
Assistance and Surveillance:

War Refugees in Italy,

1914–1918

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Abstract

This article deals with the forms of assistance given to refugees in Italy during the First World War. The entire subject has been neglected because of the dominant myth of a victorious nation. The Italian situation was peculiar because of the high level of migration and the multi-ethnic origin of people in the border areas. By pinpointing the pattern of relocation in Italy during the war this article seeks to explain the policies pursued by the state and by aid agencies, the rationale behind that aid and the continuities and discontinuities in the assistance given to the refugees. Significant political, juridical and social issues evolved around the image of the refugee, including the protection that the state owed to its citizens.

Introduction

In Italy between 1914 and 1918 a combination of factors – the closing of the borders, military manoeuvres and internment policies toward ‘enemies within’ – brought about the movement of more than a million people. Other belligerent states also witnessed population displacement on a wide scale. However, the Italian situation was distinguished by a high level of pre-war migration, the multi-ethnic character of the borderlands and the authoritarian actions of a ruling class that decided to test the state’s endurance during the war.¹

The vicissitudes of Italy’s ‘war refugees’ have been neglected until recently.² This prolonged silence in the Italian historiography can be explained by the myth of a victorious nation which overshadowed the story of displaced civilians. For a

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¹ Giovanna Procacci, *Dalla Rassegnazione alla rivolta. Mentalità e comportamenti popolari nella grande guerra* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1999), 11–37.

² Bruna Bianchi, ed., *La violenza contro la popolazione civile nella Grande Guerra. Deportati, profughi, internati* (Milan: Unicopli, 2006).

long time the complex experiences of civilians behind the lines were neglected.³ Nevertheless, their history is gradually coming to light. This article does not dwell on the reasons for their 'escape' and on the refugees' living conditions, which have already been examined by other scholars.⁴ Instead, it analyses the structure and forms of the assistance given to the refugees. Indeed, the dimension and characteristics of this wartime displacement implied the 'mobilisation' of material assistance, involving at the same time issues of public order and the state's management of the relationship between refugees and the 'host' communities. By pinpointing the pattern of relocation in Italy during the war, this article seeks to explain the policies pursued by the state and by welfare agencies, the rationale behind that assistance and the continuities and discontinuities in the support given to refugees. Important political, juridical and social issues evolved around the image of the refugee, including those concerning the protection that the state owed to its citizens.

'Forgotten history': war and population movements, 1914–1918

At the outbreak of war in August 1914 about six million Italians were living abroad. The war immediately ruptured the mobility of labour that had been a characteristic feature of Italian society during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The mobilisation of the army, the initial fighting and the transition to a war economy resulted in an almost total, immediate – although not organised – repatriation of about 500,000 Italians from Alsace-Lorraine, the Rhineland, France, the Hapsburg Empire and the Balkans.⁵ Population movements gathered momentum in the period before and after Italy entered the war in May 1915. Surrounded by growing popular hostility and fearing internment, some 86,500 *regnicoli* (the so-called *Reichsitaliener*, or Italian citizens who lived in the Hapsburg lands) left Trento, Trieste, Gorizia, Istria and Dalmatia and sought refuge in Italy. Around 35,000 left Trieste alone.⁶ Among these were irredentist 'political' refugees who supported the Italian cause and voluntarily fled to Italy or deserted from the Austrian army. After Italy's entry into the war, 42,216 civilians, most of them women, children and the elderly, were

³ Franco Cecotti, ed., *'Un esilio che non ha pari'. 1914–1918. Profughi, internati ed emigrati di Trieste, dell'isontino e dell'Istria* (Gorizia: Libreria Editrice Goriziana, 2001), 15.

⁴ Elpidio Ellero, *Storia di un esodo. I friulani dopo la rotta di Caporetto 1917–1919* (Udine: Ifsml, 2001); Anna Paola Peratoner, *Michele Gortani e l'attività assistenziale a favore dei profughi carnici 1917–1919* (Tolmezzo: Museo carnico delle arti popolari, 2004); Daniele Ceschin, *Gli esuli di Caporetto. I profughi in Italia durante la Grande Guerra* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 2006).

⁵ 'L'attività dell'Opera Bonomelli in Germania e nell'Austria Ungheria durante la guerra europea', *Rivista di emigrazione*, 1–2 (1916), 3; Roberto Michels, 'Cenni sulle migrazioni e sul movimento di popolazione durante la guerra europea', *La Riforma Sociale*, 1 (1917), 22–3; Ministero Agricoltura Industria e Commercio, *Dati statistici sui rimpatriati per causa di guerra e sulla disoccupazione* (Rome: Ufficio del lavoro, 1915), 14.

⁶ Neva Biondi, 'Regnicoli. Storie di sudditi italiani nel litorale austriaco durante la prima guerra mondiale', in Cecotti, *'Un esilio che non ha pari'*, 52; Brunello Vigezzi, 'L'Italia del 1914–15, la pace, la guerra', *XIXe et XX siècles* (Rome: Collection de l'École française de Rome, 1991), 248–65.

expelled from Austria–Hungary and repatriated through Switzerland; Italian officials termed them ‘repatriates’ (*rimpatriati*).⁷

During May and June 1915, Italian troops occupied Austrian territories and evacuated civilians, ethnic Italians, citizens of the Habsburg Empire. Some of them were labelled as ‘refugees’ by military authorities and were evacuated because they were living too close to the battlefield; others were considered to be ‘internees’ – civilians who were sent away from those territories and compelled to take permanent residence in Italy, since they jeopardised military security. In 1915 the Italian military authorities managed the evacuation of about 52,000 people from these areas, including 10,000 from the mountain area of Friuli, 12,000 civilians of Slavic origin from the Isonzo valleys and another 30,000 from the border areas of Veneto, Trentino and Lombardy.⁸ To these figures should be added 3,000–5,000 Italian-speaking Austrian civilians from the occupied areas who had been interned by the Italian military authorities, either because of the ‘spy psychosis’ or because of a denationalising project that entailed the forced removal of civil and religious bodies believed to be loyal to the Habsburg monarchy. In the Austrian lands, meanwhile, around 100,000 ethnic Italians who were citizens of the Habsburg Empire were interned in Bohemia, Moravia and Lower Austria.⁹

The military manoeuvres following the establishment of the Italian–Austrian front in the north-eastern Alps had a deep impact on civilians behind the lines. In May 1916 the Austrian *Strafexpedition* on the Asiago plateau brought about the evacuation of about 110,000 people. However, the defeat at Caporetto made the refugee a familiar figure in the country as a whole. Between 25 and 28 October 1917, Austrian and German forces broke through the Italian lines and succeeded in occupying the areas of Udine, Belluno and part of Treviso, Venice and Vicenza. One million soldiers and half a million civilians fled.

These population movements have been neglected because of the dominant myth of a victorious nation and the wish to forget the defeat at Caporetto: Fascist Italy exalted the courage of soldiers, while refugees represented defeat. Being predominantly women and children they did not symbolise a victorious (and masculine) ‘nation at war’. Mainly focused on the battle zone and the home front, Italian historians did not analyse the phenomenon of mass displacement in the border zones.¹⁰

⁷ Commissario Civile Milano a Ministero Interni, 22 June 1915, no. 21393, Ministero degli Interni, Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza, Divisione Polizia Giudiziaria 1914–1915 (hereafter Mi. Dgps. Pg 1913–15), b. 188, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Rome (hereafter ACS).

⁸ Elpidio Ellero, ‘Autorità militare italiana e popolazione civile nell’Udinese (maggio 1915–ottobre 1917). Sfollamenti coatti ed internamenti’, *Storia Contemporanea in Friuli*, 29 (1998), 9–108.

⁹ Giorgio and Sara Milocco, *Fratelli d’Italia’. Gli internamenti degli italiani nelle ‘terre liberate’ durante la grande guerra* (Udine: Gaspari, 2002); Paolo Malni, ‘Evacuati e fuggiaschi dal fronte dell’Isonzo. I profughi della Grande Guerra in Austria e in Italia’, in Cecotti, *‘Un esilio che non ha pari’*, 99–102.

¹⁰ Mario Isnenghi, *Il mito della grande guerra* (Bari: Laterza, 1970); Antonio Gibelli, *Il popolo bambino. Infanzia e nazione dalla Grande Guerra a Salò* (Turin: Einaudi, 2005); Maria Casalini, ‘I socialisti e le donne. Dalla “mobilitazione pacifista” alla mobilitazione postbellica’, *Italia Contemporanea*, 222 (2001), 7.

The test of 1914

The return of the emigrants in August 1914 represented the first important testing ground for public and private assistance because of its sudden character. It foreshadowed issues that emerged later in the war. As soon as Italian consulates reported the emigrants' difficult situation, Prime Minister Antonio Salandra entrusted the *Commissariato Generale dell'Emigrazione* (the General Committee for Emigration) with their repatriation. The ministry of the interior was charged with the task of moving the workers to their original municipal districts and offering them financial assistance.¹¹ But border guards reported the size and rate of the return movement (running at between 2,000 and 5,000 daily), and stressed that unemployed people could subvert public order.¹²

The lack of government preparation brought to the fore the activities of socialist and Catholic organisations (the *Società Umanitaria* and the *Opera Bonomelli*) which had been devoted to the protection of emigrants since the beginning of the century. These activities were largely confined to the main railway stations in Milan, Turin, Udine, Padua and Verona. For example, in Milan, the co-ordination between the *Umanitaria*, the *Bonomelli* and the town council allowed the transit and the settlement for a few days of over 120,000 emigrants in August and September 1914. Thanks to private donations, more than 50,000 meals as well as medicine, shoes and garments were provided for the poorest people. The emergency caused by those returning was believed to be both exceptional and temporary. As it happened, most emigrants had a home to which they could return. The main problem was a lack of work. Meanwhile, only a handful of these repatriates could be defined as 'refugees' in the sense of being deprived of their possessions and being made homeless.

All the same, the fear of disorder prompted a repressive response by the police and the army in the north-eastern part of the country that was most affected by the repatriations. In September 1914 there were some popular riots, and unemployed immigrants demanded 'bread and work'. Through the ministry of the interior the Italian government tried to devolve the task of assistance to the local authorities. The ministry sent prefects to assess the number of distressed repatriates and to provide basic relief funds. The civil authorities and some members of the middle class responded enthusiastically, by collecting promises of funds and by setting up committees. In many north-eastern cities assistance was provided by the emigration secretariats, parishes and municipalities, which provided household goods, subsidised food, kitchens, night shelters and other accommodation. The provision of this assistance reflected traditional practice, that is to say it was temporary aid given according to family status and age: the town councils and local charities drew up lists of people and provided discretionary relief. The aid given by the municipalities did not have a universal character; it favoured the residents, and it was temporary; refugees received funds from charities.¹³

¹¹ 'L'opera d'assistenza agli emigrati italiani in Francia durante la prima fase della guerra', *Rivista di Emigrazione*, 2 (1915), 63–4.

¹² Prefetto Udine a Ministero Interni, 3 Aug. 1914, no. 5498, Copia Lettere, ACS.

¹³ Ministero Interni a Prefetti, 21 Aug. 1914, no. 28685, Mi. Dgps. Pg 1913–1915, b. 13, ACS.

The criteria for receiving support from a socialist organisation such as the Umanitaria were very strict, requiring enrolment in the organisation and a certificate of previous employment. Funds were given only after formal application to the organisation.¹⁴ Generally, the subsidies were paid as vouchers to be used in council kitchens, in order to prevent idleness, ‘vice’ and undue demands on funds. Meanwhile, the crisis of employment encouraged widespread antipathy towards workers. For example, newspapers usually portrayed the ‘unemployed poor’ as idle and potentially dangerous. In the popular imagination the refugees were assigned to this category.

During the winter of 1914–15 the inadequacy of the municipal and private charities, together with riots in north-eastern regions caused by shortages of food and work, forced the central government to intervene by providing subsidies, public works programmes and food rationing. These measures were late and ineffective and reflected a wish to appease the rioters and to support the military mobilisation.¹⁵ The crisis highlighted the importance of the local administrators and the private organisations as mediators between the state and the people. This difficult relationship helped to consolidate two traditional tools for mass control and the prevention of disorder, namely public works (schools, roads, aqueducts, shipways etc.) and government subsidies. Public works started in March 1915 but ended when Italy entered the war two months later. On the other hand, the administrative management favoured the political criteria. The ‘prefects’ – employees of the minister of the interior that, since unification, co-ordinated state activities, monitored local government and ensured the maintenance of public order – were preferred to the technical organisations of the age of Giolitti (Ufficio del Lavoro, the Central Labour Bureau, and Uffici di collocamento provinciali, or county employment agencies). By entrusting ‘prefects’ with the interpretation of the law, the emergency anticipated the centralising and authoritarian trends which would arise during the war. Thus the first months of war, characterised by suspicion and repression, were associated with a policy of assistance that hinged upon the need to maintain public order in the interest of national security. The criteria for assistance were in the first instance governed by political rather than humanitarian considerations.

Discontinuities of war, 1915–1917

During summer 1915 a precise division of responsibility between military and civilian authorities for managing displaced civilians was established. Full powers were given to the government and the general staff headquarters respectively. The front line was managed by the General Secretariat for Civil Affairs, which registered, selected and re-located refugees, internees and evacuees. Meanwhile the rest of the country was ruled by the ministry of the interior, whose ‘prefects’ sorted and controlled the refugees.

¹⁴ *Gli uffici di collocamento, la Cassa di sussidio alla disoccupazione e il loro contributo all'assistenza ai disoccupati per la guerra nel 1915* (Milan: s.n.t., 1917), 8–14.

¹⁵ Matteo Ermacora, *Un anno difficile: Buja tra pace e guerra. Agosto 1914–maggio 1915* (Udine: El Tomât, 2000).

In this respect the government relied on the municipalities and local civil assistance committees, these latter embodying the patriotic mobilisation of the middle classes.

The criteria for evacuation corresponded to the need for military security immediately behind the lines. Those civilians evacuated from the Isonzo front, after a short stay behind the lines were sent to Novara, Florence and Parma, from which they were subsequently allocated to virtually every Italian region and in particular to Lombardy, Piedmont, Tuscany, Campania, Umbria and Sicily. The authorities adopted a dual strategy. On the one hand they created 'colonies' of 100–300 people, supported by the state and living in schools, barracks, convents and council buildings. On the other, they relocated small groups of refugees who became self-sufficient thanks to a daily government subsidy. These decisions, often arbitrary, generated confusion, mistrust and even outright hostility among the host populations. Groups of 'political exiles' and irredentists set up autonomous committees, such as 'Trento-Trieste', to promote the Italian cause. They were subject to strict police control.¹⁶

The government failed to anticipate the difficulties of managing the refugees. In December 1915 Prime Minister Antonio Salandra eventually admitted to the Chamber of Deputies that assistance to refugees and internees had been randomly organised, since expectations of a short-lived war had convinced the government and the army to take only temporary measures rather than to work out an 'organic' and centralised plan of assistance. Salandra had appealed to elite social groups and to the middle classes to assist the families of the recalled reservists, as well as the wounded, the disabled ex-servicemen and the refugees through the organisation of the aforementioned civil assistance committees.¹⁷ During the first two years of war, assistance was managed by individual committees and charities which, together with the municipalities, organised housing, gave small subsidies and tried to find some employment for the refugees. However, as surveys from 1916 revealed, this assistance was weak and fragmented, since it depended on local initiatives and on the work of single individuals. The subsidies were not homogeneous. They were often unjustifiably revoked, especially for the employed. Furthermore, the relocation process was often incomplete and the housing system left much to be desired, especially in the south.¹⁸ Assistance was subject to cost constraints because the municipalities tried to save money and disliked the idea of relieving refugees. Private associations and charities had only a limited role, whereas the 'prefects' and the military authorities took care of registering the population and managed the funds as a means of social control.¹⁹

¹⁶ Malni, 'Evacuati', 134–6.

¹⁷ Andrea Fava, 'Assistenza e propaganda nel regime di guerra (1915–1918)', in Mario Isnenghi, ed., *Operai e contadini nella grande guerra* (Bologna: Cappelli, 1982), 187.

¹⁸ Relazione sull'andamento del servizio profughi, 24 Aug. 1916, fasc. 1051, Caserta, Ministero dell'Interno, Direzione generale di pubblica sicurezza, divisione polizia giudiziaria amministrativa e sociale, Profughi e internati di guerra (1915–20) (hereafter PIG), b. 23, ACS.

¹⁹ Fiammetta Auciello, 'I profughi a Milano: i censimenti, le commissioni, i patronati', in *I friulani durante l'invasione. Da Caporetto a Vittorio Veneto* (Udine: Arti Grafiche, 1999), 62–4.

The Austrian *Strafexpedition* of May 1916 changed this picture, because refugees now became a mass phenomenon.²⁰ Henceforth the ‘prefects’ and municipal authorities were involved more deeply in assistance to refugees. Notwithstanding the plethora of committees and municipal commissions devoted to the assistance of the refugees, the money provided by the civil assistance committees in 1916 and 1917 was very low. In all refugees received less than 800,000 lira, compared to the 59 million lira given to the families of the recalled reservists; in per capita terms the subsidies were miserly.²¹

In general, as the committees claimed, the voluntary contributions were insufficient in north and south alike, especially in the towns, where need far outstripped the available contributions.²² The government urgently needed to pay more attention to the ‘refugee question’. In July 1916 groups of political refugees demanded the creation of a central council for refugees, as well as an increase in subsidies and the possibility of moving out of the unhealthy and poorest areas of southern Italy. Nevertheless, the government acted only slowly. Only in October 1917 did it establish a central committee for the refugees, and the defeat at Caporetto prevented it from starting work. Even then, the military and police authorities retained control of the refugee population.²³

The emergency phase, November–December 1917

The defeat at Caporetto turned this displacement into a matter of national importance. After October 1917 about 500,000 refugees arrived in the country by train or on foot. They were tired, sick, frightened and badly lacking essentials. The difficult military situation and the fear of ‘defeatist’ propaganda led the government to keep the refugees out of big cities such as Rome and Bologna and to prevent them from travelling to destinations that had not been approved by police authorities. This first phase of ‘assisted segregation’ was followed by the government’s creation of a more widespread system of assistance.²⁴

The ‘Caporetto refugees’ found very little housing, as a result of which communities and families were scattered throughout the country. The census conducted in September 1918 showed that Lombardy took in 98,997 refugees and Tuscany 83,036, followed by Emilia with 78,417, Piedmont with 62,869 and Liguria with 32,175. Others moved to the central and southern regions; Milan and Florence received 47,614 and 39,741 refugees respectively. Schools, convents, hotels, summer camps, barracks and factories were commandeered or rented by the state on behalf

²⁰ Daniele Ceschin, ‘I profughi vicentini durante la Strafexpedition. Appunti storiografici ed ipotesi interpretative’, *Venetica*, 6 (2002), 93–121.

²¹ Commissariato generale per l’assistenza civile e la propaganda interna, *Notizie sull’assistenza civile in Italia nel secondo anno di guerra* (Rome: Bertero, 1919), 52.

²² Siena. Relazioni e rapporti, fasc. 1059.1, Commissariato generale assistenza civile e propaganda interna (hereafter AP), b. 11, ACS.

²³ Malni, ‘Evacuati’, 143.

²⁴ Roberta Corbellini, ‘I profughi friulani dopo Caporetto. Un quadro delle vicende attraverso le fonti archivistiche’, in *I friulani*, 43.

of the refugees. Those who could rely on friends or acquaintances or who were economically self-supporting were allowed to go where they wished.

The distribution of the refugees was preceded by intense activity in Treviso, Vicenza, Milan, Turin, Florence and Bologna. Once again, the emergency was mainly managed by the socialist and Catholic organisations, while the state entrusted the ‘prefects’ with the distribution of aid. Voluntary committees, parish organisations and civil assistance committees again became involved. As in Milan during 1914, the Opera Bonomelli, the Umanitaria and the Red Cross accommodated refugees (by now numbering 200,000), providing them with clothes, shoes, milk and hot meals. Particular attention was paid to the care of the many children who had been separated from their parents during the flight.²⁵ Subsequently these agencies arranged for accommodation, and thanks to a close network of parishes and trade union branches, they set up offices to trace missing persons and to disseminate news that might be useful to the refugees.²⁶

Assistance committees: between solidarity, patriotism and middle-class activism

The displacement of people on this scale prompted a collaborative effort that involved the working class and middle class alike. The donations collected during November and December 1917 were publicised in the press and suggested that local trade unions, workers’ associations, parish congregations, professional bodies, publishers, soldiers, officers and emigrants sought to demonstrate their solidarity with the ‘fugitive brothers’ following Caporetto.²⁷ Many committees arose thanks to the patriotic impetus given by the middle classes: the Comitato Trofarellesse Pro Profughi (Turin), the Comitato di Soccorso di Pontevecchio (Brescia), the Segretariato assistenza profughi Arezzo were just a few of the hundreds of agencies that assisted the refugees, thus partially compensating for the delay and inefficiency of state support.²⁸ Soon these organisations were joined by municipal committees in cities such as Milan and Florence, as well as by the American Red Cross, the civil assistance committees and Catholic organisations.²⁹ The relief efforts became part of wartime mobilisation and resistance to the invader.

Refugees, too, organised their own associations, often led by deputies, administrators or people who came from the aristocracy or from the middle classes. They provided assistance and also worked to improve relations between the refugees and the host population. The north-easterners who fled in October 1917 now

²⁵ Daniele Ceschin, ‘Le condizioni delle donne profughe e dei bambini dopo Caporetto’, in *DEP. Deportate, esuli, profughe. Rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile*, 1 (2004), 23–44, available at www.unive.it/dep.

²⁶ Società Umanitaria Milano, *L’Umanitaria e la sua opera* (Milan: Tipografia degli Operai, 1922), 428; Opera Bonomelli, *Relazione del lavoro compiuto dall’Opera durante il triennio di guerra 1916–1918* (Milan: s.n.t., 1919); Michele Dean, ‘I profughi a Milano: la città, l’assistenza’, in *I friulani*, 77–92.

²⁷ ‘Terzo elenco delle offerte in denaro pervenute alla Società Umanitaria in favore dei profughi’, *L’Umanitaria per i profughi*, 20 Dec. 1917.

²⁸ Prefetto Como a Commissione per assistenza e propaganda, 27 Nov. 1917, no. 4167, fasc. 23, Como, Alto Commissariato per i profughi 1917–1919 (hereafter AC), b. 1, ACS.

²⁹ Ceschin, *Esuli*, 71–94; Peratoner, *Gortani*, 57–63.

‘discovered’ Italy for the first time. Having been accustomed to migrating abroad, they knew Habsburg territories better than they did Italy. As in France, refugees were represented by newspapers as ‘heroic’ victims of the barbarian. The occupied territory was portrayed as a ‘martyred land’ in which ‘slavery’ had become the norm. The patriotism of refugees was indicated by the image of ‘exile into homeland’, with flight as a conscious choice. Italian refugees were likened to the ‘French brethren’ who fled from Artois and Picardy.³⁰ Refugee elites portrayed themselves both as ‘sons of the motherland’ and as affiliated with the ‘little homelands’ of Friuli and Veneto. In turn, newspapers and government propaganda framed assistance to refugees as an act of solidarity and brotherhood which helped to strengthen the country’s resolve and reconstruct national identity. Humanitarian intervention could thus be construed as an essential patriotic and moral duty.³¹

It is impossible to enumerate the multitude of Catholic and lay associations that, with financial support from the government, took part in this activity. The surviving documentation reveals that their actions were usually the same, namely to find buildings and then to notify the government, and to supply food, clothing and household goods. Once the initial emergency had been tackled, there were numerous other tasks to perform: to register the most needy cases, to distribute financial support, to open co-operative stores and to contact local and central government authorities for funds and employment on behalf of the refugees.³² These associations were extremely skilful at fund raising since they already had contacts with the local authorities and notables, as in Caserta, Busto Arsizio, Pesaro, Ascoli, Benevento and Massa Carrara, where they collected pledges for thousands of lire.³³ The figures conceal a mountain of paperwork as well as the need to become familiar with the law and with the operation of the bureaucracy. State controls became more extensive in 1918 as the government sought to avoid committing any more funds than were necessary. Municipal committees favoured immediate material assistance and regarded employment as secondary.³⁴ Municipal kitchens and shops were set up to address the lack of food supplies. Tracing missing persons was another important function.³⁵ In many respects the committees operated along traditional charitable lines that dated back to the nineteenth century. At the same time the war introduced new features, such as the development of a bureaucratic structure which was not only larger but capable of dealing with a multitude of tasks through a functional division of labour.³⁶

³⁰ See Pierre Purseigle’s article, ‘A Wave on to Our Shores’: The Exile and Resettlement of Refugees from the Western Front, 1914–1918’, in this issue.

³¹ Ceschin, *Esuli*, 50–54.

³² Relazione sull’opera svolta a favore dei profughi da parte del comitato provinciale di Terra di Lavoro, 30 Sept. 1919, fasc. 572, PIG, b. 7, ACS.

³³ Prefetto di Massa a Alto Commissariato, 28 Dec. 1917, no. 13250, fasc. 39, Massa Carrara, Ac, b. 2, ACS.

³⁴ Patronato profughi. *L’opera del patronato profughi di guerra di Busto Arsizio* (Busto Arsizio: Tip. Labadini e Colombo, 1919), 9; *L’opera del Patronato profughi di Bari* (Bari: Tip. Panzini, 1920), 6.

³⁵ L’azione svolta dal Segretariato provinciale di Ancona delle Opere Federate (ottobre 1917–marzo 1919), 8 Apr. 1919, fasc. 1086. 2, Ancona, AP, b. 13, ACS.

³⁶ Patronato profughi Pesaro. *Relazione sull’opera svolta dal patronato dal 10 novembre 1917 al 31 maggio 1919* (Pesaro: Tip. Nobili, 1919), fasc. 370, Pesaro, PIG, b. 20, ACS.

Once the emergency phase had passed, the committees lost much of their purpose and autonomy.³⁷ Some committees were dissolved while others were turned over to *patronati* (municipal relief organisations created by the decree of 3 January 1918), thus entering the state's assistance structure. During the first months of 1918 only the most effective associations continued to exist. At the same time one can identify something of a 'crusading spirit' that entailed asserting social, moral and political authority over the assisted people. Indeed, members of the middle and upper-middle classes stirred up emotional participation, which was determined by the desire for security, order and social cohesion.³⁸ Most committees were inspired and supported by women, who regarded this work as an opportunity to demonstrate their effective participation in the 'nation at war' and thus to advance the cause of 'emancipation'. Even though the committee presidents were male, women often played an important role in the executive, in interpreting legislation, in arranging for the distribution of medicines and clothing, visiting the sick, taking care of women and children in hospitals and stations, and arranging schooling and leisure activities within the 'colonies' (schools, abandoned factories, public buildings or barracks where hundreds of refugees were accommodated). Aristocratic and upper-middle-class women committed themselves to traditional charitable works such as fund-raising, inspections and visits.

Women therefore played a role that, although represented as a natural extension of their family role, also entailed a new public presence that was legitimised by the national war effort; the war increased women's visibility and accelerated their professionalisation, for example in social work and public health.³⁹ Middle-class women were particularly sensitive to the patriotic rhetoric. They participated in the local committees as a kind of political 'militancy' while working within a well-defined political and symbolic framework. The secretary of a civil assistance committee spoke in August 1918 of the 'Love of one's country and fraternal charity towards those who suffered most in that unfortunate October. One's holy duty is to resist at all costs the enemy who is offending our country'.⁴⁰

The government's intervention: light and shade

The defeat at Caporetto sanctioned government intervention in the system of refugee relief. The new government formed by Vittorio Emanuele Orlando faced the hard task of reorganising the country after the catastrophe and aiding the fugitives, which was now construed as a 'national duty'. This reflected in part a campaign by refugee deputies from Veneto and Friuli, who set up a Parliamentary Committee of Veneto

³⁷ Comune di San Giovanni Valdarno a Alto Commissariato, 15 Feb. 1918, no. 22847, fasc. 6, Arezzo, Ac, b. 1, ACS; Avellino, Relazioni e rapporti, fasc. 1086.6. Avellino, AP, b.10, ACS.

³⁸ Giovanna Procacci, 'Aspetti della mentalità collettiva durante la guerra. L'Italia dopo Caporetto', in Diego Leoni and Camillo Zadra, eds., *La Grande Guerra. Esperienza memoria immagini* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1986), 277.

³⁹ Stefania Bartoloni, *Italiane alla guerra. L'assistenza ai feriti 1915–1918* (Venice: Marsilio, 2003); Barbara Curli, *Italiane al lavoro 1914–1920* (Venice: Marsilio, 1998).

⁴⁰ Federazione nazionale opere assistenza Milano a Federazione Orsanmichele, 3 Aug. 1918, Archivio comunale di Gemona del Friuli (hereafter ACG), b. 322.

as the French had done when Germans invaded northern departments. On 18 November 1917 Orlando established a Refugee High Commissariat in order ‘to provide war refugees with moral and material assistance’ as well as to reconstruct the economy of the ‘invaded areas’.⁴¹

The Commissariat was ratified by a circular on 10 January 1918, which acknowledged the juridical status of the ‘war refugees’, who were entitled to state assistance, and reorganised the relief provided by ‘prefects’ and committees. From a legal point of view, ‘refugees’ were those who had fled following the enemy invasion of October 1917, as well as the evacuated populations living near the front and the other groups of refugees who had already been living in Italy since 1915–16, namely the political refugees (*fuoriusciti irredenti*), evacuees from the war zone, repatriates and civilians who had escaped from the Austrian *Strafexpedition* in the Asiago Plateau (Vicenza). Assistance was also granted to all serving soldiers who came from the invaded territories.⁴² The new provisions included a daily subsidy as well as household goods and food, based on the number of family members. The neediest refugees were also entitled to medicine and free medical care. Further provision was made for education, relocation and employment. The continuous subsidy represented a departure from established practice, since it was envisaged as a compensation for the moral and material damages caused by the war, and not as a mere means of survival. The 3 January decree regulated the local assistance system: the *patronati* in the municipalities where the refugees resided were responsible for paying the subsidies, assisting children and the elderly, arranging food supplies and employment. The aid agencies were not autonomous, since they depended on the prefects, who funded them and selected the staff. In this way, the authority of the prefects and the bureaucratic control structure were preserved within the state assistance system.

This programme of assistance brought about a considerable increase in public expenditure. The overall cost for the refugees in the 1918–19 financial year amounted to 435 million lire, equivalent to 1.5 per cent of the total national budget.⁴³ In June 1918 the minister of the treasury, Francesco Saverio Nitti, attempted to cut the costs, but his proposal was withdrawn following protests by the refugees and the High Commissariat. His attempt demonstrated that during 1918 the refugees were no longer regarded as ‘heroes’ and ‘patriots’, but as a ‘burden’. Henceforth, in order to lessen the financial effort, employment was considered compulsory and became the main criterion for assessing entitlement to the subsidies, which after 13 September 1918 were given only to the poorest families.

A congress of refugee committees in Florence in June 1918 discussed the crisis in assistance. The representatives demanded greater public recognition, more financial resources and the decentralisation of administration. They complained that the

⁴¹ D. lgt. no. 1897, 18 Nov. 1917.

⁴² *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, no. 3, 3 Jan. 1918; no. 15, 18 Jan. 1918.

⁴³ Commissione parlamentare d’inchiesta sulle spese di guerra, *Il costo finanziario della guerra*, 16–17; 119–20, Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, *Guerra europea 1915–1918*, b. 189, ACS.

government's efforts were still 'insufficient' and random, and even 'lacking' in some places. Bureaucracy remained excessive. The work of the 'prefects' was criticised not only because of their discretionary power when dealing with funds and relocation, but also because of their increasingly oppressive attitude towards refugees.⁴⁴ Against this background, refugees' self-organisation and the setting up of co-operative stores may be interpreted as an attempt at self-preservation, since the 'prefects' tended to minimise the material problems suffered by the refugees. The prefects regarded public order as their priority, intervening only in case of conflicts between the refugees and their host communities. Such conflicts became more common during 1918, when food shortages and the strains of the war effort created a more hostile atmosphere in which refugees were often identified with the enemy (*austriacanti* and *tedeschi*).

Refugees and charitable institutions

Refugees asked for help and support from public and private institutions. Their letters to the lowest levels of the assistance system are an important indicator of how charities functioned and of the relationship between the state and its citizens.⁴⁵ The first step of the bureaucratic procedure was for the refugee to be recognised through a certificate or an identification card. These letters show how bureaucratic the assistance system had become. They also reflect cursory knowledge of the legal system. The refugees' ability to get help depended not only on their social status, but also on their ability to access information and to work out appropriate tactics, for example asking for subsidies from the charity committee, the prefect, the local deputy or the High Commissariat, at the various levels of the assistance system.

The refugees lived in conditions of social isolation and powerlessness. This emerges especially in the letters written by women when they asked for help: 'But I am a refugee, therefore explain how I should go about it.'⁴⁶ Refugees' contact with private and state institutions was continuous, since without their support refugees were unable to get the necessary funds or goods. This relationship requires further analysis; if, on the one hand, refugees expressed satisfaction with the work done by the committees, then on the other hand many of them complained about their incompetence and inadequacy. Refugees criticised the 'great confusion' of the paperwork, the discretionary powers and the class-based policy of intervention and the attitude of the staff. The committees themselves admitted to a certain amount of discretionary power: in Pesaro, for example, the committee gave supplementary funds to well-off refugees. Relations with government offices were also difficult and hampered by the fact that, as one refugee wrote, the employees in the humanitarian aid offices came from public security forces, and refugees did not want to be considered as criminals or thieves, but simply as citizens who needed help. 'Prefects' and state officials were accused of being partial, of turning a deaf ear and of wasting money. Refugees

⁴⁴ Ellero, *Esodo*, 19.

⁴⁵ Ceschin, *Esuli*, 175–86.

⁴⁶ The quotations in this paragraph, from refugees' letters from November 1917 to November 1918, are from bb. 317, 321, 322, 323, ACG.

complained about the lack of communication from state officials and the prejudice they demonstrated. Thus government became the target of considerable hostility.⁴⁷

The voices of the refugees show how they claimed the right to assistance. They thus reveal the beginning of a new relationship with the state. This attitude emerged when they showed that laws were not being respected or that they were being interpreted in a partial fashion. Their letters and petitions were suffused by a moral claim that the state should be fully aware of its responsibilities. One finds such statements as ‘it is owed to me’ and ‘I too have the right to be granted assistance’, which not only expressed a need but also the assertion of a right that was denied or at least delayed.⁴⁸

Soldiers from Veneto and Friuli denounced the poor living conditions of their refugee relatives and the hostility of the host communities; ‘They are treated like Austrians’, read one letter. The discomfort was felt especially by those who had prior experience of work abroad: inadequate assistance seemed to confirm their country’s inability to find them work in their homeland, while at the same time it expected them to fight in the trenches. This kind of criticism showed how the relationship between assistance and citizenship was being examined: ‘Why can’t I get this? Am I not Italian?’ The same point was made by a refugee from Friuli in Militello (Messina, Sicily): ‘Why have the other refugees in the northern areas been supplied? Aren’t we in the same conditions and lacking everything in the same way? Don’t we belong to same country? We think so.’ Others claimed equality: ‘I think I am Italian at least like any other Italian.’ Thus beyond the public debates the refugees’ letters from Veneto and Friuli underlined that they saw aid as a duty from the government, particularly because the border regions suffered more than the others. Refugees moved beyond their individual needs to a form of collective protest, seeing in the charitable institutions the damaged image of the state that should have granted them sufficient protection and assistance.⁴⁹

Conclusions

After Caporetto, the atmosphere of suspicion, economic difficulties and the lack of consideration for the plight of the refugees affected policies and their outcomes. What also became apparent was the heterogeneity of the refugees, their political, social and ethnic differences. The uncertain distinction between ‘refugees’ and ‘internees’ strengthened an inquisitorial attitude on the part of a government that was more concerned with public security than with humanitarian intervention. Whereas in France refugee relief became part of the immediate mobilisation, in Italy emigrants and subsequently refugees were considered as an inconvenient and unforeseeable ‘by-product’ of the war, undeserving of attention in either political or economical terms. This attitude did not change after the defeat of Caporetto, when they were used from a purely propagandistic point of view to sustain the home front. By November and December 1917 the image of the refugee as a heroic victim of German warfare became a means of resisting the invasion and concealing the defeat. However, the

⁴⁷ Ellero, *Esodo*, 188–90.

⁴⁸ Luigi Fabiani to commissario prefettizio, 14 Aug. 1918, ACG, b.323.

⁴⁹ The quotations are taken from bb.321; 322; 323 ACG. See also Ceschin, *Esuli*, 206–10.

Italian people were deeply divided and the flight of refugees increased the strains in society. The history of Italian refugee relief in wartime showed the lack of national integration, the strength of regional cultures and the division between the lower and upper classes over the war.

Given the deteriorating economic conditions, the assistance provided to refugees was insufficient. The problem was compounded by the delegation of responsibility to private charities and the random resettlement of the displaced population. Ethnically non-Italian refugees suffered particular hardship, but all refugees were marginalised. Their random relocation hindered the provision of assistance. Their place in the host communities was particularly precarious; at end of the summer of 1918 half a million refugees were reduced to poverty. Living conditions were better in the towns, where it was easier to find work or welfare. In the countryside, especially in the south, institutional support was weaker and less well organised.⁵⁰ Free health care was frequently unavailable, thus fomenting complaints by the charitable institutions.⁵¹ The mortality rate among the refugees was a third higher than that of the rest of the population because of influenza, tuberculosis and malaria, not to mention cases of malnutrition and physical deterioration.⁵² Refugees who had been lodged in private houses were also subject to rent speculation, while in the seaside areas they had to endure evictions. Communal life in the 'colonies' was no less difficult. In spite of the idyllic pictures produced by government propaganda, national solidarity was at odds with selfish interests that the compliant attitude of the authorities did nothing to counteract. In summer 1918 refugees were barely tolerated; they had simply become extra mouths to feed.⁵³

In 1915–16 the problems arising from the relationship between limited funds and employment opportunities had not been resolved: whoever worked was deprived of the subsidy, and therefore the refugees preferred to settle for the state subsidies. The problem got worse in 1917–18, when insufficient funds and budget cuts required that the refugees find work. But work was hard to come by. Refugees were accused of lingering on 'barren and corruptive idleness' and subjected to increasing control.⁵⁴ The state resorted to blackmail and punitive measures; the repeated threat of the revocation of the subsidies became a cause of deep resentment. In 1918 the mayors and the 'prefects' invited the refugees to 'be quiet' and to accept the funds given 'otherwise they will not even get what they had been already given'.⁵⁵

At first seen as a means of support, following Caporetto the subsidies also represented moral and material compensation. However, the relationship between assistance and citizenship remained uncertain. In 1917 refugees were now acknowledged as juridical figures, protected by the law. This was an important step even though the refugee had to be familiar with the law in order to secure recognition. There was thus a more conscious relationship between the refugees and

⁵⁰ Ceschin, *Esuli*, 132–6; 152–5.

⁵¹ 'Assistenza medica e medicina', *L'Umanitaria per i profughi*, 23 Jul. 1918.

⁵² Ceschin, *Esuli*, 131.

⁵³ Italo Scottoni, 'L'assistenza a i profughi', *La Libertà*, 21 Sept. 1918.

⁵⁴ 'Il lavoro dei profughi', *L'Umanitaria per i profughi*, 27 May 1918.

⁵⁵ Lettera di Francesco Bellina a Commissario Prefettizio, 1 May 1918, b. 322, ACG.

the government, a relationship which was mediated by politics (charitable institutions, mayors, deputies). However, the frequent instances of class-based attitudes and discrimination – linked to the idea of the poor as a potential danger to social order – caused deep divisions among the refugee population. The rhetoric of unity and brotherhood was at odds with the indifference of the government, the lack of funds and the priority given to the war effort. The growing strains created tensions between refugees, the host population and the government. At the same time displacement contributed, as in France, to recognising a right to state relief.

The role played by the committees was essential, because they narrowed the gap between refugees and the government; in this respect the Umanitaria and the Opera Bonomelli stood out, their work continuing after the war. Meanwhile the co-operation of the middle classes anticipated the ‘permanent mobilisation’ of the Fascist years. The High Commissariat lacked sufficient financial resources in order to work effectively; it was torn between budgetary policies, bureaucratic centralisation and the desire to ensure public order.⁵⁶ The impact of assistance therefore depended on a multitude of overlapping organisations that acted separately and hindered each other. On the one hand, verticalism and excessive bureaucracy made the system cumbersome; on the other hand, the arrangements allowed for improvisation and personal initiative, thus increasing the discretionary power of assistance and the continued dependence of the refugees on public and private institutions.

⁵⁶ Ellero, *Esodo*, 16–17; Peratoner, *Gortani*, 45.