the conflict and their bargaining power was extremely limited. Only a part of the industrialists (in particular those in engineering in Turin) were ready to talk with the unions. Iron and steel makers, and the new war industries, were in the main indifferent to the efforts which even the government representatives on the IM made to establish a policy of collaboration and dialogue.

These efforts became more persistent from 1917 on, in line with the social policy of the state determined by the second phase of the war. As the illusion of the short war disappeared at the end of 1916, Italy faced the urgent question of how to meet a war of attrition. At this point the question of consensus, ignored in the first phase of the war, became paramount because of the increasingly dramatic situation within the country.

The exhaustion of the population, which in the first part of the war had been relatively calm and resigned, became increasingly obvious from the end of 1916. In rural areas of most regions, groups formed mainly by women protested - often violently - against the low subsidies they received, requisitions, the refusal of leave to men, and generally against the war. Peasant demonstrations often spread towards the towns where they joined with similar urban demonstrations, increasingly frequent from the spring

of 1917, and which aimed at the cost of living, the lack of bread, the absence of public services, etc. Sometimes the urban demonstrations sprang from the protests of workers who, despite the repressive legislation, decided to strike. In fact, from the beginning of 1917 and with particular intensity in the spring and summer of that year, there were protest strikes which, beginning usually for economic reasons, became solidarity strikes against unjust treatment of workmates, and often developed into open demonstrations against the war. In 1917 the short strikes of small dimensions, sometimes by a single workshop, were accompanied by long, widespread, and politically tense agitations in the main industrial centres. The insurrection in Turin in August 1917 is well known; but there were other violent agitations, probably linked to it, in Liguria, Milan, and Naples. Recent studies have sought to indentify the main protagonists in the strikes. Certainly women were prominent, in as far as they risked less severe penalties. Male workers, in particular those who risked being sent to the front, usually used other means of protest, such as obstructionism. Even so, male participation in strikes tended to increase with the progress of the war and was most notable in 1917. Among the various categories of worker there was considerable solidarity, probably due to the fact that the rigid discipline of the factory hit them all. It is true that there were tensions between the male and female workers, but, as far as we know at the moment, there was not the conflict between skilled and unskilled as there was, for example, in Britain.

Faced by an increase in popular protest and disturban-

ces in the factories, the Italian government also attempted a policy of collaboration. In favour of moderate policies was V.E. Orlando, Interior Minister in the new government of national unity (Salandra had fallen in June 1916). Orlando was an open-minded liberal, ready to reach agreement with the socialist opposition and with the unions. The head of IM, General Alfredo Dallolio, took the same position. Referring to policies already followed by the allies, he reminded the regional committees of IM (which were notoriously independent of the Central Committee) several times in 1917 of the need for conciliation. ('Better to give way than to be compelled to give in', he wrote in his circulars, repeating a famous phrase of Giolitti). But in Italy, as in Germany, both political and military spheres were split down the middle. The moderate line was opposed by the supreme commander, Cadorna, together with the right wing coalition allied with Salandra, and the left wing interventionists (Mussolini and a number of democratic interventionists), who, either in good faith or bad, considered that lack of military success was the result of unpatriotic activity of the socialists, and therefore pressured the government to apply a more extensive repressive legislation.

The moderate line held sway for the best part of 1917. As has been seen, conciliatory action within the factories increased notably, even if strikes were not always avoided. Because employers often waited a long time before acting on arbitration judgments, or because these judgments were inferior to the demands of the workers, strikes could not be prevented. It is also clear that when demonstrations became massive the authorities preferred to avoid harsh interven-

tion, except where insurrection seemed possible, in order not to worsen the situation. In other words the policy was to repress and punish the individual, but to react against collective action only if absolutely necessary. In addition, in 1917 a bill was passed which provided compulsory insurance for workers in the IM, as well as other measures designed to improve safety and health regulations in factories. These provisions, although very much more limited in scope than in other belligerent countries, were nonetheless an indication of the changed attitudes of government circles in respect of the workers' conditions and trade union demands.

But, in the autumn of 1917, after the polemics following the insurrection in Turin and, above all, after the defeat of Caporetto, the extremist hard line emerged once again as the prevalent policy. Faced by grave social and military disorder and fearful of the events in Russia (Caporetto occurred only a few days before the October Revolution), the ruling class reformed around intransigent positions. Although it was clear immediately that the military defeat had been due to errors on the part of the chief of staff, the government, in order to engender some patriotic cohesion in the country, allowed people to believe that there had been a 'military strike' organised by unpatriotic and 'defeatist' forces - the so-called 'internal enemy'. At this point, a series of government decrees made the repression of dissent much easier, so that even ordinary citizens who had expressed reserves about the outcome of the war in a bar or café could be arrested. Above all the repression hit the socialist party. The principal leaders

were arrested and imprisoned and a large number of local political organisations dissolved. In factories spies infiltrated the workers and heavy penalties were applied to those suspected of unpatriotic activity.

However, if every facet of political opposition was repressed, the conciliatory activity of the MI, which was concerned with economic conflicts, was at the same time stepped up. Thus, while strikes decreased, the number of disputes solved by arbitration increased, and the power of the unions also grew. The objective of the governing class was, as everywhere, that of deepening the split between political and economic aspects of the struggles, thus cutting the ground from under the feet of the socialist party. In fact, after Caporetto, measures were introduced which favoured soldiers and their families as well as the rural population.

A final aspect of the new policy of consensus was the increased attention given to propaganda - undervalued while the illusion of a short war persisted. Patriotic propaganda had been left to private associations, both assistential and political (among the latter, the 'fasci'). It was only after the defeat at Caporetto and the Austrian invasion that the Italian government began to organise an extensive propaganda campaign. In the last years of the war, thousands of patriotic leaflets and newspapers were distributed in the country and in the trenches. These preached the defence of the 'soil of the Fatherland' (the war had now become a defensive battle) and propagated Wilsonian principles. Moreover, in order to give 'social content' (as they put it) to the war, promises of social reform were made, in

particular that of giving land to the soldiers, the majority of whom were peasants. Propaganda aimed at factory workers was more limited, partly because attempts at holding patriotic meetings in the factories were met with derision, provoked protest strikes, and generally proved counterproductive. Conciliation was here entrusted to the policy of increasing wages, and to the activities of the unions.

To conclude, it would seem that the Italian state faced up to the problem of social control with a policy in which the repressive component was much stronger than the conciliatory element. To a drastic limitation of civil liberties was added particularly harsh legislation in respect of the 'militarised' workers. Half way through the war, the policy of simple repression was flanked by a new policy of social pacification which envisaged activities of conciliation, welfare and propaganda, but at the same time repression was never excluded. Conciliatory action was slow in establishing itself because industrialists were simply not ready to follow a policy of concessions and dialogue with the unions. The Italian government had neither the force nor the will to impose an organic plan of state intervention, and acted through sectorial measures, lacking any overview and thus favouring, and being conditioned by, individual interest groups. It was both the weakness of central government and the increase in the responsibilities thrust upon it, which resulted in the centres of decision making moving outside the normal institutional context and in the loss of political weight of the instruments and institutions of democratic mediation.

This weakness of the state had dramatic consequences in

the post-war. With the end of the situation which had justified special legislation, that legislation was rapidly dismantled. Yet the social conflicts had not been eliminated; rather, having become more bitter during the war despite the truce enforced from above, they exploded with renewed violence. Once again the solution was found in authoritarianism. Almost immediately after the March on Rome, fascism showed it has learned the lessons of the war. From 1923 on, and above all after 1925-26, a series of laws reproduced the strategies derived from the social and political experience of the war - that is, an increase in the power of the executive at the expense of parliament, the abolition of rights of association, of the press, of opinion, and of the right to strike. With fascism, the principle of state control in mediation in labour conflicts is again asserted; but the lack of any real union organisation rendered the functioning of even these mechanisms only formal, more propaganda than reality.

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