

‘No-One Wears the Fascist Badge Anymore’: Blockade, Starvation and Popular Opinion in Wartime Sicily and Sardinia, 1940–3

Journal of Contemporary History

1–22

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DOI: 10.1177/00220094251414065

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Abstract

This article analyses the relationship between the maritime war, food supply, and popular opinion in Italy during the ‘fascist war’ (1940–3). It does so through a novel case study, focusing on Sicily and Sardinia. Drawing on a rich body of multinational sources – including detailed Italian police, informer, prefectural, and censorship reports – the article demonstrates that the war at sea critically disrupted food supplies to the islands, precipitating a rapid deterioration of civilian support for the regime well before the onset of sustained, large-scale Allied bombing. This challenges the prevailing historiographical narrative that attributes the breakdown of the Italian home front primarily to events from late 1942 onwards. By systematically tracing the links between maritime logistical failures, food shortages, and the erosion of consensus, this study not only integrates three historiographical strands – maritime warfare, the wartime ‘battle for food’, and the dynamics of home fronts – but also proposes a broader methodological framework for examining the impact of maritime warfare on civilian morale in island contexts. The findings suggest that the Italian case may offer wider comparative insights into the social consequences of the maritime war during the Second World War.

Keywords

Italy, Mediterranean, food, blockade, war, islands

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For many civilians during the Second World War, life was fundamentally dependent on the transport of supplies by sea. The ebb and flow of the global maritime war thus impacted their lives both directly and indirectly, and this relationship was most pronounced for those living on islands, where there were limited alternatives to the seaborne transport of crucial resources. Food was undoubtedly among the most important of these resources. The impact of hunger on civilian populations during the Second World War can hardly be underestimated, as, according to some sources, approximately 20 million people perished due to wartime food-related issues or their consequences.¹ The need for food influenced crucial aspects of national and coalition conduct of the war, which has led to a rich developing historiography covering its impact on areas such as the development of war strategies and occupation policies.² Food security was, of course, also essential for the functioning of wartime ‘home fronts’ and the maintenance of popular support for the war.

This article analyses the relationship between the maritime war, food supply and popular opinion through the lens of a novel case study: the largest Italian islands, Sicily and Sardinia, during the ‘fascist war’ period from 1940 to 1943. It demonstrates the hitherto underappreciated deleterious impact of the war at sea on civilian life and consequently on popular opinion and support for the ‘fascist war’. More broadly, this article acts as a step towards the goal of integrating three important themes of Second World War history that have largely been treated separately or only partially integrated by historians: the global maritime war, the wartime ‘battle for food’, and the issue of home fronts and popular ‘morale’/support for the war.

Each of these three themes has a developed but largely self-contained historiography. First, the importance of the maritime aspect of the war has long been recognized by historians. In recent years, several ambitious, wide-ranging studies have sought to take global views of the maritime war and its impacts on the broader conflict. They offer important new perspectives on issues of strategy, operations and in some cases link to economic issues, showing the centrality of the seas in defining the development of the conflict.³ Their scope, however, does not extend to the link between the maritime war and civilian life, while the ‘battle for food’ remains largely absent from such works.

Meanwhile, Lizzie Collingham’s landmark work has repositioned food as a central facet of the war and expanded our knowledge of wartime access to and denial of food

1 L. Collingham, *The Taste of War: World War Two and the Battle for Food* (London: Penguin, 2012), 1

2 See for instance G. Gesine, *Nazi Hunger Politics: A history of food in the Third Reich* (London: Rowman&Littlefield, 2015); W.Z. Goldman, D.A. Filtzer (eds), *Hunger and War: Food Provisioning in the Soviet Union during World War II* (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2015); G. Huff, *World War II and Southeast Asia: Economy and Society under Japanese Occupation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

3 E. Mawdsley, *The War for the Seas: A Maritime History of World War II* (London: Yale University Press, 2019) and C. Symonds, *World War II at Sea: A Global History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018) offer global narratives of the maritime war focusing on strategy and operations. P. O’Brien, *How the War Was Won: Air-Sea Power and Allied Victory in World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) argues for the centrality of sea and air power as determinants of Allied victory in the war, linking the air and maritime domains with economic-industrial issues.

as well as the consequent civilian impact.⁴ Collingham's work includes sustained efforts to link the maritime war and the 'battle for food' to the impact on civilian lives. This is done regarding specific examples, such as the impacts of the Battle of the Atlantic and the Pacific War, on the lives of those in Britain and the Pacific islands. Collingham offers a clear integration between the maritime war and food security, while elsewhere historians have incorporated the war at sea into their analysis of food accessibility in particular nations or regions, primarily Britain and the Atlantic, and Japan/wider Asia with the Pacific.⁵ The impact on Italy, however, is almost entirely absent from these studies, while the question of impacts on popular opinion generally receives only brief attention.

In the burgeoning sub-field of 'home front studies' of the Second World War, the importance of food and assessments of popular opinion and 'consensus' have seen increasing attention. Research on the Italian *fronte interno* (1940–3) has frequently stressed the impact of wartime hunger. Some focus has been placed on the food crisis as a critical factor in undermining the credibility of the fascist regime.⁶ Studies have covered the impacts of shortages and rationing on public health and civilian efforts to adapt diets and recipes to increasingly desperate circumstances. This has included significant focus on the mismanagement of rationing and distribution by fascist authorities and the choice to maintain a public-private rationing system.⁷ This emphasis on mismanagement as the primary causal factor in food shortages remains strong in the latest literature.⁸ These studies sit beside several scholarly works that cover Italian popular opinion and support for the 'fascist war'.⁹ While they offer plenty of coverage of food shortages,

4 Collingham, *Taste of War*, and also her succinct overview 'The Human Fuel: Food as Global Commodity and Local Scarcity' in M. Geyer and A. Toozé (eds), *The Cambridge History of the Second World War*, vol. III, *Total War: Economy, Society and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 149–73.

5 See for example S. Garon, 'Operation STARVATION, 1945: A Transnational History of Blockades and the Defeat of Japan', *International History Review* (May 2024), 1–16; Huff, *World War II and Southeast Asia*; R.J. Hammond, *Food*, 3 vols. (London: HMSO, 1951–62); B.F. Johnston with M. Hosoda and Y. Kusumi, *Japanese Food Management in World War II* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1953).

6 A. De Bernardi, 'Alimentazione e guerra', in L. Alessandrini, M. Pasetti, 1943, *Guerra e società*, (Rome: Viella, 2016), cit., 136; G. Chianese, *Quando uscimmo dai rifugi: il Mezzogiorno tra guerra e dopoguerra (1943–46)* (Rome: Carocci, 2004), 14; S. Colarizi, *L'opinione degli italiani sotto il regime 1929–1943* (Rome-Bari: Laterza 2000), 378–93.

7 See for instance D. Garvin, *Feeding Fascism: The Politics of Women's Food Work* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022), especially 119–52; P. Sambuco and L. Pine, 'Food Discourses and Alimentary Policies in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany: A Comparative Analysis', *European History Quarterly*, 53, 1 (2023), 135–55; M. Legnani, 'Consumi di guerra. Linee di ricerca sull'alimentazione in Itali nel 1940–43', in Dipartimento di Discipline Storiche Università di Bologna (ed), *Guerra vissuta, guerra subita* (Bologna: CLUEB, 1991); A. de Bernardi, 'Alimentazione di guerra' in Luca Alessandrini and Matteo Pasetti (eds), 1943. *Guerra e società* (Rome: Viella, 2015); L. Baldissara, *Italia 1943, La guerra continua* (Bologna: il Mulino, kindle ed., 16%); Colarizi, 'Vita alimentare degli italiani e razionamento' in R.H. Raniero and A. Biagini (eds), *L'Italia in guerra, il 2° anno – 1941* (Rome: Stabilimento Grafico Militare, 1992), 279–90; F. De Ninno, 'La fame e le vittime civili', in N. Labanca (eds), *Ostaggi della guerra. Vittime civili del secondo conflitto mondiale* (Rome: Viella, 2024), 103–20.

8 R. Mangiameli, *Guerra e desiderio di pace La Sicilia nella crisi del 1943* (Rome: Viella, 2025), 30–1.

9 C. Duggan, *Fascist Voices: An Intimate History of Mussolini's Italy* (London: The Bodley Head, 2012); M. Avagliano and M. Palmieri, *Vincere e vinceremo. Gli Italiani al fronte, 1940–1943* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2014), ch. 6; Colarizi, *L'opinione degli italiani*; A. Lepre, *Le illusioni, la paura, la rabbia. Il fronte interno italiano, 1940–1943* (Naples: Edizione scientifiche italiane, 1989). Note that Paul Corner's important book *The Fascist Party and Popular Opinion in Mussolini's Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021 [2012])

they focus on public opinion without investigating the disruption of supply chains caused by military operations, and how this impacted the civilian population in terms of food security, popular opinion and the relationship with the fascist regime.¹⁰ Indeed, while there have been multiple high-quality studies of the impact of Allied bombing on Italian civilians, often arguing that it played the central role in collapsing popular support, the role of the maritime war has received scant attention.¹¹

Clearly then, the lack of attention to the impact of the maritime war on Italian civilians has hampered our understanding of Italy's war in multiple ways. This article addresses the issue directly and contends that the maritime war disrupted both Italian imports of food and the regime's ability to distribute food from the centre to the periphery of metropolitan Italian territory. It does so by focusing on the major Italian islands, which were by their nature heavily dependent on maritime supply. The disruptions caused food shortages that in turn contributed directly to the rapid decline in civilian support for both the fascist regime and their war. This process began well before any substantial bombing of the civilian populace, which began at large scale from late 1942 for some parts of Italy but only in early 1943 for the islands.¹²

In order to demonstrate this, it is first necessary to outline the Axis maritime logistics network in the Mediterranean, the supply requirements of the two islands and the wartime disruption of these supplies. This demonstrates how the loss of and disruption to shipping resulted in a rapid deterioration of supply to the islands. Then a mixture of Italian sources is used to demonstrate that these shortages clearly contributed to a rapid decline in Italian civil 'morale' and support for the 'fascist war'.

Italy's reliance on seaborne transport and imports represented a serious vulnerability, as was clearly recognized by multiple nations long prior to the Italian declaration of war in June 1940. An October 1924 memo drafted by the Secretariat of the newly formed *Commissione Suprema di Difesa* (CSD) predicted that for a single month of war the country would have to import 840,000 tons of coal, 137,500 tons of steel, 35,400 tons

focuses almost entirely on the *prewar* period, only briefly touching on events after the declaration of war in June 1940. This is also true of much of the weighty literature on prewar 'consent' in fascist Italy, which is consequently omitted from this note.

10 Some attention to fascist collection policy is in M. Vaquegno Pinero, "'Rastrellare il grano'", *Gli ammassi obbligatori in Italia dal fascismo al dopoguerra*, *Società e Storia*, n. 158 (2015), 257–93; A single example of study on the blockade is by R. Mallett, but his analysis refers to the problem of Mussolini's appeasement by Britain before Italy's entry in the war, see Robert Mallett, 'The Anglo-Italian war trade negotiations, contraband control and the failure to appease Mussolini, 1939–40', *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 8, 1 (1997), 137–67.

11 On the bombing of Italy, see C. Baldoli and A. Knapp, *Forgotten Blitzes: France and Italy under Air Allied Attack, 1940–1945* (London: Continuum, 2012); Baldoli, 'Il fallimento militare del regime: la guerra e i bombardamenti', in G. Albanese (ed.), *Il fascismo italiano. Storia e interpretazioni* (Rome: Carocci, 2021), 69–92; M. Gioannini and G. Massobrio, *L'Italia bombardata. Storia della guerra di distruzione aerea 1940–1945* (Milan: OscarStoria edizione, 2021); M. Evangelista, *Allied Air Attacks and Civilian Harm in Italy, 1940–1945: Bombing among Friends* (London: Routledge, 2023).

12 Baldoli, 'L'Italia meridionale sotto le bombe, 1940–44', *Meridiana*, 82, n. 1 (2015), 37–57. According to statistics compiled in Gioannini and Massobrio, *Bombardate l'Italia*, Appendix, there were numerous raids on both Sardinia and Sicily over 1940, 1941 and 1942, but these were nearly always by very small quantities of aircraft (usually fewer than 10). The first raids recorded as involving more than 20 bomber aircraft for each island only came in January 1943.

of sulphuric acid, 24,600 tons of nitric acid, 79,500 tons of petrol, 20,850 tons of naphtha, 120,000 tons of cement, 21,700 tons of brass and 28,000 tons of timber.¹³ More broadly, by spring 1940, it was estimated that Italy needed around 21–22 million tons of imports annually in *peacetime*. Between 1936 and 1940, more than three-quarters of these imports had come by sea and by 1940 that proportion may have risen as high as 84 per cent. The vast majority of these seaborne imports originated from outside of the Mediterranean.¹⁴

Clearly then, to potential enemies such as Britain, who controlled the entrances to the Mediterranean at Gibraltar and Suez, blockade offered a powerful potential wartime tool. A 1931 report on ‘The possibilities of the exercise of maritime economic pressure upon Italy’ concluded as much. It was felt that successful wartime control of the Mediterranean entrances would ‘practically strangle Italian maritime trade, and with it the national war resistance’, unless another major source of imports could be found.¹⁵ Mussolini himself stated in 1925 that ‘blockade would render Italy’s food situation “extremely difficult”’.¹⁶ Not only would enemy blockade of the Mediterranean entrances hamper imports, but the Italians rightly anticipated that it would deprive them of a substantial amount of their shipping capacity, which was regularly engaged in international duties. An ‘incredibly accurate’ study by an inter-ministerial commission in January 1940 predicted that in the event of war, 235 merchant ships totalling 1,238,053 gross registered tons (GRT) would be trapped outside of the Mediterranean.¹⁷ It would prove to be only a very slight overestimation of the actual total of 212 ships totalling 1,216,637 GRT that were trapped outside of the Mediterranean on the Italian declaration of war on 10 June 1940. After discounting unusable vessels, the Italians were left with 548 merchant ships (1,749,441 GRT) plus a collection of small vessels suitable only for coastal shipping. Even with the subsequent addition of 56 German ships (203,512 GRT), this amounted to a total of less than two million GRT of shipping with which to supply all military and civilian needs across the Mediterranean.¹⁸

The twin dilemmas of shortages in key resources and of maritime transport would greatly harm both the Italian war effort and civilian life. An extensive historiography has been developed covering the impact of resource shortages on Italian war industries, but much less so for civilian lives.¹⁹ Meanwhile, there has been substantial coverage of

13 G. Colliva, ‘Ufficio trasporti rifornimenti in guerra: studi per un conflitto (1931–1940)’, *Bollettino d’Archivio dell’Ufficio Storico della Marina Militare* (June 1998), 51.

14 Ufficio di Stato Maggiore della Regia Aeronautica, 1° Reparto, Divisione Operazioni, P.R. 12 – Studio operativo n.2, ‘Azioni aeree contro le basi navali ed i porti mercantili del Mediterraneo’, 1 April 1940 in F. Mattesini and M. Cermell (eds), *Le direttive tecnico-operative di Superaero*, 1, 1 (Rome: Ufficio Storico dell’Aeronautica Militare, 1992), 94; G.E.A. Raspin, *The Italian War Economy, 1940–1943, with particular reference to Italian relations with Germany* (London: Garland, 1986), 66.

15 The National Archives, Kew, London (TNA), ADM 1/8739/47, ‘The possibilities of the exercise of maritime economic pressure upon Italy’, Part I, March 1931, 7.

16 M. Knox, *Common Destiny: Dictatorship, Foreign Policy, and War in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 119.

17 Colliva, ‘Ufficio trasporti rifornimenti in guerra’, 93–4.

18 M. Bragadin, *The Italian Navy in World War II* (Annapolis, MD: US Naval Institute Press, 1957), 365.

19 On war industries, see for example Raspin, *Italian War Economy*; C. Ristuccia, ‘The Italian Economy under Fascism, 1934–1943: The Rearmament Paradox’ (unpublished DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 1998); F. Minniti, ‘l’industria degli armamenti dal 1940 al 1943: i mercati, le produzioni’ in V. Zamagni (ed), *Come perdere la guerra e vincere la pace. L’economia Italiana tra guerra e dopoguerra, 1938–1947*

the impact of shipping losses on Italo-German efforts to sustain their fighting forces around the Mediterranean region, particularly in North Africa.²⁰ However, these two issues combined in another important way: the supply of food and other essential goods to the Italians islands. Despite strident interwar efforts at achieving self-sufficiency, Italy remained reliant on imported foodstuffs. This was particularly the case for grain, and especially wheat, domestic production of which fell substantially each year from 1939 to 1942.²¹ The imports that they did receive were never sufficient. Indeed, the average calorific intake fell after the 1935 Ethiopian intervention and continued to do so prior to and throughout the war. By 1943, Italians received 'one of the lowest per-diem rations in Europe'.²²

Due to the distant blockade from Gibraltar and Suez, wartime Italian imports came primarily via rail from occupied Europe, which was itself experiencing a shortfall in production by 1941, or from European Axis allies.²³ Germany could take 'first choice' over their Italian ally in resource extraction or trade from these sources. In 1942, the total deficit of cereals in Italy was estimated to stand at five million quintals, and total consumption of wheat, corn and rice in Italy had dropped from a prewar total of around 60 million quintals to below 50 million.²⁴ Italian weaknesses in production and importation of food were further magnified by difficulties in distribution, especially to the south, where rail lines were less well developed and relied on key nodes at Naples and Foggia that frequently became bottlenecks. Then there was the issue of competing military requirements versus those of civilians. By January 1943, the prioritization of limited overland transportation capacity towards military needs had caused serious disruption of supply to the civilian population.²⁵

The islands then had yet another layer of complexity and vulnerability added to those outlined above, as they still required maritime transport for the onward delivery of essential supplies. Congestion became a common problem for the railway that connected Naples to Villa San Giovanni, the main Calabrian departure point for journeys across the strait of Messina toward Sicily.²⁶ Heavy bombing of rail stations from late 1942 onwards intensified the overland transport issue. In July 1943, after the bombing of

(Bologna: Il Mulino, 1997), 55–148; F. Degli Esposti, 'L'industria bellica Italiana e le commesse tedesche (1937–1943)', *Rivista di storia contemporanea*, 2–3 (1993), 198–244.

20 See for example R. Hammond, *Strangling the Axis: The Fight for Control of the Mediterranean during the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); M. Van Creveld, *Supplying War: Logistics from Wallenstein to Patton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2nd edn, 2004), 181–201; D. Austin, *Malta and British Strategic Policy, 1925–1943* (London: Frank Cass, 2004).

21 Raspin, *Italian War Economy*, 299.

22 A. Nützandel, 'Dictating Food: Autarchy, Food Provision and Consumer Politics in Fascist Italy, 1922–1943' in F. Trentmann and F. Just (eds), *Food and Conflict in Europe in the Age of the Two World Wars* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006), 95, 98; C. Helstosky, *Garlic and Oil: Politics and Food in Italy* (Oxford: Berg, 2004), 92.

23 A. Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy* (London: Allen Lane, 2006), 418–9; Raspin, *Italian War Economy*, 222, 224, 301–4; Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ACS), Segreteria particolare del Duce (SpD), Carteggio Ordinario (CO), b. 791, f. 500.003/IV, Ministero per l'Agricoltura e le Foreste, 'Relazione sulla campagna cerealicola 1 Luglio 1941–30 Giugno 1942', 30 April 1943, 1.

24 ACS, SpD, CO, b. 791, f. 500.003/IV, Ministero per l'Agricoltura e le Foreste, 'Relazione sulla campagna cerealicola 1 Luglio 1941–30 Giugno 1942', 30 April 1943, 2, 6.

25 ACS SpD, CO, b. 781, Il Ministro per l'Agricoltura e le foreste, Appunto per il Duce, 15 January 1943.

Foggia, all trains directed toward Calabria had to be stopped or diverted toward the already congested railways on the Tyrrhenian coast, impacting supply for Sicily yet further.²⁷ In the case of Sardinia, there was no realistic alternative to maritime transport for getting supplies to the island, with ships generally discharging in the main ports of Cagliari and Olbia. For Sicily, shipping was used alongside the 'rail ferry' across the Straits of Messina.

Much like mainland Italy, the islands proved unable to reach food self-sufficiency in wartime, even though agriculture was the main form of employment on each island (accounting for, according to a prewar census, 51 per cent of the Sicilian employed workforce and 57 per cent of the Sardinian).²⁸ Partly this was due to specific deficiencies on the islands, as described below, and partly because agricultural labourers joined the fighting services and, later, Italian and German servicemen swelled the island populations. Therefore, the islands sat at the periphery of Italy's parlous national supply chain and were reliant on maritime transport for the final stage of supply.

Despite these difficulties, the strategic importance of the islands was well recognized by naval strategists, for instance, and the Navy entered the war with clear directives that securing communications with the islands was considered of 'preeminent interest'.²⁹ At the final prewar meeting of the CSD in 1940, there was a position of broad confidence on display regarding the ability to keep the major islands supplied in wartime. This was despite the fact that the islands already had significant prewar populations to feed: according to the 1936 census, Sicily had 3.92 million inhabitants, and Sardinia 1.024 million. Together they accounted for c12 per cent of the total Italian population of c42 million. Moreover, the CSD expected further increases in their populations due to wartime deployments.³⁰ This confidence was retained even though they actively expected to have deficiencies in numerous key foodstuffs and other living essentials. Table 1 shows a selection of these expected deficiencies for Sicily and Sardinia, as determined by the Ministry of Agriculture. These goods would need to be provided to meet an estimated one-year sufficiency plus reserves in each.

The table reveals significant deficiencies in some of the most fundamental, essential foodstuffs. The lack of wheat was especially serious given the centrality of bread and pasta to islanders' diets: before the war, Sicilians consumed on average 30 per cent

26 ACS, SpD, CO, b. 797, f. 500.004/III, *Situazione dei trasporti sulle linee ferroviarie, Promemoria per il Duce, il Ministro delle comunicazioni, 18 March 1942.*

27 ACS, SpD, CO, b. 798, f. 500.004/IV, *Il ministro delle comunicazioni, Promemoria per il duce, 24 July 1943.*

28 Calculated from Istituto Centrale di Statistica (Istat), *Annuario statistico italiano, 1939*, Quarta serie, vol. VI (Rome: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1939), Table 18, 23. The next largest employment sector for both islands was Industry, employing 24% of the Sicilian and 21% of the Sardinian workforces.

29 On the 'preeminent interest' of supplying Sardinia and the broader strategic importance of Sicily, see Archivio dell'Ufficio Storico della Marina Militare (AUSMM), DG, 'Di. Na. 0, Concetti generali di azione nel Mediterraneo nella ipotesi di conflitto, Alfa Uno', 29 May 1940.

30 TNA GFM 36/183 [Frame 033595], Ministero dell'Agricoltura e delle Forreste. Direzione Generale dei Piani della produzione. Relazione sul no.22 dell'O.d.G della XVII Sessione della Commissione Suprema di Difesa. 'Organizzazione per la guerra delle grandi isole (Sicilia-Sardegna)', January 1940, 1; Population details from Istat, *Annuario statistico italiano, 1939*, Tables 3–4, 12.

Table 1. Expected deficiencies for Sicily and Sardinia, 1940.

Goods	Expected deficiency (in quintals unless otherwise stated)	
	Sicily	Sardinia
Wheat	1,442,000	291,000
Rice	224,000	39,000
Beef	548,000	32,000
Preserved fish	11,000	2,000
Cheese	171,000	N/A (small surplus)
Dietary fats	194,000	N/A (small surplus)
Coffee	63,000	21,000
Sugar	182,000	72,000
Oats/Feed	N/A	263,000
Firewood	7,737,000	4,561,000

Source: TNA GFM 36/183 [Frame 033602], Ministero dell'Agricoltura e delle Forreste. Direzione Generale dei Piani della produzione. Relazione sul no.22 dell'O.d.G della XVII Sessione della Commissione Suprema di Difesa. 'Organizzazione per la guerra delle grandi isole (Sicilia-Sardegna)', January 1940, 8.

more wheat than those on the mainland.³¹ Nevertheless, a positive spin was placed on this in the report: ongoing efficiency efforts were expected to further increase yields in the future and thus reduce the need for imports, so long as sufficient quantities could be imported in the short term.³² The prewar optimism shown by the CSD soon proved to be misplaced, as difficulties in supplying the islands during wartime appeared immediately and quickly worsened, having been intensified by a poor Sardinian domestic wheat harvest in 1940.³³ They were driven by several interlinked factors: an initial shortage of shipping, which also had to be spread across multiple supply commitments, including North Africa, the islands, South-East Europe and the Aegean, among others. This was then exacerbated further by wartime disruption, unsustainable losses of merchant ships, and a management approach which for much of the war had

A marked tendency in the bodies in charge of the nation's individual activities, both civil and military, towards a limited and not general conception of the transport problem. Each responsible body seeks, in essence, to address and solve its own difficulties of the moment, not framing them within the no less pressing ones of the collateral bodies.³⁴

31 E. Gugino, 'Indagini sul fabbisogno alimentare della popolazione in Sicilia', *Il giornale di Sicilia*, 3 November 1944.

32 TNA GFM 36/183 [Frames 033595–6], Ministero dell'Agricoltura e delle Forreste. Direzione Generale dei Piani della produzione. Relazione sul no. 22 dell'O.d.G della XVII Sessione della Commissione Suprema di Difesa. 'Organizzazione per la guerra delle grandi isole (Sicilia-Sardegna)', January 1940, 1–2.

33 See Archivio di Stato di Cagliari (ASC), Prefettura – Ufficio territoriale del governo di Cagliari, Gabinetto del Prefetto (GP), Relazioni, Relazioni periodiche (RP), Faldone 10, Relazioni del Prefetto (Faldone 10), f. 59, Il Prefetto al Ministero dell'Interno, 5 October 1940, 2.

34 ACS, SpD, CO, b. 797, f. 500.004/III, Host-Venturi, Promemoria per il Duce, Oggetto: Istituzione di un organo regolatore dei trasporti, 20 March 1942, 1.

The Allies rarely targeted Axis shipping with the islands directly, apart from a brief period in 1943. Instead, their main targets were the maritime routes to North Africa, or for a brief period in 1941, across the Adriatic.³⁵ Nevertheless, shipping to and from the islands was sometimes interdicted, but more impactful still was the disruption to shipping routes and the overall effect of attrition to shipping. The immediate loss of more than a third of the Italian Merchant Marine shut out of the Mediterranean, alongside the threat of attacks on the shipping that remained within, caused immediate disruption to the supply network even though relatively little shipping was actually sunk in the early months of the Mediterranean war.

For a short period after the declaration of war, shipping to Sardinia was fully suspended for what the Minister of Communications, Giovanni Host Venturi, would later refer to as 'obvious security reasons'. This appears to have included disruption caused by the Allies laying some magnetic mines in and around harbours, and shipping was only reinstated after additional traffic protection measures were instituted.³⁶ By August 1940, the Director-General of the Italian Merchant Marine already felt the need to complain to Host Venturi of the logistical problems of insufficient port capacity at Olbia, poor overland transport networks to distribute supplies from the ports, and a barely sufficient level of shipping assigned to the Sardinian routes.³⁷ In fact, it appears that between 10 June and 3 September 1940, traffic with Sardinia suffered an astonishing 803 hours of combined interruptions.³⁸ As to Sicily, Admiral Arturo Riccardi complained that there was already a 'severe crisis' in transport across the Straits of Messina in July 1940.³⁹ Relatively small numbers of losses, even in completely different parts of the Mediterranean, could cause 'grave difficulties' in maritime supply across the theatre.⁴⁰ By January 1941, a modest increase in sinkings by submarines off the Italian coast was deemed sufficient cause to institute a programme of evasive (i.e. varying and circuitous) routing to destinations including Sicily and Sardinia. This method, while potentially safer, was also longer and less efficient.⁴¹

Over the course of 1941, Allied air and naval reinforcements poured into the Mediterranean, as the Allies placed a greater priority on the interdiction of Axis shipping. Axis shipping losses consequently increased greatly, while the supply situation

35 On Allied approaches to the anti-shipping campaign, see Hammond, *Strangling the Axis*.

36 ACS, SpD, CO, b. 796, f. 500.004/II/2-1, Host-Venturi, Promemoria per il Duce, 4 October 1940, Oggetto: Trasporti di carbone dalla Sardegna. On magnetic mines, see ASC, GP, RP, Faldone 10, f. 59, Il Prefetto al Ministero dell'Interno, 2 September 1940, 1.

37 ACS, SpD, CO b. 796, f. 500.004/II/2-1, Ingianni to Host Venturi, 16 August 1940.

38 This figure is calculated from the totals given in AUSMM, Maricotraf, I serie, b. 5, cartella 5/1, Comando Difesa Traffico, Promemoria per il sottosegretario di stato, 'Dati relativi al traffico metropolitano', 7 September 1940, specchio b, 'Traffico navi mercantili interruzioni dall'inizio della guerra'.

39 AUSMM, Maricotraf, I serie, b. 5, cartella 5/1, Riccardi Promemoria, 'Traffico fra le coste orientali della Sicilia ed il Continente', 5 August 1940, 1.

40 AUSMM, Maricotraf, II serie, b. 64, cartella 5/3, Balella to Ministero della Marina, Comando Difesa Traffico, 'Trasporti via mare Alto Adriatico', 21 October 1940.

41 AUSMM, Supermarina - Dipartimenti metropolitani, b. 7 - Messina, f. 42, Campioni to Marina Taranto and Marina Messina, 20 January 1941; AUSMM, Maricotraf, I serie, b. 5, cartella 5/1, Promemoria per l'eccellenza S.S.S., 'Traffico tra la Sardegna e la Penisola', 11 January 1941.

accordingly deteriorated further. The majority of the losses came on the routes to and from North Africa, but losses to vessels on the island routes did increase too. Over June–August, for instance, nine ships were sunk on routes to and from Sardinia, while another two were attacked but avoided damage. These losses and the ongoing threat of Allied submarines led one official to report a ‘contraction’ in traffic to and from Sardinia.⁴²

The anti-shipping campaign reached a new level of intensity in late 1941, but the year ended on a dire note for the Allies in the theatre. While the Japanese attacks in December had triggered American entry to the war, they also had serious implications on the Mediterranean, as Allied forces were diverted east of Suez. Meanwhile Axis reinforcements bolstered their position in the Mediterranean, accompanied by numerous successes in the ongoing aero-naval war. The result was that the first eight months of 1942 were marked by grave setbacks for the Allies across the theatre, and a subsequent drop in their own offensive efforts as they faced global overstretch, greater losses of their own, and a protracted siege of Malta. Despite this advantageous context, the Axis powers struggled to improve their own overall transport and supply situation for the islands.

The ongoing attrition to Axis shipping stocks was compounded by their inability to replace losses. Italy launched just over 295,000 GRT of new merchant shipping over the 36 months of 1940–2. Purchases of foreign vessels, and seizures from defeated nations like Greece and Yugoslavia, added little to this total: seemingly only around 80,000 GRT in 1941, for instance. Indeed, the need for vessels of any type led to the Navy requisitioning more fishing vessels, directly contributing to seafood shortages for islanders.⁴³ By contrast, in the last four months of 1941 alone, around 280,000 GRT of Axis shipping was sunk, crippled or otherwise lost.⁴⁴ Consequently, even though the level of losses and interruptions dropped in early-mid 1942, it proved impossible to substantially improve island supply. In February, Riccardi, now the Italian Navy’s Chief of Staff, complained that they only had five escort vessels available to cover

42 AUSMM, Maricotraf, I serie, b. 5, cartella 5/1, Pasetti to Ministero della Marina, Comando Difesa Traffico, Promemoria ‘Traffico con la Sardegna’, 5 September 1941, 1–2 and Appendix 1.

43 Construction calculated from C. Ristuccia, ‘The Italian Economy Under Fascism, 1934–43: The Rearmament Paradox’ (Unpublished DPhil thesis, Oxford University, 1998), 226. Seizures of Greek and Yugoslav merchant vessels are hard to precisely determine. For instance, the Italian official history appears to suggest that over the course of 1941, a little over 80,000 tons of ‘foreign ships’ were incorporated into the merchant marine, although it is not explained how many of these are seizures versus purchases, nor where they came from, nor how many of them were fully operational. See LMI, Vol. 1, *Dati statistici*, Table VIIIb, 32–3. On naval requisitions of fishing vessels and fish shortages for Sardinians, for instance, see ASC, GP, RP, Faldone 10, f. 59, Il Prefetto to the Ministero dell’Interno, 5 October 1941, 1. For impacts on Sicilian fishermen, see ACS, Ministero dell’Interno (MI), Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza (DGPS), Affari generali e riservati, 1942, b. 72, Agrigento, Relazione sulla situazione politica ed economica della provincia, 31 March 1942, 4.; ACS, MI, DGPS, Affari generali e riservati, 1942, b. 77, Trapani, Questura di Trapani, Situazione politico-economica della provincia di Trapani dal 1° luglio al 30 settembre, 1942, 3.

44 Calculated using data from TNA AIR 20/9598 and J. Röhwer, *Allied Submarine Attacks of World War Two: European Theatre of Operations, 1939–1945* (London: Greenhill Books, 1997). The lower figures in the Italian official history should be disregarded due to the numerous bizarre omissions, such as the liners *Neptunia* and *Oceania*, see USMM, LMI, Vol. 1, *Dati Statistici*, table LXXVib, 232–3.

transport for both islands. Meanwhile, losses among specialized coal transport vessels meant further problems both in extracting coal from Sardinia and in supplying it to Sicily.⁴⁵ The transport situation only continued to decline thereafter. In June, the German Naval Attaché in Rome wrote to Berlin that the ‘transport space situation’ had become ‘alarming’. Mussolini himself echoed similar comments on shortages of shipping space in September.⁴⁶ In a major conference of senior Italian military and political leaders in October, the Minister of Communications directly warned that the state of the merchant marine was ‘extremely serious’ and that there was a deficit of 167,000 GRT of shipping available for civilian supply.⁴⁷

November seemed to offer some respite to the situation due to the seizure of large quantities of French shipping. However, much of this proved to be unseaworthy and in need of repair, or vessels of an unsuitable type. Ultimately, less than 150,000 GRT of it was actually used in the central Mediterranean by May 1943.⁴⁸ Meanwhile, losses increased again over late 1942 and into 1943. The deleterious impact on island supply was substantial, despite the nominal influx of French shipping, as noted by the Director-General of the Merchant Marine (Ingianni) in February 1943:

As a result of the losses suffered in recent months and further absorption by the military, we now have approximately 175,000 tons of merchant shipping. This shipping is almost entirely engaged in voyages (triangular type) between the continent-Sardinia-Sicily. The service is organised so that the steamships never travel empty. The most important transports to be provided for are coal and salt transports from Sardinia. Last November, we had a transport availability of 500,000 tonnes per month, which has now been reduced to around 300,000, also taking into account a French shipping allocation.⁴⁹

Ingianni made clear that there was no realistic prospect of increasing this capacity unless shipping was diverted from other tasks, which was virtually impossible. Instead, the situation worsened as more vessels were put out of service, either by sinking or need of repair. According to the ‘Comitato Coordinamento dei trasporti’ (CCT), there were 94 ships (366,699 GRT) under repair as of 20 May 1943.⁵⁰

The combination of sinkings, shipping shortages and the perceived threat of attack led to repeated interruptions of shipping programmes for the islands, which were generally

45 *Verbali delle riunioni tenute dal capo di SM generale (VCSMG)*, vol. 3 (ROME: USSME, 1985), nos.33 and 49, 4 and 20 February 1942, 118–9, 180.

46 Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, Freiburg, Germany (BA-MA) RM 11/54, B.Nr. GKdos 850/42, Marineattaché Rom to OKM, 26 June 1942, ff. 186–7; BA-MA RH 19 VIII/27, fo. 55, ‘Erinnerungsprotokoll über den Empfang beim Duce in Rocca della Caminata um 11 Uhr’, 24 September 1942.

47 TNA GFM 36/6, Verbale della riunione tenuta il giorno 1° ottobre 1942 a Palazzo Venezia presso il Duce sull’argomento ‘Potenziamento delle FF.AA’, 1 October 1942, 8, 10, 14, 18–19.

48 See Hammond, *Strangling the Axis*, 168–9.

49 VCSMG, vol. 4, no. 11, 8 February 1943, 41–2.

50 AUSMM, Maricotraf, III serie, b. 17, f. 6, Comitato Coordinamento dei trasporti, verbale no. 57, ‘Riassunto degli accordi intervenuti nella seduta plenaria del giorno 20 maggio 1943’, 5.

Table 2. Shipping interruptions with Sicily and Sardinia, 1941–2.

Year/Trimester	Individual interruptions	Total hours of interruption
1941 – Jan–Mar	Sicily 7, Sardinia 4	Sicily 334, Sardinia 204
1941 – Apr–June	Sicily 8, Sardinia 9	Sicily 604, Sardinia 285
1941 – July–Sept	Sicily 18, Sardinia 13	Sicily 1,856, Sardinia 1,472
1941 – Oct–Dec	Sicily 16, Sardinia 10	Sicily 1,056, Sardinia 751
1942 – Jan–Mar	Sicily 10, Sardinia 2	Sicily 822, Sardinia 95
1942 – Apr–Jun	Sicily 3, Sardinia 0	Sicily 321, Sardinia 0
1942 – July–Sept	Sicily 5, Sardinia 5	Sicily 487, Sardinia 475
1942 – Oct–Dec	Sicily 7, Sardinia 6	Sicily 534, Sardinia 272

Source: Calculated from figures across multiple documents held in AUSMM, Maricotraf, I serie, b. 5, cartella 5/1.

meticulously recorded in reports that have survived to this day. Table 2 offers a breakdown of interruptions in shipping with Sicily and Sardinia over 1941–2.

Broadly speaking, this tells a story of consistent interruption. Evidently, there were greater levels of interruption during mid-late 1941, but even in the seeming ‘Axis ascendancy’ for much of 1942, there was still substantial disruption. The subsequent impact to the supply of civilians’ essentials to these islands was huge and manifested quickly. Indeed, already in January 1941, Sardinian shipowners complained that the war was greatly disrupting supply to the island from the key ports of Genoa, Livorno and Civitavecchia. As a result, 787 tons of food supplies allocated to Sardinia had been left waiting on the mainland.⁵¹

Determining the fluctuating supply requirements of the islands and finding accurate statistics for quantities that were delivered is a complex task. The fascist regime’s published figures are open to critique but, in any case, the wartime (1940–3) volumes of the *Annuario statistico Italiano* simply do not contain data on goods delivered.⁵² They do indicate, however, a big decline from the last prewar figures (1938) of 1,925,438 tons delivered to Sicily and 637,330 to Sardinia, compared to the first postwar figures (1947) 1,629,420 to Sicily and 408,355 to Sardinia.⁵³

In the absence of published wartime figures, it is necessary to knit together a patchwork of data from different unpublished sources. For instance, in September 1942, the Agriculture Minister (Carlo Pareschi) reported that, although 600,000 quintals of grain and flour had been transferred to Sicily and 500,000 to Sardinia in the previous ‘cereal year’, this was still insufficient. Worse, they calculated a minimum need to transport 1,700,000 quintals to Sicily and 700,000 to Sardinia in the current year but feared that the

51 ASC, GP, RP, Faldone 71, Traffico fra la Sardegna ed il continente interessante la provincia di Cagliari, January 1941.

52 Istat, *Annuario statistico Italiano*, Quarta serie, vols. VII–X (Rome: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1940–3).

53 Istat, *Annuario statistico Italiano*, 1944–48, Serie V, vol. I, Table 291b, ‘Movimento della navigazione marittima per operazioni di commercio nei principali porti nazionali, b. Merci e passeggeri’, 280.

problem of supplying these goods appears to be almost insoluble in the current state of affairs, if one cannot rely on efficient means of transport by sea, not only for Sardinia, but also for Sicily, since the possibilities of rail transport on the Mezzogiorno lines are limited. Unfortunately, the difficulties in obtaining such means are increasing, also because the Regia Marina, for its own needs, sometimes diverts the steamships used for cereal transport.⁵⁴

Pareschi went on to petition Mussolini directly for 'a sufficient number of ships for the transfer to Sardinia and Sicily of the above-mentioned goods' and greater naval escort to minimize further losses.⁵⁵ These shipping shortages also worsened the problem of internal transport on the islands themselves, hampering the distribution of supplies that has been shipped across. In November, the Army staff reported that the shipping of coal to Sicily could not be increased, despite its pivotal importance for the functioning of the island's railways, because wartime exigencies meant that they would not consent to diverting resources for this task.⁵⁶

Deficiencies in crucial cereals like wheat led to major shortages of bread and pasta, which were ubiquitous in islanders' diets. Pareschi outlined an 'emergency programme' that had been devised in response but complained in January 1943 that 'for entire weeks we found ourselves, in many areas, unable to implement the prepared food distribution plans, due to the almost absolute lack of means of transport'.⁵⁷ The situation was dire: one senior official warned that in Palermo, if supplies ceased, there would be no possibility of distributing bread in six days' time.⁵⁸ For Sardinia, maritime supply had become so deficient that the Director General of Supply, Vittorio Ronchi, briefly considered the use of aircraft to supplement deliveries, before dismissing the idea as fantasy.⁵⁹

Despite consistent efforts to alleviate the supply situation, it only deteriorated further. The CCT calculated that as of 15 January, there were shortfalls of 30 per cent in food-stuffs for each of Sicily and Sardinia, along with shortages in medical supplies.⁶⁰ In response, they devised another programme, calculating overall supply requirements to be 231,000 tons (including 50,000 for stockpiling) for Sicily and 51,000 tons (including 11,000 for stockpiling) for Sardinia, and allocating specific ships to the role.⁶¹ Yet these targets were repeatedly missed. In May the Minister for Communications was informed of serious food shortages across the major Sicilian urban centres, noting urgent daily food

54 ACS, SpD, CO, b. 797, f. 500.004/III, Il Ministro del Agricoltura e le Foreste, Appunto per il Duce, 6 September 1942, 1–2.

55 Ibid.

56 ACS, T-821, 196, Stato maggiore esercito, Direzione superiore trasporti, Autosufficienza carbone per traffico ferroviario in Sicilia, 28 November 1942.

57 ACS, SpD, CO, b. 791, f. 500.003/IV, Ministero per l'Agricoltura e le Foreste, appunto per il Duce, 15 January 1943, 1.

58 VCSMG, vol. 4 (Rome: USSME, 1985), Verbale no.11, 8 February 1943, 44.

59 V. Ronchi, *Guerra e crisi alimentare in Italia, 1940–1950: Ricordi ed esperienze* (Rome, 1977), 127.

60 AUSMM, Maricotraf, III serie, b.17, f.6, Comando Supremo, Comitato Coordinamento dei Trasporti, 8 February 1943, oggetto: rifornimenti in Sicilia-Sardegna-Corsica, Table: 'Deficienze esistenti al 15 Gennaio 1943 nelle autosufficienze degli scacchieri sottoindicati'.

61 AUSMM, Maricotraf, III serie, b.17, f.6, Comitato Coordinamento dei trasporti, verbale no.42, 'Riassunto degli accordi intervenuti nella seduta plenaria del giorno 10 febbraio 1943', allegati 1–3.

shortages in Palermo, Messina, Trapani, Catania and Augusta.⁶² From 7 June to 10 July, Sicily received just 105,421 tons of supplies, well below half of the monthly requirement that had been outlined in February.⁶³

In summary, the wartime maritime supply situation for the islands was characterized by constant instability, shaped by a combination of logistical, military, and administrative factors. The persistent shortage of shipping, repeated disruptions of maritime routes, and the structural inability to compensate for losses led to increasingly severe shortages of food and other essentials, which progressively undermined domestic support for the fascist regime. Axis losses and disruptions in the maritime war were therefore critical in the exacerbation of supply problems and aggravating civilian privation, with a consequent impact on popular opinion and ‘consensus’.⁶⁴

The task of gauging popular opinion presents the historian with considerable challenges, and Paul Corner has provided a succinct discussion of these when it comes to fascist Italy.⁶⁵ Perhaps the greatest difficulty is balancing the reliability of sources with their representativeness. As Corner has noted, the collected reports of police and security services, along with those of informers for the regime, comment extensively on public opinion and are best placed to offer broader representation of views. They were evidently also sources of information that were taken very seriously by the regime leadership. Mussolini himself usually started his days during the wartime period with audiences with secret and regular police chiefs to discuss the latest reports and questions of public opinion.⁶⁶ These sources, however, carry risks regarding the motivations of their compiler(s) and of being at least partly filtered through a centralized ‘regime lens’. In order to build a robust evidential basis, this section is therefore based on a mixture of such reports from different services that were collected centrally, balanced with sources from local prefectures and censorship offices on the islands themselves, and engagement with relevant secondary literature.

Fascist Italy entered the war in a general position of vulnerability regarding food supply and was forced over the course of the war to introduce increasingly stringent rationing. Starting in the late 1930s, a marked contraction in popular consumption – driven by autarkic policies and the growing prioritization of military preparations – began to undermine the regime’s ability to maintain consensus on the islands, particularly in large cities, where hardship and public discontent had been mounting throughout the second half of the decade. The blockade thus struck at what was already a vulnerable point in the foundations of fascist support.⁶⁷

62 AUSMM, Maricotraf, III serie, b.17, f.6, Riunione presso l’Ecc Cini, 26 May 1943, 2.

63 AUSMM, Maricotraf, III serie, b.17, f.6, Stato Maggiore della Regia Marina, ‘Materiali sbarcati nei porti della Sicilia, Sardegna e Corsica nel periodo dal 7 Giugno al 10 luglio 1943’.

64 For a critique of the term ‘consensus’ and its use in the context of fascist Italy, see Corner, *Fascist Party*, 7–8.

65 Corner, *Fascist Party*, 172–6.

66 J. Gooch, *Mussolini’s War: Fascist Italy from Triumph to Collapse, 1935–1943* (London: Allen Lane, 2020), 64.

67 S. Lupo, *Blocco agrario e crisi in Sicilia tra le due guerre* (Naples: Guida, 1981), 19.

The announcements of new rationing measures were themselves often accompanied by reports of increasing discontent, public protests and later rioting.⁶⁸ Within months of joining the war, there were indications of food shortages damaging popular support for the war throughout the country. Collected *Carabinieri* reports from December 1940 highlight the rising prices of fish, eggs, butter and pulses, along with scarcities of flour, pasta, oats, meat and other essentials in some provinces. This ‘economic malaise’ had ‘a significant impact on the public spirit’.⁶⁹

The islanders, however, with their additional vulnerability due to reliance on sea-borne transport, found their suffering to be that much more acute, and their ‘consensus’ thus declined even faster. Just weeks after the Italian declaration of war, informers and secret police in Cagliari reported overhearing concerns voiced in public over food shortages. This was during the initial period when shipping to Sardinia was suspended, and the report noted patrons at one café stating impatience waiting for the arrival of ‘a few steamships’.⁷⁰ Similar concerns about the vulnerability of Sardinia’s sea communications were also reported in the northern city of Olbia in a report to the Chief of Police in late 1940.⁷¹ These concerns were accurate, given that, by November 1940, stockpiles of wheat in the Cagliari province had dropped to 75,000 quintals, ‘sufficient to cover [their] needs until 30 June 1941’. The consequent rationing of pasta impacted all but was deemed to ‘absolutely deficient’ for hard labouring miners.⁷²

Local Prefectures and their personnel often felt the brunt of rising public anger as the food situation on the islands continued to worsen into 1941. In March, for instance, there was ‘a certain turmoil’ in the Sardinian mining regions of Iglesias and Carbonia, as bread rations were tightened further, forcing some partial, temporary relaxations in these measures by the local authorities.⁷³ In April, multiple citizens in the municipality of Geraci Siculo near Palermo took the opportunity to complain to a visiting fascist Gerarch that they were being ‘left to starve’ and requested the removal of the local Prefectural Commissioner.⁷⁴ In the following months other protests exploded in Alimena and Mezzojuso, motivated by the reduction of rations assigned to the population.⁷⁵ By June, the Police Chief in Sardinia was reporting that students from the University of Sassari were organizing to ‘form a nucleus of opposition to the Regime’ known as the ‘Movimento universitario rivoluzionario antifascista’, and had recruited members in universities across the island. Both the

68 Colarizi, ‘Vita alimentare’, 282; Nützandel, ‘Dictating Food’, 102.

69 ACS, SpD, CR, Promemoria per il Duce, Mese di Dicembre 1940, 5.

70 Report from 2 July 1940 quoted in A. Vacca, *La tela del ragno. L’OVRA in Sardegna (1937–1943)* (Cagliari: Condaghes ebook, 2015), 174.

71 Lepre, *Le illusioni*, 120–1.

72 ASC, GP, RP, Faldone 10, f. 59, Il Prefetto al Ministero dell’Interno, 3 November 1940, 2–4.

73 Report from 17 March 1941 quoted in Vacca, *La tela del ragno*, 188.

74 Archivio di Stato di Palermo (ASP), Prefettura Gabinetto, 1941–5 (PG), b. 652, f. Geraci Siculo: Situazione politica, Provincia di Palermo, Municipio di Geraci Siculo, il Commissario Prefettizio to Prefetto di Palermo, 3 April 1941, 1.

75 ASP, PG, b. 762, Alimena dimostrazione, 19 August 1941; ASP, PG, b. 762, Municipio di Mezzojuso, Biglietto postale di stato urgente, il Podestà al Prefetto di Palermo, 5 May 1941.

public and secret police were forced to act to suppress them, reporting the next month that public demonstrations of antifascism had been ‘attacked and crushed’.⁷⁶

As the war drew into the autumn of 1941, a period when the shipping losses and supply interruptions started to increase rapidly, stringent new rationing measures were brought into place, limiting most individuals to just 200 grams of bread per day.⁷⁷ A report for the Palermo prefecture noted that the ‘discomfort’ caused was not limited to ‘specific categories of consumers, but the whole population’.⁷⁸ The impact was not only a physical one for islanders, but also visual, as noted by the Prefect in Cagliari:

The greatest satisfaction of the citizens of Cagliari, in times of peace, was to pass by the market in the morning, where they always found it well supplied with meat, vegetables, fruit and abundant fish. Such a morning spectacle could no longer be given to the citizens of Cagliari in times of war.⁷⁹

It was easy enough for these citizens to link at least some of these shortages directly with the maritime war, given that the Italian Navy had requisitioned many of the fishing vessels operating from the island.⁸⁰ The island’s censorship office recorded that complaints about the scarcity of bread and the high prices caused by the difficulties in supply were dominating private correspondence in late 1941.⁸¹

In response to these shortages, public protests over food reached a new level of intensity on the islands. Reports soon surfaced of ‘communist propaganda’ being circulated among workers in the industrial and mining communities of Sardinia, accompanied by what was suspected to be deliberately slowed productivity.⁸² Across Sicily, the Carabinieri reported multiple substantial protests in October, usually by women and young boys. In the Acireale *comune* of Catania province, around 300 women and 50 boys protested outside the town hall over bread shortages on 2 October, while in one neighbourhood of Catania city, about 1,000 women marched the same day, chanting ‘we want bread’. This was followed by at least seven other substantial public protests over food across Acireale, Siracusa, and numerous areas of Catania and Messina in the space of one week. On at least one of these occasions, it took a (non-lethal) intervention from the Army to disperse the protest.⁸³

In November, the Palermo Police Chief (*Questore*) noted that coal shortages on the island were also causing severe dissatisfaction, and that there was an urgent need to

76 ASC, GP, RP, Faldone 10, f. 59, unsigned promemoria, 2 June 1941 and ‘Provincia di Cagliari, situazione politica ed economica’, undated but July 1941, 1.

77 M. Patti, ‘Palermo e la guerra (1940–1943)’, *Italia contemporanea*, no. 286 (April 2018), 41.

78 ASP, PG, b. 762, Consiglio provinciale delle corporazioni, 10 October 1941.

79 ASC, GP, RP, Faldone 10, f. 59, Il Prefetto al Ministero dell’Interno, 5 October 1941, 1.

80 Ibid.

81 ASC, GP, RP, Faldone 29, Commissione prov.le censura Cagliari, relazione dal 12 al 18 Dicembre 1941.

82 See the report from 26 October 1941 quoted in in Vacca, *La tela del ragno*, 197–9.

83 These are detailed various ‘promemorie’, see ACS, SpD, CR, b. 168, Promemoria per il Duce, 4, 6, 7 and 8 October 1941. A mention of Army intervention comes from the promemoria of 8 October 1941.

increase availability.⁸⁴ By December, the 'severe economic hardship' showed 'no signs of abating' and plenty of public anger over the shortages of meat, milk and fats, as well as over coal deficiency. Even supplies of beans and potatoes were limited, while the visible preferential treatment of the Armed Forces stationed in Sicily for the few meat stocks that were available was noted as stoking public resentment further.⁸⁵ It was a similar concurrent story in Sardinia, especially as the arrival of more military personnel on the island caused yet more strain to the supply situation.⁸⁶ The capital, Cagliari, was the scene of public protests and reported to be rife with 'dissatisfaction with the authorities' over food shortages, especially in meat. However, this issue was not confined to the island's largest, and arguably its only 'large' (i.e. with a prewar population of over 100,000) city. 'Malcontent' was reported elsewhere across many of the island's small and mid-sized towns (where the majority of the population lived), most notably in Iglesias and Oristano.⁸⁷ The complaints about the availability of food (especially bread and pasta) were increasingly combined with anger over the quality of what was available from November 1941 onwards. This was primarily a result of a regime decision at that time to mix other ingredients, such as corn, into bread and pasta mixes in order to compensate for the wheat shortages, which had been exacerbated by the maritime supply difficulties.⁸⁸ The regime also prohibited private milling over concerns it would undermine their food distribution efforts. The action was met with the clandestine production of small hand-mills, which made it possible to process limited quantities of flour, sometimes mixed with other grains like barley to compensate for the scarcity of wheat.⁸⁹

The introduction of stricter food rationing measures introduced by the regime in late 1941 were an attempt to try and ensure that minimal levels of essential foodstuffs were available to all, in the face of difficulties with overall production and importation, and with distribution. Distribution difficulties were partly born of problems with inefficient and clogged routes of overland transportation, and the serious bureaucratic and polycratic inefficiencies of the regime itself. They were accompanied by widespread popular dissatisfaction across Italy.⁹⁰ However, for the islands this was exacerbated greatly by the

84 ACS, MI, DGPS, Segreteria del capo della polizia (SCP), Segreteria del Capo della Polizia Senise e Chierici (SCPSC), Relazioni dei questori e degli ispettori delle zone OVRA 1940–1943 (OVRA), b. 6, f. 60.7, Questore di Palermo to Capo della Polizia, 5 November 1941, Oggetto: 'Relazione settimanale sulle condizioni dello spirito pubblico', 1.

85 ACS, DGPS, SCP, SCPSC, OVRA, b. 6, f. 68.7, Il questore di Palermo to Capo della Polizia, 15 December 1941, 2–3.

86 ASC, GP, RP, Faldone 10, f. 59, Il Prefetto to the Ministero dell'Interno, 4 November 1941, 1.

87 ACS, DGPS, SCP, SCPSC, OVRA, b. 6, f. 70.5, L'Ispettore Generale di P.S. to Il Capo della Polizia, 9 December 1941, 2; according to Istat, *Anuario statistico italiano, 1939*, Table 4, around 88% of the Sardinian population lived in either small (population 1,001–10,000) or mid-sized (10,001–100,000) *Comuni* as of 1936.

88 ACS, SpD, CO, b. 791, f. 500.003/IV, Ministero per l'Agricoltura e le Foreste, 'Relazione sulla campagna cerealicola 1 Luglio 1941–30 Giugno 1942', 30 April 1943, 6–7.

89 Mangiameli, *Guerra e desiderio di pace*, 35; ASC, Prefettura, Gabinetto, b. 11, Relazione sulla situazione della provincia al mese di maggio scorso, 2 June 1942.

90 Nützandel, 'Dictating Food', 102; Colarizi, *L'opinione degli Italiani*, 378–9.

difficulties of maritime importation, and it is no coincidence that the islanders were generally at the forefront of public displays of dissatisfaction and protest.

These continued into 1942. In January, the *Questore* report from Cefalù, on the northern Sicilian coast, noted continued complaints with the delivery and allocation of rationed foodstuffs to local officials. Deliveries had often dipped below even the newly rationed limits, as ‘the quantity of pasta due to this Municipality for the second fortnight of the month of December – lard and fats in general – has not yet been received. Other complaints exist for the lack of leather, cotton yarn, potatoes and legumes’.⁹¹ Public anger increased over the course of 1942, even while much of that year represented Axis success in many aspects of the Mediterranean War. By March, security services warned that ‘Sicily is like a powder keg, and that the slightest shock will be enough for it to burst’.⁹² Over June and July, even as the Axis powers successfully pushed the Allies back across North Africa and interdicted major convoys to Malta, the Sicilian population as a whole showed serious signs of ‘alarm and discontent’ over inadequate pasta availability. The malnutrition was found to be causing oedema (fluid retention and swelling) among the island’s working-class population. By September, the Prefect for Palermo felt that while public opinion ‘remains favourably oriented towards the current war events’, the food situation had not notably improved. Public anger remained over the ‘almost total lack of pulses, eggs, sausages and cheese, the shortage of potatoes, and the insufficiency of meat and fresh fish’.⁹³ In the town of Ciminna, one local official was chased by residents who were angry over the lack of food and accused him of hoarding meat. The official, who was lucky to escape serious harm, noted that public anger over food was usually directed first at local authorities.⁹⁴ More broadly, it was feeding widespread disillusionment with the war and the fascist regime.

It was a similar story for Sardinia. One resident of the *comune* of Nuraminis, for instance, later recalled that the stringent rations of essentials such as bread, sugar and milk never provided anything close to enough for their needs. Despite efforts to supplement diets via black market purchasing, ‘Hunger became more and more intense, malaria broke out’.⁹⁵ Public signs of anger became more widespread in the face of such conditions, often taking the form of antifascist posters and graffiti. One report from March warned of graffiti in multiple public toilets with slogans such as ‘Mussolini [is] betraying us and starving us to death. Remember this people. Let the revolution break out, at least let us drive out that cuckold Mussolini’ and ‘To the ground, the Fascio! Mussolini down!

91 ASP, PG, b. 652, f. ‘Cefalù: Situazione politica’, Questore to Prefetto di Palermo, 8 January 1942.

92 Political Police report from Messina, 21 March 1942, quoted in Colarizi, *L’opinione degli Italiani*, 380.

93 ASP, PG, b. 636, Prefetto di Palermo to Ministero dell’Interno, 5 September 1942, Oggetto: ‘Situazione provinciale politico-economica. Relazione del mese di Agosto 1942’, 2; Prefetto di Palermo to Ministero dell’Interno, 5 October 1942, Oggetto: ‘Situazione provinciale politico-economica. Relazione del mese di Settembre 1942’, 1–2. On oedema, see the entry for 1 August 1942 in R. de Felice (ed), Galeazzo Ciano, *Diario 1937–1943* (Milan: BUR Rizzoli, 2010), 640.

94 ASP, PG, b. 652, f. ‘Ciminna: situazione politica’, Comune di Ciminna, Podestà to Prefetto di Palermo, 22 September 1942, 1–3.

95 See the interview of ‘Nonna di Alessandria, available at <https://digilander.libero.it/emcalvino/bombe/>, ‘Interviste’ page, accessed 28/04/2025.

Down with Mussolini!⁹⁶ These forms of protest became more organized thanks to the direction of several members of the *Partito Sardo d'Azione* (Sardinian Action Party) that had been banned under fascism. Consequently, during Mussolini's visit to the island in May 1942, which he undertook in part as a response to the burgeoning food crisis, numerous walls in Cagliari were graffitied with the words 'Pane, pace e libertà' ('Bread, peace and liberty'). Although several suspects were arrested in the aftermath of the visit, the incidents of graffiti continued, linking to the issue of hunger and anger over the war, exemplified by phrases such as 'Pane e pace' ('Bread and peace') and 'Guerra = fame' ('War = hunger').⁹⁷ In Sassari, multiple onlookers ('especially women') yelled 'offensive phrases' at Mussolini during his tour of the island, while informers reported that disillusionment in the war had affected the islanders so much that some spoke openly of welcoming any possible 'detachment from the Mother Country and perhaps an English occupation'.⁹⁸ Later, living conditions continued to worsen as food shortages were exacerbated by ever rising prices on the island. Salaries simply couldn't keep pace, resulting in even greater anger among all classes of Sardinian society. As the Carabinieri reported in October, there was 'an increasing sense of unease among all employers in the face of the demands, indiscipline, and poor performance of workers in general'.⁹⁹

In 1943, war came to the islands in a new form: large bombing raids. Prior to 1943, there had only been scattered raids on the islands by handfuls of small or medium aircraft that generally only targeted ports, shipping and airfields.¹⁰⁰ These pinprick raids usually had little direct impact on civilians on the islands, but in 1943 this changed, as raids became larger, more frequent and often included heavy bombers. These raids had a serious impact on popular morale but as has been demonstrated, this had already declined seriously due to the food situation.¹⁰¹ The raids themselves also exacerbated the food problem yet further, but it had already reached an irredeemably serious point. Sometimes these raids directly impacted the maritime supply issue. Ports were a frequent target, making unloading of supplies difficult. In Sardinia, raids on the main ports of Cagliari and Olbia greatly damaged the moles and unloading facilities, substantially reducing their capacity and rendering Cagliari 'almost useless' by mid-May. For the Sicilians, Messina suffered particularly heavily.¹⁰² Frequently, ships were damaged or destroyed in

96 Report of 23 March 1942, quoted in Vacca, *La tela del ragno*, 209.

97 B. Anatra, 'L'opposizione a' regime' in M. Brigaglia and G. Podda (eds), *Sardegna, 1940-1945, la Guerra, la bomba, la libertà. I drammi e le speranze nel racconto di chi c'era* (Cagliari: Tema, 1994), 35-7.

98 See the report from 'mid June' 1942, quoted in Vacca, *La tela del ragno*, 211.

99 ACS, DGPS, SCP, SCPSC, OVRA, b. 7, f. 85.6, L'Ispettore Generale di P.S. to Il Capo della Polizia, 4 September 1942, 1; ASC, GP, RP, Faldone 11, f. 61, Legione territoriale dei carabinieri reali di Cagliari. Chiesa to Prefetto, 26 October 1942, 1.

100 Giannini and Massobrio, *Bombardate l'Italia*, Appendix holds statistics of the numbers and composition of raids.

101 On the impact of bombing on popular morale on the islands, see for instance Patti, 'Palermo e la guerra'; Brigaglia and Podda (eds), *Sardegna, 1940-1945*; ASC, GP, RP, Faldone 11, f. 62, Legione territoriale dei carabinieri reali di Cagliari in Nuoro, Gruppo interno di Cagliari. Chiesa to Prefetto, 18 June 1943, 2. For an example of an exception where a small, pre-1943 raid did appear to have a more widespread impact on civilians, see ASC, GP, RP, Faldone 11, f. 61, Il Prefetto al Ministero dell'Interno, 3 July 1942, 1-3.

102 *VCSMG*, vol. 4, no. 27, 5 July 1943, 180; Hammond, *Strangling the Axis*, 170; TNA GFM 36/239 [Frame 046316], Report for Sforza by Cucco, 17 June 1943, 1.

the port entrances or while docked. In a striking example from March 1943, several merchant ships were wrecked by bombs in the port of Palermo before they could unload. Their cargoes included crucial stocks of maize, pasta and wheat that proved to be largely unsalvageable, at a time when the reserves of flour for breadmaking were deemed sufficient to last for only a few days.¹⁰³

Food shortages thus continued across the islands, as did popular discontent, exacerbated by the addition of heavier air raids. Food shortages caused ‘appreciable repercussions on morale’ and directly stoked further protests across Sicily.¹⁰⁴ In the words of one Sicilian parish priest from Bolognetta in April, ‘the people must still have the pasta, sugar and oil from last March, from January to today they have only had meat once; legumes, potatoes, cheese, cured meats for Bolognetta exist only in the dictionary!’¹⁰⁵ A report from Sicily by the Vice-President of the Fascist Party in June noted that food shortages were the greatest cause of popular misery. Shortages of flour, and hence bread, were the worst while the ‘pasta is distributed with a very long delay; legumes, sugar, fats, oil and rice were not distributed for months and months’. This had led to incidents of military personnel ‘bullying’ and threatening civilians in order to ensure their own access to the limited quantities of food.¹⁰⁶

The *fronte interno* had been fundamentally undermined at an earlier stage than 1943, but in that year it effectively collapsed. Food shortages were a, perhaps *the* central reason and the transport issue was a key causal factor in these shortages for the islanders. Beyond general disaffection and protest, anti-fascist activity and propaganda had begun to spread more widely on the islands. As one report from early July succinctly put it, there was abundant evidence that ‘in Sicily and Sardinia no one wears the fascist badge anymore and that the economic situation with regard to food and especially transport is disastrous. The Sicilian and Sardinian populations are said to be fed up and have all become anti-fascist’.¹⁰⁷

To conclude, food was undoubtedly a central issue in the deterioration of wartime public opinion and, for the islanders, this was intimately linked with the war at sea and the issue of maritime supply, on which they were heavily reliant for many key foodstuffs. Overstretched shipping commitments, mismanagement, losses of ships and interruptions to the island routes all contributed to ensuring that food shortages were worse on the islands than the shortages on the mainland. Indeed, some parts of the mainland with better transport infrastructure and closer proximity to major centres of agricultural production could still report a relatively favourable food situation as late as autumn

103 ASP, PG, b. 641, Unsigned letter, 23 March 1943.

104 ASP, PG, b. 636, Il Questore di Palermo to il Prefetto di Palermo, 27 February 1943, Oggetto: ‘Relazione mensile sulla situazione economico-politica della provincia’, 2.

105 ASP, PG, b 652, f. ‘Bolognetta: situazione politica’, Il Parocco Giacomo Orazio Scuderi to Mussolini, 30 April 1943. See also the follow up from 29 May 1943 stating that the situation had not improved.

106 TNA GFM 36/239 [Frames 046319–20], Report for Sforza by Cucco, 17 June 1943, 4–5.

107 Informers report of 6 July 1943, quoted in Lepre, *Le illusioni*, 183. An example of the antifascist propaganda circulating on Sardinia was Mario Berlinguer’s *Avanti Sardegna*, see L. Marrocu, ‘Il ventennio fascista’ in M. Brigaglia, A. Mastino and G. Giacomo Ortu (eds), *Storia della Sardegna*, 2. Dal Settecento a oggi (Rome-Bari: EditoriLaterza, 2006), 133.

1942.¹⁰⁸ Regime records, along with individual testimonies, indicate that on the islands, food was a far more fundamental reason for the deterioration in public spirit than a generalized dissatisfaction with the course of the war and news of military defeats elsewhere. Bombing certainly had a major deleterious impact on public opinion, but substantial bombing raids on the islands did not begin until 1943, and even then, these were generally smaller in scale than the major raids on northern Italy, with a few exceptions.¹⁰⁹

With that in mind, it is clear that, at least with regards to the major Italian islands, there was a clear link between the maritime war, food shortages, and the decline in popular opinion. The interconnection between these two aspects is underscored by the fact that, in order to restore internal order, the Allies were compelled to supply food to the islanders. After initially attempting to continue the fascist distribution policies, which soon proved ineffective, imports became the only means of avoiding the ‘total failure’ of the occupation.¹¹⁰

This is important in itself in explaining the collapse of wartime ‘consensus’ in fascist Italy, given that the islands (especially Sicily) were the sites of some of the earliest popular demonstrations of dissent towards the regime and of wartime acts of popular resistance to it. The war broke the islands’ connection to the national markets, isolating their populations from an economic perspective, and this was the premise for the subsequent political isolation and disaffection. It is clearly evident across the source material that this state had been reached before the start of major air attacks in 1943. Over 1941 and 1942, shipping shortages and maritime supply interruptions to the islands resulted in wholly inadequate deliveries of vital foodstuffs that could not otherwise be provided on the islands themselves. While the availability of food decreased, popular opinion and support for the regime and the war concurrently degraded. The maritime war had played a central role in this dynamic and therefore, at least when assessing the Italian islands, we should view the sudden collapse of the *fronte interno* in 1943 as a result of longer-term wartime attrition, rather than an immediate consequence of major bombing or of Italian military defeats overseas.

Indeed, given the global and ‘total’ nature of the Second World War and the widely acknowledged importance of both the maritime war and of food supply, we believe that there is wider potential and benefit to interrogating the link between these two factors and popular opinion, stretching beyond the Italian example. This article therefore represents a step towards a broader goal for enhancing our understanding of the largest conflict in human history.

108 Archivio di Stato di Torino, Prefettura di Torino, Gabinetto, I Versamento, Modello B, Relazione mensile agosto XX, 7 September 1942; L. Cavazzoli, *La gente e la guerra. La vita quotidiana del «Fronte interno». Mantova 1940–45* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1989), 52.

109 Exceptions include the raid by more than 220 American bombers on Palermo on 9 May 1943 and by nearly 200 against Cagliari on 13 May 1943, see Gioannini and Massobrio, *Bombardate l'Italia*, Appendix.

110 H.L. Coles, A.K. Weiberg, *Civil Affairs: Soldiers Become Governors* (Washington D.C., Centre of Military History, United States Army, 1986), 310.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Professor Manoela Patti for commenting on a draft manuscript, Federico Cormaci for providing some additional sources from Rome, and Sara Pattatu for assistance with research in Cagliari. This research was in part funded by Brunel University of London's 'Mid and Early Career Research Support Scheme'.

Disclaimer

This article was conceived, researched, and written jointly by the two authors; however, in order to comply with the absurd Italian evaluation rules, we will state that Hammond is responsible for the first half of the text and De Ninno for the second.



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