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## Propaganda and the Italian Battle for Wheat

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## Propaganda and the Italian Battle for Wheat

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### Abstract

Using propaganda from the 1920s and 1930s, as well as other primary sources, I will examine how the methodology and implementation of the Battle for Wheat shows that the policy was never meant to provide true economic benefit to Italy but instead was a ploy to uphold a weak fascist regime. Despite Italy's reliance on imports to satisfy their demand for wheat, Mussolini sought ways to make Italy self-sufficient in wheat production, which led him to create the policy. It was enforced that farmers cultivate wheat in all parts of Italy regardless of what region they resided or what crop they typically farmed. The results of the study show that the policy was harmful to Italian agriculture and its economy, creating harmful effects like environmental degradation, decreased crop diversity, and economic inefficiency which still impact Italy's agricultural sector to this day.

Keywords: *Battle for Wheat, corporatism, fascism, Italy*

Wheat is a staple food in every country. It is used to make bread, pasta, cereals, and other foods that people heavily rely on for a large portion of their caloric intake. Some countries are more capable at farming their own wheat than others based on geography and soil fertility, among many other factors. Italy is a country capable of farming its own wheat but one that still holds a reliance on other countries for some importations. During the time of the Fascist regime, however, the government wanted little to nothing to do with said importations and wanted to make Italy completely self-sufficient in their production of wheat. To do this, Mussolini, the Fascist dictator of Italy, instituted the Battle for Wheat: an economic policy aimed at freeing Italy from slavery to foreign bread. The question one has to ask is: how could you have made a country that eats so much wheat and imports much of their supply, self-sufficient in production? What methodology and propaganda were used by the Fascist government in instituting the Battle for Wheat, and what can those two factors tell us about the goals of the Fascist government? Through the tactics the Fascist regime used to implement the policy, it shows that the goal of the policy was never to create a sound economic policy; the true goals were to show the strength of the Fascist government and bring more areas of the country into state control.

To begin with, one must understand the ideas running the Fascist economy. The first idea was producerism, which is the idea that the top priority of the economy must be to produce goods; a person who produces and contributes to the economy is more valuable than someone who has inherited money, for example. Augusto Lanzillo, an Italian Fascist, described this idea as the state not being composed of citizens but as “producers and parasites.”<sup>1</sup> A person who produced more for the economy was seen as being worth more to the country. This idea fed into the Battle for Wheat because the whole goal was to produce as much wheat as possible. Those who produced more were rewarded more, as will be shown later. Fascists also believed in an idea called syndicalism. Syndicalism is defined as “a movement that advocates direct action by the working class to abolish the capitalist order, including the state, and to establish in its place a social order based on workers

organized into production units.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, this is a revolution through workers. Mussolini and his peers viewed their syndicalism as a revolution against not only the state but against communism. Unlike communism, syndicalism still wants social structures to remain intact because it depends on class collaboration for the economy to grow. Italian Fascists believed that economic individualism was outdated. Fascist syndicalist, Alfredo Rocco, believed that the states should “recognize the importance of syndicates, and should ‘absorb them and make them its organs.’”<sup>3</sup> The regime believed that the way to make the country more self-sufficient could only be done through this organization of workers.

Corporatism is the government function of syndicalism. One can think of corporatism as the system itself and syndicalism as the idea that the system is based on.<sup>4</sup> It had goals to eliminate individualism and place a greater focus on the state’s economy. In Italy, corporatism created a richer relationship between industrialists and workers. This created class collaboration that Fascists believed would help the economy to flourish. To achieve true class collaboration, the Fascist regime had to work with unions to create corporations. Agreements were made with unions so that the only labor groups workers were allowed to join were Fascist government corporations.<sup>5</sup> Workers were separated into one of seven categories depending on what field they worked in. In an ideal world, once in those fields, those workers would then collaborate with each other and with industrialists to help improve their sectors and, therefore, the national economy. Each of those seven categories, or corporations, were overseen by a Fascist state ministry: the Ministry of Corporations.<sup>6</sup>

The first corporation to be created was the Corporation of Agriculture. The only two groups that agricultural workers could be a part of were the *Confederazione Nazionale Fascista degli Agricoltori* (the

<sup>1</sup> Adrian Lyttelton, *The Seizure of Power: Fascism in Italy 1919-1929*, (Charles Scribner’s Sons: New York, 1973), 50.

<sup>2</sup> “Syndicalism,” Britannica, last modified October 18, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/syndicalism>.

<sup>3</sup> Lyttelton, 205.

<sup>4</sup> Ludwig von Mises, “Corporatism and Syndicalism,” *Libertarianism.org*, January 1, 1940, accessed November 16, 2024, <https://www.libertarianism.org/publications/essays/corporativism-syndicalism>.

<sup>5</sup> Lyttelton, 229.

<sup>6</sup> Michael J. Lyons, *World War II: A Short History*, 5th ed. (London: Routledge, 2016), 34.

National Fascist Confederation of Agriculturists) or the *Confederazione Nazionale dei Sindacati Fascisti dell'Agricoltura* (The National Confederation of Fascist Agricultural Syndicates). Together, these two groups made up the Corporation of Agriculture.<sup>7</sup> By forcing farmers to be a part of these two groups exclusively, in the early 1920s, Italian agriculture had fallen under state control completely. This allowed the government to institute policies like the Battle for Wheat, policies that included state control of everything farmers did—from what they grew to how they grew their crops. In 1925, the separation of agriculture and the state shrunk even more as Mussolini appointed himself as the head of the Confederation of Agriculture. In this speech, Mussolini said, “Italian Agriculture does not need a ministry. Maybe he needs a minister. That minister is me. It needs means. He will have them.”<sup>8</sup> It is clear that Mussolini wanted to take the actions of agriculture into the hands of state control.

The Battle for Wheat was instituted in 1925. The main goal of the policy was to free Italy from its economic slavery of wheat from other countries. There were a few goals of the policy other than to increase wheat production to the point of self-sufficiency. The reclamation of land is a goal that is not explicitly stated but one that can be implied through the actions of the state. The idea of land reclamation was not a new one in Italy; it had been happening long before the Fascist regime came to power. In the south, land reclamation was a solution to combating the swamplands, which were a breeding ground for diseases like malaria. Land was reclaimed to increase irrigation, as well as help create infrastructure like roads. In 1923, a proclamation was released by the government that land could be reclaimed not only for sanitary reasons, but for economic reasons as well.<sup>9</sup> The large jump in land reclamation makes it clear that the government was collecting this land for

their own economic goals. An article from *Time* magazine written in 1938 stated that over the years of the policy, around 6,600,000 acres of southern swampland had been reclaimed and cultivated with wheat.<sup>10</sup> If the land was swampland, that meant it was being reclaimed from the south, where soil is not very suitable for the production of wheat.<sup>11</sup> From 1910-1919, land that wheat was farmed on accounted for  $2.45 \times 10^{296}$  hectares. In 1920-1929, the time period that the Battle for Wheat was instituted in, acreage increased slightly to  $1.08 \times 10^{296}$  hectares. By the next decade, acreage had gone up yet again to 5,019,000 hectares.<sup>12</sup> Mussolini had said that the goal of this policy was to increase output of wheat, not area of wheat. However, there would be no way to increase the output of wheat without increasing the acreage of farmland being used to farm wheat.<sup>13</sup> A law passed on December 24, 1928, called the “Mussolini Law,” said that land could be reclaimed to intensify agricultural programs like the Battle for Wheat.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, a goal of the policy must have been to increase the area of wheat farmed. An increase in land reclaimed by the government led to an increase to state control of the agricultural sector, which was the overarching goal of the Fascist regime.

A second goal of the policy was the production of raw materials, which can be seen as a clear preparation for war. Shortly after the introduction of the Battle for Wheat, on August 8, 1926, Mussolini released a statement saying “spaghetti must go—its place to be taken by potatoes—to help conserve wheat,” with the reason being to “restore the grandeur of Ancient Rome.”<sup>15</sup> While the article said this reasoning is because Romans never ate spaghetti, it can also be assumed that the grandeur of Ancient Rome will be restored through conquest and that conquest can only be completed if Italy goes to war. To go to war, there needed to be more food,

<sup>7</sup> N.W. Hazan, “The Agricultural Program of Fascist Italy,” *Journal of Farm Economics* 15, no. 3 (July, 1933): 501, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1231067>.

<sup>8</sup> Benito Mussolini, “Per La Battaglia Del Grano,” 1925 in *Opera Omnia di Benito Mussolini XXI: Dal Delitto Matteotti all'Attentato Zaniboni (14 Giugno 1924-4 Novembre 1925)*, ed. Edoardo e Duilio Susmel (Firenze: La Fenice, 1956), 377.

<sup>9</sup> N.W. Hazan, “The Agricultural Program of Fascist Italy,” *Journal of Farm Economics* 15, no. 3, (July 1933), 493, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1231067>.

<sup>10</sup> “Italy: Harvest and Headaches,” *TIME Magazine*, July 18, 1938, <https://time.com/archive/6759303/italy-harvest-and-headaches/>.

<sup>11</sup> Salvemini, “Mussolini’s Battle of Wheat,” 28.

<sup>12</sup> B.R. Mitchell, *European Historical Statistics 1750-1970*, “abr. ed., (Great Britain: Columbia University Press, 1978).

<sup>13</sup> Hazan, “The Agricultural Program,” 492.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 494.

<sup>15</sup> Edward Alden Jeweli, “Spaghetti Finds a Foe in Mussolini,” *New York Times*, August 8, 1926, 118, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1926/08/08/98499871.html?pageNumber=118>.

especially wheat, to feed soldiers. This idea of preparing for war becomes more solidified after a speech given by Mussolini in 1936; he said the production of agriculture will remain the same, meaning the focus on wheat production will continue. He also said, “Italy can and must achieve a maximum of economic autonomy for peace and above all for war.”<sup>16</sup> While the goal of preparing for war may have been masked at the beginning, it is clear as time went on that the increased production of wheat was a necessity for the war that Italy was preparing for: to restore their Roman Empire.

The final and perhaps clearest goal of the Battle for Wheat was decreasing imports of wheat from other countries. Imports of wheat had increased prior to 1925 due to increasing population. From 1909-1913, imports were 49,500,000 bushels a year. From 1922-1923, imports were at 114,760,000 bushels.<sup>17</sup> Part of the reason for this increase of importation was the discouragement of emigration. This focus was a focal point of the nationalistic policy of the Fascist regime.<sup>18</sup> To decrease imports, a high tax of 7.50 lire per quintal was placed on wheat importations.<sup>19</sup> This tax increased throughout the duration of the policy, rising from 7.50 gold lire to 19 gold lire in 1931.<sup>20</sup> The goal of these taxes was clearly to encourage production of wheat at home.

The first method of the Battle for Wheat was heavy financing from the government to encourage farmers to participate. It was shown earlier that the government reclaimed land, especially marshlands in southern Italy, for the purpose of cultivating wheat. At the beginning of the policy, it was estimated there were about nine million acres of land that could be reclaimed, and Mussolini wanted those acres to produce wheat. With the passing of the Mussolini Law, just over nine million acres of land were to be reclaimed over a period of 14 years, with the government paying for \$215,000,000 of the

\$350,000,000 cost.<sup>21</sup> This was a huge financial agreement for the Fascist regime and one that can be linked to the Battle for Wheat through the evolution of land reclamation laws. Another form of this financing was the idea of shifting the burden of the depression to peasants. The government did this through giving land to the peasants, which therefore ruralized it and made it farmland. The purpose of this was not so much to empower peasants as it was a form of propaganda to encourage peasants to give into fascism.<sup>22</sup> In a speech, Mussolini told peasants “I am proud to be your friend, your brother, your leader ... only with fascism have the peasants entered into their full rights.”<sup>23</sup> This speech, in conjunction with having known that Fascism needed the peasants to achieve class collaboration, showed that giving land to peasants so it could be worked agriculturally was only to help the Fascists achieve their economic goals. This was shown further through the fact that poverty did not improve in the south despite this program.<sup>24</sup>

The government not only paid for land but also paid for the development of technology. A *New York Times* article published on December 5, 1932, said that the government had been paying for the “building of silos and elevators.”<sup>25</sup> One propaganda poster showed trucks full of grain moving over the rising sun, with the text saying “Conceived and wanted by the head of the government, organized by the National Agricultural Technicians Union, under the Ministry of Agriculture and government.”<sup>26</sup> The government paid for farmers to get new machinery and equipment as well.<sup>27</sup> There is no doubt that the government being so financially involved

<sup>16</sup> “Speech to the National Corporate Council in Rome, March 23, 1936: General Plan of the New Italian Economy,” *Biblioteca Fascista*, last modified March 4, 2012, [https://bibliotecaFascista.blogspot.com/2012/03/speech-to-national-corporative-council\\_10.html](https://bibliotecaFascista.blogspot.com/2012/03/speech-to-national-corporative-council_10.html).

<sup>17</sup> Hazan, “The Agricultural Program,” 496-497.

<sup>18</sup> Bosworth, *Mussolini's Italy*, 407.

<sup>19</sup> Jon Cohen, “Fascism and Agriculture in Italy: Policies and Consequences,” *The Economic History Review* 32, no. 1, (February, 1979), 71, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2595966>.

<sup>20</sup> Schmidt, “The Italian ‘Battle of Wheat’,” 648.

<sup>21</sup> Hazan, “The Agricultural Program,” 494.

<sup>22</sup> Carl T. Schmidt, “Agricultural Property and Enterprise Under Italian Fascism,” *Science and Society* 1, no. 3, (Spring, 1937), 327, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/40399072.pdf>.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 332.

<sup>24</sup> Schmidt, “The Italian ‘Battle of Wheat’,” 653.

<sup>25</sup> “Italy’s Wheat Crop Fills 92% of Need: Mussolini Awards \$100,000 in Prizes to Nation’s Farmers in Tenth Annual ‘Battle’,” *New York Times*, December 5, 1932, 27, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1932/12/05/100879884.html?pageNumber=27>.

<sup>26</sup> “La Battaglia del Grano,” *Libero Digiland*, n.d., accessed October 30, 2024, <https://digilander.libero.it/trombealvento/vari/grano.htm>.

<sup>27</sup> Mario F. Carillo, “Agricultural Policy and Long-Run Development: Evidence from Mussolini’s Battle for Grain,” *The Economic Journal* 131, no. 4, (May, 2020), 2. [https://www.amse-aixmarseille.fr/sites/default/files/events/Carillo\\_Mario\\_paper-2.pdf](https://www.amse-aixmarseille.fr/sites/default/files/events/Carillo_Mario_paper-2.pdf).

in the development of technology and land reclamation encouraged poor, rural farmers to give into the Battle for Wheat. There would have been no way to have increased production without the development of technology, and farmers would not have been able to create that momentum on their own without the financial support of the government.

The major method the regime used to encourage the policy was propaganda. The clearest element of the propaganda came from the name of the policy itself: the Battle for Grain. As can be seen through posters and speeches made by Mussolini, there was repeated use of terminology of winning a battle against foreign grain. This terminology can be seen as early as when the policy was implemented, when Mussolini made a speech to the National Fascist Confederation of Agriculturists in Rome on July 30, 1925. In this speech, he said, “The Battle of Wheat, gentlemen, means liberating the Italian people from the slavery of foreign bread.”<sup>28</sup> In one popular poster, a strong, younger man riding a bull is seen harvesting a large bundle of wheat, as the text says, “National competition for the victory of wheat.”<sup>29</sup> Another poster shows a golden statue of a woman with wings (the image resembled a Roman goddess) as the text reads, “In the spring, every clod has its seed. Sow to win!”<sup>30</sup> A clod is a lump of soil.<sup>31</sup> This means that this poster was explaining that every piece of soil must be harvested with wheat. Only that way could Italy win its victory. There was another poster showing a statue of someone in a tunic, which said the same phrase about winning the battle.<sup>32</sup> This continued Ancient Roman imagery further showed the Fascist regime’s goals of returning to their Roman Empire roots, a conquest that could only be achieved through war. When figures of the harvest came out each year, Mussolini would describe them as a victory or defeat. A good harvest was a victory, and a bad harvest was a defeat.<sup>33</sup> This talk of being engaged in a “battle” and needing to win a “victory” was terminology being used to prepare the country for

a war. One poster even shows wheat being held up in a soldier’s helmet, with the insignia of the Fascist regime below it.<sup>34</sup> The continued usage of war terminology and imagery clearly showed the country was preparing for war.

The propaganda also heavily encouraged the use of fertilizers, especially calcium cyanamide. Many posters can be found of young women spreading fertilizer around wheat fields.<sup>35</sup> These fields were abundant and looked just about ready to be harvested. One could assume that the continued use of young women in these posters was to encourage the fertility of wheat that could be achieved if fertilizers were used abundantly. The government encouraged the use of fertilizers to help the wheat grow faster. In one poster, a man in good physical condition carried a large box in one hand, in the other, he was scattering a large handful of white powder. The text above the image said the name of the fertilizer and then said, “maximum yields, at the lowest cost.”<sup>36</sup> The government not only had to advertise the use of the fertilizers but also had to make them more cost effective to encourage poor farmers to use them. The use of fertilizers will be discussed further in a later section.

Mussolini put a great deal of effort into making himself seem like a farmer. There were multiple instances when the dictator jumped into fields of wheat shirtless and began harvesting. A *TIME* article from 1938 said that after making a speech declaring “victory” in that year’s “battle,” Mussolini took off his shirt and “pitched in with the threshers, for an hour jerked open stacks of wheat and tossed them into the hopper.”<sup>37</sup> There are many images of Mussolini working in the fields, often shirtless, as he tried to seem like he was in peak physical condition.<sup>38</sup> Not only did he farm in other people’s fields while out doing press, but in 1927 he even announced he had his own wheat field. According to a *New York Times* article published in May 1927, “he has entered a small farm he owns near Forli in the wheat raising competitions

<sup>28</sup> Mussolini, “Per La Battaglia Del Grano,” 377.

<sup>29</sup> Libero Digiland, “La Battaglia Del Grano.”

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 11th ed., s.v. “clod,” accessed November 26, 2024, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/clod>.

<sup>32</sup> Libero Digiland, “La Battaglia Del Grano.”

<sup>33</sup> Salvemini, “Mussolini’s Battle of Wheat,” 32.

<sup>34</sup> Libero Digiland, “La Battaglia Del Grano.”

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> “Italy: Harvest and Headaches,” <https://time.com/archive/6759303/italy-harvest-and-headaches/>.

<sup>38</sup> “Benito Mussolini performs agriculture for the cameras,” ResearchGate, last modified 2008, [https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Benito-Mussolini-performs-agriculture-for-the-cameras-Source-Caprotti-and-Ka-ika-2008\\_fig1\\_330489737](https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Benito-Mussolini-performs-agriculture-for-the-cameras-Source-Caprotti-and-Ka-ika-2008_fig1_330489737).

promoted by the Minister of National Economy ... the wheat sown by Mussolini has done so well that it is now considered the best of the whole region.”<sup>39</sup> The simple fact that this was a repeated occurrence—of Mussolini jumping into wheat fields to harvest crops—showed it was only for spectacle. Its only goal was to encourage more farmers to join in. Perhaps if farmers were to see their leader farming wheat with new technology, they would feel more motivated to do the same.

Propaganda also frequently showed groups of Italians bonding over the large wheat harvest. One image showed four men standing atop a large square of wheat. These men looked wealthier than the men below who looked like farmers celebrating the successful harvest, playing music on their accordions.<sup>40</sup> Another poster showed a group of men unloading one of the grain trucks mentioned earlier into bags. Into a pile of those bags, a man placed a large Italian flag, flowing in the wind, to signify they were full of Italian, domestically produced wheat.<sup>41</sup> This idea ties back into the initial ideology behind the program in the first place: that Mussolini wanted self-sufficiency in wheat production. The Fascist regime was extremely nationalistic and had goals of being autonomous. For the government to succeed in its goals, it needed to make all Italians, not just those at the top, feel needed. This policy was a way for the Fascist government to bring its citizens together, and it created the class collaboration it needed for its economy.

The regime shamelessly used religion to encourage the production of wheat. Italy is a Catholic country, and the Fascist regime had no issue exploiting that in their propaganda. There was a poster which showed children in a wheat field as the text about it read “give us this day our daily bread.”<sup>42</sup> This phrase comes from the Catholic prayer, the Our Father, and is meant to be speaking on the Eucharist. The government was comparing wheat that is harvested for an economic policy to what Catholics believe is the physical embodiment of Jesus Christ.

The government also offered large prizes to those

who harvested the most wheat. Each year, after the harvesting was done, Mussolini would make a speech on the quality and quantity of the wheat. The prizes were handled by the Ministry of National Economy. To be awarded a prize, the field must have an “average yield of wheat per acre show the greatest percentage of increase over the average yield of the surrounding district.”<sup>43</sup> On October 15, 1928, an article from *The Guardian* was published which said, “In the Argentina Theatre at Rome this morning the Duce distributed prizes ranging from £20 to £200 to Italian farmers who had increased their grain output in the past year.”<sup>44</sup> On December 5, 1932, a *New York Times* article said Mussolini “gave about \$100,000 in prizes and many words of high praise to those whom he has led for seven years in his ‘battle of the wheat.’”<sup>45</sup> This idea of prizes relates back to the government paying for new technology and machinery. Without the incentive of cash prizes, it was not possible to say if yields would have increased in the highly rural Italian population.

Overall, the Battle for Wheat did show an increase in wheat production and a decrease in wheat imports. In wheat production, a consistent rise can be seen from 1924 (prior to the policy) onward. In 1924, Italy produced 4,479 million tons of wheat. In 1925, the country produced 6,340 tons. In 1926, the harvest was 5,808 million tons. This number only fluctuated a few tons up and down until the 1930s, when wheat production became mostly consistent at around 7,000 million tons.<sup>46</sup> The statistics that came out from the Fascist regime projected much higher numbers for these years. In 1925, the harvest was projected at 6.55 million tons, and in 1926, it was projected as 5.99 million tons.<sup>47</sup> This presents a trend of the Fascist government reporting figures of wheat higher than what was true. While it is understandable for there to be some margin of error in reporting these figures, what was not understandable is the continuous failure to report the proper figures, whether by accident or to make the policy seem like it was working

<sup>39</sup> “Mussolini Enters His Wheat for Prize: Plowed His Own Field, Sowed it Himself and the Grain Is Now Doing Well,” *New York Times*, May 3, 1927, 29, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1927/05/03/issue.html>.

<sup>40</sup> Libero Digiland, “La Battaglia Del Grano.”

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Sambuco, “Food Discourses” <https://doi.org/10.1177/02656914221140274>.

<sup>43</sup> “Mussolini Enters His Wheat”, 29.

<sup>44</sup> “Mussolini awards himself agricultural prize,” *The Guardian*, October 15, 1928, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/15/mussolini-awards-himself-agricultural-prize-archive-1928>.

<sup>45</sup> “Italy’s Wheat Crop,” 27.

<sup>46</sup> Mitchell, *European Historical Statistics 1750-1970*, 103.

<sup>47</sup> Salvemini, “Mussolini’s Battle of Wheat”, 29-30.

more than it was. It is more plausible to think it was done on purpose due to the nature of the Fascist regime. The reporting is a strong indicator of the overarching goal of the Fascist regime: to appear stronger than they truly were. Had the policy been working to the extent the government wanted it to, there would be no need to skew figures.

Another result of the Battle for Wheat was a decrease in the production of livestock. The decline was more noticeable in some parts of the country compared to others. In comparing the census from 1926 to the one done in 1930, all areas of livestock (horses, donkeys, mules, cattle, hogs, sheep, and goats) decreased considerably. Imports of live animals increased after 1925. Even eggs, a byproduct of chickens, began to be imported as the production of wheat increased.<sup>48</sup> Another factor of the decrease in livestock was the increased cost of manure, which was an essential factor to farming.<sup>49</sup> This decrease could be attributed to the extreme focus on wheat production, with all other areas of agriculture being neglected. Production of other foodstuffs was simply not a priority for the Fascist regime.

Not only did the production of livestock decrease, but the production of other crops decreased as well. The Battle for Wheat favored wheat to all other crops produced by Italy, including wine, grapes, and citrus fruits, even though these crops were more profitable in the southern regions of the country than wheat was.<sup>50</sup> Not only did production of these commodities decrease, but a tax was placed on them as well to encourage more production at home.<sup>51</sup> The difference between this tax and the wheat tax is that the government did not encourage the production of these crops like it did with wheat, so the prices of these crops skyrocketed as their supply fell. Wine, a large export of Italy, began to suffer during this time. The area of wine vineyards decreased from 4,239,000 hectares from 1920-1929 to 3,967,000 hectares in 1930-39. The area of olive vineyards also decreased over this time period.<sup>52</sup> This reduction can

once again be attributed to the reclamation of land to turn it into wheat farms. Simple supply and demand laws lead one to the conclusion that as the supply of wine and other crops decreased, there would be an increase in price.

Not only was the supply of other crops extremely low, but the high tax on wheat to encourage its production at home led to higher prices on domestic wheat. Whereas a family would have paid \$45 for a ton of imported wheat, they now paid \$75 for a ton of domestic wheat. Gaetano Salvemini, an Italian political scientist, said that the Battle for Wheat was more of a “battle against the consumer of wheat.”<sup>53</sup> The price of wheat became so high that in the late 1930s, bakers began to substitute wheat for other carb sources in their bread. A *TIME* magazine article published in 1938 said, “Bakers, unable to purchase sufficient wheat flour, eked out their dough with substitutes like corn flour, bean flour, ground lentils or ground ceci, yellow, bean-like pellets.”<sup>54</sup> The increase in the cost of wheat due to its domestic production combined with the increased price of other foods due to their lack of supply created a cost of living crisis in Italy.

There is no doubt that technology improved drastically for wheat production during the time of the Battle for Wheat. These developments, however, were never applied to other sectors of agriculture. Had agriculture been allowed to carry on as normal, there still would have been developments in technology.<sup>55</sup> By putting such a large focus on wheat, the rest of Italy’s agricultural sector lagged behind compared to wheat cultivation. This lagging behind led to an extreme cost of living due to the lack of other crops available at the time.

The Battle for Wheat also led to agricultural differences between the northern and southern regions of Italy. As was discussed previously, the new strains of wheat seeds took better to the soil in northern regions than they did in the south. This led to the policy being more successful overall in the north than in the south. Another factor to be considered was the lack of industrialization in the south. Whereas the north was home to Italy’s industrial triangle, the south had no such innovation. Because the south was not allowed to farm their more profitable crops, the development of technology

<sup>48</sup> Schmidt, “The Italian ‘Battle of Wheat,’” 652-53.

<sup>49</sup> Cohen, “Fascism and Agriculture,” 73.

<sup>50</sup> Emanuele Felice and Giovanni Vecchi, “Italy’s Growth and Decline. 1861-2011,” *Centre for Economic and International Studies*, 11, issue 13, no. 293, (October 2013), 23, <https://ceistorvergata.it/RePEc/rpaper/RP293.pdf>.

<sup>51</sup> Cohen, “Fascism and Agriculture,” 72

<sup>52</sup> Mitchell, “European,” 137.

<sup>53</sup> Salvemini, “Mussolini’s Battle of Wheat”.

<sup>54</sup> “Italy: Harvest and Headaches,” <https://time.com/archive/6759303/italy-harvest-and-headaches/>.

<sup>55</sup> Cohen, “Fascism and Agriculture,” 73.

in the south lagged behind that of the north.<sup>56</sup> As was stated earlier, if agriculture had been allowed to progress naturally, there still would have been a development in technology. Instead, by forcing development of one crop, there was a large disparity between wheat and everything else.

Following the war and the fall of Mussolini, the aftermath of the Battle for Wheat did not fare well for the Italians. In 1947, Italy was forced to increase corn in their bread rations due to a lack of wheat. A *New York Times* article said, “the bread ration will remain unaltered at about eight and one-half ounces daily, but it will contain rather more than one ounce of corn flour mixed in with wheat flour.” In this article, the blame was placed on the government for reducing “the amount assigned from world supply.”<sup>57</sup> That same year, the United States ambassador to Italy sent a telegram to the United States Secretary of State which said that Italy was barely meeting their rations of bread and pasta. He says the reason for this is that Italy is suffering from poor growing conditions, soil fatigue, and unpopularity of government policies. The Ambassador plead with the Secretary that “2.2 million tons of wheat be shipped at the full rate of 220,000 tons per month.”<sup>58</sup> It is clear through the lowered rations and the concern of the United States that Italy did not become self-sufficient under any means. The production of wheat did increase, but its production was not sustainable for the country and led to a poor quality of life for its citizens.

In conclusion, the Battle for Wheat was never a sound economic policy. This can be seen through the lack of thought put into the possible effects of the policy on other sectors of Italian agriculture. Had the regime been more thoughtful in its implementation, there could have been developments in other sections of agriculture. Instead, all others lagged behind, which led to a high cost

of living for Italians. It is also clear that the propaganda used in the Battle for Wheat was aimed at preparing a country for war. The continued use of terminology relating to battles and victories showed the overarching goals of the Fascist regime: imperialism and complete control. This was seen even in the propaganda for fertilizers, where there was an increased focus on fertility. This relates back to the idea of the regime’s discouragement of emigration and their focus on nationalism. Therefore, it can be concluded that the purpose of the Battle for Wheat was to make Italy seem like a strong nation and its dictator seem even stronger. The ultimate goal of the Fascist regime was to project its strength as it prepared to go to war to restore their Roman Empire, and they thought the production of wheat would be a way to restore its grandeur. However, when one looks deeper, it is possible to see all of the holes in the policy that show it was never created for the true benefit of the people of Italy but for the facade of the dictatorship to be upheld.

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<sup>56</sup> Felice and Vecchi, “Italy’s Growth and Decline,” 23.

<sup>57</sup> “Wheat Lack Hits Rations for Italy: Government Keeps Up Bread Volume With Corn Flour, Pending Expected Imports,” *New York Times*, February 17, 1947, 6. <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1947/02/17/88758270.html?pageNumber=6>.

<sup>58</sup> U.S. Department of State, *The Ambassador in Italy (Dunn) to the Secretary of State, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1947, the British Commonwealth; Europe, Volume III, Document 626 (Rome, 1947)*, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1947v03/d626>.

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