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PFR in Milan and the War Rationing System. Dynamics of Control, Direction and Abuse within the Province (1943-45)

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ABSTRACT

The present study analyses the chaotic system of interdependencies in the light of the conduct of the municipal structure of the Partito Fascista Repubblicano (PFR) in the province of Milan, focusing on a few issues that have been identified as fundamental for the relations between occupiers and occupied. These issues include the management of rationing and that of appointments and roles within the bodies connected to food distribution.

Introduction

Among the fundamental problems of the research concerning the 600 days of the last fascist government, scholars have highlighted the documentary lacunae related to the official acts and documents produced by Mussolini's republic. In particular, as it has been documented extensively, the archive of the National Secretariat of PFR is not available for consultation, as it was most likely destroyed in the final stages of the Allied conquest of the peninsula. The provincial and city archives of the party have survived only in special cases.¹

¹ Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Repubblica Sociale Italiana, Partito Fascista Repubblicano, Federazione di Milano (da ora Acs, fed. Milano); D. Gagliani, "Il partito nel fascismo repubblicano delle origini", in *Rivista di Storia Contemporanea*, 1-2, 1994/95, pp. 253-73.

Concurrently, a local history of the Republican Federations may be established through documents produced by authorities other than those of PRF, provided that these documents are not inimical to PRF. This includes information on the conduct of the party sent by administrative, political and police bodies, or even the papers produced by the Liberation committees and the files of the trials held by the special criminal courts (*Corti di assise straordinaria*, CAS), an ad-hoc judicial body set up to judge the Italian collaboration with the occupier. The latter documentary source has been the subject of criticism regarding the conditions under which the trials took place; however, even with all the cautions already mentioned in recent publications, the trial files are fundamental for the information contained therein.²

Throughout the occupation, the prevailing instability and weak sovereignty of RSI (aka Repubblica Sociale Italiana) manifested in a persistent series of conflicts between authorities, thereby establishing a system that historiography has termed “polycracy”, drawing parallels with the studies on Nazi Germany, or “polycentrism”, highlighting the Italian subordination to the occupying powers.³ The Republican autonomy was already visibly mortified by the German presence and the exclusion from its formal sovereignty of the nine provinces included in the two Military Operation Zones set in the north and north-east of the peninsula. In addition to this, there was the conduct of the Wehrmacht in the immediate aftermath of the armistice, directed at the capture of hundreds of thousands of Italian soldiers and characterised, especially in the southern regions of the peninsula, by violent acts against the population and the looting of economic resources.⁴ In the northern territories, the diplomatic, mil-

² T. Rovatti, “Tra giustizia legale e giustizia sommaria. Forme di punizione del nemico nell’Italia del dopoguerra”, in G. Focardi, C. Nubola (eds.), *Nei tribunali*, Bologna, 2015, pp. 38-39; A. Martini, *Dopo Mussolini. I processi ai fascisti e ai collaborazionisti (1944-1953)*, Rome, 2019, pp. 305-318.

³ M. Palla, “Amministrazione periferica e fonti locali sul collaborazionismo in Italia durante la RSI”, in L. Cajani, B. Mantelli (eds.), *Una certa Europa*, Brescia, 1992, p. 238.

⁴ C. Gentile, *I crimini di guerra tedeschi in Italia 1943-1945*, Turin, 2015, pp. 22-55.

itary and police authorities of the Reich swiftly asserted their authority over the state administration of the peninsula. In the months following the armistice, representatives of the ministries and national-socialist leadership began to enter Italy, marking the onset of a protracted period of competition and negotiation within the German structure, concerning the delineation of competences, responsibilities and powers. Within this system, characterised by conflicting entities and shared, overlapping responsibilities, the various Italian initiatives designed to “cooperate” with German authorities on the peninsula became disorderly.⁵

Whilst concurring with the methodology employed by Labanca in her study of the economic offices of the *Militärkommandanturen* (MK), specifically concerning the occupiers’ inclination to destroy and exploit Italian resources,⁶ it is crucial to acknowledge the role of Italian authorities and elites as instrumental in facilitating Germany’s military, economic and food objectives;⁷ at certain stages of the slow Allied ascent of the peninsula, Italian state and parastatal authorities or local economic power figures were able to exploit their role in order to gain a position of trust and a fair degree of freedom of action in relation to German authorities. These systems were characterised by non-legal trafficking and temporary agreements, which were aimed at the illicit management of the major problems.⁸

1. Occupation and collaboration

In the historiography of the Second World War that has emerged in

⁵ R. Gildea, A. Warring, O. Wiewiorka (eds.), *Surviving Hitler and Mussolini. Daily Life in Occupied Europe*, New York, 2006; H Klemann, S. Kudriashov, *Occupied economies. An economic history of Nazi-occupied Europe*, New York, 2012.

⁶ N. Labanca, *Il nervo della guerra: rapporti delle Militärkommandanturen e sottrazione nazista di risorse dall’Italia occupata (1943-1944)*, Milan, 2019-21.

⁷ E. Collotti, *L’amministrazione tedesca dell’Italia occupata, 1943-1945*, Milan, 1963, pp. 38-77; L. Klinkhammer, *L’occupazione tedesca in Italia, 1943-45*, Turin, 2016, pp. 100-113.

⁸ M. Legnani, “Guerra e governo delle risorse. Strategie economiche e soggetti sociali nell’Italia 1940-1943”, in *Italia contemporanea*, 179, 1990, pp. 229-261; T. Rovatti, “Linee di ricerca sulla repubblica sociale Italiana”, in *Studi storici*, 55, 2014, pp. 287-299.

recent years, there has been a marked greater interest for the collaboration with the German authorities. In particular, these studies have highlighted a heterogeneous relationship between occupiers and occupied, which is difficult to generalise and appears to be closely dependent on the power structure that arose in the country invaded by the Wehrmacht.⁹ In Italy, the Berlin leadership imposed the establishment of a national government under the control of a plenipotentiary from the Foreign Ministry. The creation of various territorial control structures in central and northern Italy was characterised by a combination of civil administration, which was dependent on plenipotentiary Rudolf Rahn and supported by the Italian bureaucratic structures, and a military control network formed by territorial commands, the aforementioned MK. Concurrent with the civil and military administration, the central bodies of SS and the German police appointed Karl Wolff as head of several security offices aimed to suppress and persecute political opponents and Jews in various regions of the peninsula. This is a description that is as general as not definitive: the German authorities should have renegotiated their responsibilities and attribution limits throughout the period of occupation.¹⁰

The Republican state is regarded as a particular example of collaborationism, whereby the “technical” level of cooperation with the occupier – an option vainly desired by the German military authorities – was often limited by the political and ideological character of Mussolini’s government, embodied by the party structure.¹¹

The return of the Fascist republican party (PFR) is depicted in the documents as a contradictory event, orchestrated by minor and

⁹ R. Gildea, A. Warring, O. Wiewiorka (eds.), *Surviving Hitler and Mussolini. Daily Life in Occupied Europe*, New York, 2006; M. Mazower, *L'impero di Hitler. Come i nazisti governavano l'Europa occupata*, Milan, 2010. H Klemann, S. Kudriashov, *Occupied economies. An economic history of Nazi-occupied Europe*, New York, 2012; I. Deàk, *Europa a processo*, Bologna, 2019.

¹⁰ Collotti, *L'amministrazione*, cit., pp. 51-72, 407-437; Klikhammer, *L'occupazione*, cit. pp. 60-131.

¹¹ N. Labanca, *Il nervo della guerra*, cit., voll. II, p. 613.

radical figures with a secondary career within the regime's structures. This state of affairs resulted in a resurgence of the most intransigent currents of returning fascism, which proposed projects of 'totalitarian' occupation of the republican state structure.¹² In contrast to this, the Republican state recommenced the administrative subdivision of the Kingdom of Italy. It was therefore incumbent upon the Ministry of the Interior and the dependent prefectures to assume a more prominent role in the governance and oversight of the provincial territory. The newly appointed provincial leaders were responsible for maintaining the prerogatives of the royal prefect in the domain of provincial security and in the responsibilities associated with the control of rationing and the distribution of food-stuffs, as well as the fundamental matter of the republican conscription. Despite Mussolini's initial ambitions to unify political and administrative roles, from October 1943 onwards, the federations of PFR became centres of power separated from the prefectures, held by a federal commissioner. In every republican province, attempts were made to limit the interference of the heads of the province, thus producing widespread conflicts of competency.¹³ The result was a recurrence of the diarchy of the past regime.

This contrast was replicated, albeit on a reduced scale, in the interactions between the regents of the cities' *fasci* and the *podestà/commissari prefettizi* (the unelected fascist mayors). Nonetheless, within the geographical and political boundaries of the province, and from the perspective of "territoriality" in relation to power balances,¹⁴ the milanese municipalities exhibited heterogeneous conducts towards party authorities and occupiers.

One week after the armistice between the Kingdom of Italy and the Allies, Mussolini assigned the party a fundamental role in the establishment of the republic, marking one of the first reconstitution

¹² D. Gagliani, *Le brigate nere. La militarizzazione del PFR*, Turin, 2017 pp. 22ff.

¹³ A. Osti Guerrazzi, "Mussolini e i capi provincia della RSI", in *E-Review*, 6, 2018.

¹⁴ R. Parisini, "Amministrazione e società nella Repubblica sociale italiana. Una proposta interpretativa", in *ibidem*.

of the regime's structures. Concurrently, Alessandro Pavolini was designated as national secretary and minister of state. The initial activity of Pavolini's secretariat concentrated on regulating and imposing formal rules for the appointment of federal regents. The selection of provincial federal commissioners was intended to unite hierarchical and elective principles: the election of the party regent in the provinces was to be ratified by the national secretary, and, at a lower level, the commissioner would be responsible for the management of the *fasci* and the network of district circles in larger cities. The heads of the lower structures of PFR were entrusted with the task of managing the political and welfare activities in the municipal area, as well as with the responsibility of indicating personalities of good moral conduct for technical administrative roles. The initial appointments, influenced by radical instances and local interests, exhibited heterogeneous characters and were associated with the multifaceted manifestations of fascist resurgence. In this particular context, the party would endeavour to assume a pivotal role in matters pertaining to the maintenance of territorial law and order, as well as the control of men and resources in the area.¹⁵ In the following month of January, the party would regain its legal status, the property of PNF would be partially returned to Pavolini's party, and there would be the reconfirmation of fascist merits in favour of the PFR hierarchy. This meant a marked retreat from the initial revolutionary and radical prospects.¹⁶ The evident congruence between the totalitarian aspirations of PFR and the official prerogatives of the prefectures gave rise to recurrent conflicts between prefectural authorities and federations. PFR was able to establish itself at the local level, accompanied by a range of attributions and responsibilities, in an unofficial and illicit manner, because of the superior role of the prefectures.

¹⁵ Gagliani, *Le brigate nere*, cit., pp. 52ff.

¹⁶ Gagliani, *Il partito*, cit. pp. 144-148.

2. Occupied Milan

During the occupation, because of its centrality Milan was defined a “double capital”, or the informal capital of RSI and of the anti-fascist Resistance.¹⁷

The presence within the city's borders of the headquarters of partisan organisations and of representatives of the economic ministries as well as of the repressive structures of the *Reich* gave the city a centrality in different spheres within the context of German occupation. The economic importance of the province, characterised by the presence of large mechanical, chemical and siderurgic companies and a widespread network of manufacturing companies outside the capital, influenced the policies of the occupier. The German economic directorates, which were integrated into the military and civil control networks, directly managed part of this production system. Companies that were given orders and raw materials by the German authorities were granted protection (*Schutzbetriebe*). Another pivotal area for the German strategic plans was agriculture, in an area characterised by the presence of several large farms and producers' consortia that had been able to influence the society and the employment systems of the province for decades. During the period between 1943 and 1945, the population of the city lost around 300/400,000 inhabitants out of the 1,200,000 registered in 1940. In 1936, the population of the province of Milan was recorded as exceeding 2.3 million. A large part of them chose to move to other parts of the provincial area because of supply difficulties and, more distinctly, out of concerns regarding potential aerial bombardment.¹⁸ The reconstitution of the provincial federation occurred in the second half of September, but only in October Pavolini gave his approval to the appointment of Aldo Resega as regent. Resega had previously served as deputy federal of PNF in the spring of 1943

¹⁷ L. Ganapini, *Una città, la guerra. Milano 1939-1951*, Milan, 1988, pp. 66ff.

¹⁸ Ivi, p. 61; A. Rastelli, “I bombardamenti aerei nella seconda guerra mondiale”, in *Italia contemporanea*, 195, 1994, pp. 325-326.

and, according to memoirs, he was regarded as the moderate soul of republican fascism in the city. This was in contrast to the *squadre* that reappeared on the political scene in an autonomous and apparently spontaneous manner, with the creation of different paramilitary groups, like the *Squadra*, then *Legione*, “Ettore Muti.”¹⁹ The demise of Resega, who was killed by a partisan commando on 18 December, 1943 provided the party’s armed formations with the opportunity to maintain the positions they had acquired up to that point, influencing the conduct of the federation until the following spring.²⁰ Resega was replaced by Dante Boattini who proved to be totally unsuitable for strengthening federal control over peripheral fasci.²¹ Furthermore in January, a new prefect was selected by Mussolini’s executive, Piero Parini, known in the history of RSI as advocating an apparently moderate approach to the major problems experienced by the city.²² Parini aimed to be the exclusive mediator with the Reich authorities in the city and often received favourable support from the German diplomatic and economic offices.²³

At the end of April, the Milanese federation saw a change in leadership with the appointment of a new commissioner, Vincenzo Costa, to replace Boattini. Costa undertook extensive work to discipline the republican Fascist periphery. Costa led the federation up to the end of the war and was responsible for incorporating the Milanese party members into the Brigata Nera (BN) from July onwards. In fact, the start of the summer phase of military operations on the southern front, the failure of the call for conscription, and the growth of anti-fascist activities led Pavolini and Mussolini to reform the

¹⁹ M. Griner, *La Pupilla del Duce*, Turin, 2004.

²⁰ Ivi, p. 116ff; communication to Pavolini, 1 March 1944, in Acs, Rsi, Pfr, b. 2. Communication to Boattini, 18 March 1944, in Isec, Fontanella, b. 33, f. 170; Testimony of Cabrini, 25 May, in As Mi, Cas Mi, fp. b. 41, f. 42, Costa, 1946. As Mi, G.P. b. 267, f. Aldovini.

²¹ Order issued by Pavolini, 18 March 1944, in Acs, Rsi, Pfr, b. 2, f. 4.

²² L. Ganapini, *Una città, la Guerra*, Milan, 1988, pp. 88-92, 151-153; E. Collotti, *L’Europa nazista, il progetto di Nuovo Ordine Europeo*, Florence, 2002, pp. 251-268; M. Cuzzi, *600 giorni di terrore a Milano*, Vicenza, 2022.

²³ Klinkhammer, cit., pp. 172-173.

structure and function of PFR. From the end of June onwards, the federation of PFR were transformed into a paramilitary organisation, the BN.²⁴ The fasci saw the formation of a garrison or brigade company, which often occupied the same premises as the political structure. In this way, the regents were surrounded by individuals who had previously served in the military or displayed more combative behaviour. In some cases, the former regencies were able to maintain their role and take care of the garrison themselves.²⁵ The continuation of the occupation and the civil war after the summer laid the foundations for numerous special and autonomous police forces to coexist within the Milanese province. This resulted in an increase in violent episodes and, in general, the barbarisation of internal clashes within the occupied territory.²⁶

3. Rationing and the informal government of the province.

The outcome of the described barbarisation, which became particularly evident from the autumn onwards, was to alienate and isolate the most radical defenders of RSI from the majority of their fellow countrymen. The latter were accused of being lukewarm, if not hostile, towards the war effort. Within the provincial power system, PFR and the territorial BN were particularly affected by this sense of “otherness” within their own communities, a phenomenon that became widespread in most regions north of the 1944 frontline.²⁷

The connection between fasci and local armed groups of the BN, as well as the gradual takeover of administrative roles by PFR members, created a system of semi-autonomous areas with respect to pre-

²⁴ Memorandum issued by Riggio, 28 August 1944, in As Pd, G.P. b. 580, f. 5.

²⁵ Gagliani, *Le Brigate nere*, cit., p. 104; Communication to Costa, 18 November 1944, in *ivi*, f. Abbiategrasso, Bn.

²⁶ T. Rovatti, *Leoni vegetariani*, Bologna, 2011, p. 112; Borgomaneri, cit., pp. 198, 199; C. Pavone, *Una Guerra civile*, Turin, pp. 399ff.

²⁷ N. Adduci, *Gli altri. Fascismo repubblicano e comunità nel Torinese (1943-1945)*, Milan, 2014; M. Storchi, *Anche contro donne e bambini*, Bologna, 2016, pp. 240-253.

fectural and federal dictates.²⁸ This autonomy often manifested as an apparent moderation in the fight against partisans, supported by secret agreements with local economic elites and certain figures within the complex German administrative system. Some municipal authorities, in collaboration with local fascists, managed to protect clientelist and generally illicit systems of power in the area until the end of the war. To achieve this, they exploited the chaotic organisation of rationing and the growing instability of the provincial administration.

The management and distribution of rationed goods was never rationalised or reformed during RSI.

The complicated conferral mechanism continued to be based on the local system of state and private entities, or entities of a mixed nature, officially embedded in the fascist corporative structure. Generally, agricultural consortia were responsible for controlling the production and management of stockpiles during the initial phase of rationed goods conferral. The compulsory supply of certain goods dates to 1936 and was expanded during the early years of the Second World War, with the introduction of food stamps for a large number of goods. Quantities to be distributed were prepared according to instructions from the Provincial Food Department (Sepral), which operated under the authority of the prefect and was responsible for controlling production and subsequent stages in the system. At a municipal level, Sepral cooperated with the municipal ration service. Allocation within the territory was carried out through two offices controlled by the municipality and the prefecture, which arranged and controlled distribution to wholesalers. In the case of cereals, fats, sugar and alcohol, the office responsible for transferring goods to wholesalers was the Distribution Office (Udis); for meat, this respon-

²⁸ Electoral results for Legnano, 7 March 1945 in ACS, RSI, Federazione di Milano, b.3, f. Legnano, fascio. Report on the resignation of the prefecture commissioner of Barlassina, 12 February 1945, in *ivi*, b.2, f. Barlassina, podestà. Communication of the federal deputy Rao Torres, 13 January 1945 in *ivi*, b. 3, f. Cesano Maderno, Bn e f. Carate Brianza, Bn.

sibility was in the hands of the Consortium for Meat Production and Slaughter (Coproma). Subsequent distribution to shop owners and restaurants was carried out by a variety of bodies and companies, including the Food Consortium (Conal), provincial agricultural consortia, cooperative organisations, government directorates and private companies, which reinforced the mixed public and private nature of the supply system.²⁹ By the spring of 1944, Udis had registered 1,400 wholesale distributors and 12,000 retail licences in the province of Milan, 5,000 of which were in the provincial capital.³⁰ The system involved an impressive number of players in the intermediate positions that separated producers from traders and restaurants, divided between public and private bodies, as well as local authorities and ministerial structures.³¹

In everyday trade, any actor taking part in one of the above-mentioned phases had the possibility of redirecting a certain amount of rationed goods towards illicit accumulation or sale. This could be done by exploiting the official channels of wholesalers and the significant price differences between agricultural and non-agricultural provinces. All authorities involved in the various stages of rationing were required to adhere to the official price constraints, which were publicised rather than imposed by the Price Commissariat through a national bulletin from January 1944.

In most republican provinces, the centralised management of the Price Commissariat was simply ignored, while the repression of the black market was never systematic and remained limited to a few isolated incidents. Final pricing decisions were often made by wholesalers with no connection to the state administration.³² The

²⁹ G. Gregorini, "Mercati, prezzi e distribuzione in Italia tra guerra e RSI", in A. Moioli (ed.), *Con la vanga e col moschetto*, Venice, 2007; A. De Bernardi, "Alimentazione di guerra", in L. Alessandrini, M. Pasetti (eds.), 1943. *Guerra e società*, Rome, 2015, pp. 133-136. E. Collotti, "Sicurezza pubblica e problemi economici a Milano", in *Il Movimento di liberazione in Italia*, 113, 1973.

³⁰ Udis report, del 24 April 1944, in Acs, Fed. Milano, b. 7, f. Sepral.

³¹ Municipality report of Abbiategrasso, 21 February 1945, in ivi, b. 1, f. Abbiategrasso, Bn. S. Misiani, *La via dei tecnici*, Milan, 1998, pp. 255-256.

³² Klinkhammer, *L'occupazione*, cit. pp. 176-178, 191; G. Corni, "Terzo Reich e sfrutta-

consequence of this phenomenon was an escalation in “legal” and illegal prices and a swift and unsustainable proliferation of black market prices, given the prevailing circumstances of surging and uncontrollable inflation.³³

In the relations between the National Socialist leadership and the republican government, the collection of foodstuffs for the benefit of the German authorities often took different routes to the system described above; the occupying authorities could refer directly to the republic’s economic ministries or prefectures, thus simplifying the provision of certain goods. In other contexts, often marked by proximity to the front line, German conduct took the form of looting and the illegal seizure of rationed and unrationed goods. However, this type of behaviour should not be considered as homogeneous or common to the various centres of power of the occupying forces. The shortcomings of the Italian rationing system meant that the occupying forces had to adopt a pragmatic approach to managing economic matters on the peninsula, as they could not intervene directly to reform the organisation responsible for civil supplies. Severe repression of the “borsaneristas” (aka black marketeers) was rare, and groups of soldiers, SS members and German economic office representatives fed illicit exchange systems across different Italian provinces. The German authorities generally tolerated the management of illegal sale channels for this reason; the black market was considered as vital for maintaining public order in large cities such as Milan, Rome and Genoa, where the population density, proximity to the front line and lack of agricultural land made it impossible to supply citizens with food through the official channels.³⁴ Recent

mento dell’Europa occupata. La politica alimentare tedesca nella seconda guerra mondiale”, in *Italia Contemporanea*, 209/210, 1997-1998, pp. 5-37. G. Becattini, N. Bellanca, “Economia di guerra e mercato nero”, in *Italia contemporanea*, 162/165, 1986, pp. 5-26.

³³ J. Calussi, “Strategie politiche, prezzi e società di fronte al mercato nero bellico. Autorità e popolazioni durante l’occupazione tedesca”, in *Annali Fondazione La Malfa*, 37, 2022, pp. 37-59.

³⁴ Gregorini, cit. pp. 24 ff.; Corni, cit. pp. 5-37; R. Gildea, *Marianne in chains*, New York, 2004, pp. 122-125; eg. relazioni del 18-24 aprile 1944 sugli approvvigionamenti di Roma, in *ivi*, b.2, f. 2, Sf. Roma.

studies have shown that German pragmatism led to a “Darwinist” competition between different collaborationist authorities, local authorities and ordinary citizens.³⁵ Supply difficulties, rising inflation, the context of radicalisation of Nazi-fascist repressive policies, and the fragile nature of the republican sovereignty led to changes in the informal hierarchy of the province. We premise that these changes gave additional weight to the peripheral context in relation to the directorial ambitions of the national republican authorities or the German structures themselves.

Since October 1943, PFR had been entrusted with assisting the lower strata of society, and this prerogative was maintained even after the establishment of the BN. The removal and resignation of republican technical and administrative personnel, particularly in remote areas of the province, enabled the party to take on increased responsibilities in the distribution system. The activities of the prefectural commissioners (a role supposed to substitute the former podestà) were influenced by local power systems and the intransigence of some of the regencies, even forcing their resignations.

In this context, PFR members occupied influential positions in the system of representation and management of producers and rationing bodies, which was in complete contrast to Pavolini’s decisions to clarify and streamline PFR responsibilities in January 1944, as well as in the context of summer militarisation.³⁶

For example, in the last two months of the war Legnano’s commissioner Favari adopted a strict policy of repressing rationing offences taking advantage of the possibility of autonomously managing the seizure and delivery of foodstuffs taken from evaders and purse-snatchers through the communal requisition commissions. The inspector even proposed to Costa the elimination of the

³⁵ N. Stargardt, *Germany at war*, New York, 2015, pp. 385-411.

³⁶ Report, 12 December 1944; report to the federation, 21 December 1944; complaints against Bonetti and Pizzamiglio, 14 August 1944; communications sent by the podestà of B. Garolfo, 17 February 1945, in Acs, Fed. Milano, b.2, f. Barlassina, varie; ivi, b. 4, f. Legnano, varie; b.3, f. Codogno, podestà; b.2 B. Garolfo.

quantity of grain stored by producers for family consumption – a lawful concession, albeit modified over the years – since the beginning of the war. Furthermore, shortly after his appointment, the inspector proposed the closure of all mills of the municipality which Favari considered to be major centres of illicit distribution to the local black market. In doing so, Favari adhered to a particular propagandistic view prevailing in some federations and expounded by various republican authorities. This view saw the rural context as a collection of disloyal countrymen dedicated to the black market and starving the urban population.³⁷ In the context of the disintegration of the republican structures in the early months of 1945, the party's activities regarding requisitions were generally ineffective. The rigidity with which requisitions were managed depended on local factors and on the decisions of the local regency. The severity observed in the Legnano area, for instance, is not reflected in the documentation from the western part of the province or the Lodi area, as we shall see.³⁸

4. Abuse and moderation

Adopting the analytical framework proposed by Roberto Parisini, the “entanglements” between political representation and local economic power are pivotal to understand the economic and political collaborationism and the administrative practices of the various republican authorities. The case of Codogno is exemplary in this respect. During the occupation, the Lodi area (then an internal area of the Milanese province) had on average, “acceptable” and “punctual” productivity indexes with reference to the quantities required by the German and republican administrations.³⁹ Codogno was one of the few municipalities to be governed by the same prefectural commis-

³⁷ Comunicazione to the federation, 15 March 1945, in *ibidem*.

³⁸ Report from the commission to the federation, 14 february 1945, in *ivi*, b. 3, f. Cassano d'Adda, Varie.

³⁹ Parisini, *cit.*, 2018.

sioner, Franco Bonetti, for the entire duration of the occupation. Bonetti had been one of the members of PNF federal leadership in the 20's. Expelled in 1933, Bonetti regained his PNF membership and his position "among the agrarians" in Codogno in 1935.⁴⁰ From October 1943 until the following September, Bonetti cooperated with the regent of the fascio, Giuseppe Pizzamiglio. Since February 1944, Pizzamiglio had attracted the attention of the prefectural and federal authorities in the capital due to the so-called "market of exemptions", whereby exemptions for men of draft age were granted in exchange for payments and donations to the *fascio*.⁴¹

Pizzamiglio had also been part of the PNF'S lower structure since its foundation. His positions within the party and the municipality gave him leverage in managing the city's economy: opponents of the two accused the *fascio* and the municipality of creating a "cricca" (aka a gang) and a "real business society of mutual aid" in the Codognese area, dedicated to the black market and accumulating money from the conscription "exemption market". In fact, the two local authorities exploited the complex responsibilities of the two centres of city power to strengthen ties with the economic elite – exemptions were often granted to the wealthiest families in Codogno – as well as with part of the local population. From the summer onwards, the prefectural commissioner was responsible for administering the Codogno hospital. This role enabled Bonetti to provide shelter and safe havens to draft evaders, antifascists and Jewish families in the final phase of the war.⁴²

Bonetti maintained an illegal system for selling rationed goods until April 1945.⁴³ At the beginning of August, Costa attempted to

⁴⁰ I. Granata, "Il PNF: organizzazione del consenso e società milanese negli anni Trenta", in M. Betri et al., *Il fascismo in Lombardia*, Milan, 1980, pp. 53-57.

⁴¹ GNR report 23 March 1944, in As Mi, Questura, 1944 b. 159, f. Codogno, fascio.

⁴² Testimonies of Polenghi, Clavena, Ghisleri 15-26 September 1945; Communication sent by Esposito, son of a martyr of Piazzale Loreto massacre, to CAS, in As Mi, Cas Lodi, fp., b. 6, f. 30, Bonetti, Pizzamiglio, Nicolini.

⁴³ Accuse della Gnr di Lodi del 14 agosto 1944, in Acs, Fed. Milano, b. 2, f. Codogno, Bn.

tighten control over one of the areas farthest from the capital and the Federation by appointing Aristide Sala, a historical “*squadrista*” (aka blackshirt) from Codogno, as commander of the local garrison. The new commander seemed to adhere only to an apparent radical conduct against no-fascist or anti-fascist personalities in the area. In a scathing letter to the Milanese federation, Sala criticised “the commanders” of the BN for not responding immediately to his request for reinforcements to carry out a roundup in Castelnovo.⁴⁴ No other operations were connected to the event, and Sala was later accused of providing false information about partisan attacks at the end of September, with no input from other authorities.⁴⁵ This outward radicalism continued in line with that of the former commissioner and inspector of the *fascio*, Pizzamiglio, who had been expelled from the party in August. Pizzamiglio vehemently criticised the local “multimillionaire party”, accusing them of attempting to “smash fascism” in the early stages of RSI. ‘Such a cattle-stable aristocracy’ continually tried to slander the regent of the *fascio* by accusing him of theft and blackmail in the area. A few weeks later, Pizzamiglio continued along the same lines during his address to the PFR assembly and Boattini.⁴⁶

Let me suggest a more straightforward system: in every town, the richest farmer who must deliver the most to the hoard should be arrested and imprisoned.

Lodi’s CAS documentation clearly shows that Sala’s angry stance, Pizzamiglio’s vindictive will, and Bonetti’s similar conduct were mere propaganda tools dedicated to local politics. The accusations against the landowners seem to be intended to present a conception of provincial fascism that is consistent with republican radicalism. Conversely, Bonetti and Pizzamiglio collaborated with the leading “stable aristocrats” in the area.

⁴⁴ Report to federation, 9 September 1944, in *ibidem*.

⁴⁵ Requests sent by the prefect to the Codogno BN, 8-30 October 1944 and report of the questore, 4 January 1945, in As Mi, G.P. b. 365, f. *squadristi patite lesioni*.

⁴⁶ Report on the *fascio*’s assembly, February 1944, to Boattini, in As Mi, Questura, 1944 b. 159, f. Codogno, *fascio*.

The fascio and the municipality directly managed the donations of money requested to the richest residents of Codogno for assistance, before and after Costa's attempts to discipline and expel them.⁴⁷ The municipality, for its part, was profiting from the contribution of industrial goods to the Codognese factories, providing the company with quantities of raw material that exceeded the official limits and appeared to be autonomous from the German control. In the summer of '44, Bonetti and Pizzamiglio sold around 320 quintals of aluminium to the Polenghi company, while the legal quota was just 36 quintals.

A further accusation concerned the relationship between the municipality, the party regencies and the local milk and butter producers. Contrary to Pizzamiglio's fiery speech, the *fascio* and the town hall were considered centres for the illegal collection and sale of 'condensed, non-skimmed and powdered' milk, in agreement with local farmers, from the end of '43 onwards.⁴⁸ Milk, especially non-skimmed milk and butter, were among the most important products for supplying the German military in Italy, as well as the labourers employed in war industries in Italy and Germany. This made the Codognese area fundamental to German exploitation plans. Further agreements concerned the Brisa food canning company, run by Antonio Biffi. He, Polenghi and other figures from the Codognese economic system testified at the trial held in Lodi by the local CAS. All their testimonies were naturally in favour of the defence.⁴⁹

The CAS verdict, corroborated by the testimonies of known anti-fascists in the area, was one of acquittal. However, the municipality's continued collaboration with German authorities and major local economic players did not prevent violent and criminal acts against the civilian population, including kidnappings, robberies, and vio-

⁴⁷ Federal memorandum 7 August 1944, in Acs, Fed. Milano, b.2, f. Codogno, varie.

⁴⁸ Communication of the prefecture to Bonetti, 8 December 1944; sentence of the party's Ufficio disciplina against Bonetti 21 April 1945 in Acs, Fed. Milano, b.2, f. Codogno, Varie.

⁴⁹ Testimonies of Polenghi, Clavena, Ghisleri, 15-26 September 1945, in As Mi, Cas Lodi, fp., b. 6, f. 30, Bonetti, Pizzamiglio, Nicolini.

lence.⁵⁰ Control over some *squadristi* was fragile, and illegal acts were often not sanctioned by the city *fascio* or the federation itself.⁵¹

Conclusions

In the early months of 1945, the “habit” of illicit seizures by party men to leading figures of the province’s economy led to peculiar reactions, in which the binary paradigm of opposition/collaboration with German authorities seemed to be useless for any historical interpretation. An example of this is the report issued by the “*Ufficio provinciale dei produttori del cuoio*” (a lower branch of the Union of leather industries) on the 1st of March 1945.

In the Turbigo area, Sergeant Colombo (of the local BN) seized batches that he deemed irregular from the tanneries and warehouses. (...) On 2 February, this Office had to inform (...) of the unlawfulness of what had been ordered by (...) Colombo in the case of the Piave tannery. The Office has since been informed that Colombo has allegedly initiated similar actions against the Ltd-Corim (...) If Colombo continued with this system, the German authorities would inevitably become aware of it, with the well-known consequence of confiscating all the tanned goods in the area and transferring them to Germany for security purposes.⁵²

We can observe the effective pragmatism of local economic elites in the administration of rationing issues. During the final phase of the occupation, the PFR’s positions and roles in the province became central to the local economy, ultimately investing individual party representatives with powers beyond legal practice. The fact that representatives of the industries reserved the right to contact the occu-

⁵⁰ Interrogation of Marshal Bezzi 30 November 1944, in As Mi, G.P. b. 364, 1944-45, f. Maresciallo Bezzi.

⁵¹ Request made by the codognese fascio, 9 March 1945, in Acs, Fed. Milano, b.2, f. Codogno, Bn.

⁵² Report sent by the Union of leather manufacturers to Costa, 1 March 1945, in ivi, b.2 Busto Garolfo, varie.

pying authorities only as a last resort added a further layer of complexity to the relationship between occupiers and collaborationists. On the other hand, the possibility of acting under the party banner had the effect of influencing and deflecting government and German control in the province.

The exploitation plans of the polycratic German leadership had to pass through directions and trajectories that were strongly influenced by republican polycentrism.⁵³ The result was not always the radical clash between occupiers and the occupied, especially in areas not traversed by the Wehrmacht, except during the final stages of the occupation. Despite constant reminders from their superiors, the republican authorities at lower levels of the provincial administration proved to have useful tools for independently handling local problems.

At the same time, the population's limited adherence to the social and radical approaches of late fascism strengthened the intransigence of some elements of PFR but limited its influence in favour of radical and ferocious behaviour, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, of administrative instruments and practices that were inconsistent with national socialist and Mussolinian ambitions. This does not disprove the genuine faith and dedication of some PFR members or the armed republican forces towards fascism and its leadership. Indeed, the autonomy of individuals and regions does not absolve the head of the republican government of responsibility. With his decision to lead RSI again, he laid the foundations for the system we have attempted to describe here. At the city level, the fasci and the municipality occupied a fundamental role in meeting, directing or deflecting the needs of the resident population and competing authorities. The attitude of republican fascists shows that cooperation with the occupying forces could be initiated through various channels that could not be categorised as neither voluntary nor compulsory collaboration, nor limited to strategies of modera-

⁵³ Report to Costa 20 February 1945 in ivi, b. 2, f. Abbiategrosso Bn.

tion or intransigence. In the context of the occupation, the territory, its balances, the complicated economic system and the influence of private companies in the agricultural and industrial sectors remained fundamental actors in the territorial governance and in the control and employment of residents. The conditions associated with the fragmentation of territorial power and the transient sovereignty of RSI permitted the establishment of informal channels of protection for the local community. This role was typically assigned to parish clergy, who were often the target of PFR radical criticism, as well as certain administrators and business owners who had access to rations more than those stipulated by the ration card, and to municipal commissioners and officials. Further studies and archival research within municipalities and in company archives where available, could delineate a significant expansion of the concept of collaborationism and the grey zone, perhaps articulating a confused set of temporary relationships and alliances of convenience.

This does not imply an underestimation of the responsibilities of collaborationist authorities, such as federations and provincial administrations. The efforts of RSI members were directed towards supporting the German war effort and the defence of fascism and Mussolini. Party members cooperated with German police and SS commands, providing men and logistical support to Wehrmacht troops. In the final stages of the conflict, they played an active role in the division of residual powers and responsibilities, the outcomes of which were fundamental and dramatic for the civilian population.

Conversely, the repetition of the Ventennio's (aka Twenty Year period) conduct in local politics during RSI demonstrates a degree of responsibility, autonomy and agency in favour of the Italian authorities that is peculiar and not common in German occupied Europe.