

Food and Nutrition (Italy)

By [Maria Concetta Dentoni](#)

Summary

During the First World War, the Italian government was unable to establish a realistic plan to feed the army and the civilian population; consequently there was a significant reduction in the consumption of even basic necessities, with hardships above all for the poorest. The inevitable protests and the risk that they could also involve the army, prompted the government to seek social consensus, especially in resolving the food issue, favouring, in this way, the emergence of a myth of future well-being based on some sort of revived “moral economy”.

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The Policy of Procurement and Consumption

A common mistake in all the countries involved in the First World War was to assume that the war would not last long: no government, therefore, concerned itself with developing realistic plans to feed the army and the civilian population. In the short term, this led to having to reduce the consumption of even basic necessities.¹

For [Italy](#), the reductions were particularly painful. “Sober” by necessity, rather than by nature, as the liberal theorists were wont to repeat, the majority of the population based its diet mainly on carbohydrates – bread, pasta, polenta – in the years preceding the war, or, at most, on vegetable proteins provided by pulses, consuming just fourteen to fifteen kilograms of meat, on average, per person, per year.

Even the slight dietary improvement in the first decade of the 20th century, compared to the period immediately following the unification of Italy (1861) and especially the years of the agricultural crisis (1887-1897), is to be understood in the sense that the almost generalized

use of corn bread or other minor cereals, had been followed by a more widespread use of wheat bread, confirmed by the surge in imports, which more than doubled between 1911 and 1913, compared to the last four years of the 19th century.²

Initially neglected, especially in the period of [neutrality](#), then tackled without a general plan of action, the problem of supplies, especially wheat, the most important item for the people's diet, had, as early as 1914, accumulated virtually irremediable delays.³

This situation was partly due to objective issues, namely the loss of the usual channels of supply from [Russia](#) and [Romania](#) after the closure of the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles, but also to the poor management of the problem by the government of [Antonio Salandra \(1853-1931\)](#), with its uncertain policies. For example, concerning the question of the duty on foreign wheat, the government had driven the private sector to reduce and then abandon imports.⁴ These conditions, combined with the refusal to purchase from [America](#), considered too expensive, led, as early as December 1914, to the first wheat shortages and an increase in bread prices, with the risk of serious consequences for maintaining public order.

Following Italy's entry into the war, in May 1915, the national production of wheat, together with all the other agricultural products, suffered significant deficits, nor could it have been otherwise, considering the manpower shortage, as so many men had been called to arms, above all from the agricultural sector. The latter had provided the majority of the workers (the number of peasants at the front, out of a total of 4,200,000 men engaged in war operations, was higher than 2,500,000).⁵ The situation was further aggravated by the lack of work animals, which had also been requisitioned for the army, and by serious shortcomings, if not total absence, of imports of fertilizers and machinery.

The alarmed dispatches from local authorities, which reported the poor harvest of 1915⁶ and new price increases, forced the government to abandon its out-and-out defence of liberalism and accept the arguments of those responsible for procurement and consumption, by imposing the first price caps and controls.

Of course price controls alone could not have solved the country's food crisis, in fact often, as the liberal theorists pointed out, it was precisely price capping which could have caused the disappearance of goods and the growing phenomenon of the black market or, more seriously, the drastic reduction of production. To avoid these negative consequences a chain of controls, production targets, and prohibitions would have been triggered, which would have had their logical conclusion in the imposition of rationing coupons.

The heads of the bodies responsible for overseeing procurement and consumption responded to these arguments not only by indicating the deterrent function which the mere possibility of the imposition of price caps should have had on producers and traders, “shirkers” as they began to be called, but also by insisting that the blatant dishonesty of some prices could only be eliminated by price capping. Even admitting, finally, the lesser efficiency of the mechanisms triggered by state control compared to the rules of the free market, the higher priorities of public order would, in any case, have counselled their adoption. It was practically the repudiation of the modern economy and, conversely, the revival of the moral economy of the *ancien régime*, the one that required the lord, the “good lord”, to provide, in the event of disaster, for the essential needs of his subjects.⁷

The spokesmen of this need for distributive democracy, the directors of procurement and consumption, supervised by [Vincenzo Giuffrida \(1878-1940\)](#), became the theorists of new formulations such as the “associated economy”⁸ or state socialism, systems that, despite the differences in terminology, implied the old paternalism of pre-industrial societies, pursuing the same result, namely to guarantee consensus among subordinate and dominant social groups.

Reluctant to abandon liberalism, the Salandra government instead showed less uncertainty in adopting the measure which, focusing on quality, would have reduced the consumption of the most widespread product among the less affluent. In fact, in March 1915, two months before Italy’s entry into the war, there was a decree establishing the first rule for the mandatory production of a single type of wheat bread. It would be made with flour no longer sifted 70 percent, as was customary, but 80 percent, with the separation, therefore, of only the bran from the selected flour. In March 1916, the sifting was increased to 85 percent, which meant that the flour and middlings had to be mixed with a part of the bran and the fine bran, with a saving of wheat which, according to the experts, would be around 6.5 million quintals per year.

Another series of decrees, from March 1916 to February 1917, would then have set forth increasingly punitive rules – large loaves of bread, 700 grams, unsliced and stale bread to be sold and packaged with any type of substitute – rice flour, corn, chestnuts, lupines – with the desired result of making the consumption of the product, which by then was only bread in name, less enjoyable. It was black bread, barely digestible and particularly unpleasant because it was made of wet crumbs and was practically raw.

The imposition of “wartime bread” was the first example of the “fight against waste” inaugurated by the Italian [government](#) during the war. Other examples of this culture of frugality were the so-called “decrees against luxury goods”, issued between September 1916

and March 1917. They regarded the consumption of food and drink in catering businesses, the possibility of entering, at a late hour, after 10.30 PM, these premises and theatres, the production and purchase of more than fifty grams of confectionery and meat consumption, for which two consecutive days of abstinence were prescribed.

As regards to this last decree, it should be borne in mind that, in the period before the war, the consumption of meat – one of the lowest in Europe⁹ – was reserved, among the lower classes, for particular moments or, in any case, it concerned the least select cuts. In the cities, for example, where a higher consumption could be detected, meat was taken to mean offal, heads or legs of beef, leftovers from the butcher, or meat from animals which had been slaughtered because they were unable to work, if not decidedly ill.

With the war, as millions of Italians, now soldiers, passed from a basically vegetarian diet to a meat diet, things changed significantly, neither could it be expected that the physical and moral effort of the troops engaged at the front could be made with a diet which was low in proteins and fats. Initially, the daily meat ration of soldiers at the front was set at 375 grams, but later, in December 1916, also on the advice of some physiologists who felt that the diet of the Italian army was too “luxurious”, the ration was decreased to 250 grams, replaceable, twice a week, with dried salt cod. Only after [Caporetto](#) would this measure be reviewed.

Also in December 1916, together with meat, other components of the daily diet of the soldier at the front were reduced (bread, for example, passed from 750 to 600 grams), reducing the protein intake to 3,067 calories, from the initially almost 4,000, as against the 3,400 calories of the French rations and the 4,400 of the British. Only in June 1918, with the increases in rations of meat and bread (350 grams/700 grams), restoration of 50 grams of cheese and an increase of ten grams of sugar, would the diet of the Italian soldier reach 3,580 calories.

For the civilian population, together with the provisions about meat, the other decrees regarding confectionery, theatres, and the consumption of food and drink in catering businesses, having little effect on working-class habits, were designed to contain the luxury of the privileged few, and had more of an impact in terms of appearance than substance. Therefore, these provisions aimed – rather – at showing how the government was concerned with sharing out the inconvenience of war among all the citizens.

By the same token, from January 1917, not by chance, while popular protest against the war was becoming more marked, a campaign to spread the principles and techniques of “living well by eating little” among all the social classes, but especially among the working class, was begun with great fanfare by ladies, charitable organizations and, various associations.¹⁰

The Art of Living Well by Eating Little

Prepared by a special team of experts, the pamphlets of the “Office for the Propaganda of the Limitation of Consumption” explained, “for the women of the less educated classes”, that the necessary calories for an adult male should not exceed 3,000. Excess calories, especially if derived from meat, would give rise “to very harmful poisons”.¹¹ The myth of white bread, the “luxury” bread, was also debunked. It was described as less nutritious than ordinary bread, while the soft part of the bread and stale bread would have been more digestible than the crust and fresh bread.

The differences between olive oil and seed oil were defined as negligible, margarine was considered superior to butter, while it would have been better to replace meat broth with lard soup. The various committees of Civil Assistance and the National Women’s League for Limiting Consumption were also full of exhortations and advice which, addressed generally to every woman, became particularly insistent for peasant women. Firstly, it urged them not to waste government subsidies (as much as 0.60 / 0.70 cents a day), claiming to teach those who had always been accustomed to saving how best to use “leftovers” without throwing away anything.

Women

Women were the main protagonists of the popular protests against the war, which were very numerous as early as the end of 1916 and then increased during 1917.¹² It was the women who took to the streets against the high cost of living, and it was the women who threatened to block agricultural work to ask for an increase in subsidies or, more directly, the return of their men from the front and the end of the war.

Clearly this discontented and quarrelsome feminine universe referred to a readily identifiable social segment, namely the poorest people, and this applied both to the cities, and even more so, to the countryside. In fact, it had been the agricultural areas which had provided the greatest number of men for the front, leaving the farm work for women, the old, the young. Those who had the least guarantees, the day labourers and the small and very small landowners, had to contribute the highest number of recalls to arms in contrast to a much greater proportion of exemptions, for example, for sharecroppers.¹³

It was the agriculturally poor areas, those already tried by the emigration of the decades preceding the war, particularly Veneto and the South, which bore the brunt of the new lack of male workers, just as it was above all the small family farms that suffered immediately and more substantially because of the requisitioning of wheat, livestock, agricultural products in

general. While in the medium term, because of the transport crisis, and the delays and errors in the distribution, it was once again the self-supplying agricultural areas, particularly widespread in the South and in mountainous areas, which quite often even remained without supplies for sowing.¹⁴

This type of [rural life](#) does not coincide with the stereotype of the farmer who grows rich because of the war. Of course there was also a peasant stratum – the large tenant-farmers, middle-income and rich peasants who produced for the market – who, with the war, thanks to the continuous increase in prices, and the black market, were able to accumulate savings of some significance, which were subsequently invested in acquiring land. However, this was not the condition of the majority of those 2.5 million farmers – often owners of less than a hectare of land – who, called to arms, left their families with no resources other than women’s work and public assistance.

These resources both had difficulty operating precisely in the areas where they were most needed. In fact, apart from the scant government subsidies, in the countryside and in small towns, and particularly in the south, it was with difficulty that subsidized factories for producing military clothing were set up. They were the only alternative, however poorly paid, to unemployment in the winter months.

It was equally difficult, in the poor areas, to take advantage of the kindergartens and recreation centres, which had been created in the cities by ladies’ assistance organizations or civilian mobilization activists. Consequently, the women in those centres, if they did not receive any help from relatives or neighbours, had to give up work, even seasonal, and therefore their wages. The war brought hunger, fatigue and loneliness. How could one not fight for peace?

The New Food Policy

Despite the activism of all those in favour of saving, the supply conditions continued to be serious. The shortage of goods and the soaring prices¹⁵ led to recurring protests against the high cost of living, with the most serious episodes in Milan (May 1917) and, above all, in Turin (August 1917), where there were more than fifty deaths.

After the fall of the government led by [Paolo Boselli \(1838-1932\)](#) which, with its last act imposed general rationing, the new government of [Vittorio Emanuele Orlando \(1860-1952\)](#), also because of the upheaval caused by the defeat of Caporetto (24 October-9 November 1917), once again changed the men and the structures of the rationing machinery, entrusting its direction to the industrialist [Silvio Crespi \(1868-1944\)](#).

After having transformed the Commission for Procurement and Consumption into a huge trading office, Crespi introduced, in the management of public affairs, a breath of statist efficiency which, because of the shock of Caporetto, overcame the final resistance of the liberals.

Having defined price capping as useless and controls as counterproductive, he began constructing a complex legal system for food production which, along with technical issues – the monopoly of meat, the creation of consortia for milk, cheese, fruit and vegetables, [coffee](#), as well as frozen and canned fish – had its strong point above all in the “moralization” of the food issue. Having established new penalties against hoarders, and created a real food-control police, with the task of controlling all the shops and, in the case of illegal practices, decreeing their closure, Crespi turned the food issue from a serious problem of police control, as it had been up to that point, into the “patriotic centrepiece” of the economic policy of the nation at war.

After Caporetto, Crespi also decided to change the soldiers’ diet. In fact, he attributed the military defeat to a loss of morale caused by the army’s poor nutrition.¹⁶ He increased the meat ration to 350 grams per day. Consequently there was an increase in meat consumption of approximately 50 percent,¹⁷ compared to the pre-war period, with a significant decrease in the nation’s livestock, in particular in cattle.¹⁸

Even before Crespi had been appointed head of the Commission for Procurement and Consumption, it had been decided to purchase frozen meat from abroad, but this proved to be too expensive and, above all, it was difficult to conserve the meat due to the lack of efficient refrigeration systems. In November 1915, in fact, there were only 250 refrigeration plants in Italy, a quarter of them very small and in any case distributed in only forty-six of the sixty-nine provinces of the Kingdom, for the most part in Piedmont and Lombardy. The majority of them still used hand or horse-drawn vehicles, resulting in scant guarantees of hygiene and the preservation of the meat, often rejected even by the poorest lower classes because of its lack of quality.¹⁹

After Caporetto, with a decree of 18 April 1918, Crespi put an end to the free market of meat, by imposing a series of new controls and the mandatory closure of all butchers’ shops from Tuesday to Friday. At the same time he took up the government programme for importing frozen meat again. Having obtained more supplies from America, he proposed a plan to solve the problem at its roots by creating a truly national system of refrigeration. However, signed in November 1918, the decrees relating to the refrigeration industry came too late to be used during the war.

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Notes

1. For a quick overview of the subject cf. Hardach, Gerd: *La prima guerra mondiale 1914-1918* (Italian translation), Milan 1982. ↑
2. Wheat imports: 1896-1900/ 6.6 million quintals; 1900-1905/10.2 million quintals; 1911-1913/13.8 million quintals, cf. Porisini, Giorgio: *Produzione e produttività del frumento in Italia durante l'età giolittiana*, in: *Quaderni Storici* 14 (1970), pp. 512-513. ↑
3. Dentoni, Maria Concetta: *Annona e consenso in Italia 1914-1919*, Milan 1995, pp. 15-25. ↑
4. Bachi, Riccardo: *L'alimentazione e la politica annonaria in Italia*, Bari 1926, p. 152. ↑
5. According to the 1911 census, the Italian working population was distributed in the following percentages: Agriculture 55,4; Industry 25,5; Services 19,1, cf. Vitali, Ornello: *Aspetti dello sviluppo economico italiano alla luce della ricostruzione della popolazione attiva*, Rome 1970, pp. 328-331. ↑
6. Data regarding the national wheat production, millions of quintals: 1914: 46.153; 1915: 46.414; 1916: 48.044; 1917: 38.102; 1918: 49.885, cf. Bachi, Riccardo, *L'alimentazione 1926*, p. 123. ↑
7. Thompson, Edward P.: *L'economia morale delle classi popolari inglesi nel sec. XVIII*, in: *Società patrizia e cultura plebea*, Turin 1981, pp. 64-70. There is an ongoing debate about these concepts - welfare and warfare: cf. Conti, Fulvio/ Silei, Gianni: *Breve storia dello stato sociale*, Rome 1913. ↑
8. Cf. Giuffrida, Vittorio: *La corsa alla rovina* (a proposito della propaganda di Einaudi). Lettera a Filippo Turati, Milan 1920, pp. 3-15; Villari, Lucio: introduction to Rathenau, Walther, *L'economia nuova*, Turin 1976, pp. XX-XXI. ↑
9. In a study of 1914, the Commission Scientifique Interalliée du Ravitaillement (CSIR), created because of the war, noted that in Italy the percentage of calories derived from animal products was only 12 percent of the total, compared with values which were more than double, or nearly triple, in France, Germany and England (26.59 percent / 32.79 percent / 35.54 percent, respectively, cf. Zingali, Gaetano: *Alimentazione. Consumi. Bilanci di famiglia*, in *Trattato elementare di statistica*, IV-V, *Statistica economica italiana*, Milan 1933, pp. 9-20). ↑
10. Dentoni, Maria Concetta: "L'arte di viver bene mangiando poco". *Signore e contadine di fronte ai problemi limentari*, *Annali Cervi*, XIII, Bologna 1991, pp. 133-147. ↑
11. Unione Generale Insegnanti, Comitato Lombardo, *Collaborazione di medici e insegnanti alla Guerra*, fascicolo n. 2, p. 4, in *Archivio Centrale di Stato*, Roma, Presidenza Consiglio dei Ministri, busta 40, fascicolo 22; Santori, Saverio, *L'alimentazione razionale e la*

- disciplina dei consumi, Opuscolo n. 4 dell'Ufficio Propaganda Disciplina Consumi, Rome 1917. ↑
12. From December 1916 to April 1917 there were more than 450 protests by women, cf. De Felice, Renzo, *Ordine pubblico e orientamenti delle masse popolari italiane nella prima metà del 1917*, in: *Rivista storica del socialismo*, September-December 1963, pp.488 ff. ↑
 13. Tuscany, a prevalently share-cropping region, September 1918: exemptions for day labourers 49.1 per thousand, compared to the national average of 26. 7, cf. Soldani, Simonetta, *La grande guerra lontano dal fronte*, in *Storia d'Italia: le regioni dall'Unità a oggi. La Toscana*, Turin 1986, p. 355. ↑
 14. Cf. Ricci, Umberto, *La politica annonaria dell'Italia durante la guerra*, Bari 1939. ↑
 15. The increases of 50 percent, at the end of 1916, grew in the following years, Procacci, Giovanna: *L'Italia nella Grande Guerra*, in Sabbatucci, Giovanni, Vidotto, Vittorio (eds.): *in Storia d'Italia, Guerre e fascismo, vol.4*, Rome/Bari 1997, pp. 54 and 84. ↑
 16. Crespi, Silvio: *Alla difesa d'Italia in guerra e a Versailles*, Milan 1937, p. 16, not because of a "military strike" or, as Cadorna would have said, because of the soldiers' "cowardice", cf. Isnenghi Mario, Rochat, Giorgio: *La grande guerra 1914-1918*, Milan 2000, pp. 385-400. ↑
 17. Average availability of meat: 5,128,000 quintals during the years 1901-1910; 7,017,000 quintals in the four years of war, cf. ISTAT: *Sommario di statistiche storiche italiane*, Rome 1958, p. 226. ↑
 18. A census of April 1918 noted a decrease of 660,659 head of cattle compared to 1914, cf. Bachi, *L'alimentazione 1926*, p. 430. ↑
 19. Dentoni, Maria Concetta: *Refrigeration and the Italian meat crisis during the First World War*, in: Hietala, Marjatta, Vahtikari, Tania (eds.): *The Landscape of Food. The Food relationship Town and Country in Modern Times*, Helsinki 2003, pp.157-170. ↑

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External Links

- [Bachi, Riccardo: L'Italia economica nell' anno 1916, Città di Castello 1917 \(Internet Archive\) \(Book\)](#)
- [Comitato Ministre Gratuite per le famiglie bisognose dei soldati \(Ball State University\) \(Primary Source\)](#)

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