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Warfare to Welfare: World War I and the Development of Social Legislation in Italy

Pierluigi Pironti*

Abstract: »Krieg und Wohlfahrt: Der Erste Weltkrieg und die Entwicklung der Sozialgesetzgebung in Italien«. The First World War and the social policies supporting its victims played an essential role in the development of the Italian welfare state, its spectrum of benefits, and its organization. The relief programs for millions of soldiers and their families as well as disabled veterans and survivors led to a new dimension of state intervention in the field of social policy. The influence these programs have had on the successive reforms of the post-war period is clearly visible. An obvious example are the measures to increase the employment of disabled veterans, which were precursors of the 1919 compulsory insurance against unemployment and represented the first concrete state intervention in the labor market, meant to even out some of its flaws and help particularly disadvantaged groups of employees. Another wartime legislation that inspired post-war measures was the law supporting the Great War's widows and orphans. It paved the way for the first and most important social law of the Italian fascist regime of the 1920s: the Law on Protection of Mothers and Children. Additionally, the modernization of relief services during the war diminished the importance of traditional charitable and confessional assistance and resulted at the same time in a nationalization of social policy. This in turn brought about the bureaucratization and technocratization of welfare services throughout state departments and public agencies. The nexus between warfare and welfare, a relationship which can be identified in several belligerent countries after the Great War, was particularly evident in Italy. During the war, a pronounced process of "compensatory state building" gripped the country, with the consolidation of new social rights guaranteed by the state going hand in hand with the limitation of several political and civil rights. This paper will, based on these considerations, analyze the connections and continuities of Italy's social legislation during the war and post-war period. It will include modernization factors and limits and contradictory developments of the Italian welfare state between World War I, the Civil War, and the rise of fascism.

Keywords: Disabled, orphans, relief, victims, wartime, welfare, widows.

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1. Introduction

At the beginning of the 20th century, Italy was late in developing into an industrial and military power. It was characterized by a rapidly progressing industrialization but also by unresolved economic and social imbalances, as well as the lack of public social legislation (Procacci 1992, 145-77).¹ The Great War represented a moment of strong growth for the Italian welfare system. It had a huge impact on the political life, the society, and the institutions of the Italian state. For one, the large-scale war economy led to the direct involvement of the civilian population on the home front. This, as well as the mobilization of millions of soldiers, imposed an unprecedented organizational effort on the country's central authorities.² In this context, social policies developed into a crucially important tool to compensate for the serious damages caused by the conflict and became a driving force behind expanding the government's competencies. Because of the state of emergency the war had created, significant efforts were made to develop modern legislation and to improve the administrative organization in the fields of compulsory insurance and social welfare, leading to the emergence of new social rights.

Scholars have expressly spoken of a nexus between the *warfare state* and the *welfare state*, saying that the necessity to assure the efficiency of production and to safeguard the home front increased the public role in the field of social relief to include a much wider range of citizens (De Maria 1989, 72-85; Clausen 1998; Obinger 2020, in this issue).³

However, after some interest in the matter in the 1980s, the importance of the policies concerning disabled veterans and families of the fallen soldiers was long underestimated.⁴ Recently, because of the centenary of the outbreak of the Great War, an area of studies on war victims has developed. However, most researchers have placed an emphasis on the cultural aspects of war victims, such as the immediate experience of war and traumatization, the processes of inclusion and exclusion in post-war societies, and the interactions between war

¹ For more on the development of the Italian industrialization in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and the imbalances between the North of Italy and the Mezzogiorno, see Zamagni 1993, 67-267; Fenoaltea 2006.

² For more on Italy in the First World War, see Gibelli 1998; Insenghi and Rochat 2008.

³ In Italy, this theory was proposed by Giovanna Procacci in relation to the development of Italian social legislation during World War I. See Procacci 2013.

⁴ For more on the war victims, especially the category of disabled veterans, see Prost 1977; Whalen 1984. For a comparative perspective, see Geyer 1983, 230-77, Cohen 2001. On the connections between social policies for disabled veterans and other social laws see Frie 1994, 563-80.

victim's organizations and other social and political groups.⁵ In this context, the social policies themselves have mostly been left unexamined.⁶

War victims, as a new category of relief recipients, did not fall within the already existing work-related insurance schemes, and thereby their protection required new forms of intervention. As a result, they influenced governments and administrations in the effort to update old laws from the pre-war period and to rationalize the discrepancies in the voluntary and local relief. Another aspect also came into play: The debt of gratitude to the victims of war. In order to make sense of the controversial decision to enter the conflict and to legitimize the authoritarian way in which it had been conducted, the issue of caring for those the war had hurt turned into a moral obligation for the different Italian administrations. Thus, this paper intends to show what role the policies on war victims played in the development of Italian social legislation during wartime and the immediate post-war period. However, it will also stress the limits of this development process, which was interrupted by the tumultuous political context of post-war Italy. The escalation of social and economic conflicts in the aftermath of the Great War prevented a public debate on the social rights that emerged during the war and the social responsibility of the State.

2. Nation-building, the Army, and Social Policies in Liberal Italy

War and the military were extremely important factors that heavily influenced the history of Italian unification and the organization of the Italian state. The army played a key role after the country's unification in 1861, mainly because

⁵ For a cultural and social point of view of Germany's disabled veterans, see Kienitz 2008. An interesting study on the relationship between disabled veterans and national socialism in Germany is Löffelbein 2013. On Austria, see Pawlowsky and Wendelin 2015. Other studies in the last years have also broadened the analysis in a comparative matter, for example in the case of Eastern Europe; among these: Boeckh and Stegmann 2010. In Italy, there was some interest in disabled veterans and their political organization in the post-war years in the 1970s and 1980s, then this issue remained in the background for many years. The centenary of the First World War recently gave fresh impetus to this research field. See in particular: Sabbatucci 1974; Isola 1990; Salvante 2013; Pironti 2015; Labanca (ed.) 2016.

⁶ The legislation for war victims has often been considered a temporary form of state intervention and not directly connected to the welfare state. On the contrary, some elements prove the direct link between these measures of wartime or post-war years and the regular social legislation of peace time. This is the case of the rehabilitation right of physical damaged (*Rehabilitationsrecht*) introduced in Germany in 2001, which contained some guiding principles introduced for the first time with the pension law for the war victims in 1920 (*Reichsversorgungsgesetz*); see Frank 2003. In the case of Austria, the direct relationship between disabled veterans and welfare state was recently stressed by Pawlowsky and Wendelin 2015, 14-9.

of the difficulties related to the pacification of the national territory. This led to a substantial militarization of the southern regions, which lasted until 1865.⁷ It wasn't only military operations that were affected by this development, but the liberal political class started to rely on the idea of a strong and solid military institution as a precondition for the formation of a national identity. Military discipline and compulsory conscription were instruments to "making the Italians," inculcating those moral values of order and love for the fatherland, which were indispensable to the task of eliminating the considerable differences still present between the populations of the pre-Unitarian states. As the Italian historian Rovinello pointed out, the army was heavily engaged in the task to "militarize, regulate, nationalize" (Rovinello 2011, 96).

The administrations therefore paid particularly sharp attention to the army. This can be seen, for example, in the rate of military spending, which remained extremely high until the end of the 19th century and made up an average of 23.7% of the public budget.⁸

The army also influenced the initial development of social policies. Together with the old-age pensions for civil servants, the pensions for army personnel introduced in 1865 were the only public social measures implemented for some time.⁹ A second phase of reforms took place in the 1890s. The Italian military apparatus tried to orient itself on other European armies,¹⁰ and Italy had ambitions to rise as a great power in the international and colonial context. However, the debacle in Ethiopia, culminating in the first defeat of European troops

⁷ For more on civil war and its destabilizing potential for the Unitarian state, see an interesting comparative perspective to the USA in Dal Lago 2015, 123-40. For more on the war on Brigandage in Southern Italy after 1861, see Cafiero 1998; Cammarano 1995, 3-112. For an overview of the political and institutional context of the unification of the country and the first post-Unitarian years, see Cammarano 1995. For more on the administrative formation of Italian State after the unification, see Melis 1996.

⁸ The period of maximum expansion of military expenditure coincided with the repression of the southern brigandage from 1861 until 1865 and led to an increase in public debt of up to 80 %. See Gooch 1989, 13.

⁹ The first compulsory insurance for employees of the industrial sector was introduced in 1898 following the violent repression of the demonstrations against the price increases in Milan. Until then, the only measure of some importance had been the law for the reorganizing of charitable institutions (*Pious works*), whose organization and efficiency varied drastically from region to region (see Farrell-Vinay 2000, 611-34). On the origins of the Italian welfare state, structured around the classic model of professional insurances against accidents, sickness, and old age, see Cherubini and Piva 1998; Bartocci 1999, 186-96. For more on the distinction between the minimal state of liberal tradition and the model of the state as "insurer" during the Giolittian era, see Quine 2002, 36-95.

¹⁰ After the end of the privileged relationship with Napoleon III's France, Italy necessarily looked to the emerging power: Germany. It sought a general reference model in the Reichsheer and in the myth of the Prussian army's efficiency. However, contact to the German military command remained limited, even within the Triple Alliance. See Rochat and Massobrio 1978, 107; Walter 2003, 99-100.

against a non-European army, gave rise to doubts about the real capabilities of the Italian war machine.¹¹ A call for the modernization of multiple parts of the military followed, such as the recruitment parameters, the medical relief system and the pensions for the regular troops and officers.

The first change came with Royal Decree 103 of 24 March 1892. It established a new list of imperfections and physical infirmities, which allowed those affected to avoid enlistment. The decree's main objective was not, however, to assure that only strong citizens entered into the military, but rather to prevent exemptions from being attained too easily. In fact, the compulsory conscription established in 1863 had encountered many difficulties. There were multiple ways to obtain an exemption and the reasons that were considered valid ranged from having a weak constitution to being the only male child of elderly parents (cf. Gooch 1989, 21). The decree therefore constituted a first step toward a more efficient assessment of physical dysfunction in the Italian army. With a better overview of the young population's health and physical condition, thanks to the progress of medicine, it was possible to exclude physically inadequate elements from the army and conduct a more careful selection. The previous vague definition of a "weak constitution" could now be replaced with a more precise table that medical officers could put to use, although it remained a mere consultation tool in their hands. Far from being binding, the decree still left a lot of room for individual interpretation and assessment of general physical capacities and the extent of damages caused by the injuries suffered during military service. This medical judgement was often influenced by underlying ideological considerations and could thereby stray from making impartial and purely scientific decisions. In fact, the increased attention to the soldiers' physical condition itself was not free from the influence of modern social sciences and most importantly from Social Darwinian approaches to anthropology.¹²

The reorganization of military pensions came with Royal Decree 70 of 21 February 1895, which introduced a double system of pensions: one for the physical damages suffered during the service, the other being old-age pensions, supporting soldiers after their retirement. Invalidity pensions were divided into three categories (serious, moderate, and mild damage). The legislation, however, only applied to career officials. The soldiers temporarily enlisted in the case

¹¹ Italian colonialism was not motivated by a status of international power, but rather by the hope of reaching it. The defeat of Adua in 1896 against the Ethiopian army triggered a sharp downscaling of Italy's colonial ambitions. On this matter, see Del Boca 1997; Labanca 2002; Finaldi 2017.

¹² The influence of Cesare Lombroso's criminal anthropology on the judgement of the military physicians is indubitable. He made extensive use of anthropometric parameters in order to identify criminal characters in the men subjected to medical examination. Anthropometric surveys were carried out on 300,000 recruits and the results were published between 1896 and 1905, in order to produce a sort of "Atlas" of the anthropological differences in the Italian population (see Farolfi 1984, 1181-219).

of a war, such as the combatants of the Wars of Independence between 1848/49 and 1870 or the troops that were part of the expeditionary force in China in 1901, only received special grants.¹³ Despite this decree, the question of pensions as a whole remained unresolved. The initially slow but then increasingly rapid industrialization of Italy and the emergence of a combative industrial proletariat exacerbated the social question and the conflicts linked to the world of work. The struggles for labor rights at the beginning of the 20th century shifted the governments' attention and public opinion away from military issues.¹⁴

2.1 Pre-War Legislation concerning Disabled Veterans: The Italo-Turkish War

In one important aspect, Italy was not so different from other countries: Before the Great War, hardly any had implemented measures to improve the support for wounded soldiers and survivors.¹⁵ However, Italy had the opportunity to partially change this situation in the context of the Italo-Turkish War in 1911/12. Influenced by the patriotic and nationalist rhetoric that accompanied the conflict, the Giolitti government introduced a system of “privileged pensions” for conscripts, non-commissioned officers, and voluntary medical relief

¹³ In 1898, a fund of 1.6 million lire was created to guarantee an economic subvention of 100 lire to veterans and widows of the fallen soldiers of the wars of independence. For the members of the expeditionary force in China, 650,000 lire were allocated.

¹⁴ The military policy of the Giolittian period was, as a result, inconstant and particularly controversial. While the military spending continued to grow and was now supported by an increasing rearmament, the relationship between the political class and the army began to deteriorate. The link between the executive branch, parliament, and the army had been close in the first decades of the unitarian state. The Ministry of War and that of the Navy had always been directed by senior officers and many representatives of the high ranks of the army were represented in the Senate. This balance was broken when Giolitti assigned a civilian to the position of Minister of War in 1907. Then, he nominated a parliamentary commission to set the funding of the army. His purpose was to reduce the autonomy of the *Regio esercito* in favor of the government and the civilian institutions. The failure of this project, however, not only made it impossible to reorganize the military sector in a more modern way, but also led to the isolation of the military sphere from the political and parliamentary life of the state. The army Chief of Staff, Alberto Pollio, repeatedly denounced the isolation of his function from the government. For example, the decision to start the expedition in Libya was made without even consulting the army first (see Meriggi 1987, 55-92).

¹⁵ War pensions and dependent's allowances were introduced in the USA in the aftermath of the American Civil War, while in Europe, Germany and France remained linked to the traditional model of military pensions for career officers after the war of 1870/71. For more on the American case, see Skocpol 1992. The Russo-Japanese War also sparked no significant changes. There was little to no interest in the tactical and strategic aspects of this war. Psychiatry and the studies on the mental pathologies of the soldiers on the other hand made important advancements. Nevertheless, the war had no consequences for military pensions or relief systems (see Gibelli 1998, 40-1).

personnel.¹⁶ The amount was higher than that of normal pensions and additional allowances were allocated in the case of multiple mutilations or total blindness. The state also took on new competences, including the daily care of families of combatants and the support of war orphans, which were organized by provincial offices and coordinated by a national patronage system (*Opera Emanuele Filiberto*).¹⁷ Nevertheless, the changes set in motion with the war for Libya remained very limited. As early as 1909, a parliamentary commission of inquiry into the *Regio esercito* (Commissione d'inchiesta per l'esercito 1910) had complained about inadequate planning in anticipation of a large-scale war. The commission had denounced the lack of coordination between the military administration and civilian relief organizations; there was no central coordination office, and there were no measures for the health care of disabled veterans after their discharge from military hospitals and return to civil life. These problems returned during the war in 1911/12 and were not resolved with the war pensions reform. The "privileged pensions" did not guarantee adequate compensations for the reduction of one's working capacity due to loss of manual skills or mobility. In a similar way, the pensions for war widows and orphans could not compensate for the loss of an indispensable source of income – in most cases the only one – occurring with the death of the husband or the father.

The pension was, at this point, not an instrument of socio-economic compensation, but rather a "moral" act of gratitude. It had to be considered as a prize for those who could prove that their wounds were caused by fighting on the front lines. Even if those affected presented the corresponding evidence, granting the pension remained at the discretion of the medical officers and the military bureaucracy, which could deny the request without granting any right to an appeal.

Nevertheless, the pensions of 1912 were generally judged adequate. Just like the rest of Europe, Italians thought the likelihood of a large-scale and long-term conflict was remote, if at all possible (cf. Afflerbach and Stevenson 2007). Besides, the Italo-Turkish War had only resulted in a small number of losses, not enough to fuel a debate on the limits of the country's war relief system and pensions.¹⁸ After the state of emergency had subsided, everything went back to normal. However, many questions remained unresolved, as was shown by the situation immediately following the Italian intervention in World War I.¹⁹

¹⁶ The declared objective was to "present the soldiers with the gratitude of the nation for having shown such conspicuous valor and sacrifice" (see Groppali 1916, 4).

¹⁷ The Italo-Turkish War was a test bed for voluntary relief, which operated both in the war zone and on the home front, where organized civilian committees supported the combatants' families (daily allowance of 1 lire for the wife and 50 cents for each child).

¹⁸ The losses among the Italian army amounted to ca. 3,400 men; 4,200 were permanently disabled. For more on the Italo-Turkish War, see Labanca 2012; Gaeta 1982.

¹⁹ On the eve of the war, organization of military hospitals was completely inadequate, as well as the number of military medics (882 by entry into war in May 1915; see Cadeddu 2009).

3. The Relief for Disabled Veterans and Survivors of the Great War from 1915 until 1917

3.1 The Policies in Favor of Disabled Veterans

When Italy entered the war on 24 May 1915, it rapidly decentralized all war relief efforts to avoid an excessive burden on the central organs of the state. Agreements with the Red Cross and other organizations were signed for the hospitalization of the wounded soldiers; at the local level, all philanthropic and charitable associations were mobilized, as well as the many patriotic organizations, which had been founded during the period of Italian neutrality.²⁰ Under the supervision of prefects, civilian relief committees were created in the main cities. They mobilized the population – mainly women – in the support for the families of combatants, bolstered by the relentless propaganda of the government.²¹ The emphasis, with which national solidarity was constantly being invoked, can be explained with the need to reduce the pressure on central state organs, but also with the will to overcome the fracture between interventionists and neutralists that had divided Italian society. The mobilization of the civil society, in this context, served to cement national unity in the face of the country's darkest hour and to instill a sense of belonging to the national cause.

Despite the proliferation of charitable initiatives, the fractured relief system as a whole proved to be weak. A clear dichotomy emerged between the activism of the larger cities, where a strong bourgeois philanthropism had taken root, and the rural regions of the country, where relief initiatives had been mostly unsuccessful. In the poorest rural areas, where the traditional predominance of religious institutions often replaced the inadequacy of local administrations, even the distribution of daily dependents' allowances was difficult (Toja and Giusti 1917). At first, little to nothing was being done to remedy these imbalances, although the emergence of trench warfare and the proportions of social emergency rapidly canceled all hopes of a quick and painless conflict.²² Gradually however, the situation changed. Starting in 1916, there was an increasing intensity of state interventionism to coordinate and reorganize the relief efforts across the entire country. This was influenced by the concern among political and military authorities that the enormous sacrifices im-

²⁰ For more on women's associations and the mobilization of teachers for the purposes of relief and war propaganda, see Beatrice Pisa 2010; Fava 2010.

²¹ Prime Minister Antonio Salandra was one of the first who emphasized the national duty to help the combatants and their families. In a speech at the Capitol on 2nd June 1915, he appealed to the duty of "those who remain" to contribute to the war, giving "their mind, goods, heart, renunciations and sacrifices" (Cited in Salandra 1922, 35).

²² By the end of 1915, the Italian losses amounted to about 250,000 men dead, wounded, or missing (see Stato maggiore dell'esercito 1929, 609).

posed on the population would feed into its discontent and destabilize the home front. Social policies became an indispensable tool to compensate the damages produced by a war, for which the nation did not appear to be sufficiently prepared.²³

In this context, the disabled, widows and orphans were particularly vulnerable without any adequate social protection. Wounded soldiers were gathered together in military hospitals without precise directives on what kind of support they were eligible to receive after their discharge. To avoid unsustainable costs caused by increasing war pensions, a professional rehabilitation system was established, which was tasked with facilitating most of the invalids' reentry into the labor market. "Work therapy," a practice that spread throughout all belligerent countries,²⁴ was intended – officially – to restore dignity to the disabled soldier, making him economically independent and thereby freeing him of his reliance on state-issued allowances. Faced with the extreme rise of the cost of living, the privileged pensions introduced in 1912 could not provide adequate economic protection. Thus, the disabled were encouraged to return to work to avoid pauperization and consequent social marginalization. Work therapy was meant to have a positive impact on the stability of the home front by turning the disabled veterans into a public example of perseverance and sense of duty, a role model for the rest of the population. Thousands of disabled veterans still capable of work and of being productive were an extremely useful vehicle for propaganda and represented, as Senator Enrico di San Martino stated, "a project that benefits the interests and decorum of the state" (San Martino 1916, 2).

For it to function effectively, work therapy required the contribution of different experts, orthopedists being the most important. The actions of preeminent physicians such as Riccardo Galeazzi from Milan, the director of *Pio Istituto dei Rachitici*, and Enrico Burci and Ettore Levi from Tuscany, served to overcome the initial inhomogeneity of interventions and to develop a unitary medical-social approach throughout the country. By working with the military authorities, they set the professional re-education guidelines for all military hospitals, care facilities, and civil committees, which were first and foremost concentrated on the veterans' "moral education." The disabled were to be persuaded with the social and patriotic values of working once again, while depending on state pensions was portrayed as amoral. "All war cripples and mutilated, even the most severely damaged, must work" stressed Galeazzi (Galeazzi

²³ In the interpretation of Giovanna Procacci, the emergence of social rights is considered a consequence of the strong reduction of the political and civil rights produced by the restrictive measures of wartime (see Procacci 2010).

²⁴ The Italian physicians' work therapy was partially influenced by the German *Arbeitstherapie*, which had been introduced at the beginning of the war (see Perry 2014; Pironti 2015, 107-19).

1915, 10). The medical and psychological work of physicians was to be accompanied by consultants working with the trade unions and the employers in order to find the best solutions for the reintegration of the disabled into the labor market.

In 1916, all civil committees were united in a national federation to better coordinate the actions of physicians and consultants. This federation served to establish identical procedures for reintegrating war invalids throughout the country.²⁵ The patients were to be treated within a single medical facility in order to better coordinate surgical-orthopedic therapy, physical rehabilitation, and professional reeducation. Prostheses had to be designed by the hospital so as to be properly tailored to the veteran's physical capacity.²⁶ Of particular relevance, especially for an army composed mostly of illiterate peasants, was the intention to provide an elementary school education alongside the physical rehabilitation program. It was meant to give the entire reeducation process a positive spin and could be of use once the patients actually wanted to rejoin the labor market. In case the return to the previous occupation or to any kind of manual labor was not possible, it was necessary to identify a new working field linked to the invalids' changed physical capacities. Hence, a basic education was crucial for opening new doors.²⁷

To adapt the practice to these theoretical principles, the Boselli government enacted Regent's Decree 1012 of 10 August 1916. It introduced daily allowances for those disabled veterans who, after their leave from active military service, had participated in the re-education program for up to six months. During this period, the state would finance orthopedic surgeries and prostheses.²⁸ The decree was important not only because it sanctioned the extension of health care beyond the end of the invalid's military service, but also because it indicated the main objective of public relief efforts: restoring the veterans' lost working capacity. Since the disabled soldier was a civilian, only temporarily enlisted in the army, relief programs had to take into account the damage done

²⁵ The rehabilitation program was organized in a step by step manner: First came the medical/surgical, orthopaedic, and prosthetic therapy, then physiotherapy and professional re-education, and lastly assistance to relocation in the labor market.

²⁶ To this end, a national factory for the production of prostheses was created in Milan, under the supervision of Riccardo Galeazzi (Royal Decree 392 of 24 February 1916). The factory held the monopoly on patents and regularly tested the prostheses created by singular healthcare institutes. For more on rehabilitation measures during the war and the production of prostheses, see Pironti 2015; Montella 2016.

²⁷ Next to typewriting, telegraphy, and accounting, which only required a limited amount of manual skill, the most taught professions were mechanic, shoemaker, tailor, and carpenter.

²⁸ The idea of making the reeducation program compulsory was rejected. A compulsory hospital stay of two weeks was decided upon, with the possibility for the hospital to delay the discharge, in order to improve the physical condition of the patient. The military administration would carry the cost of hospitalization after the discharge for a maximum period of six months, during which a daily allowance replaced the pension (see Levi 1917, 5).

to his ability to work and his socio-economic condition, trying consequently to repair it as far as possible. This represented a significant step forward on the path to a recognition of the state's social responsibility for the victims of the conflict.

Legislative interventions continued and even increased in 1917; the tiredness caused by the war and the growing discontent encouraged further social policies. It is not a coincidence, that the measures for disabled veterans and family members went hand in hand with other important interventions, which, more than 20 years after the first pension laws of 1898, were going to reinforce the compulsory insurance system considerably. The two most important reforms were the reorganization of compulsory invalidity insurance and old-age insurance (Regent's Law Decree 670 of 29 April 1917), which included all employees of both sexes up to 70 years of age, and the compulsory insurance of employees in the agricultural sector (Regent's Law Decree 1450 of 23 August 1917).²⁹ Following their implementation, the ONIG (*Opera Nazionale Invalidi di Guerra*), a national foundation which was given sole responsibility for the relief programs for disabled veterans, was created in March 1917. The ONIG had to coordinate the work of health facilities, rehabilitation institutes, and re-education schools, provide the allowances during the convalescence in the hospital, and pay repairs and spare parts for the orthopedic prostheses. It was also tasked with accelerating the disabled veterans' reintegration and hence contacted trade unions, employers, and local administrations and, where necessary, encouraged alternative solutions through advice and incentives, for example, for the development of agricultural cooperatives or artisan workshops managed by the invalids themselves.

3.2 The Support for War Orphans – a Complex Issue

Another important state intervention concerned the support for war orphans. It was a highly delicate issue because it involved an unprecedented intrusion of the state into the autonomous sphere of the family.³⁰ The moral and social implications of the matter were clear: from a moral perspective, supporting war orphans was meant to show those fighting on the battlefield that the state, upon their death, would guarantee their children still had a comfortable existence. Meanwhile, the social perspective concentrated on the possible long-term consequences of not providing the proper assistance and the risk of leaving an

²⁹ Behind this important social measure was the necessity to morally and economically support peasants, who made up the majority of the combatants in the Italian army. The first signs of war-induced tiredness and discontent in the winter of 1916/17 led the government to accelerate the development of a social measure, which had been blocked by parliament for more than a decade (see Bartocci 1999, 226-7).

³⁰ For more on the political debate concerning the war orphan's relief in the Chamber and in the Senate, see Pironti 2017.

entire generation to its own devices. Securing adequate support for war orphans meant possibly providing them with the means to restart the national economy at the end of the conflict. Therefore, their protection was an “investment in the nation’s future” (Speech of deputy Patrizi on 12 December 1916, Atti del parlamento italiano, Camera dei Deputati, Discussioni, Leg. XXIV, vol. 11, 11576-77).

Some people wondered, however, how far the state’s intervention could go and whether it could replace the role of the family and especially that of the mother, whose rights many considered to be inviolable (Ragghianti and Dalmazzoni 1916). Many liberal and catholic politicians opposed the project of a national organization for war orphans because they saw this type of centralized public relief as a threat to the autonomy of the family.³¹ In 1917, after a long parliamentary debate, a patronage system was decided upon, structured at the provincial level in committees coordinated by the prefect and a supervising judge. To safeguard the orphan’s interests, they would constantly check the activity of tutors and could intervene in cases of negligence, which could lead to the annulment of parental authority and the orphan’s transfer to a public facility. In this way, traditional forces tried to avoid submitting an excessive amount of power into the hands of the central state. Instead, they wanted local authorities and charitable organizations, which were more closely linked to the territory and better capable to deal with the families’ immediate needs, to have more leeway.³²

Despite the limitations of the state’s influence it contained, the law introduced new forms of protection for minors and laid the basis – at that moment only on a theoretical level – for public education connected to the possibility for post-school vocational training. These measures represented a significant departure from the idea of *laissez faire*; in opposition to the liberal tradition of non-intervention, they emerged as examples of new planning tendencies in public social policy. The foundation for a public relief program, for new forms of social rights, and public responsibility had been built.

³¹ This political clash on war orphans was not an entirely Italian phenomenon. In France, before the government introduced the law on state relief for the “*pupilles de la nation*,” a vehement debate between the supporters of state intervention and the defenders of the unalienable rights on children of mothers took place in parliament (see Faron 2001).

³² In Germany and especially in Austria-Hungary, where the issue of the family’s autonomy and public intervention had become particularly acute, close attention was paid to the Italian legislation. Many observers considered it an optimal middle way between state intervention and the protection of the private familiar sphere, without sliding into socialism (see *Kriegswaisenfürsorge in Italien* 1918; Hueber 1918).

4. The Crisis after the Battle of Caporetto

4.1 The Centralization of Italian War Relief

In the aftermath of the Battle of Caporetto (cf. Labanca 2017), the risk of the home front's collapse forced the new government of national unity, led by Vittorio Emanuele Orlando, to increase public intervention in the war relief effort. The war victims themselves began to pressure military authorities and the political class, defending their economic interests. During the last year of the conflict, the National Disabled Veterans Association of 1917, the ANMIG (*Associazione Nazionale Mutilati e Invalidi di Guerra*), and a similar association of mothers and widows, increased the public's interest and political class' attention to the plight of the war victims considerably (cf. Sabbatucci 1974; Pironti 2015).

In November 1917, the Ministry for Military Relief and War Pensions (*Ministero per l'assistenza militare e pensioni di guerra*, MAMPG) was created, and Leonida Bissolati was placed at its head. The ministry assumed responsibility for all administrative and financial questions involving war relief programs, tasks previously held by the Ministries of War and Treasury, whose respective paths had proven faulty. The MAMPG also took control of the ONIG and the patronage system for war orphans. Where the situation required it and in order to reach greater transparency in the delivery of pensions, MAMPG's provincial offices replaced municipalities in the distribution of allowances and provided medical-legal advice to individuals and families that had been left without assistance. The MAMPG became fully operational by February 1918 and in its first weeks of activity alone, the ministry helped reduce the dramatic delays in the conduction of the various war relief programs.

In the years 1914 and 1915, Minister Leonida Bissolati and Gaetano Salvemini played key roles within the movement in favor of an Italian entry into war. They developed a left-wing – almost social democratic – pro-intervention movement as a counterpart to the dominant nationalist interventionism.³³ For this reason, Bissolati's appointment as minister represented a turning point. The previous governments under Salandra and Boselli had proven insufficient in the organization of war relief programs. But Bissolati considered the MAMPG a “revolutionary” institution, a starting point for a radical reformation of the public relief system. In his view, after the end of the war, which meant victory and the achievement of the geographic and moral unity of the nation, the state had to turn its attention to the social problems of the pre-war time, which had so far remained unresolved. Only then could the wealth of a renewed Italian society be ensured. Bissolati believed a new “juridical-social state” (*Stato*

³³ For more on Leonida Bissolati, see Baldoli 2008.

giuridico-sociale) should take the place of the old liberal night-watchman state, abandoning the postulates of *laissez faire* and self-help and intervening directly to protect the integrity of the social body.³⁴ From this perspective, the defeat of Caporetto should have been seen as an opportunity. Now the state could intervene in the war relief efforts without resistance and with renewed energy, centralizing all issues and creating an interconnected system of health care and re-education measures for disabled veterans as well as public assistance for mothers and children. It could have been seen as the first step on the path towards a greater welfare state after the war. However, Bissolati did not propose a total centralization nor a state socialism based on the German model of welfare. On the contrary, he envisaged a public relief system in which many private actors would play an essential role. In Bissolati's optimistic interpretation, the war had promoted national cohesion and shown that appealing to national solidarity could deliver tangible results. The state could sponsor legislative reforms which would rationalize interventions across the country while at the same time eliminating traditional territorial imbalances.

The new Minister of the Treasury Francesco Saverio Nitti had a more pragmatic and rational perception of the situation. He feared conflicts and social tensions would arise after the war if no wide economic and social reforms were implemented. Nitti felt that the government, which after the defeat at Caporetto was asking for further sacrifices from the country, also had to take into account the requests for more social rights and economic protection of those social groups who were particularly affected by the privations of the conflict. "All that we have must be used for the war; but everything we will have after the war will have to be dedicated to the economic reconstruction of the country and to the support of those who have suffered most from the war," he said in a speech to the Chamber of Deputies on 19 December 1917 (*Atti del parlamento italiano, Camera dei Deputati, Discussioni, Leg. XXIV, Vol. 14, 15246*). The introduction of life assurance policies for combatants and their families, re-named "Nitti Policies," the further development of the ONIG and the regulation of competences of the MAMPG, and the recognition of the right to a survivor's pension for unmarried cohabiting partners were definitely some steps forward.

There were some initial difficulties for the MAMPG, originating, on the one hand, from the lack of financial resources, which prevented both the ONIG and the patronage program for orphans to work properly. On the other hand, the more than 40 emergency measures implemented since 1915 had developed into

³⁴ Bissolati called this new state a "juridical-social state" (*Stato giuridico-sociale*). In a report published by the MAMPG in 1919, the term is explained as follows: "A juridical-social state means that each and every relationship between society and the state is defined by the law; since there is no law without a correspondent duty, the state has to preserve and protect the interests of both individuals and society as a whole" (*Ministero per l'assistenza militare e pensioni di guerra 1919, 541*).

a legislative and bureaucratic labyrinth. Managing the war pensions was particularly complicated. Regent's Decree 876 of 20 May 1917 amended the privileged pension law of 1912 and introduced ten categories of disability. This new system was intended to improve the accuracy of the medical officers' evaluations, seeing as the old three categories had often been criticized for enabling vague judgments, thereby arousing doubts and discontent. However, it was not a reform *tout court*. Indeed, this third model, next to the privileged pensions and the three-category system, was simply flanked by the other two. The ten-category system would only apply to disability and survivors' pensions requested after the implementation of the law. For the disabilities and deaths that occurred previously, the privileged pensions of 1912 would remain in force, although many of them had not yet been liquidated. Lastly, the cases occurring outside the zone of operations continued to be treated applying the three categories of the law of 1895. As a result of this "tripartite system," the work of the MAMPG in verifying and providing pensions was severely hindered.

The socialist deputy Angiolo Cabrini emphasized these problems in the Chamber of Deputies, characterizing the procedure widows and invalids had to endure to attain a pension as a "way of the cross." In his mind, they had first become victims of the war and then of its bureaucracy. Camillo Peano, a supporter of former Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti, stressed the fact that the persons requesting war pensions or social relief from the state had no sufficient guarantees of their social rights. From his point of view, without the recognition of an objective responsibility of the state for the damages caused by the war and without the possibility of appeal against the decisions of medical officers and military bureaucrats, being gifted with the "gratitude of the fatherland" was a meaningless promise (see *Atti del parlamento italiano, Camera dei Deputati, Discussioni, Leg. XXIV, vol. 15, 15795-810, part-session of 18 February 1918*).³⁵ Peano emphasized the evident inadequacy of the emergency policies, which were introduced without any consideration of long-term implications. Responding to both Cabrini and Peano, Bissolati himself acknowledged that the bureaucratism and paternalism ingrained in the military relief system had caused some damages and were not compatible with the principles of social justice. He promised, thus, to impress a democratic spirit upon the future state policies pertaining to war victims.

By the end of the war, the results of these policies were, therefore, extremely contradictory. The recognition of the state's social responsibility towards war victims could be seen in the government's efforts to coordinate health care and economic measures. War victims became the first group to benefit from a

³⁵ During the discussion, the liberal socialist Luigi Rava and the socialist Fabrizio Maffi also denounced the risk of losing pensions for the disabled veterans who refused to undergo surgical procedures or rehabilitation therapies, even if they were invasive, painful, or potentially dangerous.

new quality of state social policy. The increasingly extensive intervention of the central state had led to a partial reduction of regional dysfunctions and to the improvement of local welfare services. However, this interventionism was born from a state of emergency and then developed within a chaotic context. Only with Bissolati and Nitti's entry into the government did the impression emerge that the executive had finally had a concrete idea about the importance and the purpose of public war relief.

4.2 Occupational Rehabilitation and the Legal Debate on War Pensions

Reforming war pensions meant first having to establish their legal nature. Many jurists tended to emphasize this aspect in order to extract the topic of war victims' relief from the rhetorical, propaganda-centered sphere in which it had been entirely enveloped. All legal considerations had to start from the same point: the change in the relationship between the state and its citizen soldiers that had occurred during total war. If the state had the right to impose war on its citizens, it was simultaneously obligated to repair the damages the conflict had caused them. There was an inherent "risk factor" to serving the country by fighting in the war, and as this duty was one the state requested, one which citizens could not refuse to do, this risk factor established an objective responsibility of the government.

The Neapolitan jurist Giuseppe Morelli thought the risk of fighting at the front was not dissimilar to the occupational one industrial workers had to face every day. The contractual basis of invalidity pensions and the agreement on the employer's objective liability were, for Morelli, an archetype applicable to the relationship between the state and its citizens called to arms (Morelli 1920, 37). War pensions had to be considered a normal social security service like any other. Morelli felt that using terms such as "moral gratitude of the fatherland" meant transporting war pensions from the normal legislative praxis, which was based on concrete principles such as "harm at work" and "compensation," to a much vaguer and more uncertain field (*ibid.*, 40-1).³⁶

The socialist jurist Mario Bracci partially agreed with Morelli. For Bracci, the pension, as an act of national gratitude, should only be granted in extreme cases, as for the widows of the two irredentists Cesare Battisti and Nazario Sauro for example. The citizen soldier's pension however, was a different case. There, the state's coercive power was dependent upon its willingness to compensate and guarantee protection from poverty and social marginalization. The pension could not be a prize for heroism, Bracci thought, because the only

³⁶ Morelli distinguished between disabled and survivors' pensions. On the latter, he agreed with those who considered the measures for widows and orphans more an act of gratitude and national solidarity.

parameter was the direct relation between service and suffered damage (Bracci 1925, 33). However, he rejected the link between war and civil invalidity pensions because the former was devoid of any reciprocity established by a contract. The relationship between the state and the citizen at war had no contractual basis and was not equal. In Bracci's eyes, it was determined by compulsion: citizens could not oppose the will of the state to send them to the front. The right to compensation, therefore, derived not from a contract, but from the principle of non-voluntary service.

Similar to Bracci, Ruggiero Romano di Falco, lawyer and member of the ANMIG, stressed the skewed balance of power inherent to war pensions. He wrote: "While the worker is invited by the employer to voluntarily lend his work, the State does not invite, but orders: the serviceman does not accept a condition freely, but obeys by virtue of a subordination introduced by the law, in which the one has the command and the other must obey" (Romano di Falco 1919, 9). The war victims' right to compensation automatically resulted from the mandatory character of war service: Families and individuals could not avoid the social risk war posed and, thus, inflicted damages had to be repaired by society in the form of a national relief allowance (*ibid.*, 10).

However, as stressed by Mario Bracci, the state could not fully repair these damages, for economic and financial reasons. A return to the pre-war social, professional, and economic conditions was simply impossible, after the war had so thoroughly changed the social and economic life of the nation. The war pension could therefore only be considered a partially compensatory instrument (Bracci 1925, 146). What the war victims had gained was instead the right not to fall into a state of need, even if the compensation did not completely restore them to their pre-war economic situations. It must be stressed that such an approach, which derived from a principle of preventive social state action in favor of more vulnerable social groups, did not exist in Italian law up until this point. Now it was emerging not only in relation to war victims, but also in other fields of legislation, such as compulsory insurance against involuntary unemployment, which represented the most important measure undertaken by the Nitti government after the war.³⁷

Social policy experts acknowledged that the path towards a full social responsibility of the state had been compromised during the war by administrative chaos and lack of coordination. However, in the aftermath of the conflict, there was an attempt to draw guidelines for a more rational system of public intervention. The ANMIG kept the debate alive during this phase, trying to combine the rhetorical discourse on the "national debt" towards war victims with the demand for modern social security legislation. Immediately after the Austro-Hungarian capitulation announcement, the association published a

³⁷ For more on this 1919 law, see Cherubini and Piva 1998; Bartocci 1999.

political program, the *Manifesto della pace*. It included main points for a future social reform: flexible pensions, to guarantee protection against an increase in the cost-of-living; free health care and professional rehabilitation; compulsory employment of a certain number of disabled veterans in all private enterprises and public offices and an agrarian reform aiming in particular at enabling war invalids to settle down as small owners or partners in agricultural enterprises (Manifesto della pace, in: *il Bollettino*, 15 November 1918; Pavan Dalla Torre 2016).

The ANMIG reaffirmed these proposals at the first National Congress for Disabled Veterans Relief, which was organized by Riccardo Galeazzi and took place in Milan in December 1918. For the first time, as the socialist newspaper *Avanti!* wrote, the congress faced debating the social question of disabled veterans without “the usual rhetorical tirades” of the war period (Per le pensioni di guerra, in: *Avanti!* 348, 17 December 1918). The newspaper highlighted the serious gaps in public relief, which was affected by the weakness of local authorities and the cumbersome nature of bureaucracy.

The most important moment of the debate was the third interallied conference on the after-care of disabled men, which took place in Rome from 12 to 17 October 1919.³⁸ In the inaugural session, the Italian delegation, led by the Minister for Military Relief Ugo Da Como,³⁹ recalled the progress made by Italy in recognizing war victims’ social rights:

The right to a pension could no longer be dependent on the inability to serve in the military, but should instead be especially granted to all those unable to work. Allowances were graduated, veterans with less serious disabilities were also considered for benefits; with the flexibility of the renewable allowances the condition of absolute incurability was no longer required; decent conditions for the severely disabled were guaranteed, with attention to their children; survivor’s pensions were granted to new cases; benefits were extended to those in the auxiliary corps who were worthy; infirmities contracted and aggravated by the war were presumed to fall into the category of war-inflicted damage. The diseases, which cruelly struck so many men, gave access to a right; one soldiers affected by tuberculosis for example could call their own. This legion of suffering youths was helped and assisted by new social benefits. (Opening speech of Ugo Da Como, in: Ministero dell’assistenza militare e pensioni di guerra 1919, 57)

But he also had to admit many errors and serious delays. In fact, the paternalism and anachronistic approaches of some physicians and medical officers had too often stood in the way of the victims’ social rights. Da Como stressed that the state should first and foremost protect the disabled veterans’ right to work

³⁸ The first two conferences were held in Paris in 1917 and in London in 1918 (see Inter-Allied Conference on the After-Care of Disabled Men 1918).

³⁹ Ugo Da Como became Minister in June 1919, after the resignation of Bissolati on 31 December 1918 and the acting ministers Zupelli and Girardini.

by adapting the labor market to their needs, even before trying to inculcate in them the moral obligation of returning to work. For example, too many illiterate men from rural regions had not been informed enough about their rights or the many different aspects of modern agricultural work during their rehabilitation process.⁴⁰ The fear of a labor shortage in the agricultural sector, the image of many unemployed citizens starting to gather in the major industrial cities, and the idealized vision of a simple and healthy rural life had pushed physicians and consultants to stress re-education centered on agricultural labor. However, as many at the conference in Rome pointed out, this kind of re-education was desirable only if it could result in a cultural elevation of the peasants and in the modernization of the sector's working conditions, which had not yet taken place. For many men, the return to farming or artisanship would be impossible. Therefore, it was seen as unavoidable to pay more attention to an industrial re-education, which was meant to help implement the modern approaches of the tayloristic way of production in the work-rehabilitation-process, as already proposed by some during the war (Luigi Ferrannini 1916). Even if many feared the risks of an excessive urbanization of disabled veterans and a congestion of unemployed workers in the industrial cities, there was no doubt, however, that the industry, thanks to its diversification and simplification, had an increased capacity to absorb more disabled veterans than other sectors. The delegate of the ANMIG present at the conference also recognized that the employment in the industrial sector was the best way to reinstate as many disabled veterans as possible (Speech of Giovanni Loriga, ANMIG, Ministero dell'assistenza militare e pensioni di guerra 1919, 874-75).

This point of view was additionally confirmed by a central parliamentary commission, which was assigned to study measures for the country's transition from a war to a peacetime economy. The chairman of the Section for Social Legislation and Welfare (*Sezione per la legislazione sociale e la previdenza*), Senator Luigi Rava, not only indicated that industrial re-education was the best solution to enable the disabled veterans' social and professional reinstatement, but also saw it as a model for a larger welfare system and proposed extending it to include disabled civilians.⁴¹ This conviction, that the labor market needed to be regulated in order to guarantee the success of occupational re-education, led to the introduction of a law on the compulsory employment of disabled veterans (Law 1312 of 21 August 1921). In every public institution, 10 to 20%

⁴⁰ Some physicians, such as Gaetano Corrado, director of the orthopedic faculty at the University of Naples, accused their own colleagues of approaching the re-education of peasant soldiers in too superficial and "ideological" a manner (Corrado 1919).

⁴¹ *Commissione centrale per lo studio di proposte e provvedimenti occorrenti al passaggio dallo stato di guerra allo stato di pace*. For more regarding this, see Rava 1920. However, in the report of the commission there was no mention of the poor results of the re-education in wartime because of the ONIG's limited means and resistance from employers.

of all positions, depending on the category of employment (administrative or accounting offices, management positions, or staff), had to be held by disabled veterans. In private companies, the ratio rose to one disabled veteran for every 20 healthy employees, with a mandatory ratio of 5% at the least. Employers had to adapt their facilities to the new regulations and submit a list of available and occupied positions to the provincial employment offices.

The legislative intervention was motivated by the disappointing results of the professional re-education program and the previously insufficient cooperation of private companies and public offices.⁴² Its goal was for disabled veterans to hold a substantive share of the labor market and thereby prevent them from being disadvantaged due to competition with other healthy workers, for example women, whose employment massively increased during the war.⁴³ The law did however leave a lot of room for exceptions, even if sanctions were introduced against employers who were reluctant to cooperate, paid disabled veterans less, or provided harsher working conditions.⁴⁴ The liberal administrations, confronted with the labor conflicts that had emerged in the post-war months (cf. Fabbri 2009), could not or did not want to enforce the law against negligent employers. On the contrary, they used public employment to reduce the burden on private employers, so as to avoid confrontation. This resulted, however, in an excessive pressure for the public administrations; they were forced to open privileged channels for war veterans (for example prioritizing their applications, which resulted in a high number of complaints). Moreover, many regulations only existed on paper and were completely disregarded, as for example the one limiting the employer's right to dismiss a disabled employee, which meant private companies still had considerable discretionary power when it came to their employment policies.

The contradictory law was the only significant measure implemented to help war victims in the early post-war years. Just like the legislation introduced during the years of 1915-1918, it was a response to an immediate problem: the growing unemployment of disabled veterans. The MAMPG's main objective during Bissolati's term in office, which involved establishing an integrated system of pensions and public welfare services, was not achieved. Indeed, his resignation in December 1918 seemed to symbolize the defeat of the reformist

⁴² According to a report of the Ministry of Labour sent to the International Labour Office, only 3.3% of all disabled veterans were reemployed before the law's implementation, although there was a significant amount of vacant posts, especially in the public sector (see International Labour Office 1923, 156).

⁴³ For more on the multiple aspects of women's mobilization for war, see Bartoloni (ed.) 2016. For more on the employment policies for women, see Curli 1998.

⁴⁴ In the railway business, for example, all posts requiring a high specialization level were excluded from the law; in production sectors, which used many seasonal workers, the percentage of disabled veterans had to be calculated only on the basis of the permanently employed workers.

position the liberal left of the Orlando government, after Caporetto, had acquired. In November 1919, only a month after the interallied conference in Rome, the MAMPG was transformed to become part of the Ministry of Treasury. This meant the end of the agreement between the right and the left wing of the Interventionism-movement, which had supported the Orlando government and allowed the war victims to hope to see the state play a greater role in the development of modern social policies. After 1918, the possibility to reform the war pensions system appeared to have gradually dissipated because of the escalation of social conflicts and the weakness of the liberal administrations, which itself was a consequence of the delegitimization of the political class and the irreversible crisis of the Italian parliamentary system.

5. Conclusion: The War Pensions Reform of 1923

Italy's great difficulties with bringing order to the chaotic social policies of wartime become even more evident when compared to the efforts of other belligerent countries. In the post-war period, reorganizing the war victims' support systems was at the top of reform programs everywhere and all governments made significant efforts to shape the new social rights the victims had acquired. Compensating for their moral and physical damages not only meant fulfilling the promises politicians and military authorities had made during the war, but was also a way to give meaning to the tragedy of total war and to transcend its dehumanizing power. The state and the community were now called upon to protect the "weakest part" of the social body, in order to preserve the whole society's integrity. To achieve this goal, new social rights had to be legally codified. A French law was the first to regulate the objective responsibility of the state towards disabled veterans and survivors, establishing the invaluable *droit à réparation* in 1919. Despite the dramatic political and economic situation of Germany after the defeat, the young Weimar Republic also tried to pay the debts the previous *Kaiserreich* owed to its war victims. The 1920 National Relief Law (*Reichsversorgungsgesetz*) introduced an integrated system of pensions and social services completely financed and managed by the central state. The law represented the first measure in postwar Germany to, in the democratic spirit established by the Weimar Constitution, guarantee new social rights for all citizens.⁴⁵

During the state of emergency caused by the war, Italy had undoubtedly taken steps towards a national relief system and had started to modernize its anti-

⁴⁵ For more on the interpretation of the German state as a *sozialer Rechtsstaat* in the Weimar Constitution, see Gmür and Roth 2011.

quoted welfare structures. After the war, however, the long-awaited reform of the war victims' relief system only took place with extreme delay.⁴⁶

After street protests in many cities and some sensational actions by groups of war victims, such as the occupation of the Milan stock exchange and an attack against the Chamber of Deputies in Rome, war pensions were modified and adjusted to the ever-increasing cost of living in December 1920 (Law 1821 of 23 December 1920). The Giolitti government also introduced special allowances for the many disabled veterans who, despite the new law on compulsory employment, were still without a job. However, a complete reform, which according to the Regent's Decree 773 of 2 March 1919 had to be developed by the MAMPG, did not take place. The detrimental practice of implementing new measures that did not replace but overlapped with the old ones complicated the organization of the entire relief system to such a degree that it continued in the same way as it had during the war.⁴⁷

The vicissitudes of the reform project remained prevalent up until the March on Rome. Mussolini was intent to put an end to all "lasting residues of war." Fascism largely used the war victims' discontent to gain the approval of their associations and delegitimize the liberal institutions. By the end of 1922, most war victims openly supported Mussolini and many local sections of the AN-MIG were already under the influence of the fascist party.⁴⁸ Mussolini was able to establish a direct relationship with the associations. Contrary to the liberal political class, he had already built a connection with veterans and war victims during the conflict,⁴⁹ for example by claiming that he himself had also been "mutilated by war."⁵⁰ The liberal cabinets before him had failed in resolving

⁴⁶ By mid-1919, half of the pensions, about 400,000 of them, still had to be liquidated. By October 1920, almost a year and a half later, that number had only gone down to 101,469 pensions for disabled veterans and 174,677 for widows and orphans. For this reason, Undersecretary Bianchi, on 10 October 1919, issued an internal circular to increase the efforts to expedite the liquidation process. See *Ministero del tesoro, Bollettino dei servizi per l'assistenza militare e le pensioni di guerra* 10 (October 1920), 295-303.

⁴⁷ The government presented a draft in 1921. The bill, which included over 130 articles, had been devised by a group of experts, including Alberto Beneduce, the future director of the fascist industrial recovery program of the 1930s.

⁴⁸ The obvious exception was the socialist *Lega Proletaria*, which was completely swept away by fascist *squadristi* between 1921 and 1922. For more on the crisis and end of the *Lega Proletaria*, see Isola 1990.

⁴⁹ As director of the newspaper *Il popolo d'Italia*, he coined the term *trincerocrazia* (aristocracy of the trenches) in 1917. It was meant to stress the veterans' future role in the reorganization of the Italian nation after the war. For more on this matter, see Mussolini and Trincerocrazia, in *Popolo d'Italia* (15 December 1917), 347. For more on the connections between Mussolini and war veterans, see Sabbatucci 1974; Alcalde 2017.

⁵⁰ Paul O'Brien expressed doubts about the actual seriousness of the war wound, which Mussolini's hagiographical biographies emphasized and exaggerated. In 1917, physicians and politicians, primarily Bissolati, accentuated the gravity of Mussolini's wounds, in order to facilitate Mussolini's withdrawal from the front. For more on the issue, see O'Brien 2002.

the social issue of the war victims, so Mussolini, after the March on Rome, wanted to demonstrate that fascism was capable of honoring the sacrifice of veterans and survivors. Reforming war pensions was the best way to do it and to simultaneously strengthen the link between fascism and the war victims' movement.

Mussolini gave Alfredo Rocco, a future legislator of the fascist dictatorship who had been at the forefront of the founding of the Nationalist Party before the war (cf. Gentile, Lanchester, and Tarquini 2010), the mandate to draft a new law.⁵¹ The resulting pension reform was finally introduced with the Royal Decree 1491 of 23 July 1923. The most evident change, in line with the new fascist vision of the war, was the distinction between combatants and non-combatants (art. 15). The right to a pension went only to those who had fought at the front, while those who had remained in the rear could now only receive a temporary allowance, with a duration varying from two to eight years, or a single allowance, depending on the gravity of the wound. Additionally, a distinction between war being the direct or merely an indirect cause for the injury was introduced. Through this distinction, combatants on the front line and citizens otherwise involved in the war effort, for example members of the military administration or workers employed in war-related sectors of production, were no longer treated in the same way. The social right to a pension was guided by a "hierarchy of heroism." Health care was now only provided to the severely disabled (*grandi invalidi*) with 100% disability. Furthermore, support was automatically granted to veterans who had been wounded on the front lines, without the need for medical control or the necessity to provide documents of any sort. For these cases, the burden of proof was reversed, meaning the state, no longer the relief recipient, was obliged to demonstrate whether there was a direct relationship between disability and the service during the war. Every other citizen involved in the war effort on the other hand, had to pay for the services offered by the ONIG and affiliated structures himself. As not many disabled veterans could pay for hospitalization, surgeries or new prostheses with their pensions or temporary allowances alone, the health care services offered by the state turned into a mirage for most of them.

⁵¹ Before choosing him, Mussolini had given the task to one of the quadrumvirs of the March on Rome, Cesare Maria De Vecchi, whose draft the war victims associations considered to be paternalistic and too authoritarian. De Vecchi, an old right-wing interventionist and nationalist, was convinced that serving in the war was a duty everyone should fulfill without expecting anything in return. As he stated during his time as undersecretary of the Treasury, "the state is not an entrepreneur but a father, and the citizen is not a provider of workforce, but a son, so the father has the right to demand the son to offer up his life for the salvation and greatness of the fatherland and the son has the duty to give it with a smile on his face." Cited in Ministero del tesoro, *Bollettino dei servizi per l'assistenza militare e le pensioni di guerra 11* (November 1921), 311.

Another important issue at hand were the war orphans. Fascism paid much attention to them and to childhood in general, trying immediately after the March on Rome to assume the control of all child relief institutions and thereby coming into conflict with older – and much more culturally embedded – confessional organizations.⁵² The state's support for war orphans was maintained and extended, economic support for legal tutors was prolonged to up until the orphan turned 21. In this regard, fascism continued along the path the liberal governments had embarked upon since wartime, strengthening public intervention and introducing public relief for children and mothers. In 1925, a national care institution was founded, the ONMI (*Opera Nazionale Maternità e Infanzia*), which in many aspects derived directly from the patronage system for war orphans and probably became the most important welfare measure during the fascist dictatorship (Bresci 1993; Bettini 2008).

On the other hand, widows were affected by a reduction of social services and generally became a lesser protected group than they had been before. There was no more public support for the introduction of these women into the labor market, as all positions were now directed towards war invalids. War widows, as well as many other women, were simply excluded from the labor market altogether. Partnerships outside of a marriage, which had heavily increased in the last two years of the conflict, were no longer recognized as a prerequisite for state relief. They were, in fact, no longer compatible with the new fascist society's image of women as “angels of the hearth,” of mothers and wives at home (Saraceno 1995). Also, widows without children, as well as remarried widows,⁵³ were deprived of the allowances they had received in wartime.

The most visible shortcoming of the new set of relief regulations was the absence of the right to an appeal and an arbitration in disputes between relief recipients and the public administration. While the introduction of arbitration chambers was a fundamental achievement in other belligerent countries – because it gave the war victims a defensive weapon against the capriciousness of public offices – in Italy, appeals remained a mere bureaucratic act. A formal complaint against the decisions of medical commissions, the ONIG, or local military offices was possible, but only through an internal administrative commission, in which the relief recipient had no legal representation to defend his rights. This aspect represented the most peculiar element of a relief and pension system, which had made some progress during the end of the war but then completely fell victim to an authoritarian and anachronistic approach. Without

⁵² For more on the mobilization and militarization of childhood during the war, see Guidi 2016, 213-27. For more on the continuity between World War I and the fascist totalitarian state's control of childhood, see Gibelli 2005.

⁵³ Their pension was replaced with a one-time grant, amounting to a year's worth of the previously received pension.

a doubt, the war victim's support as established by Italian fascism was a step back in comparison to other European countries' legislations.

The crisis of the liberal state and the fascist authoritarian social reforms interrupted the development of the Italian welfare state, which had been going through a slow process of modernization between 1915 and 1918. The chaotic situation during wartime and the problems that emerged after the war determined the substantial failure of a wide social reformism in which the policies for disabled veterans and survivors were the battering ram of all future reforms. After the resignation of Bissolati in 1918, and then of Nitti in 1919, there was no more possibility for developing a reformist project. The issue of social reforms was relegated to an abstract debate between legal experts without any real influence on the legislative process. Nitti, during his time as prime minister in 1919, had tried to lay the foundations for a modern welfare state as part of the war's emergency measures (Barbagallo 1984). However, the end of the *union sacrée* between nationalist, conservative, and liberal forces, which had assured the political stability during the war, also marked the end of his social democratic experiment, which had only lasted a few months. As Tommaso Detti noted years ago, Nitti's reform program was breaking up because of the radicalization of social and political conflicts. The balance between rival forces and interests in Italy had been so deeply shocked by the war, any attempt at reforms failed, even if they were particularly innovative (such as the involuntary unemployment insurance of 1919).⁵⁴ However, this situation can also be seen as a continuation of pre-war liberal Italy's stance on the welfare state, when social-policy-measures were mostly used as instruments for exercising power and had no social or political potential (Detti 1984, 929). As Gianni Silei stressed, the Italian welfare state remained stuck in the no man's land between a traditional liberal system of the 19th century and new forms of liberal-democratic relief models, which took off in the aftermath of the Great War (Silei 2004, 415).

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⁵⁴ The Italian law of 1919 provided protection for all employed (of both sexes) between 15 and 65 years of age, including peasants, workers, and employees, with the exception of the public employees, home workers, and domestic service personnel. Only Great Britain had already introduced an insurance against unemployment, which, however, only covered some categories and was not as wide as the Italian model. The labor policies became an internationally debated question after the war, seen by all governments as most destabilizing (see Bauer 1919; for a comparative perspective, see Pironti 2014).

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