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Robert Mallett

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I

Post-War Realities

Italy 1919

The Great War exerted a profound influence on Italy and Italian society. The post-war peace in particular helped to foment an atmosphere of national resentment and frustrated great power ambitions, and this in time gave rise to the era of Mussolini and *fascismo*. For in truth the pre-war Nationalist and left-interventionist dreams of a united and geopolitically successful Italy failed to materialise after the 1915–1918 war had ended. Instead, Italy fell victim to the post-war recession, a seemingly incurable domestic political malaise and a far from satisfactory peace settlement. The Great War had not ‘made Italians’ as the Nationalists had so eagerly anticipated in 1914. Rather, *La patria* remained as bitterly divided and at war with itself as ever.

The outcome of the post-war peace settlement did much to seal Italy's fate and paved the way for the later excesses of the Fascist regime in the field of foreign affairs, and ultimately disastrous overseas military policies. In 1919 Italian Prime Minister Vittorio Orlando and Foreign Minister Sonnino arrived in Paris for the peace conference expecting Italy's allies to agree to all of the territorial handovers tabled by the *Entente* at the time of the Treaty of London in 1915. But instead, once at the peace conference, the two men were forced to contend with a new factor in international politics: the ‘principled’ approach of US President Woodrow Wilson based on his own Fourteen Points, effectively a new code of conduct governing international affairs which he had first set out in his speech to the US Congress in January 1918. Famously, Wilson worked tirelessly in Paris to introduce important new ethical innovations into international politics such as the ‘self-determination’ of individual peoples and a global security organisation, the League of Nations, which, while commendable in itself, was not to stand the test of time, largely because the US Senate failed to ratify the Versailles Treaty. At the Paris conference itself much of the work on delineating and agreeing the minutiae of the settlement was undertaken by specially convened committees, with the major decisions being taken

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by a five-power directorate made up of Great Britain, France, the United States, Japan and Italy. In reality, Sonnino and Orlando secured a good measure of the territory agreed upon by the various Treaty of London signatories in 1915. The majority of the Italian gains came, as had been foreseen, from the dismemberment of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, with the Istrian peninsula, the Trentino and the mostly German-speaking South Tyrol all becoming Italian possessions. Likewise, Trieste, for which the Italian armies in the Isonzo had of course been fighting between 1915 and 1918, became an Italian-controlled city, while northern Dalmatia was another concession secured by Sonnino and Orlando. But Wilson made it very clear to the two Italian statesmen that this was as far as he was prepared to go. He refused to agree to Italian claims on additional territory in Dalmatia, which he was determined should form part of the new state of Yugoslavia, and poured even more derision on the Italian demands for Fiume, the former Austro-Hungarian port on the Croatian coast.

Much has been made of these Italian failures, and more specifically those of Orlando, to secure the fully agreed terms of the Treaty of London at Versailles. Likewise, the fact that the outcome of the peace conference resulted in a widespread sense of failure within Italy, a sense of a 'mutilated victory' in fact, has also been laid at the door of the negotiating team. But, of course, the situation in Paris was rather more complicated than this. The real problem for Orlando and Sonnino was that the world of international politics had changed markedly between 1915 and 1919. The *realpolitik* approach that had underpinned the decisions of all of the signatories of the London agreement had been swept away by principles governed by Wilson's famous 'Fourteen Points', an attempt to create a new, open and accountable international political environment out of the secret diplomacy of old. The Italian demands tabled in Paris, or more especially those that pertained to territories designated for the new Yugoslav state, therefore collided headlong with the new Wilsonian concept of self-determination. Fiume, which had not even been included in the London agreement, was now destined to fall under Belgrade's direct control and not that of Rome. But the real bone of contention for Orlando, Sonnino, the Italian Nationalist factions and many parts of the wider population was that Wilson's prevailing ideas also prohibited any future Italian claims against Turkey or former German colonies in Africa. The Italian government was therefore left with a settlement based on a truncated version of its 1915 treaty with the *Entente*, and it was forced to accept that any plans to pursue territorial expansion would be met by the opposition of the British and French, *de facto* the predominant powers in the League of Nations, and therefore in world affairs.

Within Italy, the reaction to the Versailles settlement was, hardly surprisingly, less than enthusiastic. The Italian Nationalist Association rounded on Sonnino and Orlando and condemned them as weak failures that had brought shame and ignominy upon Italy, together with a botched victory that failed to justify Italy's participation in the war. The wider population, affected by the ending of wartime production and wartime wage levels, suffered badly in

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the subsequent economic slump, leading to widespread resentment and political volatility. In June 1919, when Orlando and Sonnino left office in virtual disgrace, the new government of Francesco Nitti found itself contending with much serious social unrest over the outcome of the Paris peace conference and the very poor state of the Italian economy. The Nationalists and a good part of the Italian population deeply resented what they viewed as Wilson's self-righteous posturing at Versailles and were profoundly angered that Britain and France had used the conference to strengthen their own global imperial positions, and especially in the Mediterranean Sea of which they were now virtually the masters. But there was little that Nitti felt he could do about the current realities of Italian geopolitics, especially given that Italy remained reliant on the Allied powers for loans and staple raw materials such as coal. Labelled a 'coward' by right-wing poet Gabriele d'Annunzio, Nitti hardly improved his standing with the Italian right by his slashing of the military budget.¹

The following September, right-wing militancy reared its head decisively and heralded what was to be a new pattern in Italian politics, namely the emergence of a strident and revolutionary form of right-wing nationalism. D'Annunzio and a band of Italian army deserters and mutineers punctuated by a smattering of anarchists, syndicalists, futurists and Nationalists converged upon the city of Fiume and 'captured' it for Italy. D'Annunzio and his 'legionaries' acted very much as the prototypes for the Fascist movement that was slowly taking shape in the turbulent Italy of 1919. He established the Fiume League, an anti-League of Nations movement, thereby echoing the sentiments of many right-wing Italians as regards the new ideas of collective security enshrined by Wilson's new vision of the world. But d'Annunzio's fifteen-month spell in command of Fiume also came to symbolise far more of what was wrong with contemporary Italy and, more importantly, how these ills could be remedied. The *Commandante*, as he was known, developed a new kind of mass politics, a system of corporations to run the economy and the sense that vigour and risk-taking were now needed if Italy were ever to find its international 'place in the sun'.

THE RISE OF THE *FASCI ITALIANI DI COMBATTIMENTO*

It fell to Benito Amilcare Andrea Mussolini, the son of a left-wing activist from Italy's Emilia Romagna region, to spread the appeal of revolutionary nationalism within Italy during those turbulent post-war years. At the time Mussolini was invalided out of the Italian army following a mortar explosion on 23rd February 1917 that left him with over forty shrapnel wounds; he remained at least outwardly bound to what was left of interventionist Socialism, indeed the Socialist idea in general. His newspaper, *Il Popolo d'Italia*, loudly proclaimed the initial February Bolshevik uprising as 'The Victorious Russian Revolution

¹ H. J. Burgwyn, *Italian Foreign Policy in the Interwar Period* (Praeger, London, 1997), pp. 3–7.

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Against the Reactionary Germanophiles' across its front pages, and once he had recovered, Mussolini, too, spoke in glowing terms of Lenin and his 'liberation' of the Russian people.²

But despite his glowing accolades for Lenin and his revolutionary vanguard, between August 1914 and the latter months of 1917 Mussolini had undergone a gradual ideological transformation. The true nature and, for that matter, the time frame of this important change in the young ideologue's perspective have influenced key scholarship on the origins and nature of Fascism by, among others, Stanley Payne and Renzo De Felice. De Felice makes use of Mussolini's published output in *Il Popolo d'Italia* to show that until the Battle of Caporetto in October 1917, he remained closely connected to Socialist ideology and only transformed his views as a result of the Italian rout that ensued on the Isonzo front.³ Stanley Payne, on the other hand, sees Mussolini's transformation from pro-interventionist Socialism to Nationalism as being much more immediate and a product of the Great War experience as a whole. Mussolini believed the war to have 'given many Italians a new sense of national identity and pride', and came to view his main goal as creating a movement that was at the same time Socialistic and Nationalistic. This, Mussolini claimed, was the only way to finally unite all Italians along not only provincial but also class lines.⁴

In reality, Mussolini's was a steady transition from internationalism through pro-interventionism into an increasingly revolutionary Nationalistic political outlook. Certainly he watched with great interest, if not outright envy, as Russia's revolutionaries made use of the turbulence generated by a war Tsarist Russia had lost to bring about seismic political change at home, the very aspiration which Mussolini and the left interventionists had been expressing since 1914. But as the war drew to its close, Italy had moved no nearer its own left-wing revolution and Mussolini, for one, had to consider new potential routes to political power, by now his predominant objective in life. Among these routes the pursuit of Italian imperialism and greater geopolitical influence became future goals that he believed could best be achieved by a united and focused Italian nation, and a nation imbued with a clear vision of its own destiny. By 1916 and 1917 that destiny, for Mussolini, lay in securing control of and dominating the Trento-Tyrol regions to 'block the path of a German invasion for all time', but also in ensuring complete Italian control of the Adriatic through the annexation of Dalmatia.⁵

By 1917 Mussolini's strong conviction that Italy should secure all of the territories agreed upon by the Treaty of London – in fact rather more than

² *Opera Omnia di Benito Mussolini* (OOBM), VIII, 'Cartelle Clinique' (La Fenice, Florence, 1951) p. 277; R. De Felice, *Mussolini Rivoluzionario* (Einaudi, Turin, 1965), p. 345.

³ R. De Felice, *Mussolini il Rivoluzionario, 1883–1920* (Einaudi, Turin, 1974) 392 ff.

⁴ S. G. Payne, *A History of Fascism 1914–1945* (University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, WI, 1996), p. 87.

⁵ OOBM, IX, 'Il terreno dell'intesa Italo-serba', p. 269.

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had been agreed with the *Entente* in 1915 – began to assume a decidedly anti-Yugoslav if not anti-British tenor. In a number of key articles in *Il Popolo d'Italia* Mussolini moved from taking a conciliatory line between the excessive territorial demands of the Italian Nationalists and those of their Yugoslav counterparts, at this time attempting to map out the geography of their new, post-war country, to one where he directly accused the British press of attempting to deny any of Italy's claims in the Adriatic.⁶ Flexing his nationalistic muscles, Mussolini refuted the arguments of Yugoslavia's future leaders that key urban areas such as Gorizia and Trieste had predominantly Slav populations and roundly denounced their assertions that Italy had no rights whatsoever in the wider Adriatic region. Gorizia did have a predominantly Italian population even if the Yugoslavs and their friends attempted to deny it, Mussolini emphasised. And 'Trieste would become Italian', he added, refuting the view from London that Yugoslav control of the city would mean that it could never fall into German hands. Responding to what he regarded as a clear British slight, Mussolini stressed that 'Italy would deal with this and deal with it well', wondering in conclusion what the government in Rome were doing to challenge and refute such ridiculous claims.

The failings of the Italian ruling class to resolve the resurgent and pronounced divisions within Italian society, together with Orlando's and Sonnino's poor handling of the Paris negotiations, contributed directly to the rallying of the various 'patriotic' movements in Italy. Just as had been the case in 1914, when an eclectic band of ideologues first formed their interventionist *fascio*, now once again a new force was born in Italian politics, the *Fasci italiani di combattimento*. Founded on 23rd March 1919 at a meeting in the *Piazza San Sepulcro* in Milan, the new 'antiparty', as Mussolini baptised it, promised to abandon the sterility and inflexibility of conventional politics in favour of a perpetual and violent revolution aimed at overturning the ruling order in Italy. Mussolini left his audience in no doubt that this ideological revolution would extend to Italy's overseas policies, and would be highly nationalistic and imperialistic in nature. As he put it during his inaugural speech as leader, 'Imperialism is the fundamental basis of life for every people that aims to expand economically and spiritually', a sentiment he was to express even more clearly in *The Doctrine of Fascism* many years later. Clearly Mussolini's conversion to an extreme form of Italian nationalism was pretty much complete. He wanted to see an Italy that was strong, united and vibrant, and not one, as he put it, whose 40 million inhabitants remained locked within geographical boundaries that barely contained enough land for agriculture and industry. As the leader of the *Fasci* elaborated with stark clarity, Italy's land mass of 287,000 square kilometres paled in comparison with the 55 million of the British Empire and the 15 million of the French Empire. So why was Italy denied the fruits of empire

⁶ OOBM, VIII, 'Italia, Serbia e Dalmazia', pp. 260–264; OOBM, IX, 'Megalomania Jugoslava', pp. 38–41.

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by Woodrow Wilson's selective use of 'self-determination'? Why had Wilson created the League of Nations if its main purpose was to be 'a solemn con trick on the part of the wealthy nations played out against the proletarian nations'?⁷

Over the course of some five years, a modified and transformed version of Benito Mussolini had begun to emerge. The 'new' Mussolini still regarded himself as an outsider, and a man who continued to believe fundamentally in the need for wholesale political and social upheaval in Italy. But now the nature of his ideological convictions had patently shifted away from internationalist Socialism towards revolutionary nationalism. His own changing beliefs altered the intrinsic nature of the domestic revolution he believed to be so necessary for his country's future place in the world. Although he had once been closely bound to the left-wing revolutionary ideas of Emilia Romagna, his birthplace, and in particular to his father's brand of populist, anarchic Socialism, now his world view had changed as a consequence of the Great War experience. Certainly Mussolini remained characteristically individualistic, solitary and aggressive in spirit, as well as instinctively intolerant of any form of discipline and imposed order. However, while he rejected external authority comprehensively, he now viewed the future of the Italian revolution as best directed by a nationalist élite which, led by him, would mobilise the masses and sweep away those decaying socially conservative institutions – the Church, the Monarchy, the democratic parliamentary process and so on – that were, in his opinion, holding Italy back. By March 1919 Mussolini was determined that the Great War and Italy's war dead would not constitute a target for the opprobrium and derision of Italian Socialism, and he vowed that his new movement would 'Defend the dead. All of the dead', at no matter what cost.⁸ This was to be one of many axioms assumed by the *fascio*, which Mussolini used to unite all former interventionists, ex-soldiers, nationalists and syndicalists, making them the vanguard of the new Italy to come. Led by him, Benito Mussolini, these men would attempt to create an entirely new type of imperialistic mass society, indeed a wholly new form of civilisation that would wholeheartedly reject the old order, at home and abroad.

⁷ OOBM, XII, 'Atto di nascita del Fascismo', p. 323.

⁸ OOBM, XII, 'Contro la bestia ritornante', pp. 231–233; B. Mussolini, *La mia vita* (Rizzoli, Milan, 1999), p. 70.

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A Mutilated Peace

Italy, 1919–1929

THE NEW ITALY

Italy's participation in the Great War yielded a degree of the territorial expectations that stemmed from the 1915 Treaty of London, although the final peace terms resulted in considerable ill feeling from many within the Italian society. Many, such as the Italian Nationalists, criticised the failure of Italy's political leadership to secure the full extent of the concessions originally agreed upon by Great Britain and France and pressed home demands for greater Italian influence in the south-eastern regions of Europe and the Mediterranean Sea itself.¹ The immediate post-war premierships of both Francesco Nitti (1919–1920) and Giovanni Giolitti (1920–1921) were characterised by a rising tide of resentment and hostility against Italy's 'mutilated victory'. Nationalists, left-interventionists, other political militants and many within the mainstream Italian society openly condemned what they saw as Woodrow Wilson's self-righteous and sanctimonious attitude towards Italy at Versailles. They spoke out strongly against the manner in which Great Britain and France had, as many in Italy saw it, used the peace conference to strengthen their own global empires and the way in which they now dominated the new experiment in international peace keeping, the League of Nations.² Mussolini, by mid-1919 an important voice within the ranks of the extreme Nationalist right, was among the most vocal of all critics. In a speech given at the most controversial of all venues, Fiume, in May 1919, he openly declared that eventually this new world order would be challenged vigorously by a more militant Italy of the future:

¹ M. Knox, 'Fascism and Italian Foreign Policy', in Knox, *Common Destiny* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 115–117.

² M. Clark, *Modern Italy 1871–1982* (Longmans, London, 1985) p. 204.

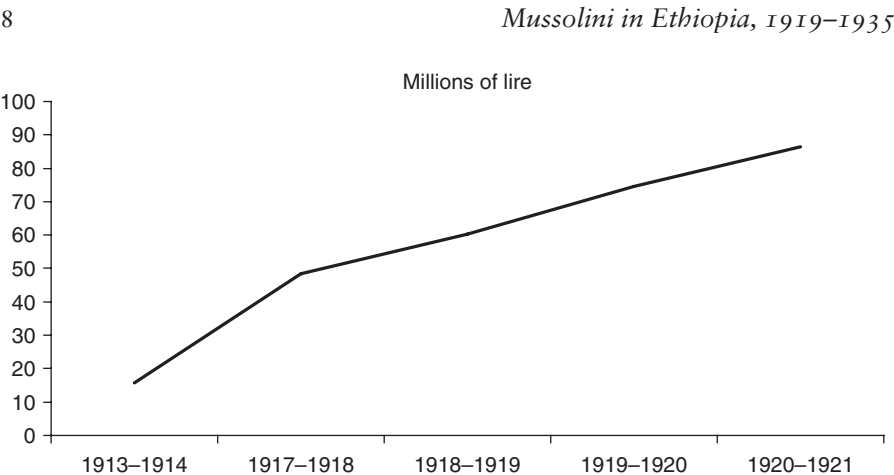


FIGURE 2.1. Italian national debt: 1913 to 1921.
Source: F. Guarneri, *Battaglie economiche, volume I* (Milan, Garzanti, 1953), p. 44.

Italy’s hour has not yet rung, but fate decrees that it surely will. The Italy of Vittorio Veneto feels the irresistible attraction of the Mediterranean which will itself open the way to Africa. A two thousand year old tradition calls Italy to the shores of the black continent whose venerated relics are reminders of the Roman Empire.³

Such statements were only too easy in the desperate political, economic and social climate of early 1920s Italy. Yet any attempt at challenging the Versailles status quo as Mussolini and others suggested, not to mention confronting Anglo–French dominion over the coveted lands of the Mediterranean and Africa, would mean significantly strengthening Italy’s economic position in order to rebuild and totally modernise the Italian armed forces. Such wealth in those first years after the Great War was not only non-existent but also wholly unlikely to materialise in the foreseeable future. Italian governments had borrowed heavily to finance a war that had offered up such modest territorial returns and, as a consequence, the budget deficit had risen from 2.9 billion lire for the financial year 1914 to 1915, to 23.3 billion lire for 1918–1919. Reckless and unlimited government borrowing meanwhile took the Italian national debt to catastrophic levels rising from 15.8 billion lire in 1914 to 86.5 billion lire by 1919 (Figure 2.1). The entire Italian economic situation was already precarious when it became clear that neither the Nitti nor the Giolitti government had the first idea about making the tricky transition from wartime to peacetime economic conditions. Nationalists and various key Italian industrialists argued strongly in favour of keeping strict wartime controls over economic life in place, believing that Italian industry could never compete in an entirely free market economy. But the politicians disagreed and the wartime regulations were removed, leaving Italy at the mercy of the volatile international markets.

³ OOBM, XIII, ‘L’Adriatico e il Mediterraneo’, p. 143.

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The effects might easily have been predicted. Major Italian companies such as the shipbuilder Ansaldo and munitions producer Ilva went out of business by the end of 1921, as did various key banks along with Lloyd Mediterraneo, the shipping firm. Male unemployment, especially among former conscript soldiers, climbed to two million by early 1920, inflation rose steeply and the value of the lire fell from 30 to the pound sterling in March 1919 to 50 in December of that same year. Middle class savings were totally wiped out as were the wages and pensions of many public sector employees. Even Fiat, Italy's biggest and best known commercial enterprise, was beginning to feel the pressure of the economic squeeze by 1921.⁴

Not all the blame for Italy's worsening economic situation between 1919 and 1921 could be placed on governmental incompetence and mismanagement however. International overproduction in both the agrarian and industrial sectors had led to saturated markets and to greater unemployment in other parts of Europe as well as in the United States and Latin America in the immediate post-war period. Moreover, the principal victors of the Great War, Great Britain and France, equally felt the economic strain, both being deeply indebted to the United States to the tune of \$4,600 million and \$3,405 million respectively.⁵ But it was in Italy that the tough and unrelenting economic climate generated widespread and sustained social unrest, thereby creating the ideal conditions for revolutionary right-wing nationalism to flourish and present itself as the only political force now capable of saving Italy from the threat of a Bolshevik style revolution. In 1919, around one million workers went on strike in Italy and still more stayed away from work throughout the following year, during a period of serious industrial and agrarian disruption known famously as the *biennio rosso*. Trade union membership rose dramatically, and food riots and factory lockouts became widespread as Italy descended into a vortex of violence and political militancy for which the government had no immediate answer. When the Giolitti administration attempted to buy off popular working class discontent by making key concessions the middle classes, in turn, became disgruntled and increasingly felt disenfranchised. By late 1921 the widespread social upheavals within the Italian society had generated a climate that was poisonous and vendetta ridden. Italy, it seemed, stood on the precipice of disaster.

THE FASCIST SOLUTION

The social and political crisis that gripped Italy in the aftermath of the Great War both transformed the nature of Mussolini's *Fasci di Combattimento* movement and directly contributed to its rapid expansion and rise to power in October 1922. At its inception the Fascist movement had been a small and

⁴ Clark, *Modern Italy*, p. 206.

⁵ F. Guarneri, *Battaglie economiche, volume I* (Milan, Garzanti, 1953), pp. 34–38.

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predominantly urban organisation that had fared poorly in the November 1921 general elections. However from late 1920 onwards, a newer, rural form of Fascism emerged, largely beyond Benito Mussolini's direct control, whose violent and brutal anti-Socialist, anti-Union ideology appealed to many within the Italian agrarian society. This emerging movement within the Fascist movement became known as *squadristmo*, and its rise marked a time of orchestrated squad violence and the murder of left-wing political opponents by the more brutal rural *Fascisti*. Amid a dramatic rise in the annual Italian homicide rate, Mussolini struggled to control the various black-shirted squads, and only barely managed to do so by transforming his burgeoning movement into a party – the National Fascist Party (the *Partito Nazionale Fascista*) (PNF) – in November 1921. By early 1922 Mussolini had been able to impose a national command structure on this lawless paramilitary force, which became legitimised once he had won power later that year. But by then it had already fulfilled its task of terrorising the Italian left into submission.

The PNF, led by a central committee of nineteen and an executive committee of eleven headed by its *Duce* Mussolini, proclaimed itself to be a 'revolutionary militia' at the service of the Italian nation and bound thereby to instil 'order, discipline, hierarchy' among all its members. The new party was ruthless and ambitious, and at its first national congress promised that under its governance Italy would be ruled over and organised by a strong Fascist state. The PNF would be comprised of three principal political units, namely the broad membership of the Party, which by that point stood at 220,000, the *squadristi* and the newly formed Fascist trade unions whose principal task would be to break any collectivist spirit in Italian society.⁶ As Mussolini put it in a major speech to the Italian Chamber of Deputies on 1 December 1921, the Party's chief task was now to quickly bring to an end 'our internal warring' in order to focus the mind of the Italian people as a whole on those evolving events 'that are destined once again to transform the map of Europe'. The dilemma, as the *Duce* saw it, was very simple: 'either there will be a new war, or we will have treaty revision!'⁷

Such overt bellicosity was echoed loudly in the Fascist programme published by Mussolini in *Il Popolo d'Italia* in late December 1921. The PNF leadership had no time whatsoever for the League of Nations or its principles, which, they argued, clearly favoured the few over the many. Italian imperialism figured heavily in the document, Mussolini declaring rather cautiously that the new Italy had every right to its former (Imperial Roman) historical and geographical unity, and to cultural domination of the Mediterranean littoral. Equally prominent were PNF demands that treaty revision and modification should lead to fairer international trade and a greater share in raw materials resources, of which Italy was desperately bereft. Italy under Fascism

⁶ Payne, *A History of Fascism*, pp. 102–103.

⁷ OOBM, XVII, 'Per la vera pacificazione', p. 300.