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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Dynamics, experiences and political meaning of the black market in Second World War Italy

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Abstract

Rationing and illegal food trade in Second World War Italy have received very little scholarly attention in comparison to the scale and impact they had on people's daily life. This article contributes to filling this gap, first by providing an overview of the dynamics that already in the early years of the war determined the development of an illegal system of food trade. It then considers the experience of the black market through two wartime diaries, one published and the other unpublished, written by women of opposite political views, both living in Rome and its outskirts. The analysis of the diaries considers women's attitudes towards the black market. The article argues that the Fascist propaganda of duty to the homeland, so intensively practised through domestic literature during the 1920s and 1930s, was again exploited in wartime in the discourse around the black market and hid the political responsibilities of the government.

Keywords: *borsa nera 1941-45*; wartime diaries; Second World War; Fascist food policies; Rome; black market

There was nothing secret about the black market in Italy during the Second World War. For most of the population, the term *borsa nera*, as it was called, had already lost the connotation of illegality by the middle of the war. It is difficult to consider prohibited something practised extensively by all social classes and referred to as a normal source of ingredients in cookery books. This very extensive phenomenon that had a significant impact on how most of the population experienced their daily life has received very little scholarly attention. This article contributes to filling this gap by framing the phenomenon of the black market in relation to Italians' everyday living conditions and their attitude to the regime. It discusses the reasons for the development of such a widespread phenomenon in the Italian context. Most crucially the article aims to illustrate how women, who dealt with the issue of feeding the family daily, experienced the *borsa nera*. Was their engagement with the black market only conditioned by material needs or did other factors play a role? This article contends that political beliefs influenced women's perception of the black market. It does so by analysing two wartime diaries: that of the teenager Gloria Chilanti, active, together with her family, in the antifascist Resistance, and of a 23-year-old woman, Clelia Curti, who expressed her disinterest in politics – '*non voglio fare politica perché non ne mangio niente*' ('I don't do politics because I cannot eat it'

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[24 January 1944]) – but, having grown up in the Fascist regime, sympathised with it.[1] The article argues that the Fascist regime's choice of implementing the liberal market, imposed to the detriment of the lower classes and structured with an emphasis on alimentary parsimony and duty to the nation, had a long-lasting effect on women's perception of the black market during the war. Richard J.B. Bosworth (2005) and John Foot (2022) have studied how Italians engaged with the regime. This analysis contributes to the depiction of people's interaction with or opposition to Fascism by considering women's daily need to resort to the black market and their perception of duty to the nation. Let's see, then, how Fascist food policies played a role in the fragmentation of society.

Fascist food policies and the fragmentation of society

Mussolini had promised an equal society unified on the concepts of frugality and the moral superiority of peasant life. But food access was all about disparity. The inequality between social classes became more and more evident during his regime and grow to be more so in the second half of the 1930s. Already from 1925, the Fascist government had implemented a series of agricultural and food policies while propagandistically promoting frugality as an innate quality of the Mediterranean race. The concepts of a healthy body, virility and fertility were the foundations of the Fascist ideas of food consumption (Garvin 2021). With the so-called 'Battle for Wheat' announced in April 1925, Mussolini launched an ambitious and structured plan towards autarky, conceived not only as an economic undertaking but as an extensive and variegated propaganda campaign aimed at galvanising the Italian population. To limit the consumption of wheat products, the government urged alternative eating habits. Vigorous was the propaganda to increase the consumption of fish and rice. Yet, it did not have a long-term impact on the habits of the nation (Scarpellini 2016, 104). Foodways were regulated by the regime, which, as Carole Helstosky (2006) highlights, managed to bind the population to its own beliefs and policies through a series of practices.

From the everyday tasks recommended for the preparation and purchase of food to food fairs and to an extensive production of domestic literature that promoted across the social classes the regime's ideas of frugality, a healthy body and nationalism, the Fascist intervention in the eating habits of Italians was very thorough (Helstosky 2006, 63). Women were at the centre of the nationalistic effort, because for the first time they were asked to play an active part in the economy of the country in peacetime, and not in an emergency wartime situation: cooking autarkic recipes and promoting Fascist food policies were their tasks (De Grazia 1992, 18). Cookbooks, journal columns and food company booklets were tools to help middle-class women to cook with less. The vast production of domestic literature for the middle class was, as Diana Garvin (2022, 130) clarifies, a means to revalue the social status of domestic work, now a middle-class activity rather than a servant job, as working-class domestic workers had moved to more remunerative factory jobs. Men and women authored recipe books and some of the women authors were destined for stardom. Ada Boni's *Il talismano della felicità* (1937), first published in 1925, went through many editions and is still in print today; Lidia Morelli, alias Donna Clara, reissued a new edition of her 1905 *Dalla cucina al salotto. Enciclopedia della vita domestica* (1925) and co-ordinated several recipe collections for the Cirio food company. Amalia Moretti Foggia, alias Petronilla, was the author of a well-read cookery column in the Sunday supplement of *Corriere della Sera* where she provided hundreds of recipes later collected in recipe books. Other publications, such as *La donna fascista*, the magazine of the women's organisation of the Fascist party, regularly published cookery columns. The food magazine *La cucina italiana*, first published in 1929, like Ada Boni's book targeted a cosmopolitan and upper-class readership rather than middle-class

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housewives, as most of the other publications did, bringing Italian cuisine in dialogue with international high cuisine (Sambuco and Pine 2023, 141–142). In this case, cooking with less was not as relevant as the international standing of Italian cuisine.

In 1935, Italy's invasion of Abyssinia and the embargo that followed opened another period of autarky. The League of Nations sanctioned Mussolini's government by applying an embargo on war-related products and by prohibiting any bank credits to Italian institutions and individuals. As Nützenadel (2006, 98) puts it, the beginning of this new phase prompted the end of the general perception 'that the burden of depression was distributed fairly evenly across society'. Fascism had constructed its propaganda also thanks to the film corporation Istituto Luce, established in 1924, which produced several documentaries on the Battle for Wheat. For example, the 1935 *La resistenza dell'Italia alle inique sanzioni* (Italy's resistance against the unfair sanctions),[2] in a propagandistic tone reiterated the readiness of the country across sectors, from agriculture to energy and wool production. But the unequal access to food and goods was made apparent by other sources: for example, cookery books. Domestic literature exhorted middle-class housewives to a frugal and nationalistic way of cooking. For example, Morelli published at this time *Le massaie contro le sanzioni* (1935), which combined the reiteration to avoid waste with the explicit encouragement to use Italian brands. From the Battle for Wheat, food and cooking were the means to inspire a sense of duty to the nation in the women of the lower and middle classes, bound to the prospect of active citizenship they had never had in peacetime.

The fragmentation of civil society in terms of its accessibility to food was not then a sudden effect of the war, but the result of a process. As Massimo Legnani (1998, 759–760) explains, fiscal decisions were one of the causes of the country's problems in terms of food supplies: investments in public finances entered into competition with investments in the stock exchange, creating an increased circulation of money that, not absorbed by public investments, ended up creating speculation. The government did not provide adequate legislation to prevent speculation; consequently, the price of goods of primary necessity increased noticeably from the very start of the war. In Rome, in the first few days after the announcement of Italy's belligerent status, on 10 June 1940, the price of flour went from 40 to 120 lire per kilogram (Helstosky 2006, 106).

The war was presented as a *blitzkrieg*, yet the news of Italy entering the war produced panic buying among the population. For example, in Tuscany, when the news of the rationing system was broadcast on the radio one day before its beginning, in September 1940, people who could afford to bought large quantities of olive oil, which was still readily available in shops (Becattini and Bellanca 1989, 9). What price increases and panic buying reveal is the unequal access to food and the fragmentation of social classes. Becattini and Bellanca (1989, 9) report how wealthier consumers' large acquisition of oil triggered the suspicion that people with a more comfortable income could have more easy access to rationed and not rationed products.

By that time, some decisions on food rationing had already been taken by the Fascist government. Already from 1939, the sale of meat had not been allowed for two days a week. Rationing cards were introduced well before Italy's entrance into the war. In January 1940 the cards were distributed to the population and, in May of that year, the regime promulgated legislation regulating their use. The cards were colour-coded according to age groups and distributed every two months. The regulation required people to book rationed food before collecting it from the shops. Food was then distributed at specific times and announced via radio or through posters displayed in cities and towns. Food rationing started with coffee and gradually included general food such as pasta, rice, milk, meat and eggs, with bread being rationed in 1941. The logic was to ration the most expensive and luxury foods first, but the late rationing of bread ended up having serious consequences for its availability and cost, at a moment when the production of wheat was

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decreasing. As Camillo Daneo (1980, 149) established, wheat production decreased from 80 million quintals in 1939 to 65 million quintals in 1943. Although the structure and policies of the rationing system were implemented in good time, many were its faults: food distribution was often irregular, it did not take place on the days advertised, and the low quantity of food finally delivered left people who had queued for hours without the provision requested. The authors of domestic literature adapted to the crisis of the rationing system: Petronilla listed at the top of a recipe all the rationed food not required rather than the ones needed, so that cooks could immediately understand if that recipe could be executed with the rationed ingredients they had left (Garvin 2022, 150).

Wartime food strategies and the development of the black market

The irregularity of distribution as well as hoarding cannot be seen only as reactions to the dramatic events of the time and the general unpreparedness of the Fascist government. The fragmentation of society that had started in the previous decades and the circulation of money permitted by fiscal decisions meant that access to food at higher prices was possible for certain social classes. At the same time, the irregularity of food distribution, once rationing was put in place, also highlights the reluctance of the Fascist government to impose statal control on food resources. When the prices started increasing, as Paola Ferrazza (1999, 29) underlines, the Fascist government should have intervened to stop irregular rises by substituting the liberal market with the state market and guaranteeing a more liveable experience in wartime for a larger section of the population. Mussolini was more concerned with the dynamics of the liberal market than with establishing a politics of state prices. Becattini and Bellanca (1989, 15) report an exchange between the German ambassador Rahn and Mussolini that highlights the different approaches of the two regimes to food availability and price increases. For Mussolini, the fight against price increases and the black market would be resolved by setting convenient prices for the producers. Rahn argued that the problem of prices was political: politics must impose low prices, as these would oblige the producers to increase production. These were two very different ways to approach the wartime economy. The Nazi regime established state control of the market while imposing national food practices aimed at keeping the population united in the effort to adopt a wartime food economy (Sambuco and Pine 2023). It differed from the Fascist regime also in the application of food policies: during the Nazi occupation of Italy, Nazi officials were surprised by the number of Fascist laws regulating food supplies (Helstosky 2006, 108). Fascist politics of the liberal market went hand in hand with a sense of duty and punishment. Fascism distinguished itself for its imposition of rules through sanctions.

As Ferrazza (1999, 29) explains, the government focused on sanctions, infringing food legislation without first creating the conditions to satisfy, within the criteria of legality, the needs of the population. Paola Zagatti (1995, 256, 263) reports that, between 1940 and 1948, 34.5 per cent of the verdicts of the Bologna courts were related to crimes against food rationing, and 17.3 per cent of them were related to the illegal trade of rationed food. Penalties were not light. The Fascist newspaper *L'Adriatico* (1942, 6), for example, reporting penalties inflicted in the city of Pescara, listed for the month of April 1942 sanctions of 4,000 lire and three months in prison for a person who had subtracted 14 kilograms of fat and 3 kilograms of butter 'from the normal consumption', and 5,000 lire and one year of prison for a woman who subtracted 280 kilograms of flour. These thefts consisted of the failure to take the specified quota of produce to the *ammassi*, the centralised food collections organised by the Fascist government. The *ammassi* were set up already in the 1930s to create a reserve of food to be distributed at a contained price and continued to exist in the immediate postwar period when they were renamed 'people's granaries', a

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name that failed to change the hostility of the population towards this initiative. The system of the *ammassi* ended up being highly ineffective as a means of redistribution of supplies, and when the economic situation worsened, they became the main source of the black market. The system favoured large farmers who could curtail contribution to the centralised collection and, later, were able to direct to the black market large quantities of food for higher prices. The *ammassi* system aimed to sell the produce collected to large wholesalers, at an established price that had become much lower than the effective price. This discrepancy turned into one of the main causes of the black market. The block on the production of some unnecessary commodities, such as fine wines, also had an effect and sparked the illegal trade of such goods (Becattini and Bellanca 1989, 13–14). The fragmentation of society and the possibility for some to afford higher prices and fine foods were fundamental to these dynamics. In addition, the Fascist government was paying for petrol, technology and other war materials with agricultural resources, therefore subtracting food that would otherwise be available to its population (De Bernardi 2015, 135). Many were the people's complaints against the delivery of produce to Germany and the reports of food raids perpetrated by Nazi soldiers (Helstosky 2004, 14–15). Italy provided Nazi Germany with rice, tobacco, cheese, fruit and vegetables (Helstosky 2004, 14). Gentilcore (2010, 164) has established that up to 90 per cent of Italy's fresh tomato crops were destined for Germany. In the meantime, access to food in Italy, especially for the less wealthy, became more and more compromised and, by the end of the war, Italians' intake of calories from rations was similar to that of the Eastern European countries subjected to the Nazi Hunger Plan. A sense of duty to the nation through frugality and self-restriction, amply testified by domestic literature during the 1930s, still dominated the hunger-stricken wartime. The lower classes were the most targeted, as is testified by the oral interview of a woman, Giulia, who lived in poverty in Milan but admired Mussolini for being 'a defender of the poor' (Moyer-Nocchi 2015, 9). She talks of people imprisoned for being only suspected of something underhand or for having on the table more food than allowed by the ration cards.

In Italy, underfeeding started being a national problem in the winter of 1941–2, became a general problem in 1943, and reached a very serious level in the period 1944–5 (Legnani 1991, 110). As Legnani (1991, 111) has established, it was in 1942 that the majority of the population started to resort to the black market as a regular source of supply rather than a supplementary one. Illegal trade became the focus of attention of most of the population for two reasons. First, as we have seen, the rations did not cover the needs required, with the number of calories provided reaching just above 900 per day by the end of the war. Moreover, the black market became a multifaceted phenomenon, not restricted to individuals who entered it for economic gains by selling certain food at a higher price. Housewives, tradesmen, office workers and everybody from the lower and middle classes became part of this trade, sometimes without even realising it, as also appears from some extracts of Gloria Chilanti's diary that we are going to analyse. Barter was also frequent. Illegal trade was practised by all social classes to supplement their needs and according to their different economic possibilities. Middle-class salaries were not sufficient any more to guarantee middle-class standards. During the Fascist period, employment in public administration had increased, as the Fascist corporation state required a network of administration. This large group of office workers were the ones who experienced the most dramatic effects of the price rises of food. While office workers saw the buying power of their salary rapidly decreasing, the wealthiest classes hardly changed their habits.

As Miriam Mafai (1987, 92) illustrates, the illegal trade was established, in the first instance, between the shopkeeper and their regular customers, as a form of solidarity. Aware of the economic difficulty of their customers, on top of the rationed food, the

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shopkeeper would give additional food to customers; it was often a small packet added to the shopping bag without even specifying what it contained. Only once at home would the client see what the additional item was. The shopkeeper would grant credit if needed, and the client would regularly return to their habitual supplier, at least while they could make food available. When food provision became irregular for the shopkeeper, a choice would be made to favour the customers who could pay. It was not uncommon for women in search of food to travel outside the city centre to meet with farmers who could provide eggs, meat and vegetables. Nor was it uncommon for women farmers to travel to the city and provide a substantial quantity of food to one woman client only, who would then distribute it to other women among her acquaintances (Mafai 1987, 93). These individual forms of illegal trade were only a part of a complex network. Rationed and non-rationed food was often sold at higher prices in shops, in what was defined as the 'white market'. Sometimes the costly prices of the white market led people to the black market, where beef could cost the same as rationed chicken (Becattini and Bellanca 1989, 10). Specific city districts became regular meeting points for illegal traders. In these areas, people coming from the surrounding countryside and the urban lower and middle classes would gather in search of food or profit. Because the trade always took place on the same streets, it was easy for people in search of food to know where to go, even though the providers would regularly change. Women and men would show the produce available using big bags or small tables. A picture taken in November 1944 by the American photographer Margaret Bourke-White for *Life* magazine, and accessible through its online archive (https://g.co/arts/oRT8WKVuQyqjMKeTA), testifies to the busy streets of the Tor di Nona black market in Rome, which is the market mentioned in the diaries analysed here. It was therefore not difficult for people to get hold of products outside their ration cards. Petronilla, the most well-known writer of cookery books for the middle classes at the time, gives us a sense of how extensive and accepted the illegal food market was when in her recipe book *Desinaretti* (1944, 5) she admits that the illegal market, albeit expensive, is the only way to obtain all that one needs. The possibility to pay for such items is what demarcated the differences between social classes. Yet, even people in the most deprived conditions engaged in forms of the black market, both as sellers looking for profits and as buyers, as the dairies we are about to analyse prove.

Experiences of the black market in Rome

The diary of 13-year-old Gloria Chilanti narrates the life of her antifascist family in Nazi-occupied Rome. Her father, Felice Chilanti, was a journalist and the organiser of the antifascist group Movimento Comunista d'Italia, known as *Bandiera rossa* from the title of their clandestine newspaper, which Mr Chilanti himself directed. Her mother, Viviana Carraresi, who was in charge of the women's unit of the group, took part in Resistance activities and got her daughter involved. In her diary, published with the title *Bandiera rossa e borsa nera*, together with the description of their life in the Resistance, Gloria meticulously annotated her daily struggle to find food. Reading her diary with particular attention to the alimentary dynamics provides an insight into her engagement with the black market as well as a view of the dire living conditions in Rome. Gloria detailed what she ate and what she bought at the black market, often specifying the cost per unit of each product. This almost obsessive recording of food data speaks volumes of the struggle people in Rome experienced during the Nazi occupation. Gloria narrates that, as a form of protest, on 1 May 1944, together with a group of friends, she painted on edifices and walls the words '*Pane*' (bread) and '*Fame*' (hunger). A few hours later, she was trying to jot down a short story titled '*Fame*'. Her untiring journeys to Tor di Nona and Tor di Quinto, where the black marketeers had established themselves, and the

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frequent trade taking place among neighbours and acquaintances to get money for food are perceived and practised by the young Gloria as matter-of-fact daily tasks.

The Nazi occupation of Rome started on 10 September 1943 and lasted up to the Allied liberation on 4 June 1944.[3] The living conditions of the population rapidly deteriorated during those nine months. In daylight, the streets were crowded with women queuing or looking for food. Rationing had already been further reduced in 1942, when the bread ration went down to 150 grams; in Rome, from March 1944, it was further reduced to 100 grams. In January 1944, the Allies landed on the coast and started slowly moving towards the capital. Because of the fighting around the city, many civilians were obliged to abandon their homes and move to the capital; therefore, the city population increased, as did the need for food provisions. The situation was made worse by the Allies' war strategies: vans of food supplies on the way to Rome were bombed to 'hunger' and more easily seize the city (Mafai 1987, 176–177).

In the capital, Resistance activities were also carried out through the work of people like Gloria, who would walk through the city carrying information and clandestine pamphlets. The city's social and economic structure was not characterised by the presence of large factories – unlike the North of Italy – places where it was easier to gather momentum for the anti-Nazi/Fascist fight. Rome was the theatre of high-profile attacks against the Nazis. On 23 March 1944, a bomb placed by an official GAP (Gruppi di Azione Patriottica) partisan unit in Via Rasella, in the city centre, blew up a column of the Bozen military police attached to the SS, causing the death of 33 military policemen (Bentivegna 1996; Lepre 1996; Portelli 1999; Capponi 2009). In retaliation, on the next day, the Nazis rounded up 335 civilians and killed them at the Fosse Ardeatine, on the outskirts of the city. On 16 October 1943, the raid of the Jewish quarter led to the deportation of more than 1,000 Italian Jews. Italian soldiers were deported to Germany. Men were rounded up at random in the streets and then sent to work either in Germany or in the Nazi army. A curfew was imposed at 5pm.

In this setting, Gloria, like many women, would travel to the black markets in Tor di Nona and Tor di Quinto. In the first months of the occupation, she could still afford some occasional cakes bought in the centre of Rome and to go to some economical restaurants together with her parents. At this time, she would buy ricotta cheese, potatoes, pork, sausages, coal and wood at the black market in Tor di Quinto. But the situation in occupied Rome was progressively deteriorating. It is not unsurprising that, starting from April, for her food shopping Gloria preferred the Tor di Nona black market, much closer to her home. Travelling around the city was more dangerous at this time; only a few days had passed since the Via Rasella events. And food availability was becoming more dire. The type of food that Gloria was trying to source was different now. Most of her trips were aimed at looking for flour, occasionally meat, and sometimes she traded food products. As Felice was an employee of the local newspaper *Il Popolo d'Italia*, the Chilantis had access to food items at lower prices from the paper outlet. They could therefore go to Tor di Nona to trade tomato passata, obtained at the outlet for butter (Chilanti 1998, 50, 53). They turned into active protagonists in the illegal trade when they were proud to have sold at 210 lire 1 kilogram of tomato passata they had bought for 85 lire (Chilanti 1998, 54). The trips to the black market in Tor di Nona did not stop with the liberation of Rome on 4 June 1944; they continued into the summer. In that summer, the network of illegal trade was made more complex by the introduction of an 'American market' at Colonna Square, where soldiers would sell chocolate, cigarettes and coffee. As Gloria comments: '*Sembra la vecchia Tor di Nona*' (It looks like the old Tor di Nona [Chilanti 1998, 79]).

Apart from the journeys to the well-known black-market districts, the search for daily food involved bartering and the trade of single items of food with neighbours. We read of Mrs Signore, who visits Gloria's house to sell a small lamb, and of Mrs Valdivisco, who

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sells them 2 kilograms of coal which they had obtained through the rationing card (Chilanti 1998, 59, 61). Through bartering, Gloria obtained 4 kilograms of flour for a pair of shoes (Chilanti 1998, 61). This system of continuous bargaining needed to be sustained by a flow of cash that the lower- and middle-class families did not have any more at their disposal, as the Chilantis testify. Selling clothing items and borrowing money from several sources were regular activities for Gloria and her family.

Gloria Chilanti's diary tells the story of a family and a network of people who actively fought against Nazism and Fascism. The tone of the narration is enthusiastic, daring and energetic. We perceive Gloria as a young woman who, with no hesitation, faces dangerous situations. Hers is a heroic narration, connotated by the confidence of those who are aware of fighting for the right cause. There is no moralistic undertone in her narration of the black market. Rather, selling and buying illegally define her heroism in the daily survival in Nazi-occupied Rome. On the contrary, in the narrative of women who sympathised with the Fascist regime, the perception of illegal trade assumes opposite and complex connotations. To this end, the unpublished diary by Clelia Curti, deposited at the National Diary Archive in Pieve Santo Stefano, Tuscany, is of help to understand why.

Clelia is a 23-year-old mother of two, who is obliged to abandon her home in Fiumicino, on the coast of Lazio, when the battle between Allied and Nazi troops intensified in that area. Clelia, her children, her parents, sisters and brother move to the outskirts of Rome and will be forced to move again once the fight for the liberation of Rome comes closer to the city. In Clelia's family, only her brother possessed the National Fascist Party membership card. The rest of the family shared mixed views; as Clelia summarises with irony, they would consider Mussolini the person who re-established law and order in a moment of crisis, but they treasured a bust of Matteotti hidden in a wardrobe (24 January 1944[4]). Clelia does not express strong political opinions in her diary, but she does mention that she would agree with her brother's political views.[5] On more occasions, she ironically highlights the disruption and cruelty perpetrated by the Allies, while she considers the Nazis more sympathetically. She judges them from the small gestures she witnesses: for example, she is touched by German soldiers kind-heartedly playing with Italian children. In her diary, there is no mention of the round-ups and massacres taking place in the centre of Rome at that time because this is not what she viewed. She mentions that the anticipated curfew at 5pm was caused by acts of sabotage against the Nazis, but she focuses on the disadvantages of the curfew rather than on the reasons for the Resistance fight. Clelia appears as a person who, like many, is concerned about her daily living and looks at politics for the effects it has on her life, rather than for ideological reasons. Her diary covers the period from January 1944, the Allies' landing and the consequent move of Clelia's family from Fiumicino, to the liberation of Rome on 4 June.

Clelia photographs the deterioration of people's living conditions. She describes the new level of misery reached by her family and provides lists of food prices she finds at the black market in Rome at different times over those six months. The standard of living of Clelia's family appears to be worse than the Chilantis', even though the Curtis had access to rationed food while the Chilantis did not. In February, Clelia's rationed bread quota is 150 grams per day, while her father, as a workman, is entitled to 350 grams. In a February entry, she pictures the grim situation by mentioning a Russian novel titled *Hunger*, according to her apt to illustrate her father's meanness, eager even to steal his children's portion of bread (25 February 1944). On 24 March, Clelia's bread ration drops to 50 grams, which she gives to her daughters. By the end of the month, the family food provision is only 1 kilogram of rice and some local cheese. Prices of food at the black market were skyrocketing. At the beginning of February, the prices reported by Clelia are 700 lire for olive oil and 125 lire for beef; at the beginning of March, olive oil was up to 820 lire and meat up to 150 lire; by the end of March, the price of olive oil

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was 1,200 lire and meat cost 160 lire (2 February, 7 March, 31 March 1944). The price of flour went from 60 lire at the beginning of February, to 80 at the beginning of March, and to 110 at the end of March. The Curtis' possibilities to source cash for their daily living seem more restricted than the Chilantis'. Clelia, who was an artist, occasionally sold her drawings in exchange for food, but already from January the family had to resort to selling some of their precious items. At the end of April, her mother was obliged to sell her last remaining gold jewellery to buy nothing more than barley and rice flour (27 April 1944). The diary by Clelia Curti is noteworthy for her unfiltered depiction of the black-market prices, her perception of illegal trade, and her views on the military tactics used by the Allies.[6]

Resorting to the black market as well as trading with neighbours and acquaintances were not such frequent activities for Clelia's family as they were for Gloria's. One of the reasons is their more limited access to the black market. As Clelia writes, because her brother, together with other local Fascists, was involved in the repression of illegal trade, most black marketeers refused to sell them any food:

> *Noi in fatto di viveri ci troviamo peggio di tutti perché nessuno dei borsari neri è disposto a venderci le loro cose per via di Mario che con altri fascisti della zona tenta di contenere questa attività.* (25 January 1944)
> As far as food provision is concerned, we are worse off than anybody else as none of the black marketeers is willing to sell us something because of Mario, who, with other local Fascists, is trying to contain this activity.[7]

Moreover, the Curtis seem to rely on a much more restricted network of interpersonal trade. Clelia was acutely aware of the new meaning that friendships and acquaintances acquire in wartime: '*Un* [sic] *amicizia è considerata tale solo se c'è la vaga speranza di riempire la dispenza* [sic] *di casa ogni minima conoscenza si cerca di sfruttarla a questo fine*' (A friendship is considered as such only if it offers the remote hope to fill up the cupboard the most insignificant acquaintance is exploited to this end [20 January 1944]). But she rejected opportunistic acquaintances.

Clelia's diary and reflections on the black market shed light on how the financial and economic decisions of the Fascist government were translated by people like her and her brother. Clelia had a strong ethical and proud attitude: she rejected opportunistic friendships and was hesitant to accept food from others, even when she was hungry. Her brother, unlike other Fascists, did not seem to acquire power and benefits in his local area for his support of Fascist policies. His actions against the black market clashed with the needs and practices of his own family. The Fascist management of the black market only through sanctions – rather than, as we have seen, through political decisions on liberal and state trade – contributed to constructing a narrative of duty to the homeland that reflected the Fascist propaganda imposed in the two previous decades. Clelia was not an active Fascist supporter, but she sympathised with the regime for the illusion of a fair and just society based on dutiful and principled behaviour. In this sense, her attitude was not different from Giulia's, who, as mentioned earlier, was living in Milan in poverty and considered Mussolini a champion of the poor for his strict rules on equal access to food. The black market was experienced by Clelia as a necessity she could not avoid but her sense of duty and principled behaviour remained unscathed.

In northern occupied Italy, the press reiterated the Fascist struggle in the repression of the black market using ethical and moral undertones. In the newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, published in Milan, it is not difficult to find articles that restated how the rejection of the black market was fundamentally an ethical action. In these articles we find vignettes representing the widespread moral corruption of a society where precarious and lower-paid

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workers had visibly improved their way of dressing through the profits of the black market; even swift changes of political views in liberated Italy were metaphorically described as the 'black market of antifascism' (*Corriere della Sera* 1944a, 3, 1944b, 1). In January 1945, the newspaper reported on war refectories offering meals at low prices in the Milanese province, presenting them as the means to counteract the black market (*Corriere della Sera* 1945, 2). It is a narrative that fits with the concepts of duty, frugality and parsimony that the Fascist government had promulgated in its propaganda for two decades, and with the sense of moral duty demanded from the population during the war. What this reconstruction of events hides is the fragmentation of society. It also conceals the political responsibility of the Fascist government in favouring the liberal market.

Conclusion

Food was at the centre of Fascist policymaking from the beginning of the *ventennio*. It was a powerful tool of propaganda for Mussolini, who proposed a concept of a morally superior country based on frugality. Parsimony and the skill to cook with little were still the focus of middle-class wartime domestic literature. But in real life, the population was facing a poorly organised rationing system and food scarcity and witnessing the regular delivery of food to Germany. The Fascist food collections aimed at redistribution turned out to be ineffective and ended up being the main source for the black market, as large farmers could easily curtail contributions for higher profit. Rather than assuring more equal access to food for all social classes, the Fascist government focused on sanctions. The fragmentation of society, with the upper classes maintaining their privileges, was crucial in the deterioration of food distribution and, together with Mussolini's preference for the liberal market, represented a primary trigger for the development of illegal trade. But the Fascist government never took responsibility for it.

Underfeeding started being a national problem in the winter of 1941–2 and it was also in this period that the black market started developing on a large scale. A complex and widespread phenomenon, illegal trade developed in Italy on a large scale that involved anyone who had something to sell or enough money to obtain some food. One-to-one trade between neighbours, shopkeepers and customers, or farmers and housewives, and trade in specific urban areas that became known as black market districts were common activities around Italy. The analysis of women's diaries in this context is important because women were the protagonists of virtually all food trade taking place at the time. The dairies of Gloria Chilanti and Clelia Curti have shown how the phenomenon of illegal trade was inextricably part of daily life in Rome and its outskirts but have also evidenced how the perception of illegality differed according to the political views of the protagonists.

Both diaries cover the period of the Nazi occupation of Rome. The young Gloria details her daily struggle to find food, her regular trips to the two main urban black markets in Rome, and her bartering and trading with acquaintances. From her diary, the deterioration of her living conditions is made evident by the type of food she buys at the black market when meat almost disappears from her shopping list. Gloria and her family are active in the Resistance, and they fight to subvert Fascist ideology and power. For the young Chilanti, who not only had an antifascist upbringing but was also home-schooled by her parents, moral duty was grounded in antifascist political values. In her diary, Clelia Curti notes the food prices of the black market at different times during the first six months of 1944, but she is not a regular customer of illegal trade. She cannot rely on a network of neighbours, acquaintances and friends as the Chilantis do for bartering, food trade or money loans. Much of the illegal trade is precluded to her due to her brother's activities of repression. For Clelia Curti, moral duty meant relying on her strength

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and succeeding with little. Her brother kept on combatting the black market, even though his family was struggling to survive. In this sense, they both seem to have absorbed the Fascist concepts of duty, obedience to the rules and frugality – concepts not equally practised by the upper classes. The analysis of these narratives suggests that, beyond the representation of the living conditions and the effects of Fascist economic decisions, research on the black market may illuminate the relations between individuals and the state and people's attachment to the ethics upheld by Fascism. Just like in the 1920s and 1930s, food represented a political tool of propaganda to bind people to Fascist ideology, so in the twilight of the regime, the idea of fighting against the black market was manipulated for a similar function.

The black market was hardly a phenomenon restricted to Italy or to the Fascist regime; rather, it was common to all wartime economies that implemented rationing. Whenever food availability was restricted, the opportunity for profits arose. Occupied and non-occupied countries, and Nazi Germany too, all had their experience of the black market (Drake 2015; Roodhouse 2013; Williams 2013; Zierenberg 2015). The actors on the black market were not only common citizens and housewives but, on a larger scale, organised criminal gangs, as well as American soldiers who traded the phenomenal quantity of food they had at their disposal. In occupied France – where, in a similar way to Italy, the black market was frequented by most of the population as a necessity – the Nazi imposition of rules and punishments was hardly applied. The Nazi command delegated to the French police and civil servants the application of their policies against the black market, but their French counterparts allowed a light application of Nazi policies (Taylor 1997, 176). In contrast, in Italy, as we have seen, Fascists were very active in repressing illegal trade activities. But the most evident mark of distinction of the Italian case was given by the powerful 20-year propaganda of equal access to food and parsimony that had affected the part of the population with lower standards of living, while the responsibility of the government remained hidden.

One year after the conclusion of the war, *L'Unità*, the official newspaper of the Communist Party, denounced both the black market in olive oil operated by the large producers of the Puglia region and, in other regions, the partial delivery of wheat to the *ammassi* by big farmers who invested the remaining part in the black market (*L'Unità* 1946a, 1, 1946b, 2). The newspaper argued that the motivation for the proliferation of the black market at this time was a calculated attack against the newly born Italian Republic. They argued that the large producers, who had constituted the stronghold of Fascist power, were now facilitating the proliferation of the black market to delegitimise the new democratic republic. After the war, the black market continued to be seen, then, as a powerful political tool, capable of catalysing interests well beyond its dynamics of profits and needs.

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Notes

1 As Clelia Curti writes: '*Io non voglio fare politica perché non ne mangio niente*' (I don't want to do politics because I cannot eat it), entry for 24 January 1944, Clelia Curti's *Diary January–June 1944*, DG/91, National Diary Archive, Pieve Santo Stefano. Regarding her perception of the Fascist regime, she writes: '*ma io sono cresciuta nel regime fascista così come sono cattolica e che ne so delle altre religioni, se sono più giuste o no, e come faccio allora a giudicare? Vivendo a Fiumicino, paese poverissimo … ho potuto constatare quanto il partito fascista abbia fatto per queste famiglie bisognose che alla sera facevano la coda presso la sede dove avvenivano le distribuzioni di pasta e lardo*' (but I grew up during the Fascist regime just like I am a Catholic and what do I know about other religions, if they are fairer

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or not, and how can I then judge? Living in Fiumicino, a very poor town … I could realise how much the Fascist party has done for these families in need who, at night, would queue at the distribution points to have pasta and fat), entry for 24 January 1944, Clelia Curti's *Diary January–June 1944*, DG/91, National Diary Archive, Pieve Santa Stefano.

2 *La resistenza dell'Italia alle inique sanzioni*, Giornale Luce, 19 December 1935, Istituto Luce, B/B08D2. See also A. Giannarelli's *Roma occupata* (1985, Luce Film Archive, D007701) and *La battaglia del grano* (1925, Luce Film Archive, M011603).

3 After the Armistice, on 8 September 1943, the king and the government did not protect the capital from Nazi troops, who had already positioned themselves around the city before September, aware of the possibility of the Italian call for a truce.

4 Dates in this section refer to the relevant entries in Clelia Curti's *Diary January–June 1944*, DG/91, National Diary Archive, Pieve Santo Stefano.

5 '*Edmondo dà una stoccata contro i tedeschi e affini. Mario gli risponde con una frase sferzante Mamma sfoga la sua rabbia contro Mussolini e per la Guerra che gli strappa e figli e mette uno contro l'altro. Io sto dalla parte di Mario*' (Edmondo criticises the Germans and associates. Mario answers with an abrupt sentence Mum explodes in rage against Mussolini and the war that takes away her children and put them one against the other. I am on Mario's side), entry for 27 January 1944, Clelia Curti's *Diary January–June 1944*, DG/91, National Diary Archive, Pieve Santo Stefano.

6 For example, Clelia Curti reports the killing of 250 children on the outskirts of Rome caused by Allied bombing and the contrasting news on Radio London of the happy welcome on the part of the Italian population. She mentions the fear imposed by Nazis but adds that, in her own area of Rome, she did not experience it.

7 All the English translations of the quoted passages of Clelia Curti's diary are mine.

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Italian summary

La storiografia si è poco occupata di razionamento e borsa nera, fenomeni che hanno profondamente segnato la vita quotidiana degli italiani durante la Seconda guerra mondiale. Questo articolo intende contribuire a colmare tale lacuna innanzitutto fornendo una panoramica delle dinamiche alla base dello sviluppo della borsa nera alimentare. L'articolo analizza poi l'esperienza di due donne, di divergenti convinzioni politiche, che vissero nella Roma e nella sua periferia occupate dai Nazisti. Lo fa attraverso la disamina dei loro due diari di guerra, uno pubblicato e l'altro no. L'analisi dei diari permette non solo la ricostruzione della vita quotidiana nella Roma affamata dell'occupazione nazista, ma prende in esamine l'atteggiamento delle due donne verso il mercato nero. Si intende dimostrare che la propaganda fascista sulla dedizione alla patria, di cui erano intrisi i ricettari e le riviste femminili degli anni venti e trenta, durante la guerra venne di nuovo sfruttata nel discorso propagandistico sulla borsa nera per nascondere le responsabilità politiche del governo.

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