


RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Austro-Hungarian prisoners of war and their employment in the Italian hinterland (1915–1920)

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(Received 26 July 2023; revised 6 December 2023; accepted 17 December 2023;  
first published online 1 March 2024)

### Abstract

This essay deals with the criteria for the employment of POWs in Italy during the Great War. It is a contribution to the current research demonstrating the close connection between civilian and military spheres during the war, including in the area of internment. This intertwining is particularly evident when one studies the wartime economic system. Although the article shows that the contribution of POWs was marginal, their work was diverse and particularly visible in certain sectors. Therefore, it is important to clarify the rules that governed their employment, and the outcomes of their work.

**Keywords:** First World War; Italy; Austro-Hungarians; prisoners-of-war; employment

### Introduction

In the context of First World War prisoner-of-war detention, it is becoming increasingly accepted that its study can only be conducted in the context of society as a whole, because the captured soldiers and the civilians interned alongside them very quickly came into contact with the local civilian population.<sup>1</sup> Since the international regulations in force allowed only enlisted personnel to work – or, more precisely, obliged them to do so if they had been so instructed – it is this category that should be highlighted when discussing the work of POWs in Italy. Research on POWs is becoming increasingly popular worldwide, including in Italy, where during the last two decades a large number of conferences and publications, especially at a local level, focused on the Austro-Hungarian prisoners. However, the fate of Austro-Hungarian soldiers in the Italian hinterland outside the camps has not received much attention.<sup>2</sup> I therefore consider it particularly important to promote research on this topic, and to publish this essay in English, since the Italian context is not in the international public consciousness due to the lack of knowledge of publications written almost exclusively in Italian or in the languages of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Accordingly, the theme of this paper is to present the

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framework, the constraints, and the main characteristics of POW employment within the Italian war economy up to and including the homecoming.

### POW employment opportunities in Italy

Article 6 of the Hague Convention of 1907 allowed POWs (excluding officers) to work, as long as this work was not connected to military operations, was not excessive and that the salary provided by the employer was equivalent to that of the soldier. The POW did not receive all his salary, since part of it was deducted to improve his conditions, and the authorities were obliged to pay the remainder only on release (Baja et al. 1930, I, 49). However, according to the 1915 Italian regulations on POWs, prisoners could only be employed within the concentration camp.<sup>3</sup> This was logical, as the Italian economy was still characterised by unemployment in the summer of 1915. During the period of neutrality itself, a significant number of Italians returned from abroad, to which tens of thousands of refugees were added in the weeks following the declaration of war.<sup>4</sup> It is no coincidence that no one wanted to further increase unemployment by the mass recruitment of POWs. I should also point out that for a very long time the Italian authorities had only a limited number of POWs at their disposal, since until August 1916 the number of those who could be forced to work was fewer than 50,000.<sup>5</sup> By contrast, the Central Powers in the first year of the war had already acquired such a large number of POWs, mostly from the Russian Empire, that by the spring of 1916, the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy had already employed nearly one million of them (Blüdnikow 1989, 687).

The official policy on POW work changed, together with the Italian economic situation, during the war. By 1916 unemployment had already been eliminated, and the call-ups during 1916 caused such a shortage of labour that it became necessary to employ prisoners-of-war en masse. In fact, the question of POW employment had already arisen at the end of 1915, when Italian Prime Minister Antonio Salandra asked his Foreign Minister Sidney Sonnino to examine the implications of the issue.<sup>6</sup> Following a favourable response, it was initially intended to employ this unused labour force to set up prisoner-of-war camps,<sup>7</sup> and in the afternoon session of the Chamber of Deputies on 9 December 1915, the possibility of employing them on public works was also raised.<sup>8</sup> In December 1915, the prefects also had to consider whether prisoners-of-war could be employed for agricultural work:<sup>9</sup> at the beginning of 1916, the growing shortage of agricultural labour in Italy led to an increasing number of proposals for the use of POWs.<sup>10</sup> Farmers in particular had to be replaced, since of the 4,800,000 farmers working in peacetime, 2,600,000 had been called up. Of the remaining 2,200,000, 1,200,040 were boys aged between ten and 18, placing a heavy burden on the six million girls and women aged over ten (Bogliari 1983, 33). In the agricultural sector, we know what the authorities' plans were to replace the lost workers. For the winter of 1916–7, 142,000 indefinite furloughs for enlisted soldiers and 90,000 30-day furloughs were planned, but after negotiations between the Ministry of Agriculture and the general staff, only 50,000 to 60,000 Italian soldiers were granted 30 to 40 days' furlough, and even this was not fully achieved. The system was not successful enough, so on 25 August 1917, the lieutenant-governor decree number 1455 provided for the indefinite furloughs of 120,000 men and 40-day furloughs of 50,000 in seven rotations, with a winter furlough wave to allow soldiers to see their families. However, the Caporetto breakthrough interrupted these intentions, and the improvised system remained, with the islands of Sicily (5,000) and Sardinia (2,000) in particular receiving large numbers of exempted soldiers as labourers (Serpieri 1930, 62–64). From September 1918, when the system was already well-established, we

know that it varied between regions (Serpieri 1930, 67): the taking of leave was not uniform, and only in Emilia-Romagna and Tuscany did the number of soldiers on furlough approach five per cent of those eligible, so the male labour shortage remained significant in every region.

In the case of industry, the indicators are somewhat more detailed.<sup>11</sup> If we look only at arms manufacturers, the numbers of employees grew steadily: at the beginning of 1916, 180,000 people worked in such factories, rising to 775,000 at the end of 1917 and reaching 1,288,000 by the Armistice. At that time, 279,000 women and children, 565,000 non-military and managerial men and 358,000 exempted and conscripted soldiers were employed, with refugees, casual labourers and POWs making up the remaining 86,000 (Tremelloni 1970, 276). It is clear from the charts that nowhere had the shortage of labour been reduced spectacularly by furloughing soldiers, leaving women and children and POWs to fill the gap. The proportions are also revealing: most of the conscripts withdrawn from the front were used to run the arms factories, keeping the prisoner labour ratio low there, while in agriculture the proportion of those released from service at the front proved insufficient to significantly reduce the shortage of manpower, leaving women, children and POWs with a much larger workload than in the war industry. The above statistics are particularly important because there is only one summary of POW labour by area and/or sector, and a large part of the agricultural labour claims have been destroyed.<sup>12</sup> A further difficulty in the analysis is that the economy was not just about military industry and agriculture, as there were also public sanitation and infrastructure tasks to be carried out. Such work included the construction of railways, roads, dams and bridges, or the municipal transportation of dead bodies. We have no comparable data at all on these, and we can only rely on records from the POW labour requisitioners.

The above figures also help to make sense of the management decisions regarding POW employment. In the spring of 1916, the shortage of Italian manpower was not yet so acute that a significant proportion of the POWs taken from the Serbs could not be handed over to the French authorities in exchange for some army concessions.<sup>13</sup> On 1 January 1917, 80,586 POWs were in Italian hands and only 8,000 of them were working: in other words, only about ten per cent of them contributed to the Italian economy (Madeddu 2018, 29). The French authorities also asked for POWs from the Italian allies in 1917. At the beginning of February 1917, POWs in Italian hands were requested for unloading at the ports, but Sonnino immediately refused the request.<sup>14</sup> In the summer of 1917, when the French allies asked for Austro-Hungarian POWs from Italy to work in the French hinterland, both the Italian Foreign Ministry and the Italian Ministry of War opposed the request. There were no available POWs, as almost all were assigned to labour squads, and they did not trust the French soldiers, because if any atrocities were committed against the POWs, the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy would have retaliated against the Italians in its hands.<sup>15</sup> By the autumn of 1918, the shortage of labour in Italian agriculture had reached such proportions that the Ministry of Agriculture asked for the return of the POWs who had been sent to France in 1916, because they needed workers!<sup>16</sup> Although Prime Minister Orlando agreed with his minister, he could not support the proposal, as it would have contradicted the previous Italian position, shown the economy to be weak, and the Allies would not have given anyone back anyway.<sup>17</sup> The solution was the capture of some 300,000 POWs on 3–4 November 1918.

Low numbers also limited the role of POW labour in the running of the Italian economy. See the following report on the distribution of workers in April 1918:<sup>18</sup>

Type of work	No. of persons
Agricultural works	60,000
Mining of energy sources (wood, lignite, and peat)	30,000
Mining (iron, copper, and pyrite extraction)	2000
Reforestation	2300
Ansaldo company	1098
Hydroelectric plants	315
Dam construction	365
Works in Genoa harbour	150
Works provided by State Railways	2153
For the use of military engineering units	560
The military tannery in Aquila	352
For the Civil Engineering Unit in Avezzano	1050
For the municipality, university, and hospital of Genoa	492
Other works	465
Monginevro / Montgenèvre road de-snowing and repair	3200
Maintenance of Strada della Cornice <sup>19</sup>	1100
Hangar construction for the Navy	500
Albania (road construction and swamp draining)	3000
Czech units already sent to the front (4 battalions of 1600 men)	6400
Czech units awaiting deployment to the front	6400
Czech units in training	6400
Total	128,300

At the end of March and the beginning of April 1918, the number of POWs among the enlisted personnel was barely 139,000. If we add to this the 4,800 or so deserters among the enlisted personnel,<sup>20</sup> it becomes clear that 89.84 per cent of the available manpower was either working or part of a national legion.<sup>21</sup> According to the report, the others were not employed only because they were physically unfit. It is no coincidence that Sonia Residori chose as the title of her book (Residori 2019) a statement by Lieutenant General Spingardi that ‘no one was left idle’,<sup>22</sup> because, with a utilisation rate of almost 90 per cent, the Italian authorities were making unprecedented use of the available manpower. But the data above also shows that this workforce was insufficient. In the spring of 1918, even the small wave of agricultural furloughs was able to free up more than twice as many soldiers than POWs, and thus to make them available to the agricultural sector. Reports of 30 November 1917 and 30 April 1918 show the following number of POWs working in the war industry, broken down by province committee of approval:<sup>23</sup>

Province	30 November 1917	30 April 1918
Turin	2385	1974
Milan	60	296
Genoa	384	726
Bologna	1550	944
Florence	no POWs	2908
Rome	1975	1492
Naples	434	936
Palermo	320	135
Total	7108	9411

The 86,000 labourers from ‘other’ sources<sup>24</sup> working in the war factories contained only a fraction of POWs. This did not change radically during the post-Armistice period, when only 83,428 of the almost 300,000 new POWs captured between October and November 1918 were employed.<sup>25</sup> Prisoner-of-war labour was just a drop in the ocean, in a time of true scarcity, when every drop counted. It was not POW labour that kept the Italian economy going, but the help of the Entente, or more precisely the American loans, since the American contribution provided more than a quarter of Italy’s war costs.<sup>26</sup>

### Characteristics of POW employment

As early as 8 July 1915, Lieutenant General Spingardi, head of the POW office of the Ministry of War, wrote to Prime Minister Salandra that many POWs were farmers who could be employed in the Italian fields (Residori 2019, 114). The skills of the POWs were exploited only later in the interests of the Italian economy, for the reasons already discussed. The first authorisation for mass recruitment was issued by Giannetto Cavasola, Minister of Agriculture, Industry and Trade, on 25 May 1916, drawing the attention of the prefects to the special nature of POW employment. This was only a replacement for shortages and in absolutely no way an alternative to free labour. The request for the prisoners’ transfers had to be made to the Ministry of Agriculture, Industry and Trade, but a favourable decision also required the approval of the local internal security service. Cavasola’s circular did not emphasise this, but the POW Commission also commented on the allocation of POWs. Initially, a minimum of 100 labourers was authorised, accompanied by an Italian officer and 24 guards. Smaller groups were approved only in special cases.<sup>27</sup> When drawing up the regulations, the Hague provisions proved insufficient, so the Italian authorities considered the practice of other belligerents. In particular, they drew a lot from the French model,<sup>28</sup> but they also followed the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy’s provisions.<sup>29</sup> The experimental nature of the provisions was indicated by the fact that the June 1916 regulation on the treatment of POWs repeated the terse description of 1915 and quoted its contents almost verbatim.<sup>30</sup> Workers could also be requested for military factories, and rarely for munitions factories.<sup>31</sup> For these, after approval by the prefect and the regional army headquarters, the application had to be submitted via the provincial industrial mobilisation committees, which were assessed at the national headquarters.<sup>32</sup> The detailed and comprehensive regulations were not published until 14

November 1916,<sup>33</sup> and were carried over almost verbatim into the August 1918 regulations.<sup>34</sup>

- except for officers and officer candidates, POWs could not refuse to work: the junior non-commissioned officers could be supervisors, but they were also employees.
- the minimum number of workers was reduced from 100 to 50 in November 1916, and then to 15 in August 1918; the workers had to be selected from POWs of the same nationality.
- a picket of Italian soldiers had to comprise one tenth or one fifth of the number of workers.
- supplies were provided centrally by the military authorities but had to be packed by the POWs.
- expectations were set centrally for accommodation; discipline was not to be relaxed, and any protest was to be punished most severely.
- the number of working hours per day could not exceed ten hours, which included travelling to work and back to the accommodation but did not include meal breaks.
- it was not possible to work on public holidays.
- the POW received a weekly wage, which in the case of a public contractor was five cents per hour, and for a private contractor the same as for any other employee doing the same job, although the daily allowance of the guard had to be deducted, so the POW still received only five cents per hour.
- more could be paid in cash, tobacco or food for outstanding achievements, but the money was credited to the POW's savings account and could only be received on his return home.
- only food not covered by the ticket system could be given as a reward.
- enforcement of the rules and investigation of abuses involving POWs was the responsibility of the relevant regional corps headquarters.

Incentives were necessary, as the 50 cents a day wage was indeed considered low. For example, the Rome Province Agricultural Commission on 2 August 1917 unanimously increased the daily wage by 60 to 80 cents, which was given in the form of extra food rations (Residori 2019, 119–120). Elsewhere they believed in money. For example, in the spring of 1917, POWs from the Gavi camp, working as farmers, were paid 25 cents an hour by the locals (Fiammetti 2011, 21–22). The idea of raising the work rate was discussed again in 1919, but for a completely different purpose. As POWs proved so cheap, employers were not interested in re-employing demobilised soldiers. The military authorities wanted to force this by artificially raising the wages of POWs. In the summer of 1919, the standard hourly rate for agricultural work was 20–50 cents, while in Alessandria the hourly rate for harvesting was one lira, and in Rome the agricultural commission set an hourly rate of 1.5 lire for vineyard work.<sup>35</sup> This wage regulation was also linked to the prefects' policy of allowing the use of POW labour only if it did not adversely affect civilian workers. According to some local organisations or even individuals, the territorial prefect did not comply with this requirement, but in all cases the prefect explained himself and no investigation was carried out.<sup>36</sup> Likewise, in some specific cases, the protection of the economic interests of local workers was formally disregarded. When the walls of the Alessandria fortifications were demolished, the local command intended to use only the cheaper POW labour because they could not pay civilian wages. And the local prefect supported the request for POW labour, as he felt that the city could only benefit from it.<sup>37</sup>

Indeed, the shortage of agricultural labour at the end of 1917 led to a relaxation of the rules of employment. In the autumn of 1917, Spingardi proposed to speed up the licensing



procedures, to carry them out ‘pro forma’ and to send workers to the site as quickly as possible, and also to waive the 15-man minimum if the two–three-man group was under the supervision of the employer and returned to the legally required 15-man group accommodation by the evening.<sup>38</sup> In the same way, it was practicality, not humanitarianism, that led to the extension of compulsory accident insurance to prisoners-of-war doing their work. Article 1 of the Decree of the Lieutenant-Governor No. 1773 of 3 December 1916 extended this obligation to all employers of POWs, with a deadline of 18 January 1917 to comply. Since the insurance was paid by the employer, the POW did not have to bear any extra costs, and in most cases neither did the state, since the employer was usually a private company or local authority. However, the cost to the authorities responsible for the care of the POWs was reduced, as the insurance fund could now be used to pay for medical costs.<sup>39</sup>

In December 1916, Alfredo Dallolio, head of the Ministry of Ammunition and Weapons, who was also responsible for economic mobilisation, laid down guidelines for the use of POWs in the military industry: the possibility of sabotage was to be avoided, rendering explosives and munitions factories, energy production and distribution networks off limits.<sup>40</sup> However, POWs were employed in electric plants and munitions and weapons factories, indicating that the guidelines were ignored (Residori 2019, 122). The use of POWs was also banned in certain territories: on the Adriatic coast from the Austro-Hungarian border to Cape Rizzuto in Calabria, and in the hinterland to the extent of 15 km. Accordingly, the Adriatic and Ionian coasts, except for a short stretch in Calabria, were declared essentially forbidden zones. This was clarified after the Armistice, after which only seven coastal strips were closed off, typically delimiting naval bases.<sup>41</sup>

The POWs therefore did a great variety of jobs. They were present in the agricultural sector, planting forests, working the land, and improving the roads leading to the area. In the autumn of 1917, Spingardi took the initiative of authorising agricultural workers to repair roads leading to the fields. Public utility work was a priority throughout and infrastructure investments were needed to guarantee agricultural production.<sup>42</sup> POWs were also responsible for other infrastructure developments, such as building dams, repairing and building railways, clearing and repairing roads,<sup>43</sup> helping to build POW camps and, after the war, carrying out much of the reconstruction work. Energy resources were very much needed by both civil society and the army, so POWs played an important role in their extraction. While some labourers planted forests, many more cut down trees and worked in mines, and prisoner-of-war labour was also represented in various war factories.<sup>44</sup> All this under the watchful eye of local workers, as several sources have been found expressing the fear that POWs would take away the income of certain groups.<sup>45</sup> In many cases, employers deliberately exploited cheap POW labour to reduce the perceived excessive demands of the local population.<sup>46</sup> The local population was also aware of the wage-cutting effect of prisoner-of-war labour, at least as evidenced by the attempts to insist on sending prisoners home even in times of labour shortages. For example, in Portotorres, Sardinia, in May 1919, local farmers were already receiving 12 lire an hour, a very high rate, and they demanded that the POWs leave in order to increase the wages further.<sup>47</sup> However, these demands were ignored by the authorities, and in any case they were exceptional, because the prefects generally protected free labour.<sup>48</sup> And with a constant shortage of manpower, there were never enough POWs, so the military authorities had to constantly rethink how to use them.<sup>49</sup>

The military authorities’ task was further complicated by the manpower shortage related to the military operations. According to Article 6 of the 1907 Hague Convention, POW works could not be linked in any way to military operations (Baja 1930, I, 49), so civilian workers had to be sought. They were deployed from 26 November 1915, but they faced many problems. In the spring of 1917, however, the

civilian workforce available for mobilisation was so stretched that it was necessary to call in POW labour. In the end, as a compromise between Hague regulations and military interests, the POWs were used directly behind the front to build roads, maintain railways, and build canals. The first permit for such work was issued on 25 May 1917, when 1,400 POWs were made available to the 3rd Army, supplemented by 800 more for loading work. A few days later, the request of the deputy commander-in-chief, General Porro, to employ 4,950 POWs was approved. During 1917, only a few thousand POWs were employed in this capacity, as the military authorities preferred to see civilian labour near the front, but as a result of this policy change, 4,000 were transported to Albania at the end of 1917, where they were assigned to road construction (Residori 2019, 141–144). In contrast, the Austro-Hungarian Empire's army, for example, preferred to work POWs directly behind the front lines. As a consequence, hundreds of POWs perished as a result of 'work accidents': from the autumn of 1915, the authorities had decided that these casualty figures were better not shared with the public (Moritz 2014, 244).

In the meantime, in Italy, the work assigned to POWs created too close a relationship with the local population and, because of the proximity of the front, which was stabilising along the Piave in 1917, a major reorganisation was carried out. The reasons were concealed, and part of the POW labour force was withdrawn from the war zone north of the Po river and assigned to mainly agricultural work in the south. Around 45,000 people were affected, but there were exceptions: woodcutting units could continue to work,<sup>50</sup> as well as the labour squads working in rice fields away from populated areas and the railway, and a 2,500-strong labour squad maintaining the Monginevro/Montgenèvre road used by French military transports. The withdrawal affected many, but was still not completely achieved (Residori 2019, 146–149). The measure was drastic and not sufficiently considered, making it difficult for many employers to switch to an already limited local workforce.<sup>51</sup> However, the immediate reactions did not always indicate that the authorities were aware of the consequences of the recall. Some prefects, for example, were particularly pleased because they saw the recalled workforce only as unguarded POWs, potential spies and spoilers of public morale.<sup>52</sup> The balanced position of the Inspectorate General of Homeland Security already took into account the economic damage, but it stood alone in its criticism and failed to prevent a mass recall.<sup>53</sup> In many cases, the labour force fleeing from the Austro-Hungarian occupation was the last source of supply.<sup>54</sup>

In January 1918, however, a new system came into force, as the Council of Ministers approved the use of 50–60,000 POWs in the war zone. In February 1918, Spingardi had drawn on the ranks of Czechoslovak POWs who had not been conscripted when he ordered the first workers' detachments to be organised, but this proved inadequate (Residori 2019, 163–164). This is how many Romanian and Yugoslav POWs were even employed in the immediate vicinity of the front, since they were not armed, and were seen as reliable workers.<sup>55</sup> It was in response to labour demands that Lieutenant General Spingardi prepared his statement at the beginning of April 1918, showing the distribution of POWs working,<sup>56</sup> as he wanted to indicate that only at the expense of other economic factors could additional POWs be redirected to work along the front. Another reason given for the reorganisation in 1917 was to prevent contact with British and French troops in the Po plain, but even this was not resolved by mass relocation, and the Italian authorities authorised the operation of Allied-controlled labour squads on Italian territory in early 1918. The POWs captured by British and French troops were used to organise additional labour detachments.<sup>57</sup> In August 1919, the organisation of the workers' detachments working under Italian supervision also changed, as the workers' squads were placed under joint battalion headquarters.<sup>58</sup> The last phase of the POWs' work was for the benefit of civilians: they had to repair war damage, build houses for



the displaced population, repair the road and rail networks, and run the economy until the demobilised soldiers could take their place. In the frenzy of victory in November 1918, when totally absurd numbers of available POWs were being circulated, the state agencies were making manpower demands in the hundreds of thousands, and private sector requests could have created an acute shortage. This, however, was the swan song of POW labour, as repatriation was well under way by the summer of 1919,<sup>59</sup> a process hastened by the fact that their work was increasing local unemployment, and so, as demobilisation progressed, the need for POW labour was diminishing (Marseglia 2015, 150–151).

### POW labour: a window on the outside world

For POWs work was compulsory. Not only in Italy, but almost everywhere. In Germany, France, and Great Britain the organisation of prisoner-of-war work was accompanied by an increase in the level of brutalisation of POWs, while the situation in the camps did not change radically (Jones 2011, 8). However, this brutalisation can be considered limited, because military law framework continued to exist. Using Heather Jones's words: 'First World War captivity never became a space beyond all legal jurisdiction' (Jones 2011, 13). There is no trace of double treatment in Italy: the POWs in labour camps were treated by the authorities in the same way as those inside the home work concentration camp. Attempts were made to investigate and settle blatant cases of mistreatment before they caused a stir. For the time being, the only explanation for this is that the fear of mutual reprisals worked well as a self-limiting element between Italy and the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy.<sup>60</sup> Work exacerbated the problems of captivity, since in most cases POWs had to perform tasks that they did not know how to do.<sup>61</sup> And, unlike the Russian example (Radauer 2022), those with special skills had no opportunity to excel or build a career while working during the Italian POW years, because they were only assigned to the simpler tasks. Also in contrast to the Russian example, prisoner-of-war work in Italy never involved such a large number as was the case with the construction of the Murmansk railway. The number of POWs in Italy was never so great that so many could be concentrated on one job. Certainly, neither the mortality nor the morbidity rates of working POWs were as bad in Italy as in the Tsarist empire.<sup>62</sup> But forced labour or not, coercion would have defined their lives also in the camp, as they had to obey orders as part of the military hierarchy. The oppression of the compulsion to work was relative, because it was present also at home, where the choice of employment was limited.<sup>63</sup> Curiously, the only known account of a POW strike written from the point of view of a POW, did not complain about the work itself, but criticised some of its conditions.<sup>64</sup> And as regards peasant strikes, we should mention that in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy these were put down by gendarmerie firing squads, while for striking POWs the Italian military courts merely handed down prison sentences lasting for years, which were replaced – especially from the beginning of 1919 – by amnesties.<sup>65</sup> Even coercion and inconvenience was a 'relative' concept if the POW was enjoying his work.<sup>66</sup> When examining POW work, it would be worth paying much more attention to the POW's point of view – which was not entirely negative.

Forced labour was more of an opportunity. The incentive procedures described earlier made it easier for the POW to get extra food and tobacco if he worked hard. These incentives did not provide the POWs with abundance, but made their situation more liveable. And the working POWs were used to these very modest conditions in civilian life too, since most of them had enlisted from a rural and working-class existence.<sup>67</sup> The POWs' work freed them from the confined world of their camp. Although walks outside the camp were compulsory, and in many places POWs were able to compensate for the grey everyday life with a very lively cultural and sporting life,<sup>68</sup> their confinement

affected their minds: the Great War led to the diagnosis of the so-called 'barbed wire disease'. The psychological disorder caused by imprisonment had existed before, but the mass internment practices of the Great War allowed psychological studies to describe it using medical methods.<sup>69</sup> And those outside the camps were not affected by this illness.

Living outside the camp sometimes resulted in quite close human interaction with the local population. Most of the camps did allow for communication, but these were episodic contacts, for example, visits by authorities to the POW camp/hospital.<sup>70</sup> The work outside the camp was usually done in partnership with the locals. This led to the development of relationships, at least as evidenced by the indignant denunciations of the phenomenon in letters of complaint<sup>71</sup> or even by the actual proceedings that took place.<sup>72</sup> And the relationships rarely turned into marriages.<sup>73</sup> So the concern of the prefects who attributed the deterioration in morale to the too-close relationship between the POWs and the local population is understandable. Perhaps an even more striking sign of social ties is the commemoration of POWs in folk songs in which the sympathy of the locals was for the working POWs, not for their guards.<sup>74</sup>

The working POWs often went on strike. This assertiveness was not the result of an organised labour movement, but generally simple disobedience of orders. They had demands and they saw refusal to work as the only means of getting them met.<sup>75</sup> There is no evidence of any link between the phenomenon and the strike culture of Italian civil society, but the patterns brought from home may have helped the POW strike to develop. The background and political culture of the participants is still being investigated, but I think it is important to draw attention to it in a synthetising work.

Finally, working outside the camp made it easier to escape. By the end of the war, especially in 1919, the number of POW labour camps had increased so much that it proved impossible to provide sufficient guard personnel. The authorities tried to intervene, but without success, so that by the spring of 1919 only those who did not want to escape were not able to do so. In addition to the failures of the authorities, we know of several cases where a POW on the run bought the silence of a local resident with his labour.<sup>76</sup> This further reinforces the assumption that the occasional animosity between the POWs and the locals was by no means insurmountable, and that at least the mutual benefit was enough to overcome the barriers. And this does not even begin to examine sympathy or national stereotypes reinforced or weakened by propaganda.

In this perspective, work is the key to understanding war captivity as more than just a story of suffering. Because – at least in the Italian hinterland – POW work was more of an opportunity: for the local economy, for the local population, but also for the POWs. Further research could yield interesting results, particularly at the level of local communities, especially if there are surviving memories from both sides – both locals and POWs.

## Conclusion

Prisoner-of-war labour in Italy contributed in a limited way to the Italian war economy. The Italian authorities generally respected the relevant rules, so putting aside the inevitable forced labour nature of the work, a controlled and generally well-functioning system was established. There were victims, such as the POWs employed in the Albanian works who died of malaria infection.<sup>77</sup> There were beneficiaries, such as employers who got cheap labour for themselves. POW labour, on the other hand, provided a regular link between the civilian sector and the camps. Human contacts were established, cooperation developed, which humanised the 'foreign enemy'. It was not without reason that some prefects feared the subversive propaganda of the POWs would undermine the patriotic commitment of the civilian population. POW work was also helpful to the POWs, since it provided short-term tasks in the context of hopeless captivity, took them out

of the confinement of the camps, and those who worked received extra rations, especially at the end of the First World War. Many public or private works in Italy during the First World War are linked to the activities of POWs: in some cases, this has been preserved in local memory, and the study of POW work is also important in the context of mapping these links.

**Acknowledgements.** The author thanks the Eötvös Scholarship of the Hungarian State n. MAEÖ2018-2019/280233 for supporting this work.

**Competing interest.** The author declares none.

## Notes

1. See for example Kowner and Rachamimov 2022.
2. Researchers have worked on the history of several camps, both large and small. For a non-exhaustive list, see Aiello 2014; Antolini 2005; Dambrosio, Falagario and Galati 2015; Francione and Juhász 2017; Gorgolini 2011; Ieranò 2013 and 2020; Incampo 1996; Madeddu 2018; Maccalini and Losardo 1996; Marseglia 2015; Martelli 2018; Nardone 2018; Petronio 2000; Salzano 2016; Residori 2018; Takács 2018, 2020 and 2022; Tavernini 2001/2003; Terranova and Ischia 2017. However, these works almost always examined the camp as an enclosed microcosm. The systematic treatment of the subject of First World War captivity in Italy, on a national level and with a high scholarly standard, started with Tortato 2004, while today Residori 2019 is the most complete and up-to-date work available in Italian. The latter covers the employment of POWs. Unfortunately, due to lack of language skills, texts written in Hungarian, Italian, Slovak, etc., on the POW camps maintained by the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and on the internment phenomenon are generally unknown to English-speaking researchers.
3. HL, I. VH, 4360, n. 1392. Spingardi, 29 August 1915. This ban was broken in some places. For example, in Gavi, in August and September 1915, POWs guarded in the local fort were used to repair the roads in the village. ACS, PS Internati di guerra, 1307, Alessandria, n. 6506. Facciolati, 11 April 1916. In the Sicilian towns of Rometta and Monforte San Giorgio, there were already ten and 20 POWs working in the fields in November 1915 (Botta 2016, 357).
4. Some 86,000 Italians had arrived over the Austrian border before the declaration of war, followed by some 55,000 after the declaration of war (Caglioti 2019, 130). For the refugee question see also Ermacora 2007. On unemployment see also Residori 2019, 141.
5. AUSSME, F-11, 112, 8. Prigionieri e disertori. Statistics.
6. ASDMAE, GPO 1915-1918, 345, n. n. Salandra, 16 November 1915.
7. ASDMAE, GPO 1915-1918, 345, n. n. Salandra, 25 September 1915.
8. ASDMAE, GPO 1915-1918, 345, n. 178, extract from the minutes of the meeting of 9 December 1915.
9. The opinion of the Milan Internal Security expert was negative, as he considered that it was not feasible to guard the POWs. ACS, PS Internati di guerra, 1306, Milano, n. 6309. Cassis, 21 December 1915.
10. ASDMAE, GPO 1915-1918, 345, n. 10. Marafini, 2 February 1916.
11. For the Italian industrial mobilisation see among others Tomassini 1991.
12. Generally, POWs were sent to work where they were requested. However, the number of POWs available was not sufficient to meet the demand, so the military office in charge of coordination had to regularly transfer POWs from one place to another. For example, the company Luigi Cravetto from Verrès asked for draftsmen, masons, earthworkers, locksmiths, carpenters, 300 POWs in total, to build the hydroelectric power station in Champedraz. As a sign of the shortage of labour, Lieutenant General Spingardi saw no chance of handing over the POWs required for the construction of the hydroelectric power station until the sowing had been completed. ACS, MAMMUDCCMI, 184, n. 107240. Indecipherable, 16 August 1917; n. 41256. Spingardi, 26 October 1917; n. 136228. Caputo, 12 November 1917; n. 137534. Caputo, 19 November 1917. After Caporetto the army gradually gained total priority in the employment of POWs. Residori 2019, 162-170.
13. ASDMAE, GPO 1915-1918, 341, n. 4117. Sonnino, 23:00 of 5 April 1916.
14. ASDMAE, GPO 1915-1918, 337, n. 7. Fiastrì, 2 February 1917; n. 1095. Sonnino, 15:00 of 3 February 1917.
15. ASDMAE, GPO 1915-1918, 350, n. 23009. Sonnino, 9 June 1917; n. 6453 G. Morrone, 14 June 1917. The Italian authorities' allegations were not unfounded as the French authorities did not always comply with the Hague Convention. Similar irregularities occurred on all the belligerent sides, so the Italian allegation was more of an excuse to continue direct control over the POWs in question. For atrocities related to POWs on the Western Front see Jones 2011.
16. ACS, PCMPGM, 100, n. 9652. Miliani, 15 October 1918.

17. ACS, PCMPGM, 100, n. 3228. Orlando, 21 October 1918.
18. ACS, PCMPGM, 100, n. n. Annex to Spingardi, 6 April 1918. See also in Tortato 2004, 108.
19. The first continuous road on the Ligurian coast, fully developed during the Napoleonic era. Previously, there was no continuous land-based coastal connection between the Ligurian towns and villages, which was provided by boat.
20. AUSSME, F-11, 112, 8. Prigionieri e disertori. Statistics.
21. At first, members of the national legions were recruited on a purely voluntary basis, with only the Italian authorities feeling compelled to recruit them, because they had no confidence in the nationalities. The creation of the legions is part of a bigger picture, which can be interpreted as an Entente-level response to their failures in 1917. The members of the legions ended up doing several jobs, but more on this later. However, the reason, the method and the purpose of the creation of the legions have nothing to do with the work of the POWs. Glant 2009, 85–87; Carteny 2019, 79–80.
22. ACS, PCMPGM, 100, n. 49811. Spingardi, 16 December 1917. The text in question is underlined in the original document, as Spingardi himself wished to emphasise it.
23. ACS, MAMMUDCCMI, 176, n. n. Situazione prigionieri di guerra impiegati in stabilimenti o lavori interessanti il munizionamento a tutto il 30 novembre 1917; n. n. Prospetto riassuntivo dei prigionieri di guerra occupati negli stabilimenti al 30 aprile 1918.
24. Refugees, casual workers, POWs (Tremelloni 1970, 276).
25. AUSSME, F-11, 112, 8, Annexe to n. 59972. Barbasetti, 8 December 1918.
26. By the end of 1917, the social tensions in Italy and the catastrophic impact of the defeat at Caporetto made it necessary to seek help from the Entente. The Allied reinforcements stabilised the military situation and the food supplies prevented further discontents of the civilian population (Winter and Prost 2005, 139). In 1913 dollars, Italian war expenses amounted to \$4,489 million, of which \$1,278 million was a US loan (Della Torre 2017, 135).
27. ACS, PS Internati di guerra, 1307, Affari Generali, n. 75. Cavasola, 25 May 1916.
28. ASDMAE, GPO 1915–1918, 345, n. 02521/676. Tittoni, 18 May 1916.
29. ACS, PS Internati di guerra, 1307, Austria, n. 9446 and annexe. Spingardi, 27 May 1916. At that time, there were about a million POWs working in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, so there were plenty to learn from. Naturally these POWs were not only Russians, as the Tsarist empire had many nationalities (Blüdnikow 1989, 687). For the POW work situation in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy see also Moritz 2014 and Moritz and Walleczek-Fritz 2021. On the German, French and British case, see among others Jones 2011. On the Russian situation see Rachamimov 2002 and Radauer 2022.
30. ACS, PCMPGM, 99. Raccolta delle disposizioni di carattere permanente relative ai prigionieri di guerra e ai disertori del nemico, Giugno 1916.
31. In the factories producing military equipment, attempts to employ only Italian labour proved inadequate by the turn of 1917/1918. ACS, PCMPGM, 100, n. 17212 G. Zuppelli, 18 August 1918.
32. AUSSME, M-7, 6, 1, n. 5338. Alferi, 2 September 1917.
33. AUSSME, M-7, 6, 1, n. 24112. Spingardi, 14 November 1916.
34. ACS, CSRESGAC, 774. Raccolta delle disposizioni di carattere permanente relative ai prigionieri di guerra e ai disertori del nemico. Agosto 1918. 22–25.
35. ACS, PS Internati di guerra, 1307, Affari Generali, n. 29756. Albricci, 18 July 1919.
36. See for example the dispute between the Prefect of Cremona and the local Farmers' Union: ACS, PS Internati di guerra, 1308, Cremona, n. 3388. Gallotti, 23 June 1917; ACS, PS Internati di guerra, 1307, Affari Generali, n. 18979. Sigliani, 27 June 1917.
37. ACS, PS Internati di guerra, 1307, Alessandria, n. 8348. Spingardi, 14 May 1916; n. 1988. Poggi, 23 May 1916.
38. AUSSME, M-7, 6, 1, n. 40819. Spingardi, 19 October 1917.
39. AUSSME, M-7, 6, 1, n. 9946. Spingardi, 27 May 1917. This was an extension of rights for many POWs. For example, in the Kingdom of Hungary, Law XIX of 1907 provided for compulsory accident insurance only for employees of workplaces considered to be the most dangerous, which did not apply to the agricultural population, even though most of the population was in this category (Romsics 2010, 82–83).
40. ACS, MAMMUDCCMI, 176, n. 205615. Dallolio, 1. December 1916, quoted by Residori 2019, 121–122.
41. AUSSMM, FB, 600, n. n. Unsigned and undated, but after 4 November 1918. Promemoria per S. E., Zone costiere interdette all'impiego dei prigionieri per lavori.
42. AUSSME, M-7, 6, 1, n. 41431. Spingardi, 29 October 1917.
43. ASDMAE, GPO 1915–1918, 352, n. 2359. Orlando, 16 August 1918.
44. For the reconstruction, see the reports received in February 1919, summarising by army the number of workers' detachments, their nationality, their place of employment and a list of activities carried out. All the higher units' reports, except for the 6th Army, have been preserved. These are listed in: AUSSME, F-11, 126,

2. For the rest, see Spingardi's previously published paper. ACS, PCMPGM, 100, n. n. Annexe to Spingardi, 6 April 1918.
45. For example, see the protests of the Cremonese luggage carriers when they feared for their contract with the army after the use of 200 POWs. AUSSME, B-3, 63, 189, n. 10196. Gallotti, 10 June 1917. In the end, it was the carriers who got it wrong, because their contract was terminated by mutual agreement. See *ibidem* n. 3960. Rondi, 12 June 1917.
46. Sonia Residori gave several examples of how POW labour became a lever for social discontent during wartime and how it helped to break down wages: Residori 2019, 126–131. See ACS, PS Internati di guerra, 1307, Affari Generali, n. 18979. Sigliani, 27 June 1917.
47. ACS, PS Internati di guerra, 1309, Sassari, n. 441. Boragno, 12 May 1919.
48. In Modena, for example, clearing snow from the roads was an easy money-making opportunity for unskilled local labour, so the prefect did not want to entrust it to POWs on principle, even though there was a shortage of labour. ACS, PS Internati di guerra, 1306, Modena, n. 1807. Scelsi, 30 December 1916.
49. See the proposals made after the Second Battle of Piave to correct the gap between needs and shortages: ACS, PCMPGM, 100, n. 8019. V. Filippini, 12 July 1918.
50. The firewood supply to the provinces of Milan and Piacenza was especially threatened, so the POWs were not withdrawn. ACS, MAMMUDCCMI, 176, n. 14465. Morrone, 13 December 1917.
51. ACS, MAMMUDCCMI, 184, n. 6388. Spingardi, 28 May 1918.
52. See for example the euphoric lines of the Prefect of Brescia: ACS, PS Internati di guerra, 1307, Affari Generali, n. 850. Bacchetti, 18 November 1917.
53. ACS, PS Internati di guerra, 1307, Affari Generali, n. 12100.1.12. Sorge, 9 December 1917.
54. ACS, PS Internati di guerra, 1307, Affari Generali, n. n. Battaglieri, 10 November 1917.
55. ACS, MAMMUDCCMI, 176, n. 94060. Indecipherable, 22 February 1918; n. 314472. Indecipherable, 24 September 1918.
56. ACS, PCMPGM, 100, n. n. Annexe to Spingardi, 6 April 1918.
57. AUSSME, F-11, 126, 5, n. n. Vivier, 12 May 1919; AUSSME, F-11, 126, 5, n. P/W 655. Headquarters No 88 Labour Group, 13 May 1919.
58. AUSSME, B-3, 63, 189, n. 4803. Monticelli, 9 August 1919, *ibidem* transcript N. 3200. Liuzzi, 2 August 1919, also cited by Monticelli.
59. The first to be repatriated in the spring of 1919 were the POWs who were not fit for work, and from the autumn of 1919 the others followed them. The order of precedence was then determined by nationality. However, at that time, it was not the hostilities during the war that were decisive, but those that followed. This is why the Hungarians were able to go home earlier than, for example, those residing in the territory of Serb-Croat-Slovene Kingdom (Juhász 2022b, 289–311).
60. For one such case of self-corrective action, where Italian carabinieri were convicted for improper procedure, see: ASDMAE, GPO 1915–1918, 374, n. 474. Cigliano, 13 February 1918; n. 7208. Spingardi, 10 March 1918; n. 9926. Spingardi, 12 April 1918.
61. The Rueping company received 100 POWs from the Casale di Altamura camp on 22 November 1916. They had to cut wood in Francavilla Marittima. The only problem was that many of the POWs had never seen a forest or sawmill before, as they had sent itinerant musicians, journalists, farmers and shoemakers to cut wood. The work ethic did not improve performance, and there were also problems with supplies. This caused the authorities to act. ACS, PS Internati di guerra, 1306, Cosenza, n. 3015. Masi, 2 December 1916, ACS, MAMMUDCCMI, 184, n. 10061. Indecipherable, 17 July 1917.
62. Between July 1915 and October 1916 around 70,000 POWs reinforced the existing workforce of Russian, Chinese, Finnish and convict labourers. During the construction of the Murman railway, there were not only many participants, but also many victims. The number of dead POWs is estimated at 25,000, while a further 32,000 contracted various serious illnesses during the works (Rachamimov 2002, 111–112). By comparison, at the end of October 1916, only 71,861 POWs and deserters were in Italian hands. AUSSME, F-11, 112, 8. Prigionieri e disertori. Statistics. On the part of the Italian authorities, only the employment of POWs in Albania caused unusually high death and morbidity rates. For this see endnote 77.
63. In the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy the only opportunity for growth was generally through geographical mobility, whether within the country or through emigration (Romsics 2010, 83).
64. Höglinger 2014, 47–48.
65. Romsics 2010, 82; Juhász 2022a, 203.
66. Kovačić 2018, 65. For a more critical POW account, which still portrayed the issue of work as endurable, see Bernátsky 2017, 231–236.
67. Mike 1927, 631.
68. Gunesch 2022, 137, 143.

69. Vischer 1919, 41.

70. For example, Gunesch 2022, 21.

71. In Castiglione a Casauria some locals denounced the POWs sleeping and working there for having developed too close a relationship with the locals. For example, they were free to go into houses, work in the fields under female supervision, read newspapers and express their opinions freely, drink with their guards in bars, and even get drunk in the wine cellar with the guard and the POW in his care, and then insult the respectable citizens together, until the affair turned into a brawl. ACS, PS Internati di guerra, 1309, Teramo, n. n. Anonymous denouncers from the settlement, Castiglione a Casauria, 26 November 1917. Similar links between the local population and the POWs were also established during agricultural work on small farms in Siberia (Rachimimov 2002, 108–110).

72. For example, Dina Gerla, a student at the Regia Scuola Normale in Pavia, had a love affair with a Hungarian POW and was expelled from school by the teaching staff for her bad behaviour. ACS, PS Internati di guerra, 1306, Pavia, n. 248. Bladier, 8 February 1918.

73. Aiello 2014, 170.

74. Fiammetti 2012, 46–47.

75. For one of the strikes and its consequences see Juhász 2022a, 203. Strikes happened elsewhere too and were handled differently. The German solution, with its heavy beatings, was one of the most brutal (Jones 2011, 89). However, nothing similar could be found in any of the Italian cases.

76. Juhász 2020; AUSSME, F–11, 129, 5, n. 34893. Pecori Giraldi, 3 June 1919.

77. In Albania, by 1 June 1919, the proportion of sick POWs exceeded ten per cent of the total, which was considered extremely high. AUSSME, F–11, 126, 4, n. 5488. Giordano, 12 June 1919.

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### Italian summary

Il presente articolo esamina i criteri per l'impiego dei prigionieri in Italia durante la Grande Guerra. Questo studio si inserisce nel filone di ricerca che evidenzia il forte legame tra la sfera civile e quella militare durante il conflitto. Tale connessione risulta particolarmente evidente quando si esamina l'economia di guerra e il ruolo che i prigionieri hanno avuto in essa. Nonostante l'articolo dimostri come il contributo dei prigionieri di guerra sia stato in fondo marginale, il loro lavoro era diversificato e chiaramente visibile in settori specifici. Pertanto, è fondamentale chiarire le regole riguardanti l'impiego di tali prigionieri e le conseguenze del loro lavoro.

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**Cite this article:** Juhász B (2024). Austro-Hungarian prisoners of war and their employment in the Italian hinterland (1915–1920). *Modern Italy* 29, 457–472. <https://doi.org/10.1017/mit.2023.77>