War Veterans and Transnational Fascism

From Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany to Francoist Spain and Vichy France (1917-1940)

Ángel Alcalde

Thesis submitted for assessment with a view to obtaining the degree of Doctor of History and Civilization of the European University Institute

Florence, 1 June 2015
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Department of History and Civilization

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Abstract

This dissertation explores, from a transnational viewpoint, the historical relationship between war veterans and fascism in interwar Europe. Until now, historians have been roughly divided between those who assume that ‘brutalization’ (George L. Mosse) led veterans to join fascist movements, and those who stress that most ex-soldiers of the Great War became committed pacifists and internationalists. This dissertation overcomes the inconclusive debates surrounding the ‘brutalization’ thesis, by proposing a new theoretical and methodological approach, and offering a wider perspective on the history of both fascism and veteran movements. Drawing on a wide range of archival and published sources in five different languages, this work focuses on the interrelated processes of fascistization and transnationalization of veteran politics in interwar Europe. Firstly, it explains the connection between Italian Fascism and war veterans as the result of a process of symbolic appropriation of the notion of the ‘veteran’. Then, it demonstrates that the cross-border circulation of the stereotype of the ‘fascist veteran’, and the diffusion of the ‘myth of the fascist veterans’, originating in the March on Rome, were crucial factors in the transnationalization of fascism and the fascistization of veteran politics in the 1920s. Furthermore, in the 1930s, networks of fascist veterans point to the existence of a transnational fascism, while new wars in Ethiopia and Spain strengthened the symbolic connection between veterans and fascism. Finally, the dissertation demonstrates that by 1939-1940, the fascist model of veteran politics was transferred into the new Spanish and French dictatorships. It is not ‘brutalization’, therefore, but rather a combination of mythical constructs, transfers, political communication, encounters, and networks within a transnational space that explain the relationship between veterans and fascism. Thus, this dissertation offers new insights into the essential ties between fascism and war and contributes to the theorization and conceptualization of transnational fascism.
This dissertation has been submitted to language correction
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<td>ANMIG</td>
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<td>ANRZO</td>
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<td>ANC</td>
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<td>ARAC</td>
<td>Association Républicaine des Anciens Combattants</td>
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<td>BArch</td>
<td>Bundesarchiv</td>
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<td>BUF</td>
<td>British Union of Fascists</td>
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<td>CIAMAC</td>
<td>Conférence internationale des associations de mutilés et anciens combattants</td>
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<td>CAUR</td>
<td>Comitati d’Azione per l’Universalità di Roma</td>
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<td>CR</td>
<td>Carteggio Riservato</td>
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<td>DDI</td>
<td>Documenti Diplomatici Italiani</td>
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<td>DNVP</td>
<td>Deutschnationale Volkspartei</td>
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<td>DNE</td>
<td>Delegación Nacional de Excombatientes</td>
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<td>DNSE</td>
<td>Delegación Nacional del Servicio Exterior</td>
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<td>f.</td>
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<td>FIDAC</td>
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<tr>
<td>MP</td>
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<tr>
<td>MI</td>
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<tr>
<td>MVSN</td>
<td>Milizia Volontaria per la Sicurezza Nazionale</td>
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<tr>
<td>NCO</td>
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<td>NSDAP</td>
<td>Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei</td>
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<td>NSKOV</td>
<td>Nationalsozialistische Kriegsopfersversorgung</td>
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<td>ONC</td>
<td>Opera Nazionale Combattenti</td>
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<td>PPI</td>
<td>Partito Popolare Italiano</td>
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Introduction

This dissertation analyses the transnational relationship between war veterans and fascism during the European interwar period (1919-1940).\footnote{In this dissertation, \textit{fascism} with lower case refers to the transnational phenomenon, and \textit{Fascism} with upper case refers exclusively to the Italian original movement and regime.} Over decades, historians have strived to explain why the European continent, only twenty years after a cataclysmic war of unprecedented murderous dimensions, became involved in a new, even more horrendous, world conflagration. Although there were important democratic experiences and remarkable advances in many facets of human life, the interwar period saw the progressive demolition of the peaceful order that many people had hoped for in the wake of the Great War. While at the beginning of 1919 democracies clearly dominated Europe, by June 1940 they were the very exception. And violent conflicts and civil wars marked this agitated transition. The eclipse of democracy cannot be understood without placing fascism at its centre. Fascism was a product of the First World War experience, and fascism can also be considered the trigger of the Second World War. In this scenario, explaining the links between fascism and war veterans, the men who were also a direct legacy of the Great War, remains crucial.

One can easily find a plethora of superficial evidence to suggest that the First World War veterans had a lot to do with the origin of fascism. For example, it is a truism to say that Hitler was just one among millions of demobilized soldiers of the defeated German army. Moreover, Mussolini was also a serviceman during the Great War. As we will see, historians have mentioned on innumerable occasions that paramilitary groups in the early postwar period, such as the Freikorps and the early Italian fascist movement, were composed of many former combatants. Furthermore, during the 1920s and 1930s, fascist movements in practically every single European country rose to prominence while displaying their members dressed in uniforms, martially parading with medals that had usually been obtained in the trenches. Militarism characterized fascism. Seemingly, war and fascism walked hand in hand. Yet, were these facts mere circumstantial coincidences, or do they reveal a substantial, quintessential connection between the fascist phenomenon and war veterans? Historians have given different (and often contradictory) answers, but a definitive response to the question remains, as yet, elusive.
This dissertation aims to provide a new account of the highly complex relationship between veterans and fascism, by employing an innovative theoretical and methodological approach. By examining processes of fascistization and transnationalization, analysing the cultural, sociological and political origins of fascism, I intend to resolve persisting historiographical contradictions, and to fill wide gaps in historical knowledge. Although much has been said about the interwar veteran movements, and the historiography on fascism is vast, only a limited number of works have directly dealt with their historical interconnections. Most of these studies have revolved around the controversial ‘brutalization’ thesis of the historian George L. Mosse. Yet they have not reached any universally valid interpretation, and in the meantime, many aspects of this historical reality have been neglected. Drawing on the extensive bibliography on fascism and on war veterans, and carrying out a detailed analysis of primary sources from different countries, this dissertation aims to provide not only a fresh historical account of inter-war European veterans, but also new and innovative insights into the history of fascism.

**Historiographies**

This dissertation is built upon a broad historiographical background, which can be roughly divided into two different areas, namely, studies on war veterans and studies on fascism. Assessing the state-of-the-art on the relationship between veterans and fascism requires, therefore, following two different historiographical traditions intertwined in this work. In this section I shall survey the relevant literature in these two areas, devoting special attention to those works that have particularly addressed the relationship between veterans and fascism.

**War veterans**

The history of war veterans constitutes a research field in and of it itself. Veterans have existed in all epochs, insofar as war has riddled human existence.\(^2\) The figure of the returning warrior is universal since Homer and his *Odysseus*. Probably, as scholarly works drawing on other disciplines such as psychology and anthropology suggest, all veterans from all periods may share a set of common traits, based on a comparable

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experience of combat. This dissertation is concerned with the inter-war veterans, or in other words, with the history of veterans of industrialized warfare.

To shed light on the history of the interwar-period veterans, it is useful to briefly observe the precedents. After the French Revolution and during the early nineteenth century, modern warfare and mass conscript armies developed; war veterans, pensioners and disabled ex-soldiers became a constant presence in popular culture, and legislation to reward their services was developed. Since ex-combatants were accustomed to the hardships of military life and the cruelties of combat, civilians deemed them as potentially conflictive individuals whose reintegration into ‘normal’ life was anything but easy. Conversely, people viewed veterans as virtuous citizens, whose service to the nation should be recognized. Subsequently, important historical developments further complexified the issue. During the nineteenth century, the centralization and nationalization of politics, the expansion of modern armies, and the consolidation of state bureaucracies heightened the political and ideological implications of military service. Revolutionary wars and forced conscription catalysed nation-building processes. It was not by chance that, in 1832, the German military theorist Carl von Clausewitz wrote that war was an instrument of policy, ‘a continuation of political intercourse, with the addition of other means’. Participation in war became an initiation to politics.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the European armies embraced new roles, shaping the social and political function of the veterans. Armed forces fought for a variety of objectives: to expand and retain colonial empires; to further national unification processes; to resolve internal civil wars. The state authorities often endowed the military with public order duties. In different countries, such as France, Italy, Germany or Spain, the state relied on military troops to repress working class protests,

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and to defend property. Thus, the figure of the soldier became associated with the defence of the establishment, with nationalist or imperial aggression, and with coercion. Forced conscription became highly unpopular. Meanwhile, in this context, ex-soldiers created associations, as civil society developed. These organizations embodied the memory of national wars, and performed functions of mutual assistance; they were closely linked to the military. In Italy, for instance, veteran patriotic groups from the wars of Independence were socially influential. And beyond patriotism, certain war veteran associations, such as the Deutscher Kriegerbund (Kyffhäuserbund) in Wilhelmine Germany — created in 1899 —, became bulwarks of social conservatism and anti-socialism. And yet, the number of former soldiers in proportion to the population was miniscule, as was the weight of veterans in political life. This would drastically change with the First World War.

Much can be learnt about the veterans of the interwar period by looking into the experiences of the Great War soldiers. Since the 1970s, historians of the First World War have increasingly turned their attention to the men who actually endured trench warfare. Scholars examined the soldiers’ written cultural production, as well as the experience of the illiterate, lower-ranked servicemen. Robert Wohl talked about a ‘war generation’, characterized by ‘a unity of experience, feeling and fate that transcended national borders’. The members of the ‘generation of 1914’ were young, bourgeois men who volunteered and sometimes returned from war believing that they had become different and better individuals. Yet, Wohl identified no unitary pattern of political response to the war experience. Furthermore, the war experience differed sharply

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8 See, for example, Gérard de Puymége, Chauvin, le soldat-laboureur: contribution à l’étude des nationalismes, Paris, Gallimard, 1993.

9 Rafael Núñez Florencio, Militarismo y antimilitarismo en España, Madrid, CSIC, 1990.


14 Ibid., p. 222.
according to the social class and conditions of the actors. This heterogeneity posits a conceptual issue. For if we cannot speak of the soldiers, combatants or servicemen as a unitary seamless whole, how can we take ‘the veterans’ as a homogeneous, firmly defined historical actor?

Some historians believe that all veterans share a set of characteristics that reflect the nature of their war experience. Eric J. Leed’s anthropological analysis of the experience of Great War trench-soldiers shed light on essential features of veteran identity. According to Leed, the war experience can be best understood as a rite of passage, which transforms the combatants into self-differentiated individuals upon their reintegration into society. The war was marked by three phases on an experience of radical discontinuity in the lives of soldiers. First came the experience of separation; then, a stage of ‘liminality’ where the combatant was confronted with death; and finally, a process of reintegration. Leed argues that the frontline soldier, after his ‘voyage along the margins of civilization’, becomes ‘an initiate in a field of force who has, apparently, no demands except to be allowed to be used as a tool of some future destiny’. For this reason, veterans are conflictive as they strive to find their place in a postwar society that no longer needs their services. They only find relief and reassurance in the comradeship they keep alive by meeting their equals in a ritualized associative life. Recently, Martin Crotty and Mark Edele have argued that, after the First World War, veterans in very different societies shared a ‘sense of entitlement’. These authors have suggested that, although only in certain circumstances did veterans succeed in becoming a privileged group; the experience of ‘twentieth century warfare’ created a ‘strong sense of entitlement among former warriors’ regardless of their specific postwar contexts.

Taking into account such characterizations, it would not be surprising if many veterans found fascism very attractive, since it was a new ideology and a form of political practice that provided them with a gratifying sense of pride. Throughout this dissertation, it will be interesting to keep in mind Leed’s interpretation of veteran

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17 Ibid., p. 3.
18 Ibid., p. 199.
identity, but it is also important to remark that this historian reached his conclusions by
providing, as evidence, the writings of several fascist, national-socialist and extreme-
right veterans, sometimes at face value. It is true that veterans most commonly
represented themselves as an ‘entitlement group’, but also that this claim implied
culturally constructing and appropriating the category of ‘veteran’. Most importantly, it
would be wrong to maintain that veterans, though sharing certain sentiments, shared
also the same political instinct. Even if we assume that all ‘veterans’ were united by
certain common characteristics, to categorize them simply along ideological trends is
untenable.

However, historiography on the interwar veterans has often tried to discern their
predominant political orientation. In the 1950s and 1960s, the first scholarly works on
French and British veterans came from political scientists, who tended to stress the role
of veteran associations as pressure groups (lobbies) in both national and international
spheres. During those decades, some of these works recalled the affinity of veteran
associations with right-wing and fascist parties, and the published memoirs of veteran
leaders who had collaborated with fascist movements and regimes corroborated this
impression. Furthermore, the paramilitary groups that emerged after the war, many of
them composed of ex-combatants, were viewed as the ‘vanguard of Nazism’, as Robert
G. L. Waite suggested in his book on the Freikorps. Within the context of the Cold
War, veteran associations were still very active in the public sphere of many European
countries. And as an analyst once wrote, these organizations had ‘offshoots which
occasionally reflect the memories of former Nazi military formations’. The Cold War
context reinforced the perception of veterans as potential fascists, but a developing
historiography would revise this idea.

The opening of archives with records of the fascist and Nazi past enabled
historians to provide the first crucial contributions on the topic. Today, some of these
books remain useful to approach the relationship between veterans and fascism. In

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20 René Remond, ‘Les anciens combattants et la politique’, Revue française de science politique, 5ème
année, 2 (1955), pp. 267-290; Graham Wootton, The Politics of Influence. British Ex-Servicemen,
Pennell Fagerberg, The ‘Anciens Combattants’ and French Foreign Policy, Unpublished PhD thesis,
Université de Genève, 1966.
21 See Theodor Duesterberg, Der Stahlhelm und Hitler, Wolfenbüttel & Hannover, 1949.
22 Robert G. L. Waite, Vanguard of Nazism. The Free Corps Movement in Postwar Germany 1918-1923,
Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press, 1952.
23 Taylor Cole, ‘Neo-Fascism in Western Germany and Italy’, The American Political Science Review,
49, 1 (1955), 131-143, here 139.
1966, based on a wide range of archival evidence, Volker R. Berghahn’s book on the *Stahlhelm* demonstrated the complex political links of this German veteran paramilitary movement with Nazism.\(^{24}\) This was, however, an historical analysis solely focused on Germany, and the connexions of this veteran association with Italian Fascism, as well as the veterans’ relation with generic fascism in more theoretical terms, were only marginally approached. German historians were aware that the inter-war veterans had created politically diverse associations, such as the republican *Reichsbanner*,\(^{25}\) the communist *Frontkämpferbund*,\(^{26}\) and the Jewish *Reichsbund jüdischer Frontsoldaten*.\(^{27}\) Juxtaposing these groups with the mainstream conservative and pro-monarchist traditional veteran societies,\(^{28}\) a more complex picture of the Weimar veterans emerged. Even though a wider comparative perspective was still lacking, this kind of well-documented, serious enquiries about the past represented the standard that other historians also put in practice during the 1970s.

In Italy, 1974, Giovanni Sabbatucci published an important book that still is the most detailed account on the Italian veterans’ postwar history. *I combattenti nel primo dopoguerra* tells the story of the ambitious, albeit failed, project for a political ‘renewal’ of Italy (*rinnovamento*) that the veterans pursued during 1919-1920. When Sabbatucci started to investigate this topic in Italy, there still existed a general belief that the Great War veterans had been the precursors of fascism; the references to this issue in the works of scholars such as Renzo de Felice did not debunk that common idea.\(^{29}\) Sabbatucci himself was surprised to discover, instead, the profoundly democratic inspiration of many early veteran leaders, who on some occasions joined the anti-fascist resistance.\(^{30}\) According to Sabbatucci, it was only after the political failure of the veteran movement that Fascism was able to occupy the political space left by the veterans upon their withdrawal from politics.


\(^{30}\) I interviewed Giovanni Sabbatucci in Rome, 10 April 2014.
Although a masterful piece of historical research, Sabbatucci’s book still has certain shortcomings in the face of today’s research agenda. It is, first of all, a forty-year-old study that obviously could not take account of all the research on fascism that was published in the following decades, nor find inspiration in the cultural studies on the First World War that gained momentum later. The focus of the book was the main Italian veteran association, the Associazione Nazionale Combattenti, during its two first years of existence; its contacts with fascism were only briefly described. Furthermore, the author’s thesis, stressing the abortive democratic potential of the veteran movement, led him to underrate the veteran element inside the early fascist movement, and to disregard some points in common that Italian veterans and fascists shared. Sabbatucci all but overlooked the rise of Italian Fascism during 1921-1922; and he accurately but broadly surveyed the history of the ANC until its fascistization in 1925. The author also excessively diminished, in my opinion, the relevance of the fascist ANC from 1925 to the end of the fascist regime, a period which was not studied in his book. My dissertation aims to compensate for these flaws by providing a new and updated analysis of the veteran-fascist relationship and a more complete history of the Associazione Nazionale Combattenti and other veteran associations during the interwar period.

In the 1970s, however, the history of the First World War veterans was attracting the interest of other historians, and the volume edited by Stephen R. Ward in 1975, The War Generation, pooled the knowledge on the topic.\textsuperscript{31} The contributors examined the veterans’ activities in postwar Britain, France, Italy, Germany, and the United States. Michael Ledeen showed that some veteran groupings in Italy, such as the arditi and many fascists, understood war as a ‘style of life’.\textsuperscript{32} James M. Diehl explained the different positions of German veteran paramilitary groups in their struggle against the Weimar Republic, a topic that he further developed in a later book.\textsuperscript{33} However, in general terms, the authors agreed that ‘the actions of veterans were determined more by their national experiences than by the impact of the war experience’,\textsuperscript{34} and that no clear

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., p. 5.
political orientation could be ascribed to them; veterans embraced not only rightist but also leftist causes, and different organizations within a single country often were political rivals. In the place of a general tendency to see the veteran groups as predominantly right-wing and potentially fascist, these works produced a more nuanced picture.

Shortly afterwards, a further blow came to the idea that war veterans had been pre-eminently pro-fascist. Published in 1977, Antoine Prost’s exhaustive study of the interwar French veteran movement is one of the most comprehensive analyses of veterans’ history ever realized. Prost not only discussed veteran politics, but also the sociological composition of the movement, veteran ideology and the culture of remembrance. Probably, the French veteran associations had been the most numerous in Europe, gathering perhaps 60% of ex-soldiers (3.620.000 held the ‘veteran card’). Prost, in contrast, did not overstate the influence of the veterans over French society, even if he argued that they had indirectly contributed to the country’s political moderation and stabilisation. In the end, the veterans’ overall commitment to the republican institutions and to international peace turned out to be fruitless. What was clear for Prost, however, was that the French veterans had represented no fascist threat; they, instead, had constituted a bulwark against the expansion of fascism in France. Today, this interpretation seems less convincing. It was rooted in the tendency, criticized though still prevalent at that time, of denying or underrating the menace of fascism and authoritarianism in France.

Paradoxically, as we see, two of the most influential works on the European interwar veterans, that of Sabbatucci and that of Prost, were inclined to underestimate the weight of fascism on the veteran politics of two countries where, in reality, fascism had been greatly influential over certain veteran groups. When they were written, Sabbatucci’s and Prost’s books were revising the widely held opinion that ex-combatants had been prone to joining authoritarian, right wing or fascist movements. However, while arguing in the direction opposite to this common belief, they would

remain the main references on the topic for a long time, thereby preventing other researchers from contradicting their optimistic interpretation.

The importance of veteran politics and ideologies in the origin of fascism was not being ignored, however. The great significance of the former works on veterans combined with some important advances in the knowledge about Fascism and Nazism at that time. Shortly after Sabbatucci’s book, Emilio Gentile — another pupil of Renzo de Felice — offered an important study of the ideology of Italian Fascism. Le origini dell’ideologia fascista addressed the origins of fascism as a revolutionary and totalitarian ideology stemming from the First World War experience.39 It was during the Great War that Mussolini’s allegiance moved from socialism to interventionism, to call on the combatants to create a new way of politics. An aristocracy of ex-soldiers imbued with war myths, particularly the assault troops (arditi), understood the war as an initiation into politics. According to Gentile, Combattentismo, a kind of rebellious instinct that characterized the returning veterans, was one of the crucial ingredients of the fascist ideological syntheses. The fact that Gentile considered the main cause of fascism to lie in the Great War experience was laudable.

This path-breaking work was part of a wider renewal in the field that strove to take fascist ideology more seriously, and not just as an irrational, violent reaction. Some years earlier, in the same fashion, George L. Mosse had investigated the cultural origins of the revolutionary national-socialist ideology.40 While stressing the intellectual crisis of the late nineteenth century as the starting point of this ideological evolution, Mosse had argued that völkisch nationalism acquired a mass-basis only after the Great War, and that veteran organizations (such as the Stahlhelm) had contributed to expanding such an ideology.41 Knowing what Italian historians were affirming about the origins of fascism, Mosse became increasingly convinced that the catalyst of Nazism had been the First World War. Based on this belief, he started to talk about ‘brutalization’.42

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Brutalization?

The slow emergence of George L. Mosse’s famous ‘brutalization’ thesis was possible thanks to the historiographical foundations discussed above, and was in harmony with the new cultural history of war, emerging in the 1980s and 1990s. At that time, many historians were in agreement in interpreting the First World War as the matrix of modernity. What Mosse finally synthesized in his 1990 book *Fallen Soldiers* had been appearing in previous minor contributions. In the post-1989 context his ideas found ample audience, since historians of fascism were showing a greater interest in the question of violence.

In his book, Mosse defined the inter-war persistence of violence as the ‘brutalization’ of politics. The postwar violent practices and discourses, derived from the war experience, resulting in a generalized indifference towards the persecution of political and racial enemies. Mosse argued that the experience of trench warfare, with its everyday confrontation with death, was the origin of a dehumanizing trivialization of violence during the interwar period, which ultimately led to genocide. The political right and the war veterans appeared as the chief agents of the ‘brutalization’ of politics. The right had monopolized the Myth of the War Experience, which made the memory of war acceptable, by means of worshipping the fallen soldiers and exalting the alleged comradeship of the youthful combatants. As a reviewer of Mosse’s book insightfully noted, ‘brutalization’ ‘occurred not simply because people became brutal but also because people learned to see the brutal as beautiful’. Even though it described cultural processes present in other European countries, Mosse’s interpretation addressed German history, and it was, in a sense, an affirmation of the German ‘special path’ (*Sonderweg*). However, by situating the origin of such ‘brutalization’ on the very

experience of war, it was inevitable that historians posed the same question to analyse the consequences of war in other countries. After all, combatants from all sides, not only the Germans, had been confronted with the deadly horrors of the front. Had all the veterans been the potential driving force of ‘brutalization’ all over Europe?

The ensuing debate around the ‘brutalization’ thesis continues to the present day. It is astounding how the notion of ‘brutalization’ has become an almost indispensable analytical tool for some historians to understand the interwar-period violence. In the last two decades, while the historiography on the ‘culture of war’ has expanded — particularly in France—, different contributions have gone further in arguing that the Great War was the matrix of totalitarianism, and that there was a continuum of violence from the First World War to the Second World War (and beyond); they often point at the war veterans as important conveyors of violence. Other scholars, in contrast, are sceptical regarding the long-term destructive consequences of the Great War experience, and even deny that such ‘brutalization’ ever existed. Some of them reject the arguments of the ‘war culture’ school. Normally, they assert that the French veterans, as Prost argued, remained committed to pacifism —although this thesis has been recently revised—. Richard Bessel, carefully analysing the situation of Germany in the aftermath of the Great War, noted that the reintegration of the frontline soldiers was effective and peaceful; only a tiny minority of them joined the mercenary Freikorps. Benjamin Ziemann, indeed, has recently highlighted the importance of a

52 Chris Millington, From Victory to Vichy.
republican, democratic culture among German veterans, maintaining that the war experience engendered rather pacifist feelings among ex-combatants.  

Helping to lessen the polarization of positions in this debate, the concept of ‘cultural demobilization’ has permitted to explain why the traumatic, violent war experiences, whilst being similar for all the combatants, had ‘brutalizing’ effects only in some countries. By focusing on the processes of demobilization, historians have offered insights into the separate paths that the veterans of different countries walked after 1918. In Britain and France, the population in general, and veterans in particular, abandoned war mentalities and attitudes more easily than, for instance, in Germany or Italy. In the latter countries, the circulation of postwar myths, such as the ‘stab in the back’ (Dolchstoß) and the ‘mutilated victory’, probably thwarted the demobilization of the minds. Victory and defeat were not necessarily decisive for the success or failure of demobilization. The case of Italy, victorious in 1918 but suffering from ‘brutalization’ of politics, is crucial to understand the context where Fascism was born. The prevalent interpretation says that the Italian liberal state and the political left failed to demobilize and welcome returning troops; therefore, some veterans turned into fascists or into supporters of D’Annunzio in Fiume, while the army officers’ neutrality and obedience to the state weakened. In the first part of this dissertation, I will revise that interpretation, by looking into demobilization from a transnational point of view.

Recent studies on the upsurge of political violence and paramilitarism in postwar Europe, while inspired by the ‘brutalization’ thesis, have provided more complex and evidence-based explanations. The German and Austrian Freikorps, as well as the counter-revolutionary army in Hungary, were composed of many veterans, particularly ex-officers, together with younger nationalist students. Yet rather than the war

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experience, it was defeat and revolution that catalyzed their violent reaction. The formation of a ‘culture of defeat’ in those regions explains the uneven distribution of violence across Europe. Thus, between 1917 and 1923, above all in the defeated countries, ‘military or quasi-military organizations and practices […] either expanded or replaced the activities of conventional military formations’ as ‘part of a larger cycle of violence that predated an outlasted the Great War itself’. In line with the new research agenda, several studies have tested the ‘brutalization’ thesis, concluding that postwar violence was not the direct consequence of the war experience. Violence was, in fact, the result of the collapse of state authority, and of the political radicalization of many different social groups —not only the war veterans— as a consequence of the war mobilization and demobilization.

Recent studies on paramilitarism and postwar violence, though offering important insights, also overlooked certain elements. While it is laudable that they have opened the scope of research to countries previously understudied, they still ignore or analyse superficially the history of some important regions. For example, Spain is virtually never introduced in these perspectives, even if the period 1917-1923 was marked by social unrest and political violence. (Not participating in the Great War did not mean Spain was unaffected by paramilitarism). Besides, we still do not learn anything really new about the important case of Italy. Collaborative research projects and publications still rely on classical works about Italian Fascism, to show how Italy was ‘the only one of the victorious states that underwent a process of the “brutalization of politics”’. It is also interesting to note that, with notable exceptions, researchers still

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64 Eduardo González Calleja y Fernando del Rey, La defensa armada contra la revolución, Madrid, CSIC, 1995; Eduardo González Calleja, El máuser y el sufragio. Orden público, subversión y violencia política en la crisis de la Restauración (1917-1931), Madrid, CSIC, 1999.  
owe much to the ‘brutalization’ thesis, even if they disagree with Mosse.\(^{66}\) The debate around ‘brutalization’ seems exhausted; hence developing a new and better interpretative model, escaping from the paradoxes of the ‘brutalization’ paradigm, is a necessary step forward. Furthermore, if researchers have occasionally introduced truly transnational perspectives, their results are still greatly shaped by the nation-state framework. And, last but not least, the studies mentioned above do not answer the questions of how, and to what extent, postwar paramilitary violence and war veterans were connected to the new fascist ideas, movements and regimes of the interwar period; they are studies on postwar violence rather than fascism.

Closely related to these studies, a different set of works has highlighted, instead, the pacifist and internationalist tendencies of important veteran movements of the interwar period.\(^{67}\) Recalling the activities of international veteran organizations in their quest for peace and reconciliation, Julia Eichenberg and John Paul Newman have argued that the majority of veterans harboured pacifist feelings, and that they ‘were not responsive to radical right ideology’.\(^{68}\) In doing so, these historians challenge the dominant ‘brutalization’ thesis. However, they do not contradict that ‘Italian Fascism and German National-Socialism used the legacy of the First World War and war veterans as a means of legitimizing their authority’.\(^{69}\) While they cast doubts on the core of the ‘brutalization’ thesis, they do not challenge the idea that many veterans in Germany and Italy supported fascism. To explain the causes of this inclination toward fascism, they employ the concepts of ‘culture of victory’ and ‘culture of defeat’. After the First World War and Versailles, the ‘culture of defeat’ had been the origin of revisionist claims. In contrast, the ‘culture of victory’, these historians argue, ‘favoured the emergence of an inter-Allied veteran internationalism’. The ‘culture of victory’ ultimately ‘transformed by a process of cultural demobilization into one of attempted reconciliation and peace’.\(^{70}\)

\(^{66}\) See also Natalie Duclos (dir.), *L'adieu aux armes. Parcours d'anciens combattants*, Paris, Carthala, 2010.


\(^{68}\) Ibid., p. 8.

\(^{69}\) Ibid., pp. 12-13.
This contraposition between ‘cultures of victory’ and ‘cultures of defeat’ stems from the confrontation between ‘brutalization’ on the one hand, and veterans’ pacifism and internationalism on the other hand. Yet this proposition does not resolve the unremitting theoretical contradictions involved in the ‘brutalization’ paradigm, nor does it explain the relationship between veterans and fascism. Were the fascist veterans inspired by a ‘culture of defeat’ or by a ‘culture of victory’? We still do not know enough about the case of Fascist Italy to answer this question.\(^{71}\) And, similarly to the studies on paramilitarism, the results of the research on veterans’ internationalism are still shaped by nation-state frameworks. Again, the validity of this interpretation falters if we introduce new comparisons, for example with the case of Spain, where undoubtedly a ‘culture of victory’ animated Francoist ex-combatants of the Spanish Civil War to support a fascist regime.\(^{72}\)

It seems therefore that studies on interwar veterans have not provided any convincing general explanation about the relationship between veterans and fascism, even if paramilitary violence has been widely analysed. Besides, historians of the veteran movements tend to focus on other questions, such as the fight for pensions, the problems of disability, rehabilitation and its consequences for masculinity. On these subfields exists a vast and ever-increasing literature in several languages, which is not directly related to the study of fascism.\(^{73}\) Nevertheless, this bibliography helps to

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\(^{72}\) Ángel Alcalde, Los excombatientes franquistas. La cultura de guerra del fascismo español y la Delegación Nacional de Excombatientes (1936-1963), Zaragoza, Prensas de la Universidad de Zaragoza, 2014; Claudio Hernández Burgos, Granada azul. La construcción de la ‘Cultura de la Victoria’ en el primer franquismo, Granada, Comares, 2011.

comprehend the overall context of the interwar period, by pointing at the anxieties of postwar societies in the process of coming to terms with some of the worst consequences of warfare, such as mutilation and mental disorder. In this way, whereas the struggle of the war victims can be seen as a symptom of democratization, historians have also argued that, in Germany, the National Socialist movement successfully wooed the victims by giving them honour treatment, therefore succeeding in transforming them into supporters of the Third Reich.\textsuperscript{74} This line of inquiry has recently yielded important results for the understanding of how Nazism dealt with war disability and mutilated ex-soldiers.\textsuperscript{75} I am aware that there is also work in progress regarding the history of disabled veterans under Italian Fascism. However, in all these cases, no transnational perspective has been significantly applied, and while focusing on disabled veterans, they leave ex-combatants, in general, aside.

In conclusion, the existing bibliography on inter-war veterans, and on the cultures of violence and paramilitarism in the aftermath of the Great War, including works on ‘brutalization’, have not explained the long-term, transnational relationship between veterans and fascism during the European interwar period. Next, I shall examine the extent to which scholarship on fascism has contributed to understanding this issue, and argue that a transnational perspective is best suited to reaching more convincing explanations.

\textit{(Transnational) Fascism and theory}

My dissertation is an innovative contribution to the history of both fascism and war veterans, not only because the relationship between veterans and fascism remains unexplained, but also because my transnational perspective offers new insights into the history of fascism. Whereas the existing bibliography on fascism is truly immense, there remain not only unresolved debates but also important gaps in knowledge. A prime example is the relationship between fascism and war — as Stanley G. Payne recently suggested.\textsuperscript{76} It is known that the fascist aesthetics were permeated by references to


\textsuperscript{76} António Costa Pinto, \textit{Rethinking the Nature of Fascism. Comparative Perspectives}, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. xi.
In a very interesting book, Thomas Kühne has shown how the mythical construct of the notion of Kameradschaft (comradeship), emerged during the 1920s in Germany to mould Wehrmacht soldiers’ attitudes during the Second World War, thereby sustaining the Nazi goals. Yet historians have only begun to understand how fascist symbols, myths and discourses about war were translated into social practice and politics.

In particular, the relationship between veterans and fascism has not been sufficiently studied. Whereas many works on fascism have pointed to the important presence of ex-combatants and soldiers within the movements, deeper quantitative and qualitative analyses are the exception. In general, the relationship between veterans and fascism has been investigated by assessing how many war veterans became fascists and how many did not, basing their conclusions on this information. But this perspective neglects many other aspects of this important relationship. Insightfully, recent studies have taken the notion of the combatant as a cultural construct that was manipulated by the fascist movements and regimes. In this sense, scholars have stressed the seminal importance of the war experience for fascism, and in particular for German National-Socialism. However, these new works usually place themselves within the ‘brutalization’ debate, and seldom provide transnational and long-term perspectives. Much more can be said on this topic. Reconstructing the history of the fascist veteran organizations and discourses in interwar Europe is a task that remains to be done, and it is from a comparative and transnational perspective that we can reach new insights.

But what do I mean when I talk about fascism in this dissertation? The conceptual debate around fascism is still so heated that one is obliged to take a position.

84 Arndt Weinrich, Der Weltkrieg als Erzieher. Jugend zwischen Weimarer Republik und Nationalsozialismus, Essen, Klartext Verlag, 2013, pp. 21-25.
The wider perspectives on ‘generic’ fascism have been usually oriented towards reaching a ‘definition’, grasping the ‘nature’, or offering a ‘typology’. Currently, there is an increasing tendency to consider ‘fascism’ as a rather vague and contradictory category that historical actors utilized to pursue their objectives within a transnational context. In this dissertation, following the latter trend, I assume as a premise the existence of a nonspecific, transnational fascism phenomenon, in which different movements and regimes were involved, starting with Italian Fascism and German National-Socialism. I do not intend, therefore, to take fascism as a static object or abstract category whose essential core should be identified. ‘The category of fascism is the product of the actions, struggles and the self-identification of the political actors themselves’, as Michel Dobry has put it. If the main task of the historian is to explain how things changed over time, the only way to fully understand fascism, in my opinion, is situating it inside its historical context and rendering visible its evolution and diffusion throughout Europe. I will, therefore, observe fascism in action, as a fast-evolving and expanding process that took place fundamentally in the transnational context of Europe during the interwar period.

Other historians’ theoretical reflections on fascism are useful here. Although the transnational dimension has been absent in the most relevant attempts to offer a full and all-embracing explanation of fascism, some of these syntheses have stressed its mutable and conveyable qualities. In this sense, Robert O Paxton has distinguished five stages of fascism. ‘(1), the initial creation of fascist movements; (2) their rooting as parties in a political system; (3) the acquisition of power; (4) the exercise of power; and, finally, in the longer term, (5) radicalization or entropy’. (In this dissertation, I will discuss the role of veteran organizations and discourses during these different stages — particularly the first four of them — roughly between 1919 and 1940.) Furthermore, to understand how fascism expanded in Europe during these decades, one must be aware of the phases of this development. Philip Morgan’s has differentiated two waves in the history of

fascism; the first during the 1920s, in which Italian fascism and the First World War consequences were the key issues; the second during the 1930s, in which the Great Depression and the example of National-Socialism marked the emergence of new fascist movements in other European countries.\(^89\) Thus, historians who observe the fascist phenomenon in action have highlighted its historical versatility and dynamism.

Also, in relation to the protean nature of fascism, the concept of ‘fascistization’ facilitates a better understanding of historical change. It must be taken into consideration that fascist movements and regimes were never hermetically isolated from authoritarian, para-fascist, and other counter-revolutionary political manifestations.\(^90\) Hence, Aristotle Kallis has retrieved the category of ‘fascistization’ to make sense of the process by which fascist leaders, ideas and organizational structures amalgamated with traditional elites and conservatism, in Italy, Germany and in other European countries.\(^91\) As we will see in this dissertation, the co-optation of fascist leaders and the adoption of fascist commodities, either forced or voluntary, occurred in the realm of veteran politics as well—not only in Italy and Germany, but also in France and Spain. Indeed, in my view, it is possible to talk about a transnational fascistization of war veterans’ discourses and organizations. By and large, this dissertation is as a piece of research on processes of fascistization from a transnational perspective, since the transnational allows us to grasp the dynamism of fascism in a wider perspective. In short, this is a thesis on ‘transnational fascism’. But what does the transnational perspective imply?

Transnational history emerged as a discipline during the 1990s as the result of theoretical and methodological progress in the fields of comparative history and the history of ‘cultural transfers’. If comparative history usually examined two static nation-state units of analysis, understanding them as parallel phenomena, thus providing unhistorical explanations only capable of exposing differences and similarities; the theory of transfers allowed historians to recognize how such units culturally intermingled over time.\(^92\) In a moment when globalization has made historians

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increasingly aware of the global interdependence and intermixing, new perspectives have allowed scholars to understand historical processes that transcended the usual national histories.\(^{93}\) Thus, aiming to abandon the nation-state as the main unity of analysis, transnational history looks ‘beyond national boundaries and seek[s] to explore interconnections across borders’; it ‘focuses on cross-national connections, whether through individuals, non-national identities, and non-state actors, or in terms of objectives shared by people and communities regardless of their nationality’.\(^{94}\) Historians have worked on a variety of topics within the field of transnational history. Migrations, international communities of experts, humanitarian organizations, border spaces, or cultural identities are typical examples of their objects of study. This dissertation aspires to represent a contribution to the practice of transnational history, by observing not only the role of political networks, international institutions and migrants, but also the cross-border transmission of myths and stereotypes that condensed the fascist ideology, as we will see.

In much the same way as the rather fashionable field of transnational history, ‘transnational fascism’ is a promising research area. Nevertheless, studies on ‘transnational fascism’ are still in their infancy, and, most frequently, have relied also on comparative history.\(^{95}\) Comparison allowed us to conceive of Italian Fascism, German National-Socialism, and other fascist movements as manifestations of the same phenomenon.\(^{96}\) Yet this method was unable to fully account for their dissimilarities and affinities. The latest great efforts to carry out detailed comparisons of the cases of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany have largely failed to provide new insights.\(^{97}\)

In recent years, the real theoretical advancement has come from transnational perspectives. Studying an ideology and a political movement, such as fascism, from a


transnational point of view, implies observing the ‘multidirectional transfer’ and circulation of ‘ideas, information, resources’. Certain works have focused on the interconnectedness, the contacts, and sometimes the rivalries between Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, leading to the entanglement of the two powers at the end of the 1930s. Therefore, the results have not only shown the similarities and the differences between both regimes, but also their kinship, bonds, and mutual influence. Fascist movements and regimes simultaneously were ultra-nationalist and transnational phenomena. And by focusing on connections and exchanges, historians have demonstrated the wide — even transatlantic — circulation of fascism during the interwar period. What seems clear now is that, during the 1920s, Italian Fascism became the model and the inspiration for different right-wing, nationalist and counter-revolutionary groups abroad. By 1934, nonetheless, Hitler had overtaken Mussolini as the lodestar of the European extreme-right; the first attempts of cooperation and the fight for leadership between fascists and national-socialists ended in the consolidation of National-Socialism as the new model for the European fascists, and as the leading force of the Axis. This strong interpenetration reveals the extent of the fascist phenomenon in interwar Europe, and provides a glimpse into its complex ‘nature’. The transnational perspective promises a redefinition of fascism, yet little empirical research has actually been conducted in this field.

If the idea of transnational fascism is a very recent historiographical development, a transnational analysis of the historical relationship between veterans and fascism is an entirely new and original endeavour. It is true that previous contributions have suggested the importance of the international contacts of fascist veterans, and

approached the transnational dimension of veteran politics during the interwar period.\textsuperscript{104} A number of publications have examined the international contacts and mutual influences of fascist, national-socialist and other veteran leaders from different countries.\textsuperscript{105} Nevertheless, these works have remained focused on bilateral encounters, and on single nation-state cases; the wider transnational phenomenon has remained unexplained. My dissertation aims to trace the web of major connections, encounters, transfers and entanglements that shaped the historical relationship between veterans and fascism in Europe. This perspective will provide a picture of the ‘transnational political space’ in which fascism took shape and evolved during the interwar period.\textsuperscript{106} In this manner, this dissertation will contribute to define the innovative concept of ‘transnational fascism’, by testing through actual empirical research the recent methodology of transnational history.

**Methodologies**

*\textit{A hypothesis}*

Having mapped the historiographical and theoretical background that forms the basis of this dissertation, it is time to propose a set of research questions. Analysing the transnational relationship between fascism and war veterans during the European interwar period, requires us not only to assess how many ex-combatants turned into fascists after the First World War experience. This is not the crucial issue; neither is the question did the process of ‘brutalization’ transform soldiers into violent fascists. This debate can be considered exhausted. We should primarily wonder, instead, why historians have felt compelled to discern whether the war veterans were truly fascists or not! The first question to ask, therefore, should be why and how the figure of the war veteran became associated with the emerging fascist ideology and movement. And only then, to what extent was veteran politics really relevant for Italian Fascism (and National-Socialism)? How did this relevance evolve over time? Most importantly, were the war veterans agents of a transnational fascistization in (Western) Europe during the 1920s and 1930s? If this is true, why and how did it occur?

\textsuperscript{104} See Julia Eichenberg and John Paul Newman (eds.), *The Great War and Veterans’ Internationalism*

\textsuperscript{105} See, for example, Claire Moreau Trichet, *Henri Pichot et l’Allemagne de 1930 à 1945*, Bern, Peter Lang, 2004.

The state of the art in the subject indicates that it is not possible to talk about a generalized inclination of the war veterans towards any fixed style of politics or any ideological option, although there were national and international veteran organizations that talked and acted in the name of the veterans’ community, adopting specific political stances. Being fully conscious that many actual ex-soldiers never felt part of such imagined groups, I will observe the veteran associations and their leaders as historical actors. Furthermore, what most interests me is to understand how the pervasive idea of the ‘fascist veteran’ was constructed and circulated throughout Europe over time. As we will see, the ‘veteran’ was a cultural construct; its meaning was defined through discursive and organizational struggles.

The main hypothesis that I aim to verify is, therefore, that the manipulation of a complex of transnational, culturally-constructed and mythical ideas of the war veteran(s), 1) allowed Italian Fascism to become a distinct, original and influential political movement; 2) contributed to its rise, seizure of power and consolidation within Italy; 3) permitted the transformation of Italian Fascism into a transnational phenomenon in Europe —fascism, in the lower case—; 4) paved the way for the creation of a fascist international entente between —fundamentally but not only— Italian Fascism and German National-Socialism; 5) became a crucial element for fascist military expansion and for the imposition of new fascist and fascist-inspired regimes in Spain and France.

**Geographical and chronological framework**

One of the most interesting results of introducing a transnational perspective is the possibility of breaking free from traditionally established national units of spatial analysis and from conventional chronological frameworks. History does not always recognize borders, nor its forces vanish at particular dates. Even if the history of fascism during the interwar period was substantially shaped by nation-state contexts, the processes that I will describe worked across borders. Furthermore, cultural elements, discourses and representations around the fascist war veteran, and also the veterans’ organizations themselves, had deep roots in a period that preceded the birth of fascism. Moreover, the working hypotheses of this dissertation requires me to finish my historical analysis at a historical conjuncture that does not correspond with any date that would conventionally be considered significant for most of the countries in question. My dissertation’s spatial and chronological framework is also worth examining.
This dissertation studies historical processes taking place within a porous geographical space that mainly corresponded to four countries: Italy, Germany, Spain and France, but not only to them. Fascism was born in Italy, and therefore events taking place in this country will be of the utmost importance to my analysis, in particular regarding the initial historical period. The German case demands attention not only for the 1930s, but also going back to 1919. Also, Spain and France were countries deeply affected by what happened in their vicinity. In these two countries, new fascist-inspired dictatorships were imposed towards 1939-1940. Cross-border transfers and contacts between fascists and veterans occurred in several directions, particularly within the above-mentioned four-countries region. Yet the events that determined these processes also took place far from this crucial space of communication. In other words, what was happening at particular moments in—for example—Russia, Romania, Britain, or the United States is, at some points of my explanation, as important as what occurred in Milan 1919, Rome 1922, Berlin 1933, Paris 1934 or Madrid 1939. Intermediate regions geographically situated between the four main poles—such as Austria—deserve attention as well. I hope that an intelligent reader will not take my unconventional narrative leaps from one country to another as a symptom of methodological inconsistency. On the contrary, this particular geographical framework adjusts to the transnational political space of fascism.

Chronologically, establishing fixed time-limits has proven relatively difficult. I cannot ignore the pre-war era, especially as it comes to identify ideological trends that contributed to shape the fascist ideal conception of the war veteran. Nonetheless, as we will see, 1917 can be identified as the key year in which the history of the relationship between veterans and fascism started, though in the nebulous realm of ideas. The interwar period can be understood as a process by which democracies—present in most of the European continent towards January 1919—were gradually replaced by authoritarian or fascist dictatorships until the bleak situation of June 1940. It is roughly in the summer of 1940, therefore, that I stop my analysis. In reality, the relationship between war veterans and fascism continued after this date. Yet by this point in time, I hope to have replied to my main working question, which set outs to consider the responsibility that can be imputed to the link between veterans and fascism in the complete failure of a peaceful post-Great War order.
Some conceptual tools

‘Fascism’, ‘war veterans’ and ‘fascistization’ are three key concepts of this dissertation—I have discussed them above. Being familiar with the notions employed in transnational analyses, such as ‘transfers’, ‘entanglement’, ‘circulation’ or ‘connections’, will facilitate the understanding of my arguments. Yet some other conceptual tools that I will employ in this work need previous clarification. In this section, I will make clear these concepts.

As I reject the notion of ‘brutalization’ to explain the connection between veterans and fascism, I shall set up a different interpretative framework to explain the process of cultural manufacture and transnational communication of the ‘fascist veteran’ symbolic complex. Understanding the origin and circulation of this constructed ideal is important, because it marked the veterans’ organizational and discursive struggles of the postwar period in Italy, and then in other regions. I will explain these processes through the concepts—some of them borrowed from other social sciences—of ‘symbolic appropriation’, ‘framing’, ‘stereotype’, ‘myth’, and ‘fascist model’.

Symbolic appropriation is a notion usually employed by social and cultural anthropologists. Here, it refers to the process by which symbols, cultural materials or objects acquire a specific meaning, becoming associated to a human group or political power. In particular, I am assuming that the ‘war veteran’ was an existing transnational symbol that acquired new meanings as a result of the First World War experience. This redefinition was possible, in part, because certain political groups succeeded to a greater extent than others in ‘framing’ veteran politics, thereby making ‘people develop a particular conceptualization of [this] issue or reorient their thinking about [this] issue’. In the first chapter, I will discuss the particularities of the transnational process of symbolic appropriation that took place roughly between 1917 and 1919 in Western Europe, the outcome of which was the widespread consolidation of a set of beliefs about what I call the ‘anti-Bolshevik veterans’. In this sense, I will analyse the veterans-related discourses and representations employed at that time in different countries, in particular in postwar Italy. My objective is to assess to what extent Italian Fascism—and National-Socialism—benefited from the symbol of the ‘anti-Bolshevik veteran’.

and whether the stereotypical notion of the ‘fascist veteran’ which emerged was also the result of symbolic appropriation.

The concept of ‘stereotype’ will allow us to observe the beginning of the European circulation of fascism. The relevance of the anti-Bolshevik veteran symbol notwithstanding, the rise of the fascist movement in Italy succeeded in consolidating a stereotype: the fascist veteran. It is worth briefly discussing the theory behind this assertion. ‘A stereotype is a set of beliefs about the personal attributes of a social group’.  

Although stereotypes often are negative, they are also ‘aids to explanation […], energy-saving devices, and […] shared group beliefs’; they always contain a kernel of truth. The process of stereotype formation occurs in three steps; first, ‘a group of people are identified by a specific characteristic’; then, we ‘attribute a set of additional characteristics to the group as a whole’; finally, ‘on identifying a person as having the identifying meaningful characteristic […] we then attribute the stereotypical characteristic to them’. It is striking to see how the theory of stereotyping is applicable to the formation of the conviction that many Italian fascists were war veterans, and vice versa. The stereotype of the fascist veteran, thereafter, circulated throughout Europe by means of communication processes that according to the theory ‘may play a major part in the spread and perpetuation of social stereotypes’. In this way, the fascist veteran became one of the most iconic incarnations of fascism. As we will see, this stereotype greatly influenced politics, since not only the fascists were believed to be —for the most part— war veterans, but also because on many occasions veterans in general were either distrustfully or enthusiastically seen as fascists, at least potentially. Understanding this phenomenon is extremely important because in reality, as historians know, a negligible proportion of ex-soldiers became fascists (at least at the beginning).

The existence and circulation of the ‘fascist veteran’ stereotype might have been innocuous had the fascist movement never conquered power; but, as the March on

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Rome succeeded, an important myth crystallized. This widespread belief that the Italian veterans had been the core of a political movement that had swiftly conquered power, destroying the Bolshevik menace and bestowing on the community of ex-combatants the leading role to which they were allegedly entitled, I will call the ‘myth of the fascist veterans’. Historians have employed the concept of ‘myth’ on countless occasions. A political myth does not just refer to an episode that probably never occurred in reality as it is commonly believed. A myth is also a narrative that helps make sense of events, providing them with significance.\footnote{Chiara Bottici, \emph{A Philosophy of Political Myth}, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2007; see, too, Lluís Duch, \emph{Mito, interpretación y cultura. Aproximación a la logomática}, Barcelona, Herder, 1998.} Myths are legitimizing processes that justify human relations and institutions; they can be employed for mobilizing purposes, to push people to adopt certain ideas and attitudes. Historically, wars and violent events have proved an excellent breeding ground for myths.\footnote{See, for example, John Horne and Alan Kramer, \emph{German Atrocities 1914. A History of Denial}, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2001; Matthias Sprenger, \emph{Landsknechte}, pp. 31-38.} During the interwar period, Georges Sorel’s reflections on the power of myth and irrationality in politics were fully assumed by fascist movements. As I will analyse, certain groups of ex-combatants in different countries, inspired by the myth of the fascist veterans, pictured ‘their coming action as a battle in which their cause [was] certain to triumph’.\footnote{Georges Sorel, \emph{Reflections on Violence}, trans. by T. E. Hulme, London, 1915, p. 22.}

The concept of ‘fascist model’ serves to understand the last period of the relationship between veterans and fascism. As a result of a primary symbolic appropriation and a framing process, the transnational stereotype of the fascist veteran and then the myth of the fascist veterans facilitated the consolidation of Italian Fascism. The myth and the stereotype also fuelled the circulation of fascism throughout Europe by means of cultural transfers, and through the personal contacts between veterans. Transnational history has normally focused on the circulation of migrants and on the contacts between individuals, experts’ communities or political elites. Whilst taking into account these perspectives, we will also be able to understand how the fascist ideology and its political practice travelled throughout interwar Europe, encapsulated in stereotypes, myths and political models. In fact, during the 1930s, it is possible to talk, about a ‘fascist model’ of veteran politics that was transferred to other countries through a process of political communication. This fascist model included not only a set of changing discourses and representations of the war veteran, but also a particular organizational structure that evolved over time. Taking these characteristics into
consideration, I will show how the Third Reich veteran organizations and discourses were deeply rooted in the Italian fascist model, whilst presenting a number of particular characteristics. I will also analyse how other groups in France and Spain adopted this fascist model during the second half of the 1930s. The fascist model of veteran politics, as we will see, was a manifestation of the highly complex and versatile phenomenon of transnational fascism. By observing the historical relationship between veterans and fascism in inter-war Europe, we can come to grips with the transnational circulation and multidirectional transfer of fascism.

Sources
This dissertation draws on a strong empirical basis. I have used both archival and contemporary published sources —such as newspapers and books— from different countries, especially Italy, Germany, France and Spain. Other historians have already consulted most of this material. However, I have analysed these records from new points of view —searching for traces of the often-neglected transnational dimension—, seeking a different kind of information. In addition, I have retrieved a set of published sources —particularly in Italy— that had never been systematically used before.

As I am concerned with political discourse and self-representation, the principle type of evidence in this dissertation comes from the fascist and the veteran press of different countries. In order to analyse the fascist discourse on veterans, I have fully reviewed the microfilmed collection of the fascist Il Popolo d’Italia (Milan) between 1916 and 1940, and a great part of the Munich and Berlin editions of the national-socialist Völkischer Beobachter between 1920 and 1939. In Italy, ex-combatants and the war disabled published a great number of bulletins and papers, particularly during 1919-1922;\textsuperscript{116} I have carefully analysed the most important of them (I combattenti, Il bollettino, etc.), and systematically reviewed many other provincial newspapers. Most of them were progressively transformed into fascist organs, particularly after 1925. Furthermore, in order to reconstruct the fascist political views on the veteran’s issues, I have analysed a number of important Italian fascist newspapers and reviews, such as Il Fascio, Critica fascista, Roma fascista or Cremona Nuova, to name but four. Since 1929, the fascist veteran press in Italy was reduced to a few publications; most importantly, I have retrieved L’Italia Grigio-Verde, later named L’Italia combattente,

\textsuperscript{116} See Giovanni Sabbatucci, La stampa del combattentismo (1918-1925), Bologna, Cappelli, 1980.
which were official organs of the fascist ANC. For the German case, I have focused on the extreme-right veteran review *Der Stahlhelm*, but eventually looked for information in other German veteran newspapers, and right-wing and national-socialist journals. Above all, I have examined the publications of the *Nationalsozialistische Kriegsopferversorgung*. In the case of France, I have employed the organs of the two most important veteran associations, *La Voix du Combattant* (Union Nationale des Combattants) and *La France Mutilée* (Union Fédérale); furthermore, I have studied relevant fascist league’s journals, for example the Faisceau’s *Le Nouveau Siècle*, and the Croix de Feu’s *Le Flambeau*. After June 1940, Vichy promoted the publication of various journals for war veterans, such as *La Légion*. During the interwar years, international veteran organizations also published bulletins, which have proved to be an interesting source of information to observe the transnational circulation of the fascist veterans’ discursive and organizational model. As for Spain, I have analysed the main journal of the fascist party FET-JONS, *Arriba*. All this material reveals the extensive impact of fascist veteran politics during the European interwar period.

I have not only examined veteran and fascist periodical publications, but also other varieties of published sources —such as memoirs, reports, etc.— and specially the general press of different European countries. For this task, several digitalized on-line libraries have been an extremely useful tool. Gallica, the free-access digital library of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, provides access to most of the main French newspapers of the interwar period, offering the possibility of searching for particular keywords across the vast breadth of the contemporary press. The Biblioteca Digital Hispánica (Biblioteca Nacional de España) also facilitates this kind of digital research for hundreds of Spanish publications of the 1920s and 1930s. In Austria, the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek runs ANNO, a digital archive of Austrian newspapers. In Germany, the Staatsbibliothek (Berlin) offers access to a few digitalized historical newspapers of the 1919-1940 period, although no text search is possible. In Italy, however, there is only one important paper fully digitalized on-line: *La Stampa*. I have reviewed some others —such as the socialist *Avanti!*— in their microfilmed or printed version, and there are several minor digitalized libraries where some Italian newspapers and reviews of the interwar period are available. In any case, the possibility of consulting a huge amount of digitalized text has made this dissertation qualitatively different from any other work that might have been finished, say, ten years ago, when most of these digital tools and resources did not exist.
The situation with archival documentation is very different. The quantity of digitalized sources from national archives is negligible. Therefore, I have visited, in the different countries, those archives that conserve useful records for the study of fascist movements and regimes, and inter-war veterans organizations. Many other historians have previously seen most of this material. The records held by the Archivio Centrale dello Stato (Rome) are, since the 1960s, the indispensable archive for historians of Italian Fascism, and hence for this dissertation as well. In Germany, the Bundesarchiv (Berlin) contains precious and abundant material from the Stahlhelm and the NSDAP archives. In France, the Archives Nationales (Paris) hold records of invaluable utility for research into history of fascism in France. And in Spain, the Archivo General de la Administración (Alcalá de Henares, Madrid) preserves documents from the party FET-JONS and its veteran organization. Apart from visiting these key institutions, I have accessed the historical archives of the Foreign Affairs Ministry in Italy —the Archivio Storico Diplomatico, Ministero degli Affari Esteri (Rome)—, and its French equivalent —the Archives Diplomatiques (La Courneuve). Evidence drawn from all these archives will allow me to explain not only the Italian fascistization of the war veterans’ discourses and organizations, but also the overall process of transnational fascistization of veteran politics in Western Europe, including the circulation of ideas, international contacts and transfers.

Structure

The explanation of the structure of this dissertation goes beyond the mere exposition of the chapters’ content. At a glance, the table of contents will show that I have emphasized the chronological over the thematic perspective. This is not the result of any predilection for a traditional, narrative way of writing history. Rather, the stress on chronology is intended to fully insert the factor of time into my historical analysis. The deep forces of History can be also understood through the exposition of the intricate and transnationally-interrelated evolution of events. In my opinion, this choice does not mean disregarding the question of why things happened, while preferring to explain how they happened.117 As I shall show with this dissertation, showing how things happened can provide a convincing explanation of why they happened. Historical events, such as, say, 1917 Mussolini’s conception of the war veterans as the harbingers of a new

ideology, cannot be fully understood without taking into account a context marked by important simultaneously-occurring events. This interconnectedness is better unravelled by taking chronology into account.

Furthermore, transnational history cannot be done without stressing the factor of time. Sometimes, due to the fairly rapid circulation of ideas, words and persons that already characterized human civilization by the Great War era —thanks to inventions such as the telephone or the plane—, if we had no method to establish a chronology, it would be impossible to discern when and in which direction a cultural transfer took place. As an ideology, fascism was born in Italy between 1917 and 1919; it was the result of the confluence of different ideas within a specific context. Only by stressing chronology can we demonstrate that the emergence of other fascist phenomena in Europe was mainly the outcome of a process of political communication in which the veterans —I insist— had a key role.

Having said that, the structure of the dissertation is uncomplicated. There are three parts, each composed of two chapters. The first part deals with the beginning of the transnational relationship between veterans and fascism; the first chapter examines the origins of this link during the Great War and its aftermath; the second chapter focuses on Italy to show how Italian Fascism was constructed on that basis, making deep impact abroad. The second part examines the 1920s; chapter three analyses the fascistization of veteran politics in Italy, and chapter four shows how the mythical link between veterans and fascism circulated in Europe contributing to the emergence of other fascist movements. The third part deals with the 1930s; chapter five explains the highly complex process of entanglement of the fascist veteran politics in Western Europe, and chapter six discusses the final events of the transnational relationship between veterans and fascism, namely new wars and the imposition of dictatorships in Spain and France. In the conclusions of this dissertation, it will be interesting to discuss, finally, if a new definition of fascism may stem from the innovative field of transnational history.
Part I
Fascism and Veterans after the Great War

This section analyses the origins of fascism, by investigating why and how a link between Italian Fascism and the symbol of the war veterans was established. After discussing the origins of the ideological relationship between fascism and veterans, I turn to the concepts of ‘symbolic appropriation’, ‘transnational stereotype’ and ‘myth’, in order to explain the symbolic and practical role of war veterans in the rise, the seizure of power, and the early transnationalization of Italian Fascism.
Chapter 1
The Great War Veterans and the Origins of Fascism (1914-1919)

This chapter examines the origins of the historical relationship between veterans and fascism, starting with the history of the Italian participation in the Great War. The primary origin of both European ‘generic’ fascism and Italian Fascism lay in the First World War, which was simultaneously a global and European event and a cluster of disparate national experiences. If we consider the First World War as a seminal event that brought an epoch to an end whilst opening a new era, the participation of Italy in the Great War was not radically different to that of other belligerent countries. However, if we try to understand the particular outcome of war in the Italian postwar period, it is necessary to take into account some particularities of the Italian involvement in the European conflict. As the war experience was fundamental for many future fascists, Mussolini’s trials and tribulations during the First World War were determinant in the process of ideological genesis of the fascist movement. I will address this issue in the first section. I will show how, in the critical context of 1917, while the Bolshevik revolution was taking place in Russia, and Italy suffered a grave military setback at Caporetto, Mussolini began to conceive a new ideology in which the war veterans would play a crucial role.

The birth of Fascism and its early relations with the ex-soldiers of the Great War were not an isolated Italian phenomenon. The deep postwar crisis that affected the country was part of a wider trend. Italy, like all the European nation-states, experienced multiple manifestations of social unrest, economic distress, political instability and varying degrees of cultural ferment. Paramilitarism and the formation of veteran movements were transnational consequences of the First World War. In the second section, therefore, I will offer an analytical overview of the background into which the Italian case must be inserted. By focusing on international events of the year 1919, I will portray the European context in which the birth of Fascism must be understood, including the appearance of veteran organizations and paramilitary movements. The interconnectedness of all these historical forces must be kept in mind, since the historical evolution and deepening of the connection between veterans and fascism can only be explained on that basis.

The two last sections of this chapter focus on the Italian postwar experience, for I argue that the link between fascism and veterans was originally established in Italy. In
Italy, the emergence of veterans’ associations had certain distinguishing characteristics, as the Italian Great War experience had been, to some extent, particular. This set of differentiated characteristics interplayed with the perception of momentous European events, such as those of the central European counterrevolution. Transnational factors, therefore, explain the appearance of the original fascist movement in Italy, as well as the fascists’ drive to absorb veterans into their ranks. The long process of politicization of the Italian veterans will be analysed here as a conflictive process of symbolic appropriation, taking place above all in the discursive and ideographic realm, with transnational origins and consequences. The consolidation of a common, albeit unhistorical, perception of the veteran as an anti-Bolshevik, nationalist figure was a crucial precedent for the future symbolic fusion of war veterans and Fascism.

**The Italian First World War experience**

The social and intellectual climate that fermented in the European societies before the outbreak of the war, as well as the participation in the system of international alliances among European states, were also features in Italy. In the country there were representatives of the new bellicose nationalism, linked to the French revolutionary rightist ideology typical of the years previous to the war.\(^1\) However, despite its uneasy Triple Alliance with Germany and Austria-Hungary, Italy did not immediately join the slaughter in August 1914: the expectations of those Italians who saw the war as the catalyst for a new and better world remained temporary unfulfilled. If one wants to understand why Fascism was born in Italy, and why veterans were related to this birth, the inquiry should start at this point.

The roots of Fascism lay in the Italian interventionist movement. While the young volunteers and soldiers of Germany, France and Britain started to kill each other along the European Western front, in Italy writers like Giuseppe Prezzolini and Giovanni Papini through the review *La Voce* and poets like Gabriele D’Annunzio and Filippo Tommaso Marinetti spurred on the Italian ‘war generation’, attributing an existential meaning to war.\(^2\) These apostles of intervention, together with young politicians, revolutionaries and republicans advocated joining the war on the side of France and Britain. Most Italian intellectuals agreed with this belligerent stance, yet for

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different reasons. Some saw the war as a historical opportunity to complete the Risorgimento and Italian unity, others as the long awaited chance to redeem the proletariat and overthrow the old political elites. War—they believed—would be a palingenetic experience for the Italian nation. Diverse groupings and organizations from the nationalist far right to the revolutionary left converged in interventionism, a movement that acquired antidemocratic traits. Although all this agitation would be presented as successfully imposing its will against the decadent bourgeois nation during the ‘radiant days’ (radiose giornate) of May 1915, the decision to enter the war on the Entente side had been carefully negotiated; the Italian government had secretly reached an agreement with the British, the French and the Russians in the Pact of London.\(^3\)

A significant particularity of the Italian Great War experience was the social and political division that intervention provoked, especially within the socialist party. The fact that Italy would receive territories of Tirol and Dalmatia—among others—in case of victory was of no interest to the massive majority of the Italian population, whose feelings were, in general, utterly opposed to war. Whereas the interventionists were usually young middle-class educated men, the working class reasonably feared that the war would bring scarcity and worse living conditions. The national truce of the ‘Sacred Union’ that took place in France and Germany in 1914, involving the socialists of these countries to support the war effort, did not exist in Italy. In France and Germany, the antimilitarist socialists were marginalized; Jean Jaurès was soon assassinated, and Karl Liebknecht would be expelled from the German Socialist Party. In contrast, antimilitarism and internationalism prevailed in Italian socialism, where it was the interventionists who were the dissidents. Thus, if the so-called ‘Spirit of 1914’ was a myth in Germany,\(^4\) May 1915 was not a time of enthusiasm and voluntary enlistment across Italian society. There was no consensus throughout Italy about entering the war. Nevertheless, the political left was not a firm and univocal pacifist, internationalist and neutralist block. Socialists like Leonida Bissolati and Gaetano Salvemini, as representatives of democratic interventionism, seeking to fight Germanic imperialism, advocated Italian entry to war.


Benito Mussolini’s attitude at this time must be understood in the context of interventionism. He had been a revolutionary socialist and editor since 1912 of the socialist newspaper Avanti! in Milan. His political ideas had sat uncomfortably with socialist orthodoxy, but it would be with the interventionist movement and the war that his passage towards the political right took place. Mussolini, coherently with his particular version of the revolutionary ideology, and galvanized by his readings of the intellectuals of La Voce, supported intervention in the autumn of 1914. He founded his own interventionist paper —Il Popolo d’Italia. Quotidiano socialista—, and broke with the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) in November. Later on, in January 1915, he participated in the founding meeting of the Fasci d’azione rivoluzionaria, a group that strived for a revolutionary intervention. After repeated bitter confrontations with the socialists in the pages of his newspaper, Mussolini welcomed the declaration of war and was called-up by the Italian army as a simple conscript at the end of August 1915. Like him, many other young men followed similar paths towards the war experience; some volunteering, but the overwhelming majority obliged to serve by conscription.

The Italian army of the First World War recruited almost six million people who had to be persuaded to fight and make sacrifices in the name of the nation. Peasants composed 45% of the army, whereas industrial workers escaped frontline service more often. Extremely hierarchical relationships between soldiers and officers marked military life. Officers and junior officers typically came from a middle-class background and constituted a military elite of around 250,000 men; at least 200,000 of whom were not professional military men. Although the figure of the peasant soldier (contadino soldato) was cultivated in the propaganda as a model of obedience, devotion and resignation, this myth, developed by middle-class officers, contrasted with the harsh realities of the front. Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) and soldiers often shared the risks and the horrors of the muddy and snowy trenches; therefore, the perceptions, discourses and expectations of both NCOs and the unranked were similar, and divergent with those of the officers. Severe discipline was applied to recruits in cases of desertion.

or cowardice. During the first years of war, there was no consensus about the war effort among Italians, although the socialists adopted an ambiguous position, expressed in the motto ‘neither support, nor sabotage’ (né aderire, né sabotare). The struggle against the Austro-Hungarian forces seemed pointless for many men exasperated by the minuscule but exhausting front-line advances and retreats, in the region of the Alps, along the river Piave, on Mount Grappa, across the rocky plateau of the Carso, or in the repetitive battles of the river Isonzo. It was on this river that Mussolini had his own baptism as a soldier.

How did Mussolini’s interest in the combatants as future political actors materialize? His belief in war as a revolutionary event was already clear in 1914, but his faith in the soldiers and veterans as political agents would mature over time. In reality, although the war experience conferred the aura of a warrior on Mussolini, his combat record was far from heroic. He spent a long time hospitalized in the rearguard, and saw his last action in February 1917 when he was accidentally wounded. Yet, although he could not fulfil his desire of becoming a junior officer because of his socialist past, Mussolini identified himself with the officers, and the junior officers became the main readers and contributors to his newspaper. His nationalist commitment to attain Italian territorial demands pushed him to exalt the front soldiers as the spearhead of the war effort. Therefore, in December 1916, he argued that the front soldiers—in contrast with the pacifist feelings of the Italians on the home-front—were reluctant to accept an agreed peace with the Germans. Moreover, he wrote that he was witnessing the birth in the trenches of a new and better elite that would govern Italy in the future: the ‘trenchocracy’ (trincerocrazia). However great his enthusiasm for the trench soldiers may have been, after February 1917, he definitively returned to Milan as a journalist and editor of Il Popolo d’Italia. It would be later, during the critical year 1917, when Mussolini’s ideology underwent a crucial turn.

The revolutionary process in Russia was the first and most consequential factor of Mussolini’s evolution towards a new ideology that would espouse the future veterans as champions. When the Russian revolution of February 1917 took place, the interventionists of Il Popolo d’Italia believed that the alleged revolutionary nature of

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8 See Mussolini’s war diary, published in several chapters in *Il Popolo d’Italia* during the war, later collected by Edouardo and Duilio Susmel (eds.), *Opera Omnia di Benito Mussolini*, Volume XXIV, La Fenice, Firenze, 1961, pp. 1-113.

the war was giving positive results. But soon they feared that the revolution could bring the withdrawal of Russia from the war. Mussolini abhorred such a possibility, since this ‘treason’ would be detrimental to Italy and the allied countries, and also — more importantly — because the outcome of an agreed peace in Russia as the result of the revolution would severely contradict his own interpretation of the revolutionary nature of war. *Il Popolo d’Italia* insisted that the war was revolutionary; the Russian front soldiers, especially the young officers, backed the revolution; but Russians must carry on the war until victory. In July 1917, Mussolini was euphoric because Russian soldiers were advancing against the Germans, and he supported the possibility of a Kerensky dictatorship. Mussolini’s inclination clearly was towards continuing war at all cost, so he subordinated any social improvement for the population — including the masses of soldiers — to the superior interests of the war effort and the nation. When the last Russian offensive failed due to the soldiers’ lack of enthusiasm to fight, he held the Bolshevik agitators responsible for it. In general, for the interventionist bourgeoisie, the bad turn taken by the revolution in Russia offered a worrisome example of what could happen in Italy. This parallel was extremely present in the minds of many like Mussolini when the Italian army, after years of brutal struggle, nearly collapsed in the autumn of 1917. The twelfth battle of the Isonzo, the so-called disaster of Caporetto, was a traumatic defeat that threw the Italian army and society into crisis.

Caporetto was the second factor that, combined with the ongoing Russian revolution, drove Mussolini to designate the veterans as the harbingers of a new emergent ideology. It is important to realise that when this massive retreat happened — between October and November 1917 — not only were other belligerent armies like the French experiencing problems of mutinies and weariness among the troops, but also in Russia a profound second revolution was taking place. The Bolsheviks had succeeded in gaining the allegiance of Russian soldiers who, enthusiastic about peace, were the protagonists of a revolution at the front. Meanwhile, in Italy, the divisions among

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10 *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 19 March 1917; 4 April 1917.
11 *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 13 April 1917.
12 *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 15 April 1917; 5 May 1917.
socialists became more acute, shocked as they were by both the Russian events and the invasion of national territory. The Italian socialists, scrutinized through the lens of the Russian example, were blamed for debilitating the morale of the troops and for having provoked the disaster at Caporetto. General Cadorna, who scapegoated the Italian socialists for the debacle, was, nevertheless, substituted by General Armando Diaz as the new Chief of General Staff. But this change would not be enough to renew the Italian war effort, nor would it stop anti-socialist discourse. At any rate, this context not only influenced Mussolini’s ideological evolution, but also provoked a set of transformations that lay the foundations for the political manipulation of the symbol of the war veteran.

After Caporetto, an array of urgent measures were taken in order to motivate the soldiers once more, maintaining their discipline and commitment to the national cause; this effort would affect the mentalities and expectations of the future war veterans.\(^{17}\) Now, the military sought a new model soldier, who should be a motivated combatant rather than just an obedient serviceman.\(^{18}\) To achieve this objective, the authorities drew extensively on a persuasive patriotic and nationalistic propaganda that demonized the enemy and exalted aggression. These discourses implied making extensive promises to the combating soldiers. It was said that the Fatherland was enormously indebted to its saviours. Propagandists depicted a future of absolute moral recognition from the entire society. They promised ‘love’, ‘respect’, ‘honour’ to the combatants. ‘The soldier will be the first also in rights’, it was stated. Propaganda predicted that ‘the returning soldiers will see everyone happily doff their hats to them’.\(^{19}\) These promises may have helped to improve the fighting spirit of the front soldiers, but surely contributed to creating unrealistic expectations for their homecoming too.

The ideal of a new self-motivated soldier found expression in the new assault troops: the *arditi*. The army intensely developed these units, whose offensive actions would be sudden and extremely violent, even in hand-to-hand combat. The tough *arditi* became a differentiated elite of soldiers who enjoyed high morale and certain concrete privileges (better food, higher pay, more comfort, and more extensive rest periods). The limited *arditi* assault units (*reparti di assalto*) numbered approximately 35,000 members. They equalled the battalions of the *alpini* in prestige and reliability on the


\(^{18}\) Marco Mondini, *La politica delle armi*, p. 43.

\(^{19}\) (‘amaro’, ‘rispetto’, ‘omaggio’, ‘il soldato sarà primo anche nei diritti’, ‘il reduce vedrà il capo di ognuno scorprirsi al suo passaggio’) *Il giornale del soldato* (Milano), 4 November 1917.
battlefield, even though their contribution to the war operations cannot be considered decisive. The main significance of the *arditi* was that they represented a new kind of war mentality, elitist, violent and intransigent; thus intersecting with the wishes of intellectuals like the futurists, who stressed action and violence as means to an end.\(^{20}\)

From 1917 on, while the Russian revolution evolved, remobilizing measures to enhance the soldiers’ morale were needed in all belligerent nations,\(^{21}\) and Italy was no exception. It is true that, to some extent, the patriotic discourses had also permeated the lower social classes of countries participating in the war, providing them with a sense of honour to confront a probable death on the battlefields, but the average soldier experienced the war as an unwanted imposition.\(^{22}\) In order to generate consent among the masses of soldiers and their families, social assistance and promises of material rewards intertwined with state propaganda. In Italy, home-front committees, and new trench newspapers expanded the spirit of interventionism, as well as hatred against shirkers, draft dodgers (*emboscati*), opportunists (*profittatori*), pacifists, and defeatists.\(^{23}\) The authorities were profoundly worried regarding the events in Russia, where soldiers fuelled the revolution by joining workers’ and soldiers’ councils (Soviets).

Mussolini was an observer of all these developments. In November 1917, when Georges Clemenceau was appointed Prime Minister in France, Mussolini praised the energetic attitude of the French statesman, who was committed to a greater national war effort. According to Mussolini, the democratic way of waging war would ‘fatally’ lead—as in Russia—‘to the regime of the Soviets, to committees of workers and soldiers, and to soldiers’ assemblies that would debate and reject the generals’ strategy plans’.\(^{24}\)

On 20 November 1917, while discussing the needs of the front soldiers, Clemenceau stated that ‘they have rights over us’ (*ils ont des droits sur nous*); a sentence that

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became famous among French soldiers and veterans, and even generated a sense of superiority among them. Meanwhile, in Italy, Mussolini was enthusiastic about the first legislative initiatives to create a supportive fund for the combatants’ families. Since peasant workers formed the bulk of the Italian army, the Italian state promised land to those who were fighting at the front. This measure had already been promoted by the Kingdom of Romania, which had entered the war belatedly on the Allies’ side. An agrarian reform in Romania would create a greater number of landowners. It is interesting to note that the Romanian King made this promise in the spring of 1917—at a time when the revolution had just toppled the Tsar in Russia. Nevertheless, it probably contributed to improving the performance of the Romanian rank and file on the battlefield for the rest of the war. In Italy, Mussolini’s newspaper relayed and applauded this decision, asserting that the Romanian soldiers would then combat with overwhelming enthusiasm.

In Italy, December 1917, two main measures tackled the problem of reinforcing the soldiers’ motivation to fight. Firstly, the Orlando government issued a decree establishing the Opera Nazionale Combattenti (ONC). This institution addressed the endemic problems of Italian agriculture and the development of the South (Mezzogiorno), as well as the reintegration of soldiers after the war. The ONC transformed the old motto ‘land to the peasants’ (la terra ai contadini) into the catchphrase ‘land to the combatants’ (la terra ai combattenti), but detailed regulations would not be published until January 1919. Also in December 1917, the minister of the Treasury Francesco Saverio Nitti created free insurance policies for the soldiers (with a value of 500 Lira) and junior officers (1000 Lira) to be paid either in case of the serviceman’s death from war-related injuries/illness, or after the war if the money was invested in productive activities. Even more advantageous policies were later created for officers (1,500 and 5,000 Lira). The bigger reward given to the higher ranks was justified as a measure to encourage the combat performance of the lower ranks, since the latter would be encouraged to reach the better-rewarded ranks.

Most importantly, as happened in other countries during 1917, the Italian state resolutely approached the problem of the disabled soldiers, and this early attention

28 Il giornale del soldato, 23 December 1917.
succeeded in maintaining the veterans’ loyalty to the war effort. As soon as seriously-wounded men started crowding the hospitals, meeting each other and complaining about their situation, the authorities put them under control. An official institution, the *Opera Nazionale Invalidi di Guerra*, took charge of the care of the war disabled in March 1917. At the same time, the mutilated veterans started to organize themselves to defend their interests. Several newspapers —especially *Il Popolo d’Italia*— reported the activities, meetings and statements of disabled veterans’ groups. The disabled set up the National Association of the War Maimed and War Wounded (*Associazione Nazionale fra Mutilati e Invalidi di Guerra* – ANMIG). This association would count on the benevolence of the authorities, since it adopted a patriotic stance unconnected with the socialists or any other party. In fact, the ANMIG became the interlocutor of the government in regard to pensions. In the period of Caporetto, other groups of disabled soldiers went further in their support to the war effort; they created Committees of Action (*Comitati di Azione fra mutilati, invalidi e feriti di guerra*) in line with the interventionists, showing an extreme zeal in persecuting internal enemies.29 Thus, the symbol of the disabled veteran acquired meanings that precluded the formation of the kind of socialist or democratically-oriented disabled veterans’ organizations that existed in France or Germany.30

During 1917, discourses and representations around the disabled veterans in *Il Popolo d’Italia* foreshadowed the mythic role that the war veterans would play in Fascism. In the spring of 1917, the newspaper argued that the veterans should not only be offered pensions and assistance, but also the honour and respect of the fatherland. Furthermore, whereas it was admitted that the state had acquired duties in relation to the disabled, it was said that these men were not exempted from the obligation of contributing productively to the nation —that veterans were not allowed to be ‘parasites’. The interventionists were enthusiastic about the disabled veterans’ commitment to the war effort.31 The ideal that these patriotic disabled veterans represented thus became an element of the proto-fascist worldview of Mussolini.

Mussolini’s article ‘*Trincerocrazia*’ in *Il Popolo d’Italia* outlined the mythic role that veterans would have in the ideology of early Fascism. It is crucial to take into

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account the context in which Mussolini wrote that text. It happened in December 1917, after Caporetto, when zones of northern Italy still remained under enemy occupation. The ANMIG was consolidating in several cities, and groups of agitated disabled veterans incited the fight against external and internal enemies through their newspapers. But sacrifices were also engendering prospects for the future. For example, in *La Voce dei Reduci*, a wounded soldier wrote that, after the war, if he would go on to become a Minister, he would uphold the rights of those who were fighting: ‘new rights of new people’. Mussolini most probably read this publication. Inspired by this spirit he picked up the notion of *trincerocrazia*. This concept now allowed him to delineate the role that he attributed to the veterans. Mussolini stated that a ‘new aristocracy’ —a concept formerly invented by Prezzolini— was being formed in the trenches: ‘Trenchocracy is the aristocracy of the trench. It is the aristocracy of tomorrow’. According to him, Italy was going towards a division between those who had fought and those who had not —the idea of two Italies was another Prezzolinian creation—, and he pointed out as evidence the disabled soldiers’ activities. The *mutilati* were the vanguard of the great army that would soon return home. Mussolini stated that the new spirit of the returnees would grant a new meaning to words now devoid of sense, like democracy or liberalism. The veterans —depicted as workers who returned from the furrows of the trenches to the furrows of the land— would synthesise the notions of class and nation, thereby producing a kind of ‘anti-marxist’ and ‘national’ socialism.

Historians have pointed to the article *Trincerocrazia* as the first clear evidence of Mussolini’s abandonment of socialism. This turn to the right has been explained as a consequence of Caporetto, and also as the result of Mussolini’s perception that the war had profoundly changed the country whilst transforming the front soldiers into a completely new political force for the postwar period. However, in my opinion, *Trincerocrazia* must be considered as more of a self-fulfilling prophecy, than as an accurate, clairvoyant prediction of the future. The article was, indeed, an early manifestation of fascist ideology, yet, at the same time, it was the revelation of a

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32 (‘diritti nuovi di gente nuova’) *La Voce dei Reduci. Giornale dei mutilati e invalidi di guerra* (Bologna), 9 December 1917.
33 In fact, he mentioned the appearance of *La Voce dei Reduci* in “Trincerocrazia”.
political ambition. Mussolini was proclaiming the new style of politics that he aspired to witness; a new society in which the war veterans would play an essential role. He was clearly targeting the combatants as potential readers of his paper, and probably thinking of them as future supporters of a new political movement. At that moment, the legendary connection between veterans and Fascism was born. But why had Mussolini become so interested in mobilizing the veterans?

There was a crucial motivation. It is clear that the course of the Russian revolution since spring 1917 pushed Mussolini to position himself violently against the Italian socialists.\(^{37}\) Let us remember that Mussolini supported intervention because he believed in the revolutionary nature of war. The Russian revolution confirmed this principle, but with undesired consequences. Overwhelmingly supported by Russian front soldiers, the Bolsheviks were willing to stop the fight and make peace with the Central Powers, therefore betraying the allied countries. Having become an uncompromising nationalist, Mussolini feared this scenario. By mid-December 1917, Mussolini’s disappointment must have been total. For on the same day the *Trincerocrazia* article was published, the armistice between Russia and the Central Powers paved the way for peace negotiations in Brest-Litovsk. Thus the Russian peace destroyed the myth of the revolutionary war in which Mussolini had believed. War did lead to revolution, yes, but revolution led to the most feared consequence for the interventionists: a peace that was not a victory. When this contradiction was revealed, Mussolini chose to support war, thus rejecting socialism and focusing on the struggle for the nationalist aims. This choice required looking for a new political clientele: the war veterans. They would represent in Fascism the revolutionary, albeit nationalist, role that would reverse the ex-soldiers’ role in the Bolshevik revolution. Thus, the *Trincerocrazia* article shows the broad extent to which the conception of a new political phenomenon, Fascism, was entangled with the belief in the war veterans as a new political driving force. In a sense, the nascent fascist ideology was a strategy to ensure that war veterans, in contrast to what happened in Russia, would remain loyal to the nationalist struggle to the very end. Originating in the revolutionary wing of the Italian interventionist movement, the idyllic connection between Fascism and veterans was first catalysed by the frustrating and unexpected outcome of the Russian revolution.

Mussolini was not alone in his ideas about the war and the future role of veterans. At that time, for instance, the interventionist intellectual Agostino Lanzillo went as far as to argue that war had defeated socialism. Lanzillo had translated the work of the theorist of revolutionary syndicalism Georges Sorel into Italian. During the war, Lanzillo had served at the front, and been wounded. At this time, Lanzillo believed in the revolutionary nature of war, but despised the Russian events as a ‘revolution that masked defeat’. In his book *The Defeat of Socialism*, finished in January 1918, Lanzillo affirmed that the generations who had fought at the front would come out of the war ‘renovated’, with a ‘new mentality’, and with ‘improved individual qualities’. This human force would be a determining factor in future events. And in any case, its actions would take a ‘national sense’. According to Lanzillo, the returning soldiers would instinctively give value to (valorizzare) their sacrifice. Therefore, it would be improbable that veterans would adopt any ‘revolutionary attitude’; instead, they would ‘fight to replace the ruling class, in the name of the power and the courage they represent’. Lanzillo’s predictions might be retrospectively seen as correct. However, they should be observed as part of the same interventionist set of beliefs as Mussolini’s *trincerocrazia*. This mind-set was the blueprint of a developing political programme and strategy for the postwar period.

Thus, after Caporetto and the confirmation of the Russian ‘revolutionary’ peace, the interventionists’ identification with the fighting soldiers increased. *Il Popolo d’Italia* changed to present itself as the defender of the combatants’ rights. This shift became evident during the last phase of the war, when the polarization of Italian society became sharp, and ‘defeatists’ were persecuted as the internal enemy. As Prezzolini put it, the biggest enemy was ‘at home’, but the combatants would come back from war to ‘renovate’ the country. *Il Popolo d’Italia* called for the establishment of a dictatorship that would militarise Italian society until victory. The newspaper made space for the material claims of the ‘trenchmen’ (*trinceristi*); junior officers found in it a forum for expressing their concerns. Yet the idea of distributing expropriated land to the peasant soldiers was played down; Mussolini foresaw a very easy reintegration of two million

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42 See for example, *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 25 August 1918; 29 September 1918.
agricultural workers from the front. Finally, in August 1918, the adoption of a new subtitle —‘Journal of the combatants and producers’ (Quotidiano dei combattenti e dei produttori)— symbolized Mussolini’s definitive rejection of socialism. Now, Mussolini distinguished his notions of ‘combatants’ and ‘producers’ from the common concepts of ‘soldiers’ and ‘workers’, which were tinged with socialism. By doing so, Mussolini was constructing symbols to counteract the pervasive idea of the soldiers’ and workers’ councils of the loathed Bolshevik revolution.

There was not yet a coherent political program or fully developed ideology for the veterans, but Mussolini had sown the seeds of the fascist veteran symbol. It is not surprising that some leaders of the nascent veteran movement adopted the seductive idea of trincerocrazia. Some Italian veterans publically depicted themselves as the ‘great vanguard’ of those who would return from the front. Until the end of the war, Mussolini and Il Popolo d’Italia paid attention to the soldiers’ expectations, and advocated a rapid demobilization of most men as soon as possible. Yet Mussolini’s group was an observer of the emerging veterans’ movement rather than its promoter, and the question of the trincerocrazia remained undeveloped. After the Italian victory of Vittorio Veneto —later established as a national myth— and Armando Diaz Victory’s bulletin (Bollettino della vittoria) on 4 November, Mussolini’s enthusiastic message was that of a fully nationalistic and anti-socialist interventionist, which is exactly what he had become by virtue of the war experience. The First World War ended two weeks later. Yet there would be no real peace in many parts of the European continent.

Veterans and the aftermath of war in Western Europe

The outcome of the First World War was traumatic for both belligerent and many non-belligerent European countries. National experiences normally differed depending on the military result of the confrontation —either victory or defeat. Regardless whether they suffered defeat or not, all participants had suffered massive human losses (10 million deaths in total), and their populations emerged from the war profoundly

43 Il Popolo d’Italia, 14 May 1918.
44 Il Popolo d’Italia, 1 August 1918.
48 Il Popolo d’Italia, 4 November 1918.
transformed. Despite victory, some countries — for example Italy — went through a long and unprecedented period of social unrest and violent conflict. In the context of defeat, the dismemberment of Central Empires meant the birth of new democratic nation states, such as the German Weimar Republic. The spectre of social revolution and civil war, as was happening in Russia since 1917, was present everywhere. Historians have studied the transition from war to peace as a complex process that led to very different results for the states involved; yet the division between war and peace was anything but clear.\(^49\) In 1919, the international-relations system struggled to find a new balance of power in Versailles; and in the economic sphere, the shift from a ‘total war’ to a peace economy provoked turbulence. Returning to the pre-1914 order was impossible. The ordeal of demobilizing millions of ex-combatants marked the history of the belligerent nations. All these countries witnessed the emergence of veteran associations. During the war, disabled veterans had created organizations; now, very politically diverse veteran groups mushroomed. The issue of reintegrating veterans was an unavoidable task that concerned politicians and civil society. The veterans stood out as a new actor in the public sphere, one impossible to ignore after the kind of experience they had endured in the name of the nation. Many returned home hoping to transform the promises they had heard during the war into reality.

In the postwar period, cultural demobilization was a necessary task for countries aspiring to return to normality after a ‘total’ war experience.\(^50\) This process, which in general implied the development of an appropriate memory of the war and the dead,\(^51\) was crucial for reintegrating war veterans, as well as to pacify the most aggressive warmongers in every country. The results of this common endeavour were once again disparate depending on countries, regions, social or age groups, and gender. To some extent, the cultural dynamic of the war lasted beyond its end; nations responded in different ways to the collective trauma of war.\(^52\) This permeability between wartime and postwar cultures is clearly evident if we look at soldiers’ mentalities during the long process of finishing the war: victorious French soldiers of the First World War held on


\(^50\) John Horne (dir.), ‘Démobilisations culturelles après la Grande Guerre’.


\(^52\) Alan Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction*. 
to the set of inculcated violent discourses and representations of the German enemy long after the armistice, even though the Germans had already been vanquished.\(^{53}\)

The issue of veterans’ reintegration and the problematic cultural demobilization must be linked with the fact that paramilitarism flourished across Europe in the aftermath of the First World War.\(^{54}\) Violence persisted in several countries, especially in Eastern and Central Europe, where the emergence of armed ‘home guards’ correlated with the perception of a Bolshevik threat. Ex-soldiers usually joined these quasi-military formations. But the emergence of civic guards occurred even in countries that had not fought in the Great War, like Spain.\(^{55}\) This widespread reaction was therefore transnational; it went beyond national boundaries and took place independent of defeat, victory or participation in the First World War.\(^{56}\) This was the wider European background into which the fascist movement was born. In this section, I shall approach the contextual elements that are crucial to understand how and why a linkage between Fascism and war veterans was established in Italy, to be later extended to other countries. I shall also examine the emergence of veteran organizations that became important historical actors in the following years, in relation to Fascism.

**Germany**

Germany was a dramatic and unique case due to its weight in both Western and Central Europe, its defeat in the Great War, and its Revolution, all of them having far-reaching consequences on the Continent. The aftermath of war in Germany was marked by a complex of social, political, economic and psychological processes.\(^{57}\) The uneven and chaotic return of the German soldiers, aside from creating a serious economic problem, conditioned the trajectory of the German Revolution. After the Kaiser’s abdication and escape, soldiers’ councils (*Soldatenräte*) quickly proliferated across Germany, with soldiers waving red flags and wearing red armbands.\(^{58}\) Power fell to the Social Democrats. Many officers were appalled as the imperial army crumbled; they often

\(^{53}\) Bruno Cabanes, *La Victoire endeuillée*.

\(^{54}\) Robert Gerwarth and John Horne (eds.), *War in Peace*.

\(^{55}\) Eduardo González Calleja and Fernando del Rey, *La defensa armada contra la revolución*.


\(^{57}\) Richard Bessel, *Germany after the First World War*.

ripped off their own rank badges; in some cases they were publically humiliated.\(^{59}\)

Between November and December 1918, while the Spartacus League was the driving force behind a communist insurrectionary movement, 1.5 million German front soldiers (*Frontsoldaten*, commonly called *Frontschweine*) returned home. Although the population normally welcomed them, they eventually employed violence against the revolutionaries, for example during the violent clashes in Berlin on 24 December 1918. Many of the revolutionaries were formerly demobilized veterans, rear-guard soldiers — called *Etappenschweine* —, and rebel sailors. In order to restore internal ‘tranquillity and order’ (*Ruhe und Ordnung*), to repress the revolution, and to defend the Eastern borders, the social democratic government promoted the creation of mercenary units: the Free Corps (*Freikorps*).  

The ruthless and bloody mentality of these ultra-violent paramilitaries was firmly grounded in the imagery of the war.\(^{60}\) In the beginning, the bulk of their membership came from the front soldiers. Their combatant methods were employed against civilians, in a context of extreme anxiety and fear. In Berlin, *Freikorps* volunteers participated in the assault of the socialist newspaper *Vorwärts* — occupied by the revolutionary rebels— and ruthlessly killed the Spartacist leaders Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg on 15 January 1919.\(^{61}\)

These German events are of the utmost importance to comprehend the Italian context in which the fascist movement would be born and to connect its history with the war veterans. The shocking news of the fate of the Spartacist insurrection in Berlin soon crossed borders. In Italy, the socialist *Avanti!* announced that, in Germany, the ‘militarist danger’ had been reawakened with the repression; the paper reproduced Liebknecht’s last message, which recognised that the revolutionaries had been abandoned ‘by the sailors and soldiers’.\(^{62}\) The rumours about the gruesome end of the German Communist Party leaders were confirmed. And soldiers returning from the


\(^{60}\) Klaus Theweleit, Männerphantasien, Frankfurt am Main, Verlag Roter Stern, 1977-1978.


front, or governmental troops as they were still called, had crushed the communist
insurrection. Seemingly, the Russian revolutionary events were not to be replayed.

For Mussolini, what occurred in Germany was particularly meaningful; it most
probably contributed to strengthening his own conception of the veterans’ political
potential. After receiving the news, he rushed to write that Leninism was an Asiatic
phenomenon unlikely to take root in the west. He also questioned what the exact role of
the old regime’s representatives, such as the army officers, had been in the anti-
Spartacist reaction. Later, Il Popolo d’Italia published news about the support of some
workers’ and soldiers’ councils for the German government. An unsigned comment on
this news highlighted the importance ‘above all’ of the soldiers’ state of mind: ‘it is a
fact, that the soldiers returned from the trenches do not want, do not tolerate disorder.
They have lived through too much, in the tragic, terrible disorder of battles, as not to
feel disgust for the internal disorder and repugnance for civil war’. As early as January
1919, a transnational perception of the veterans as anti-revolutionary agents was being
forged, thanks to the first actions of the German Freikorps.

We should note that many rightist and nationalistic young people, students or
cadets who had not actually fought the war soon joined these anti-revolutionary
organizations; only a tiny portion of the German veterans joined them. Yet the
Freikorps military performance in the Baltic region was characterised by an intense
combat experience. The short-lived Soviet Republic of Bavaria between April and May
1919 was also crushed by the Freikorps. Subsequently, Miklós Horthy in Hungary
formed paramilitary units with the same counter-revolutionary traits of the Freikorps.
These forces smashed the Soviet Republic of Hungary, inaugurating a period of ‘White
Terror’. Having played this counter-revolutionary role, the Freikorps have been called
‘heralds of Hitler’, although these mercenary units lacked a clear or coherent political
ideology.

64 (‘Soprattutto […] È un fatto che i soldati, reduci dalle trincee, nov vogliono, non tollerano disordini.
Hanno vissuto troppo, nel tragico, terribile disordine delle battaglie, per non sentire il disgusto del
disordine interno e la ripugnanza per la guerra civile’) ‘Operai e soldati solidali con Ebert’, Il Popolo
d’Italia, 19 January 1919. The writing style of this brief article induce us to believe that its author was
Mussolini.
65 Robert G. L. Waite, Vanguard of Nazism; Nigel H. Jones, Hitler’s Heralds. The Story of the Freikorps,
Schumann, Political Violence in the Weimar Republic 1918-1933. Fight for the Streets and Fear of Civil
War, Oxford, Bergahhn Books, 2009, pp. 3-53; Mark William Jones, Violence and Politics in the German
Apart from the *Freikorps* phenomenon, other German veterans significantly contributed to the formation of conservative auto-defence groups during 1919. The *Stahlhelm* (Steel Helmet) was created by Franz Seldte in Magdeburg between November and December 1918, as one of those organizations willing to restore tranquillity and social order.\(^{66}\) While the *Stahlhelm* was exclusively a group of ‘front soldiers’ (*Bund der Frontsoldaten*), most civic guards were composed of civilians in general. In February 1919, Wolfgang Kapp, a nationalist politician in close contact with the military and the *Junkers*, was suggesting that, to counteract the imminent ‘civil war’, the wealthiest landowners of every rural district should ‘buy cars, and fill them with machineguns and hand-grenades […], with young [patriotic] people […] preferably officers or students’.\(^{67}\) The ‘civic defence’ groups (*Einwohnerwehren*) were particularly important in Bavaria. Furthermore, the conservative *Kyffhäuserbund*, an anti-socialist but allegedly apolitical veterans’ organization rooted in the tradition of Wihelmine Germany, counted on more than 2 million members.\(^{68}\)

However, some of the biggest veterans’ organizations that appeared in Germany were not paramilitary leagues, but rather welfare entities. Alongside the nationalists, stood pacifist veterans’ groups. The Peace League of Ex-Servicemen (*Friedensbund der Kriegsteilnehmer*) reached 30,000 members in 1919, although it would dissolve in 1922. A Social Democratic Reich League of Disabled War Veterans, Ex-Servicemen and War Dependants (*Reichsbund der Kriegsbeschädigten, Kriegsteilnehmer und Kriegshinterbliebenen*), founded in 1917, would reach 830,000 members in 1922. German Jewish Veterans created their own veterans’ association in February 1919, committed to defend the memory of their German patriotism during the war, and to fight anti-Semitism.\(^{69}\) The majority of German veterans did not join any political organization; ‘the wartime experiences of the veterans set limits to paramilitary mobilisation rather than underpinning it’, as Benjamin Ziemann has put it.\(^{70}\) Yet the German veterans were an active factor of the social unrest of this period. In the cities,


\(^{68}\) James M. Diehl, *Paramilitary Politics*; C. J. Elliot, ‘The Kriegervereine and the Weimar Republic’.

\(^{69}\) Ulrich Dunker, *Der Reichsbund jüdischer Frontsoldaten*; Benjamin Ziemann, *Contested Commemorations*.

\(^{70}\) Benjamin Ziemann, *War Experiences in Rural Germany*, p. 240.
demobilized soldiers agitated against the authorities for compensation for their war sacrifice. The problem posed by war veterans was part of the wider question of the war victims (Kriegsopfer) in Weimar Germany, which included a shocking number of war widows and orphans.\(^71\)

After June 1919, when the treaty of Versailles was signed and made public, the German army and many veterans perceived it as a humiliation. The treaty imposed very harsh conditions on Germany, the country that was considered to have sole responsibility for the war. In this context, the ‘stab in the back’ (Dolchstoß) myth was born: the German defeat had supposedly been provoked by a bunch of — depending on the version — disloyal saboteurs, communists or Jews, whereas the German soldiers had remained unbeaten at the front.\(^72\) The Stahlhelm became an increasingly anti-republican group; its growing members adopted the monarchist black-white-red flag, and maintained contacts with other nationalistic groupings. The implementation of the treaty entailed the substantial reduction and disarmament of the army, as well as the dissolution of Freikorps units. This measure drastically ruined the possibilities of following a military career for many young ex-soldiers who had learnt no other profession. The Weimar Constitution, promulgated in August 1919, furthered the alienation of these military sectors from the Republic. Although a set of new national symbols were introduced, breaking with the monarchist tradition, the constitution allowed soldiers to use medals and decorations won through war service. Still, the anti-revolutionary military despised the new uniforms and flags. Within months, both officers and soldiers had become united in their opposition to the government.\(^73\)

In was in this context of the chaotic demobilization, revolutionary and counterrevolutionary agitation, dramatic political transformations and violence that the very first Nazi organisation emerged. In Munich, January 1919, Anton Drexler’s created the German Workers’ Party (Deutsche Arbeiterpartei). In October 1919, an embittered and disturbed war veteran, called Adolf Hitler, introduced himself as a Frontsoldat (though he had in fact been an Etappenschwein during most of the war) and applied to join the party.\(^74\) In 1920, the party changed its name to the National Socialist German Workers’ Party (Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei - NSDAP). Hitler, who

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\(^71\) Robert Weldon Whalen, Bitter Wounds; Adam R. Seipp, The Ordeal of Peace.

\(^72\) Boris Barth, Dolchstoßlegenden.


had served as an army propagandist giving anti-Bolshevik talks to the soldiers, started a political career. The chief concern in his mind was the purportedly pernicious influence of the capitalist, Anglo-American Jewry, who had imposed the humiliating peace treaty. Yet the NSDAP’s first programme did not contain a word about war veterans; its main characteristics were anti-Semitism and völkisch nationalism. The Nazi movement remained confined to Bavaria, and it was a distinct phenomenon to the German veteran organizations.

The reaction of army officers and anti-revolutionary volunteers against the young Republic resulted in the Kapp-Lüttwitz putsch in March 1920, which aimed to impose a military dictatorship. This attempt was prevented by the mobilization of the working class through a strike that saved the Weimar Republic, but subsequent violence between communists and right wing groups reached a peak. In this situation, there were calls for the formation of a front soldiers government (Frontsoldatenregierung) as a political option beyond the polarized ‘national’ and ‘social’ political sectors, but this project remained vague. The anti-republican threat was neutralized, though it became clear that important military and paramilitary sectors were utterly opposed to Weimar. In Bavaria, the putsch facilitated the imposition of a militarist government headed by Franz Ritter von Kahr, who remained on good terms with the paramilitary organizations, and would sponsor commemorations to honour the veterans and the fallen soldiers. Hence, Munich would become the centre of the anti-republican agitation. The Reichsbund, one of the biggest veterans’ organizations, clearly condemned the putsch, but anti-republican groups like the Stahlhelm would continue to grow and consolidate in its aftermath. Shortly after the putsch, militaristic circles were also displeased by the National Pension Law (Reichsversorgungsgesetz), promulgated in April 1920, as it meant the full demilitarization of the veterans’ and war victims’ care. Yet, the disabled were not completely satisfied with the public assistance

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78 *Vossische Zeitung* (Berlin), 18 April 1920.


and pensions they were awarded.\textsuperscript{81} The Weimar Republic was superficially consolidating, but important groups of veterans had not been fully reintegrated into the system.

All these German events, however, do not imply that German veterans were precursors of fascism; neither were they harbingers of Hitler or the Nazi movement. By 1920, certain army officers and groups of demobilized soldiers, as well as in the anti-revolutionary armed volunteers, had become the most active and flamboyant wing of the unreservedly anti-republican German extreme right.\textsuperscript{82} Nevertheless, the reactionary, defensive political projects and programmes of these groups cannot be defined as fascism. There were no plans for the transformation of the war veterans or front soldiers into a political vanguard, either. And the NSDAP was still a very small organization, struggling to gain membership and an audience, not focused on the veterans as its primary target. Finally, despite the fact that the symbol of the ex-soldier was increasingly linked to right-wing politics—thanks to the success of the Freikorps in smashing the communists—, it is clear that the German veterans did not act as a group committed to a singular political orientation—either left or right, revolution or counter-revolution. This reality of veteran diversity is also confirmed by the French example.

\textit{France}

In France, 1918 was a year of neither defeat nor revolution, but rather victory, and the history of its 6.4 million war veterans contrasted to that of the German veterans in the aftermath of war. France had been invaded by the enemy and suffered considerable destruction. While the war was still being fought, French disabled veterans were the first—as in Italy—to forward their interests, organizing associations with the aim of improving their lives through legal means. During 1919, the French veterans created a constellation of associations drawing on the associative tradition of the French Republic. The principal two veterans’ associations expanded rapidly. The republican, centrist \textit{Union Fédérale} (UF) was founded in February 1918, with Henri Pichot as its main leader. Charles Bertrand led the conservative \textit{Union Nationale des Combattants} (UNC), created in November 1918. The loyalty of these groups to the Republic contrasts with the lukewarm attitude that many German veterans’ associations displayed.

\textsuperscript{81} Deborah Cohen, \textit{The War Come Home}.
towards the Weimar Republic. But the French Republic had won a great war, and the Weimar Republic had been the outcome of defeat.

Different political sectors in France developed their own programme for the returning soldiers. The posture of the French left regarding the veterans was incarnated by the writer Henri Barbusse, who had written a best-selling novel about the war experiences of the poilus — _Le Feu_ (1917). During the war, Barbusse had claimed that the soldiers fought against nationalism, against militarism, and for the republican ideals of liberty and justice. He criticized the French warmongers, and supported the project of the League of Nations. Barbusse founded a small, communist veterans’ association, the _Association Républicaine des Anciens Combattants_ (ARAC), ready to defend the material interests of the disabled veterans. Furthermore, Barbusse intended to participate in politics, aiming to achieve social justice and international peace. At the beginning of 1919, the Italian socialists echoed these ideals. In contrast, the French anti-republican extreme right, the _Action Française_ led by Charles Maurras with men like Léon Daudet and Georges Valois among his collaborators, was, above all, interested in compensating the veterans. Their programme was fundamentally based on the idea of giving to the veterans their ‘share of the victory’ — ‘the veterans’ share’ (_la part du combattant_) — to which they held a right. This idea of the ‘veterans’ share’ had been developed since 1916 and was maintained after victory, although to make it real — it was said — the Germans should pay the reparations in full. Thus, the indemnity to the veterans should come directly ‘from the hands of the aggressor’ — Germany. In any case, during 1919, the political stance of the French veterans was far from being unambiguous: while some groups desired tougher governmental action against Bolshevism, others heralded the creation of the ‘international of the veterans’ (_l’internationale des combattants_) that would carry out the revolution.

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85 _Avanti!_, 15 January 1919.
87 _L’Action française_, 19 January 1919.
In general, apart from their growing discontent about their social and economic situation and their opposition to politicians, the French veterans commonly felt that the war had transformed them into new men with a new spirit, who should be charged with guiding the country morally. According to Antoine Prost, in the long term, the *leitmotif* of the French veterans’ movement would be the attempt to create a large unified association, apolitical and committed to the maintenance of internal and international peace.\(^8^9\) This commitment is not surprising, since the Treaty of Versailles had been very favourable to the French interests. Yet the two main associations had clear political divergences.\(^9^0\) The UNC, in contrast to the UF, distrusted the League of Nations and feared the German threat. In order to defend their interests on the Continent, the UNC created the *Fédération interaliée des anciens combattants* (FIDAC) in November 1920, with Charles Bertrand as its first president. (The UF would later create its own international entity —the *Conférence internationale des associations de mutilés et anciens combattants* —CIAMAC—, in 1925). Correspondingly, the ARAC maintained early international contacts with other leftist veteran associations. The deeply-rooted conviction that veterans constituted a group with a shared identity and shared interests quickly led to international contacts among veterans of similar ideology.

*The other allies and Spain*

To complete this picture of the early postwar period, it is necessary to mention other countries that, after the First World War, either had to deal with postwar demobilization or suffered the social and economic crisis of 1918-1921. Canada, for example, was faced with the reintegration of some 500,000 veterans, who formed associations as early as 1916. The Canadian government soon created an agency to ease the rehabilitation of the 70,000 disabled, and the veterans would start imposing some of their aspirations through the activities of their organizations.\(^9^1\) Canadian veterans sought to unify, and in 1925 they would create the Canadian Legion, which mirrored the American Legion. Likewise, in the United States, the veterans, displeased by what they encountered after returning from Europe, started to organize themselves in 1919 to protect their interests and reaffirm their identity. In the United States the veterans had traditionally been venerated civic figures; after the war, new associations became influential political

\(^8^9\) Antoine Prost, *Les anciens combattants*.

\(^9^0\) Chris Millington, *From Victory to Vichy*.

platforms that made it easier for veterans to move into traditional American politics. In both extra-European countries, Canada and the United States, veterans created active organizations as they did in Europe; however, fascist movements would not emerge to woo them, and they achieved unification more easily and integrated peacefully into the political system and the civil society.

Even in Britain something comparable happened. Already during the war, four different organizations were set up to defend the disabled veterans’ cause, obtaining some victories in their struggle. In the elections of December 1918 —the so-called khaki elections, as the khaki soldiers’ uniforms symbolized the relevance of postwar issues— the veterans’ ticket obtained poor results. Only one ex-servicemen’s representative was elected, probably because most soldiers, still not discharged, could not participate in the voting. When the demobilization took place, the returnees did not find the ‘land fit for heroes to live in’ which had been promised by Lloyd George during the electoral campaign. Soldiers rioted and veterans protested vehemently. In 1919, they created new associations, the National Union of Ex-Servicemen, and the International Union of Ex-Servicemen, although they still lacked a clear direction. At the highest point of unrest, they boycotted the national peace celebrations of July 1919. Finally, in late 1919, the government sponsored a set of measures in favour of veterans, so that the agitation decreased: the widespread fear of ‘brutalization’ was mainly unfounded. Finally, in 1921, the merger of different veterans’ groups resulted in the formation of the British Legion; under Field Marshal Earl Haig’s leadership, it would be a collaborative, prestigious and respectable organization to mediate between the veterans and the state.  

In the Iberian Peninsula, in contrast, the veterans’ issue had only an indirect impact on politics during 1919-1921. Nevertheless, Portugal and Spain experienced the turbulence of this period. Portugal had participated in the First World War on the allied side, and sent a small contingent of soldiers to the Western front. A veterans’ association formed very late, in 1921, when the League of the Great War Veterans (Liga

dos Combatentes da Grande Guerra) was created. Spain had not participated in the First World War, but its internal politics during this time were profoundly influenced by what happened on the Continent. During the war, there was an acute division between supporters of the Allies (aliadófilos), and supporters of the Central Empires (germanófilos). In 1917, serious military, social and economic disturbances pushed the country into a political crisis. The period between 1917 and 1923 in Spain was marked by social unrest, parliamentary crisis, syndicalism and violence, which were particularly destructive in Barcelona. Furthermore, armed conflict broke out once more in the Spanish protectorate of Morocco in 1919: the struggle against the tribes of the Rif led to a severe military disaster for the Spanish troops in Annual, July 1921. This scandal further undermined the fragile liberal political system, despised by the ‘Africanist’ (africanistas) officers. The Africanists, a corporatist military group forged in the Moroccan war, had a bitter rivalry with the officers of Peninsular Spain who organized military councils (Juntas) and were opposed to promotions based on combat experience. All these conflicts marked later political developments, as we will see.

However the transnational nature of the historical challenges of this period, the only Western European country in which the postwar crisis ended with the consolidation of a fascist mass movement was Italy. Italian Fascism was the first fascist movement capable of establishing a dictatorship and destroying a liberal democracy in a European country during the interwar period. Fascism appeared, as an ideology, in Italy 1919, and the Fasci di combattimento developed as a mass movement during 1920 and 1921, transforming into a political party —the Partito Nazionale Fascista (PNF)— in November 1921. As early as October 1922, after the so-called March on Rome, liberal democratic legality was smashed in Italy. Italian Fascism was the first, the original and most influential European fascist movement during the twenties, and its origins are rooted in the legacies of the First World War experience.

95 Eduardo González Calleja, El máUSER y el sufragio, pp. 11-253.
Veterans and the birth of Italian Fascism

Despite victory, 1919 was a year of deep crisis throughout Italy. After forty-one months of ‘total’ war, the country had to confront the further shock of the sudden end of the hostilities. During the first year of peace, while Europe was trying to settle down in the new context, Italy undertook the demobilization process. This task was carried out while the cost of living significantly increased; peasants began occupying land by themselves; while workers’ strikes, disturbances and protests traversed the peninsula; meanwhile the complicated international peace negotiations developed in Paris. Italian society was far from morally unified by the achievement of November 1918. The bitter confrontation between the interventionists and the pacifists, blending with the class struggle, intensified. Both fascist and veterans’ movements appeared in this year. With the prospect of demobilization, the time had come for the would-be fascists to test their predictions about the veterans. In this section, I will analyse the origins of the fascists’ engagement with the war veterans.

The Italian War Ministry dealt with the burdensome demobilization of approximately 3,700,000 front soldiers. Between November and December 1918, the oldest classes (those born between 1874 and 1884) were sent home. The demobilization of the rest of the conscripted (those born between 1885 and 1900) underwent a noticeable slowing down between January and March 1919. By this month, almost two million soldiers had recovered their civilian clothes, but the ongoing demobilization process would come to a stop between March and June, due to the tortuous peace negotiations that were taking place in Paris. The deceleration in the demobilization process, together with the problems of reintegration for ex-soldiers in the labour market, were the motives of embitterment for many veterans.

It was during the first half of 1919 that the veterans’ movement began to acquire a concrete shape, something that happened under the close observation of Mussolini and his collaborators. When the armistice came, the ANMIG issued a ‘Manifesto to the Country’ (Manifesto al paese), detailing a moral, socio-economic and political programme for the renovation of the nation, and took the initiative of creating a larger veterans’ association, which would be called Associazione Nazionale Combattenti.

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(ANC).\(^{102}\) *Il Popolo d’Italia* supported this idea, and underlined that the veterans considered every old party to be defunct; at the same time, the paper insisted that the nation should welcome those workers who returned from the front.\(^{103}\) However, it did not explicitly express agreement with the veterans’ measured, democratic and reformist program;\(^{104}\) so the newspaper soon began to outline its own policy regarding the returning veterans.

*Il Popolo d’Italia* started preparing the homecoming of the so-considered leaders of the new Italy (*I quadri della nuova Italia*), namely the officers and junior officers, who were named ‘trenchorarchs’ (*trincerarchi*) on the newspaper pages. The new concept of *trincerarchi* was an evolution of the earlier *trincerocrazia*, and seemed to have been conceived to praise those young men who had commanded troops during the war. It was said that these leaders had slowly matured during the war, acquiring the conscience of new rights, and opening their minds to new horizons. While nobody in the country seemed to defend their interests, *Il Popolo d’Italia* presented itself as the advocate of 200,000 officers, whose particular aspirations were equated with the national interest. The newspaper called on society to ‘make space for the *trincerocrazia*’. By collecting the complaints of these men, a programme demanding a fast and efficient demobilization was produced. Veterans’ aspirations were connected with the project of a Constituent Assembly (*la Costituente dei Combattenti*). As the *trincerarchi* had been the men who had led the troops to the victory (*inquadratori della vittoria*), they must be the leaders of new Italy, and for this reason it was necessary to discharge them quickly. This kind of discourse was predominantly adopted by certain officers and by *arditi*, who viewed themselves as *trincerarchi* and understood the *trincerocrazia* as a government made of veterans. For instance, Italo Balbo, in those days still a young Lieutenant of the *alpini*, was one of those veterans who wrote to *Il Popolo d’Italia*, making explicit their support for the *Costituente*. However, this *Costituente* never took place; Mussolini’s plans in line with the interventionist and nationalist groups remained unrealised.\(^{105}\)

\(^{102}\) Giovanni Sabbatucci, *I combattenti*, pp. 52-61.
\(^{103}\) *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 7 and 9 November 1918.
At this stage, the elitist arditi were the only defined veterans’ group that adhered to the Mussolini’s movement. Mussolini had enthusiastically paid tribute to the arditi during the victory celebrations organized on 10 November 1918 in Milan. He said they represented the ‘marvellous young warriors of Italy’. Spurred on by the futurist revolutionary discourse that proclaimed the ‘supremacy of the combatant’, discharged arditi were roaming uncontrolled around Milan and other northern regions, exerting violence against civilians, particularly against the socialists. In January 1919, the Italian Arditi Association (Associazione fra gli Arditi d’Italia) was created as an expression of the spirit of these assault troops. On 11 January 1919, the arditi provoked disturbances at La Scala theatre in Milan, which marked the rupture of the interventionist block. Mussolini’s group attacked those interventionists — such as Bissolati — who renounced certain territorial aspirations. Ferruccio Vecchi, one of these ex-arditi maladjusted to civil life, defined their aggressive and daring mind-set and behaviour as arditismo. The symbol of the arditi was already a prominent element of the interventionist, anti-socialist mythology.

Following its own agenda, in the first half of 1919 the veterans’ movement started to grow and expand. While discontented demobilized soldiers demonstrated in central and northern Italian cities, the ANC extended geographically, and set up a dense network of local veterans’ newspapers from provincial and local sections. The foundation of both ANC and ANMIG cells, their assemblies, and the incipient activity of social assistance was mentioned and briefly commented on Il Popolo d’Italia. Simultaneously, other veterans’ associations appeared, displaying a wide range of ideological orientations and uneven territorial presence. In Torino, the Operational Zone National Veterans Association (Associazione Nazionale Reduci Zona Operante – ANRZO) was set up with a vaguely Mazzinian programme; its members employed a revolutionary but anti-Bolshevik rhetoric. Predominating in rural and traditionally
Catholic zones like the Veneto, the National Union of War Veterans (Unione Nazionale Reduci di Guerra - UNRG), close to the new Italian Popular Party (Partito Popolare Italiano - PPI), represented the social and pacifist inclinations of the Catholic Church.\footnote{Livio Vanzetto, ‘Contadini e grande guerra in aree campione del Veneto (1910-1922)’, in Mario Isnenghi (ed.), Operai e contadini, pp. 72-103.} In the mountainous northern regions, the Alpini National Association (Associazione Nazionale Alpini), based on the alpini military units, displayed a rather conservative discourse. All these entities emerged from the widespread optimistic belief in the veterans’ potential to change the country, but also amidst worries and conflicts due to the worsening social and political situation.

Most importantly, the phenomenon of veterans’ associations expanded amidst the growing fear about the spread of Bolshevism, which affected the Italian middle and upper classes. At the end of the war, the maximalist trend of the PSI —inspired by the Russian revolution— became hegemonic. Simultaneously, a socialist organization for disabled veterans and ex-soldiers was created: the Proletarian League (Lega proletaria fra mutilati, invalidi, orfani e vedove di guerra), tied to the socialists.\footnote{Gianni Isola, Guerra al regno della guerra. Storia della Lega proletaria mutilati invalidi reduci orfani e vedove di guerra (1918-1924), Firenze, Le Lettere, 1990; Id., ‘Socialismo e combattentismo: la Lega proletaria. 1918-1922’, Italia contemporanea, 141 (1980), pp. 5-29.} This association was determined to defend the veterans’ interests from a class-oriented point of view, and tended to treat them as war victims —with the same consideration as war disabled, orphans and widows— rather than as heroes or as ex-servicemen. Therefore, the Lega Proletaria employed a pacifist and anti-militarist discourse that emphasized the horrors of warfare: war was represented as a useless massacre, as fratricidal madness. Its membership grew —especially in the socialist strongholds of the north— reaching more than 50,000 affiliates by the spring of 1919. The examples of Henri Barbusse and the French ARAC were an inspiration for its activities.

Within this agitated context of the proliferation of veteran groups, Fascism emerged as a formal organisation. The call for the foundation of the Fasci de combattimento at the beginning of March 1919, published in Il Popolo d’Italia, was specially directed at the veterans —‘combatants and ex combatants’ (combattenti, ex combattenti). Assertions about the veterans’ potential to oust the old ruling classes followed the announcement. Agostino Lanzillo —the interventionist intellectual had joined Mussolini’s newspaper— appealed to ex-combatants to ‘intervene and take over the government of the state’, establishing an ‘energetic regime’ that would confront the
current critical moment. The initiative of *Il Popolo d’Italia* was not very successful, however. Only some local groups of veterans pledged their support in response. As is now well known, the ‘picturesque’ foundational fascist meeting in the Milanese *Piazza San Sepolcro* on 23 March 1919 passed almost unnoticed. Perhaps half of the three or four hundred attendees (revolutionary interventionists, students, journalists…) were war veterans, but they were mostly *arditi* such as Ferruccio Vecchi, along with Marinetti’s futurists. The radical and contradictory nationalist claims and anti-Bolshevik diatribes aside, no clear fascist programme emerged; yet it is worth noting that the first point raised by Mussolini was supporting the demands of the associations of *combattenti*.

Over the course of the spring of 1919, several events demonstrated that officers and ex-soldiers could constitute a reactive force against the left, even if the overwhelming majority of the Italian war veterans was not interested in joining nationalist demonstrations. News about the Hungarian and Bavarian Soviet Republics, established respectively on the 21 March and 6 April, was circulating throughout Europe. Meanwhile, in Italy, veteran journals and organizations proliferated independent of each other. For instance, the minuscule but overtly anti-Bolshevik Officers and Soldiers’ National Union (*Unione Nazionale Ufficiali e Soldati* – UNUS), led by nationalist officers such as Giovanni Giuriati, launched a manifesto on 7 April. Mussolini criticized this dispersion of forces: a few days after the meeting of San Sepolcro, he called for the unification of all the ‘national’ veteran forces in one all-powerful body, which would confront the internal socialist danger. In Rome, the socialists held a general strike on 10 April; but the same day an anti-socialist counter-demonstration took place, with the participation of many army officers. The futurist ex-*ardito* Mario Carli ventured that, in this anti-Bolshevik demonstration, all kinds of combatants had taken part, showing a unified spirit. On 15 April 1919, following a similar dynamic of strikes and demonstrations in Milan, the fascist *arditi* assaulted and destroyed the office of the socialist newspaper *Avanti!*.

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117 Particularly from Tuscan cities (Siena, Livorno); see *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 15, 31 March 1919.


The destruction of the *Avanti!* offices had fateful repercussions; it was followed by a set of violent attacks by *arditi* against socialists in different places.\(^{123}\)

However, it should be underlined that the authors of the assault on the *Avanti!* premises in Milan were part of a very small radicalized — if exceptionally active — minority of Italian veterans. The diverse members of the huge Italian army held very disparate political opinions. Moreover, the experiences of demobilization sharpened the contradictions between the expectations of the common soldiers, on the one hand, and the mentalities of the command and the officers, on the other. In this context, a crucial historical paradox emerged. For while the war veterans were an extremely diverse and heterogenic group of individuals, contemporaries had a limited range of concepts at hand to make sense of this variety.

Many professional military and bourgeois ex-officers expected to maintain privileges obtained during the war, and to receive the respect and honour of the country. They also expected that the peace conference would satisfy the national objectives for which the army had fought. Soon, they were very disappointed, for the nation seemed cold and hostile towards them.\(^{124}\) Since the end of the war, interventionists had demanded that the promises of the Pact of London be fulfilled, and the ‘Italian’ city of Fiume added to Italian territorial gains. Ardent interventionists — like Mussolini and *Il Popolo d’Italia* group, the ex-*arditi*, or the nationalist officers of the UNUS — virulently scorned those politicians who ‘renounced’ certain territorial claims. The Italian representatives at the Peace Conference defended the interventionist aspirations (Pact of London and Fiume), although these claims contradicted the Wilsonian spirit that underpinned the conference. The result of the negotiations, therefore, was disappointing for the Italians, who would receive neither Dalmatia, nor Fiume. This diplomatic failure took place at the end of April 1919, and shattered the hopes of fervent nationalists and irredentists like D’Annunzio, who felt that the victory had been lost. In reality, the emerging myth of the Mutilated Victory was actually a half-truth.\(^{125}\) However, rumours about a military coup started to circulate.

These elevated patriotic preoccupations only shaped the minds of educated middle-class veterans and officers; young men who had been the promoters of

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\(^{123}\) Fabio Fabbri, *Le origini della guerra civile*, pp. 54-59.

\(^{124}\) Marco Mondini, *La politica delle armi*.

intervention. Meanwhile, the common ex-soldiers returned to civil life were instead concerned about the material promises that the Italian state had made to them. Peasants who suddenly found the promise of land unfulfilled showed little patience. The masses of contadini ex combattenti played a major role in mutinies against the high cost of living (carovita) between June and July 1919 in the Mezzogiorno and especially in Sardinia.\(^{126}\) Since the beginning of 1919 in Lazio, and during the summer and the autumn in several provinces of the south (Puglia, Calabria, Caltanissetta), there were land occupations by veterans who aspired to a more just redistribution of land, if not to a social revolution.\(^{127}\) Although at those demonstrations it was not rare to see proletarian ex-soldiers still wearing military clothes, it is true that the socialists did not systematically recur to the symbol of the veteran to legitimate these protests. In contrast, as the nationalists were ready to materially reward the soldiers’ service, they denounced the socialists’ attempts to foment the feeling that answering the call of duty had been useless.\(^{128}\)

What were the positions of the fascist movement and the ANC regarding the masses of veterans? As the historian Giovanni Sabatucci pointed out, the Fasci di combattimento, despite the efforts of Mussolini’s collaborators, were unable to attract many ex-soldiers; it was the ANC that absorbed the greatest number of them.\(^{129}\) The ANC would reach around 300,000 affiliated members in the autumn of 1919. The mass base of this veterans’ movement was in the Mezzogiorno, and thus was composed of peasants, while the middle class veterans from the northern and central cities usually dominated the ranks of the leadership. Although the dominant political discourse within the ANC lacked a clear and defined shape, the organization attempted to crystallize politically. All the ANC veterans seemed to share an instinctive anti-governmental attitude and a sense of patriotism, fused into the idea of renovation (rinnovamento). The leaders and representatives of sections from all over Italy met at the first ANC congress in Rome between 23 and 28 June 1919: over the course of six days of heated discussions, the key issue was whether the organization should adopt a political or an apolitical stance. It was very difficult to agree on a political standpoint shared by all sides. In the end, they approved a very abstract program written by Renato Zavatardo. It


\(^{128}\) *L’Idea Nazionale*, 18 June 1919.

\(^{129}\) Giovanni Sabatucci, *I combattenti*, p. 70.
was indicative of the pacifist and democratic preference of the majority of members, but also a symptom of the inexperienced leaders’ lack of competence, and a proof of the impossibility of defining a clear political ideology for the *combattenti*.130

The most interesting aspect of the veterans’ congress of Rome is that the fascists tried to impose their political orientation onto the ANC. In the days leading up to the congress, it was claimed that Mussolini and D’Annunzio would attend (in reality only Mussolini was in Rome). The political atmosphere in the capital was quite heated, since a new government headed by Nitti had just been formed, following the Italian failure at Versailles. As early as the first session of the congress, Francesco Giunta, an interventionist, fascist-friendly ex-officer representing the ex-combatants from Florence, championed violent action against the recently formed government. Standing on a table, he defended a radical motion (*ordine del giorno*) demanding the organization of a large insurrectional movement.131 Despite this attempt, which had aimed to organize a veterans’ demonstration on the spot with the objective of toppling Nitti, moderation prevailed. Moreover, just after this failure, the *ardito* Ferruccio Vecchi was forcefully expelled from the sessions, due to his inflammatory declarations. For his part, Agostino Lanzillo argued that the veterans should use their force to seize power and establish, ‘instead of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the dictatorship of the combatants’ (*in luogo della dittatura del proletariato, la dittatura dei combattenti*). But the majority of delegates received this statement rather coldly. In the end, seeing the ANC leaders’ lack of sympathy for these seductive attempts, Mussolini’s posture was to stress the common features existing in the fascist and veterans’ programmes: ‘their oneness is absolute’.132 Likewise, the *arditi* also pointed out the similarity of their program to those of the ANC and the *Fasci*, and advocated for a collaboration.133 Despite these overoptimistic assessments, the truth was that the ANC had reaffirmed its autonomy, differentiating itself from other organizations, particularly from the *Fasci*. The symbol of the veterans was still far from being the preserve of the fascists.

**The anti-Bolshevik veterans: a symbolic appropriation**

If the first half of 1919 showed that the symbol of the veteran was not yet politically defined, during the second half of this year, following the signature of the Versailles

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130 An exhaustive account of the congress in *ibidem*, pp. 98-119.
133 *L’Ardito* (Milano), 29 June 1919.
treaty, a process of symbolic appropriation took place, leading to the final consolidation of a transnationally-forged and widely-spread representation of the ex-soldier: that of the anti-Bolshevik veteran. In Italy, this cultural construction conditioned the origin of Fascism. However, this result was far from inevitable. Here, I will argue that the alleged anti-socialist orientation of the Italian veterans was a contingent and constructed phenomenon, the product of a long evolution of discourses and representations, in which Fascism played a crucial role. I will show that the adhesion of the Italian veterans to Fascism was only a relative phenomenon; it was above all a cultural construction, the outcome of a process of symbolic appropriation, in which the summer of 1919 was a key moment, as we will see.

The fascists, despite their lack of success at the ANC congress of June 1919, did not scale back their efforts to attract veterans to their organization. They were interested in recruiting war veterans to their movement for ideological and political reasons. Since 1917, Mussolini had based his projects on the mobilization of ex-combatants. The historian Emilio Gentile has explained that young lower-middle-class Italians influenced by the myth of the war experience, especially those who had fought in elite corps like the arditi or had been junior officers, had experienced the war as an initiation into politics, and had returned from the trenches convinced that ‘they had a mission to complete in the name of the nation’. Therefore, men like Giuseppe Bottai (interventionist, war volunteer and ex-ardito) joined the Fasci. They believed in the myth of the ‘two Italies’, one of revolutionary interventionists and combatants and the other of neutralist traitors, deserters, profittatori, liberal politicians, and Bolsheviks, who were perceived as the internal enemy. These mentalities pushed them to embrace the fascist movement, considered as an ‘anti-party’ (antipartito). All these ideological elements had been developed by the Florentine avant-gardists before the war and were later recycled by Mussolini. It is interesting to note that Florence was the city where fascists, futurists and veteran leaders were most interconnected. However, the ANC congress of Rome had revealed that these radicalized veterans were an eccentric minority in the country. The Italian veterans as a mass were not the anti-Bolshevik, national-revolutionary men of action that the fascists imagined.

However, when the Versailles treaty was being signed, the nationalist bourgeois sectors intensified the struggle to take possession of the symbol of the veterans. Their anger against Nitti’s government, and their frustration with the ‘mutilated victory’ led to moments of great tension. On 30 June 1919, after a nationalist protest meeting in the Augusteo theatre of Rome, there were violent confrontations between police and demonstrators. Among the most aggressive protesters there were many young officers in uniform; some of whom were arrested or injured in the struggle. The next day, the nationalist journal *L’Idea Nazionale* passionately claimed that the reprehensible government had attacked the ‘veterans’ (*combattenti*).

Referring to these groups of officers and nationalist students as ‘the veterans’ was manipulative. They were men, for example, like Giovanni Giuriati (irredentist decorated ex-captain) and Nino Host-Venturi (ex-captain of the *alpini* and the *arditi*), who, in contact with D’Annunzio, had started to drum up support for a voluntary military force to occupy Fiume. These ex-combatants were very different to those veterans’ representatives that had met in their congress one day before. Even so, members of the ANC and the ANMIG condemned the government and joined the nationalist outrage about the state aggression against the ‘veterans’. Even D’Annunzio, in an accusatory article against the government, depicted the stylized image of the protesting one-legged disabled soldier, beaten by the police. D’Annunzio’s literary recourse to this indignant representation of the veteran served his purpose of calling for the disobedience of the army. Thus, before the socialists were able to develop policies and discourses regarding the return of the soldiers, the nationalists and the fascists were already violently fighting over the symbol of the veteran. Yet the frustration of the nationalist aspirations was only one factor of the attempted monopolization of the veteran symbol; the other ground was anti-Bolshevism.

At this early stage, the adhesion of ex-officers and *arditi* to the fascist movement must be understood as part of the burgeoning anti-socialist and anti-governmental reaction. The young fascist movement strived to readdress politically the seemingly prodigious veterans’ force. For veteran activism still lacked a clear political orientation. In Rome, several army officers still wearing uniform attended the assemblies of the *Fascio*, where the *arditi* agitated to provoke violent anti-Bolshevik


and anti-governmental action. Yet this climate of unrest also saw the rise of anarchist ex-combatants (subversives—sovversivi—as they were called by the authorities), who conspired against the government. In July 1919, the anarchist arditto Argo Secondari organized a failed complot against Nitti in the Roman fortress of Pietralata. And in Verona, for instance, anarchist workers joined a majority of veterans and ex-arditi to found the Fascio. According to the authorities in Florence, the combined agitation of veterans, fascists and arditii was ‘impressive’. In this city, veterans set up the Fascio in the local headquarters of the ANC. But this case can be considered exceptional.

There was no general pattern of veteran proximity to the fascist movement. This relationship was still limited to the northern and central Italian regions. But even in a town such as Ferrara, the veterans shared their loyalties between the ANC and the socialists; only some local arditii were favourable to Mussolini. In Bologna, divergences among the veterans led to a split; some of them joined the ANC and an anti-Bolshevik local league, and some officers remained within the Fascio. In light of these complications, the fascist leaders opted not to recruit combatants exclusively, but also non-combatants. According to its organizer Umberto Pasella, the Fascio was ‘a very different thing from the veterans’ association’; but it is very significant that he had to express this distinction.

By mid-1919, the veterans’ movement had attracted the interest not just of the fascists and nationalists, but also of the left. In this explosive situation, in which all sides used the motif of the combattenti in their political rhetoric, it is not surprising that the representatives of democratic interventionism—such as Gaetano Salvemini—tried to mobilize the veterans in order to motivate a wide movement of social and political renovation, particularly in the Mezzogiorno. Although many socialists were sceptical about such strategies, the Lega proletaria held its own national congress, in which demobilization and amnesty were the chief slogans. The fear that men released from the

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139 ACS, MI, PS (1920), b. 105, f. ‘Roma. Fascio di combattimento’.
140 ACS, MI, PS (1919), b. 84, f. ‘Movimento sovversivo Roma II’.
141 Il Fascio, 20 September 1919.
142 (‘impressionante’) ACS, MI, PS (1921), b. 89, f. ‘Firenze’, document dated on 1 July 1919.
143 Il Fascio, 15 August 1919.
147 L’Unità (Florence), 17 July, 7-14 August 1919.
army would fall prey of Bolshevik agitators was widespread in Germany at that time. As a result, Italian military propaganda for the soldiers stressed that the combatants (combattenti) desired ‘peace, work and order’ —it was said that the disturbances were provoked by ‘masses of working class people who did not fight in the war’, while ‘combatants, officers and soldiers’ were confronting them. Meanwhile, the socialists believed in the sharp divide that existed between proletarian soldiers and bourgeois officers; the revolutionary instinct of the former contrasted with the conservatism of the latter. And news of the counter-revolutionary reaction against the Hungarian Soviet Republic — directed by military officers— seemed to confirm this interpretation.

It is clear that the antagonism between the socialists and the military heightened as a consequence of the war, but did the broad group of the war veterans also become enemies of the Italian socialists and therefore inclined towards Fascism? The retrospective evaluations in this sense made by socialists like Giovanni Zibordi, Pietro Nenni or Angelo Tasca, assumed as accurate by many historians, should be taken cautiously. Zibordi pointed out that the ex-military element, young ex-junior-officers and ex-officers who felt displaced and economically threatened, were inclined towards Fascism; however, according to him, the fault lay with the socialists, who had done nothing to ‘demobilize’ that attitude. He was forgetting his own speeches celebrating returning disabled veterans, and his early publicised calls to ‘demobilize the brains’ of the people. Assuming that the socialists were against ‘the veterans’, implies

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149 Report ‘Situazione militare della Germania’ (Berlin, 5 August 1919), AMAE, Affari Politici 1919-1930, Germania, b. 1125.
150 (‘I combattenti vogliono pace, lavoro, ordine’, ‘masse operaie che non hanno fatto la guerra [...] E la opposizione a loro è stata fatta da combattenti, ufficiali e soldati’) [Sezione ‘P’ del Governo della Dalmazia], Battute di propaganda. Per i giovani Ufficiali nelle conversazioni coi soldati, Ancona, 1919.
151 Avanti! (Turin), 1, 2, 3, 4 July 1919.
152 Cf. Salvatore Lupo, Il Fascismo. La politica in un regime totalitario, Roma, Donzelli, 2000, p. 49.
obscuring and simplifying a crucial part of the story. In reality, by the summer of 1919, even the prominent socialist thinker Antonio Gramsci was arguing that the experience of the trenches had positively transformed the masses of Italian peasant-soldiers into potential agents of a revolution similar to the Russian one.\(^{156}\)

The postwar myth of socialist attacks towards the ‘veterans’ (\emph{redduci}) is still approached rather uncritically by historians.\(^{157}\) Angelo Tasca affirmed that the \emph{Lega proletaria} practiced sectarian maximalist politics which chased away the \emph{combattenti}: the call ‘down with war!’ (\emph{abbasso la guerra!}) would have been interpreted as ‘down with the veterans!’ (\emph{abbasso i combattenti!}).\(^{158}\) The \emph{combattenti} would have reacted — as the army did — in defence of the victory, protecting a honourable version of the war experience, and therefore against socialism and in favour of Fascism. There is truth in this explanation, but it is insufficient. It uncritically assumes the constructed concept of the ‘veteran’. Not supported by comparative research, this interpretation criticises the socialist approach to veteran politics as essentially inappropriate, and diminishes the offensive role that the anti-socialist veterans and the fascists had played from the very end of the war. In reality, the socialist anti-militarist campaign stepped up after the socialists had been victims of the attacks from the fascist \emph{arditi} and military officers. And most importantly, the symbolic construction of the anti-Bolshevik veteran, a consequence of the counter-revolutionary reaction in Germany and Hungary, had started earlier. And yet, as we will see, the anti-militarist campaign was not directed against the Italian ex-combatants. If the anti-socialist groups affirmed the contrary, they were misappropriating the symbol of the veterans.

It is true that the socialists’ disdain for war, linked to the unrealistic appeal to a social revolution, outraged the military and the interventionists, who saw in the socialists the hated enemy within. The publication of the inquiry about the military responsibilities for Caporetto, just when press censorship was lifted, fuelled the socialist campaign against militarism in the summer of 1919. Through the pages of the \emph{Avanti!}, the socialists argued that the war had been an atrocious deception, that it had only benefited a few bourgeois capitalists while impoverishing, mutilating and killing millions of people (Image 1). The extreme repressive conduct of officers towards their

\(^{156}\) \emph{L’Ordine Nuovo} (Turin), 2 August 1919.


\(^{158}\) Angelo Tasca, \emph{Nascita e avvento del fascismo}, Milano, La Nuova Italia, 2002 (1\textsuperscript{a} ed 1950), p. 195.
own soldiers (punishment and executions) was thoroughly denounced. All the horrors of war were unmasked (Image 2).

Image 1: ‘The fruits of war’, Avanti!, 4 August 1919. Image 2: ‘We have stripped the war of its cardboard mask!’, Avanti!, 14 August 1919.

It is important to note that whereas the socialists insulted and scorned the army officers, this campaign—as its promoters stated—did not intend to ‘denigrate either the soldiers, or those who fought, convinced that they were fulfilling a honourable or sacred endeavour’. It was directed against those who ‘desired the war, against those who conducted it badly, and against those who, even worse, glorified it’. Instead of attacking the soldiers, the socialists condemned the terrible experience of the trenches, and contrasted it with the distorted image that the nationalist war propaganda had constructed (Image 3). It was suggested that the warmongers had quickly forgotten the soldiers after the war, in contradiction with the adulation and obsequiousness offered to the soldiers in 1915 (Image 4). The socialists deplored the fact that, while the officers did not fight in the trenches, they now enjoyed high pensions; in contrast, the conscripted had been suffering at the front, and now suffered persecutions and imprisonment.

159 (‘non è intesa a denigrare nè soldati, nè coloro che si sono battuti nella convinzione di compiere opera onesta e santa’) Avanti!, 19 August 1919.
160 (‘contro quanti hanno voluto la guerra, contro chi l’ha condotta male, contro chi l’ha glorificata peggio’) Avanti!, 4 August 1919.
In general, the exposure of these realities was not particularly offensive for most of the veterans. Neither did these representations of the veterans’ experiences substantially differ from those of certain French veteran groups that carried out their propaganda in order to obtain material benefits (Images 5 and 6). The Italian nationalists envied the successful French celebration of the victory on 14 July 1919, but the French left was very critical of this commemoration, and employed antimilitaristic terms close to those of the Italian socialists.161


However, the antimilitarist campaign provoked indignation not only among the army officers, but also among certain leaders of the veterans’ movement. Arditi such as Ferruccio Vecchi felt outraged, and clearly took the side of the army officers, through articles in L’Ardito and Il Popolo d’Italia. They planned new aggressions against the socialists, and distributed pamphlets inviting supporters to attack those parties or persons who conducted that campaign to discredit ‘those who desired the war and those who made it’. Different press organs of the ANC published harsh articles against the socialists, who were depicted as ‘ravens’ that stirred the memory of the dead for partisan objectives. The socialists were ‘defeatists’ who tried to ‘devalue the victory’. The fascists and the veterans’ organization converged in their use of these representations. Moreover, as the investigation about Caporetto resulted in some administrative measures against generals, and thousands of men accused of desertion were amnestied, the army’s loyalty to the government weakened.

The deterioration of the neutrality and discipline of the armed forces facilitated, on 12 September 1919, the poet and war hero D’Annunzio’s mobilization of troops and volunteers to occupy the city of Fiume. With this action, D’Annunzio became the point of reference for the national-revolutionary veterans, arditi and futuristi, who answered his call. Among the Fiuman legionaries were some who would play an important role in the fascist regime — such as Giovanni Giuriani —, and future fascist ANC leaders — such as Nino Host-Venturi. In fact, some of the fascist veterans left their cities to join the venture, and the ANC newspapers generally supported D’Annunzio. This action aimed to provoke the fall of Nitti’s government, but it was unsuccessful in this objective. The Prime Minister made a harsh declaration against this case of ‘sedition’ (sedizione), but at the same time, closed the debate about the responsibilities for Caporetto by highlighting the inevitability of the war and the righteousness of the

162 Document from the prefetto of Milan (9 September 1919), ACS, MI, PS (1920), b. 104, f. ‘Milano. Associazione segreta fra combattenti e arditi di principi rivoluzionari’.
163 (‘attaccare quei partiti o le singole persone che fanno una campagna per screditare la guerra, chi la volle e chi la fece’) police report (22 August 1919), ACS, MI, PS (1920), b. 104, f. ‘Associazione fra gli “Arditi’ d’ Italia’”.
164 (‘corvi’, ‘disfattisti’, ‘svalorizzare la vittoria’) Priamo Brunazzi. ‘Bisogna chiudere il becco ai corvi!’, I Combattenti (Genova), 30 August 1919.
166 Ferdinando Cordova, Arditi e legionari Dannunziani.
167 Il Fascio, 4 October 1919; I Combattenti, 21 September 1919.
168 Marco Mondini, La politica delle armi, p. 42.
army. Later, Nitti moderated his position and showed sympathy for the veterans. Yet his policy on the Fiume problem was repugnant to the Italian ultra-nationalists, and unsatisfactory for the veterans’ leaders. Mussolini did not miss the opportunity to praise the predominant orientation of the veteran organizations in favour of D’Annunzio and against Nitti.  

Although the occupation of Fiume was a failure in its immediate political objectives, it had decisive consequences, given that it amplified the transnational process of symbolic appropriation of the war veteran. Now, foreign observers regarded the Italian veterans as a homogeneous part of the overall militaristic, anti-government and anti-socialist reaction. On 4 October 1919, a report sent from Italy to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs depicted a bipolar political panorama, in which the veterans (combattants), the fascists, and almost the entire army were opposed to Nitti, whereas the socialists supported the Prime Minister: ‘the socialists organise demonstrations against the veterans’. The occupation of the Adriatic city lasted until the end of 1920, and during that time D’Annunzio’s forces received the support of interventionists and sectors of the veteran movement. Furthermore, the Fiume episode would precede Fascism in areas such as political aestheticization and ritualization. The symbol of the veteran was by now engendered with a set of implicit meanings that the fascist movement would later exploit.

In this critical situation, it is understandable that Nitti did not promote any official commemoration of the victory of 4 November, as was demanded by the nationalists and ANC sectors. It is not certain that an official celebration would have helped to appease the interventionist groups; but its absence did not relieve the frustrations of army officers and nationalists, either. A more transcendental event drew

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169 For example, La Stampa (Turin), 14 and 17 September 1919.
close: the Italian elections of November 1919, which would be another major disappointment for veterans, fascists and interventionists.\(^\text{174}\)

There were important symbolic differences in the way fascists and *combattenti* tackled the electoral process. In discursive terms, the political position of the ANC veterans—as suggested by the leader Renato Zavatardo—was against *those who had desired the war but had not fought it* (the interventionist and nationalist elites), and against *those who had not desired the war and sabotaged it* (the ‘anti-national’ leftist forces). Implicitly, the veteran movement represented *those who had not desired the war but loyally fought it* (the majority of soldiers). The ANC’s participation in the electoral struggle was obstructed by the socialists, criticised by the fascists, and seen with hostility by other political sectors, even the interventionists.\(^\text{175}\) This was a matter of rivalry: in Milan the fascists presented a list of 19 candidates—headed by Mussolini—in which almost all members were introduced as veterans. The fascists intended to represent *those who had desired the war, and also fought it*.

Apart from a very vague programme aiming for the renovation of the political elites, the actual alignment of veterans varied much depending on the region and the electoral alliances they established. The self-representations they chose to identify their candidacies suggest certain diversity (Images 7 to 10). Most of them adopted the helmet as a symbol, which remained as the identifying veterans’ icon for the elections of 1921. The helmet mirrored an essentially defensive understanding of the role of the soldiers.\(^\text{176}\) Different veteran tickets from the South, in contrast, chose a ladder as the representation of their aspirations of social improvement. The fascists’ identifying symbol was the *fascio*, which was rather rooted in the interventionist experience. (Though this symbol was also employed by the veterans’ ticket formed by members of the ANRZO in Turin). In any case, by the time of the elections, the veterans were symbolically confronting the left. The electoral tickets of the socialists were marked by the hammer and sickle; they intended to represent the war victims, widows, orphans and bereaved people.

\(^\text{174}\) For a detailed account, see Giovanni Sabbatucci, *I combattenti*, pp. 203-223.

\(^\text{175}\) For example, see Mussolini, ‘Rilievi elettorali’, *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 16 October 1919.

\(^\text{176}\) *Il Combattente. Settimanale delle Sezioni Mutilati, Invalidi e Combattenti di Capitanata* (Capitanata), 2 November 1919.
The electoral adventure of the *combattenti* was based on the hope that their moral authority over the nation would be enforced by votes, but the veterans’ tickets obtained very poor results almost everywhere. The two very clear winners of the elections were the socialists (who obtained 156 seats) and the Catholic *popolari*. The ANC-promoted veteran parliamentary group, a heterogenic platform without a clear political direction, had only obtained 232,923 votes (4.1%) —20 seats in the Parliament. The fascists’ results were even more disappointing. This outcome contrasted with the victory of the conservative *Bloc national* in France: 44% of the membership of the so-called *Chambre blue horizon* were veterans. The Italian *Camera dei Deputati* was composed of 27.97% ex-servicemen. Ironically, the Italian Socialist Party was the group with the highest percentage of veterans among its Parliamentary representatives (47.4%), who placed no stress on their veteran status. To make matters worse, it was clear that most Italian veterans, even members of the ANC, had voted for the anti-militarist and revolutionary options. Many in Italy understood this situation as a victory of pacifist socialism over the veterans, who now were represented as embittered and defeated (image 11). In fact, in certain veteran journals the results were presented as a new ‘general rehearsal for the Bolshevik revolution’.

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177 Pier Luigi Ballini, *Le elezioni nella storia d’Italia dall’Unità al fascismo. Profilo storico-statistico*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1988, pp. 186-187. The best results were obtained in Sardegna and Puglia, where Gaetano Salvemini was influential.


179 (‘*prova generale della rivoluzione bolscevica’*) *I Combattenti*, 6 December 1919.
The fascists went through very critical moments after the elections, but the symbol of the veteran acquired further anti-socialist meanings. The day the new Parliament resumed its sittings, a demonstration of monarchist military officers in Rome provoked clashes with groups of socialists. The ‘patriotic’ demonstrators punched at least one socialist MP. Outraged, the socialists immediately called a general strike. Subsequently, in many cities, such as Rome, Milan, Turin, Florence, Bologna and Mantua, socialist strikers violently attacked officers in uniform. This fierce left-wing reaction highlighted the wide support enjoyed by the socialists, but the news of attacks against officers fuelled the anxiety and hatred of the bourgeoisie. As a result, the anti-socialist myth of the ‘abused veteran’ started to circulate. Meanwhile, fascist leaders were arrested, accused of threatening public order. The combination of these events helped feed the image of veterans being brought into jail, while deserters entered the Parliament (image 12). Both nationalist veterans and fascists had to come to terms with the debacle, but actually they had achieved a determining victory: the symbol of

180 La Stampa, 2, 3 and 4 December 1919; Corriere della Sera (Milan), 2 and 3 December 1919; Avanti!, 2, 3, 6 and 7 December 1919.
181 Among others, Ferruccio Vecchi and Mussolini were arrested, see De Felice: Mussolini il rivoluzionario, pp. 574-575.
The war veteran had become associated with them, as individuals and organized groups essentially opposed to the political left.


The socialists, however, conscious that they had gained the support of many ex-soldiers, were delighted, and thought that the revolution was within reach. In October, the socialist party had confirmed its maximalist direction, aiming at the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat; they had considered the possibility of using violence against the bourgeoisie. They planned to conquer the local councils (comuni) through the provincial administrative elections during 1920, and the veterans and the war victims would have to play a role. Although the socialists lacked a coherent program to create a ‘red army’, some of them attributed a revolutionary mission to the veterans. The Lega proletaria would organize them: the apparent revolutionary nature of this organization seems clear even from the title of its newspaper: Spartacus. This name was not only a reference to the German communist faction, but also an allusion to the slave of the first century BC who, after being forced to fight as a gladiator, broke his chains to organize a rebellion against his masters. This symbol of emancipation figured on the front page of the paper (Image 13), and was representative of the socialist understanding of the soldiers’ war experience.

184 L’Ordine Nuovo, 22 November 1919.
Yet the suggested parallelism with the Italian proletarian soldier was not translated into action. In fact, Lega proletaria activities during 1920 remained non-revolutionary. Moreover, internal divisions between communists and socialists weakened the organization, particularly after 1921. In reality, the political right and the nationalists had practically monopolized the symbol of the veteran. At the beginning of 1920, when the Italian maximalists launched the project of creating revolutionary soviets, this strategy was not based on the old example of ‘soldiers’ and workers’ councils’ that had marked the origins of the Russian and German revolutions. The age of the ideal socialist revolutionary veteran had passed.
Chapter 2
War Veterans and the Rise of Italian Fascism (1920-1922)

If some form, however limited, of historical fusion between fascism and veterans did indeed take place, its foundations must be sought in Italy. As fascism was born in Italy, the link between veterans and fascism was for the first time established in Italian Fascism, which would determine the overall relationship that transnational fascism maintained with the veterans. In this chapter, I will begin with an assessment of the extent to which fascist veterans—particularly the arditi—were the forebearers of squadrist, a violent fascist political strategy that overturned the unsuccessful version of Italian Fascism born in San Sepolcro. I will then examine the process whereby two different historical actors—the fascist movement and the veteran movement—interweaved in Italy between 1920 and 1922, showing how this complex relationship contributed to the rise of Fascism. My explanation will be based on the simultaneous analysis of both movements, the Italian veteran associations ANC and ANMIG on the one hand, and the fascist movement and party on the other hand. I will contrast their respective organizational and discursive features, highlighting their commonalities and intersection points, to assess the nature and depth of their amalgamation until the fascist conquest of power in October 1922.

In the third section, I argue that the consolidation of the stereotype of the ‘fascist veteran’ was one of the most important consequences of the amalgamation between the fascists and the Italian ex-soldiers. Historical actors widely employed this constructed image, helping to disseminate the interpretation of Fascism as a veteran phenomenon. As we will see, at the beginning of 1921, external observers, such as diplomats and journalists, transmitted this stereotypical representation of the members of the fascist movement to other geographical spaces. This cross-border dissemination justifies questioning whether the perception of the fascist veteran stereotype influenced the development of the early NSDAP in Germany. I will discuss whether Italian Fascism, encapsulated in the symbol of the fascist veteran, was an inspiration for the early Nazi movement.

To conclude, the last section of this chapter will explore the transnational impact of the March on Rome. I will ask how the symbolic link established between the war veterans and Fascism in October 1922 was perceived, interpreted and employed in other countries. To answer this, I will recreate the complex and multi-layered European
context, showing how discourses and representations of the fascist veterans influenced politics in France, Spain and Germany. The March on Rome was the fascist founding myth and, in a sense, it can be considered the birth date of transnational fascism. As we will see, the war veterans had an important symbolic role in this foundational event.

**From arditismo to squadristismo**

After the November 1919 elections, both the veteran and the fascist movements entered into a deep crisis. During 1920, the veterans’ parliamentary group was relatively inactive.\(^1\) It was in the streets that the veteran movement was most effective, organizing protests to obtain an extension of the policies and a greater number of reserved jobs for the disabled from the Nitti government. The fascists supported this agitation.\(^2\) The ANC reached circa 500,000 members this year (the ANC absorbed the ANRZO); the organization of agricultural cooperatives was another important field of its activity. But bitter internal divisions drove different leaders of the movement apart. Some of them made clear their opposition to the socialists.\(^3\) The workers’ movement uncovered anti-patriotic tendencies, when militants attacked the tricolour national flag or — more often — replaced it with the red one.\(^4\) Throughout the country, at the local level, there were occasional conflicts around the commemorations of the war dead soldiers.\(^5\) Bourgeois ex-officers were horrified by the rebellion of the masses. Even if they knew that strikers and protestors were ex-soldiers they had formerly commanded in the trenches, they appropriated the symbol of the ‘veteran’, complaining that now ‘veterans received not only indifference and oblivion, but also sarcasm and acrimony’.\(^6\) The anti-socialist reaction would slowly take shape, and the symbol of the veteran would play an important role.

The ANMIG, for its part, concentrated on obtaining from the government legal improvements for the disabled veterans, although the results were unsatisfactory. Its leadership was fully renovated: rightist men like Giuseppe Caradonna (later a fascist veteran leader from Foggia) and a patriotic propagandist, Carlo Delcroix (a one-eyed, review of the texts, showing how discourses and representations of the fascist veterans influenced politics in France, Spain and Germany. The March on Rome was the fascist founding myth and, in a sense, it can be considered the birth date of transnational fascism. As we will see, the war veterans had an important symbolic role in this foundational event.

**From arditismo to squadristismo**

After the November 1919 elections, both the veteran and the fascist movements entered into a deep crisis. During 1920, the veterans’ parliamentary group was relatively inactive.\(^1\) It was in the streets that the veteran movement was most effective, organizing protests to obtain an extension of the policies and a greater number of reserved jobs for the disabled from the Nitti government. The fascists supported this agitation.\(^2\) The ANC reached circa 500,000 members this year (the ANC absorbed the ANRZO); the organization of agricultural cooperatives was another important field of its activity. But bitter internal divisions drove different leaders of the movement apart. Some of them made clear their opposition to the socialists.\(^3\) The workers’ movement uncovered anti-patriotic tendencies, when militants attacked the tricolour national flag or — more often — replaced it with the red one.\(^4\) Throughout the country, at the local level, there were occasional conflicts around the commemorations of the war dead soldiers.\(^5\) Bourgeois ex-officers were horrified by the rebellion of the masses. Even if they knew that strikers and protestors were ex-soldiers they had formerly commanded in the trenches, they appropriated the symbol of the ‘veteran’, complaining that now ‘veterans received not only indifference and oblivion, but also sarcasm and acrimony’.\(^6\) The anti-socialist reaction would slowly take shape, and the symbol of the veteran would play an important role.

The ANMIG, for its part, concentrated on obtaining from the government legal improvements for the disabled veterans, although the results were unsatisfactory. Its leadership was fully renovated: rightist men like Giuseppe Caradonna (later a fascist veteran leader from Foggia) and a patriotic propagandist, Carlo Delcroix (a one-eyed,\(^1\) Giovanni Sabbatucci, *I combattenti*, pp. 255-281.
\(^2\) See, for example *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 1 January, 29 February and 4 March 1920.
\(^3\) Ugo Grasso, ‘Noi e i socialisti’, *I Combattenti*, 24 April 1920.
\(^4\) *I Combattenti*, 27 March 1920, 3 April 1920.
double amputee from Florence), became more influential. The new leaders insisted that the ANMIG maintain a non-political position, although the anti-government attitude was clear. They adopted a rigid ‘apoliticità’ (non political stance) as the precondition of any kind of action, while preserving the liberty of thought to the ANMIG members. Nevertheless, the fascists did not divert their attention from the activities of the disabled veterans.\(^7\)

Inside the ANC, political efforts to constitute a real political party of veterans were unsuccessful, and in fact led to a double scission of the association. During both the ANC and *Partito del Rinnovamento* (the projected veterans’ party) congresses in Naples, August 1920, no precise political project was able to gather consensus. Firstly, a group of leaders from northern Italy —the fascists Agostino Lanzillo y Edoardo Malusardi among them— abandoned the sessions, since they endorsed for the apolitical nature (apoliticità) of the ANC.\(^8\) Subsequently, some southern and Sardinian representatives separated from the congress, and opted for their own political project, which would result in the creation of the autonomist Sardinian Action Party (*Partito Sardo d’Azione - PSdA*) in 1921.\(^9\) Significantly, the PSdA would be the only example of a successful democratic party of veterans across the country. The southern ANC leaders remained isolated, and thus the ‘political’ phase of the nation-wide veterans’ movement culminated in a blind alley. As it was said in a very judgmental article written by an ANMIG leader, the veterans’ pretension of making politics had been completely unfruitful; this kind of ‘veteranism’ —*combattentismo*, as it was called at that moment for the first time—, was considered to be a thing of the past.\(^10\)

The attempt to transform the mass of veterans into the basis of a new democracy, by introducing profound changes into social and political life and enacting a complete change of the ruling classes, was definitely extinguished by the autumn of 1920. This failure, according to Giovanni Sabbatucci, contributed to deepening the political void that made fascist success possible.\(^11\) In fact, the fascist movement took

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\(^7\) *Bollettino mensile. Associazione Nazionale fra Mutilati e Invalidi di Guerra. Sezione di Modena* (Modena), 8 May, 10 June 1920; *Il Bollettino. Organo Mensile dell'Associazione Nazionale Mutilati e Invalidi di Guerra* (Rome), 1 September 1920; *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 29 June 1920.


\(^11\) Giovanni Sabbatucci, *I combattenti*, pp. 343-351.
advantage of the political and organizational conflicts of the Italian veterans. Furthermore, as we will see, the fascists largely benefited from the symbolic construction of the anti-Bolshevik veterans, the alleged anti-socialist proclivity of the veterans that was embedded in the mentalities of many people. The fascists were going to exploit this asset.

During 1920, Fascism embarked on a path towards the extreme right, pushed by a series of events at home and abroad that helped to transform the fascists’ relationship with the veterans. Given the paltry results that fascists had obtained by highlighting their status as veterans, and the modest electoral performance of veterans themselves, a revision of the fascist programme and strategy was needed. As the agitation and strikes of the workers escalated forcefully, the veterans’ movement simultaneously developed its protest campaigns. Whereas Fascism opposed the workers’ protests, displaying a violent anti-socialism, Il Popolo d’Italia observed the veterans’ vindications benevolently. But the fascists were far from having a dominant influence on the veteran movement. At that time, the failure of the Kapp putsch in Germany mirrored the widening gap between leftwing workers on the one hand, and the people allegedly shaped by the war experience on the other. As events in Germany developed in March 1920, Mussolini had been well informed about the participation of Freikorps’ returning soldiers from the Baltic in the anti-republican coup. However, the German working class—almost mirroring the Italian reality—emerged victorious once more in its conflict with the army and the nationalists. This source of disappointment, however, was less disturbing than the problematic occupation of Fiume. The city was not being annexed to Italy, and the politics of D’Annunzio was advancing towards a kind of revolutionary syndicalism. Furthermore, futurists like Marinetti disliked the increasingly anti-popular fascist stance, and preferred to return to a non-political position. How was Fascism going to reconstruct its veteran politics?

In the bleak situation of 1920, Fascism resorted to a specific element of the veterans’ world: arditismo. This war mentality, conveniently wielded and transmitted, would contribute to the recovery of the fascist movement. At the beginning of 1920, in the pages of L’Ardito, the political isolation of the fascists and the arditi was

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12 For example, Il Popolo d’Italia, 29 February, 4 March 1920,
acknowledged: the elitist ex-officers had been incapable of attracting the masses of veterans, left in the hands of the Bolshevik enemy. Yet Ferruccio Vecchi argued that they were not yet tired of the struggle. In fact, he pointed to another element available to continue the fight: the young. There were Italian young men, whose desire to fight in the war had been frustrated. According to Vecchi, *arditismo*—adapted to civilian life as *arditismo civile*—would be the tool to educate this new Italian generation, on which all hopes were placed. Based in values like courage, fatherland, victory, genius, ‘schools of *arditismo*’ would help to instil the war knowledge and energies into very young Italian men (between 15 and 20 years old) for the progress of the country.\footnote{Ferruccio Vecchi, *Arditismo civile*, Milano, 1920; *L’Ardito*, 4, 11, 18, 25 January, 22 February, 14, 28 March 1920.}

In practical terms, this project implied the transmission of discourses and practices of violence to younger generations, and the result would be the revitalization of the fascist movement. The target of the violent reaction were the socialists, labelled as ‘defeatists’ and ‘deserters’ (Images 14 and 15). Although the aims and mechanisms of this

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Image 14: ‘- What will you teach me in your schools? – To liberate your Fatherland from the defeatists and not to dishonour the institutions with deserters…’, *L’Ardito*, 25 April 1920.
‘educational’ project seemed very vague and clumsy, Mussolini fully endorsed it in the pages of *Il Popolo d’Italia*, and actual ‘schools of arditismo’ were opened for the youth in the offices of the *arditi* association in Milan. As one of those newly-recruited young fascists described in his diary, in the *Fascio* of Florence—situated in the ANC offices—, older ex-*arditi* instructed them how to throw bombs and attack with daggers to dissolve demonstrations of the ‘reds’. Meanwhile, fascist ex-*arditi* like Giuseppe Bottai and Piero Bolzon furthered the politicization of their association. The boundaries between these *arditi* and the fascists had been blurred since the end of the war, but now the ethos of *arditismo* was systematically injected into young Italians that joined the fascist movement.

Image 15: ‘We are waiting for you Lenin… come. What is coming, though, is not precisely Lenin…’, *L’Ardito*, 25 April 1920.

Although the fascist characterization of political violence as *arditismo* was a new discursive and symbolic strategy, in Italy the social and political struggles actually were increasingly violent. The agitation and multiple strikes of the working class sometimes

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were aggressive. State repression was bloody, and produced a considerable number of deaths among the protesting workers and peasants, particularly from the spring of 1920 on. As we know, in some zones like Lazio, it was the ANC veterans who carried out the occupation of land.\footnote{For example, see the note of the prefetto of Rome (27 September 1920) about the occupation of land by veterans in Ciampino, ACS, MI, PS (1920), b. 78, f. ‘Agitazione agraria’.} But many bourgeois armed guards were created to confront the disturbances across Italy, and veterans were the organizers. For example, in Palermo, in April 1920, a group of ex-NCOs suggested the local ANC leaders create a force to protect ‘public order’ against the ‘subversive parties’; they would act together with the police, even participating in expeditions to other troublespots.\footnote{‘ordini pubblico’, ‘partiti sovversivi’), Note of the prefetto of Palermo (28 April 1920), ACS, MI, PS (1920), b. 104, f. ‘Palermo. Sezione della Federazione Nazionale fra sottufficiali smobilitati’.} On one occasion, a group of ‘arditi and citizens’ from Naples wrote a letter to the Italian Prime Minister Giolitti —who had been called to substitute Nitti— to express in extremely virulent terms the ‘necessity of combating also with violence the internal enemies’.\footnote{‘arditi e cittadini’, ‘bisogna combattere anche colla violenza i nemici interni’), Letter from Naples (1 July 1920), ACS, MI, PS (1920), b. 105, f. ‘Anonimi’.} Faced with the workers’ occupation of factories in August 1920, the Fascio of Venice offered the services of ‘around two hundred young veterans from the trenches’ to the prefetto, claiming that they would follow the orders of the authorities.\footnote{‘circa duecento giovani reduci dalle trincee’), quoted by Giulia Albanese, Alle origini del fascismo. La violenza politica a Venezia 1919-1922, Padova, Il Poligrafo, 2001, p. 51.} Although among the so-called ‘subversives’ there were men who had fought the war, it was only the defenders of ‘order’ who depicted themselves as ‘veterans’ (combattenti) or as arditi.

Meanwhile, Mussolini was moving the fascist movement towards the political right, a transformation that alienated important groups of arditi. Whilst relying on a few veterans and on the discursive tool of arditismo, the fascists appealed to new social groups, namely the well-off young Italians, and any citizen ready to employ violence against the left. Thereby, Mussolini made clear that, to join Fascism, there was ‘no need to have been a combatant’.\footnote{‘Non è necessario essere stato combattente’) Il Popolo d’Italia, 3 July 1920.} Fascism was concretely set on a new path, one that was fully anti-leftist and ultra-nationalistic. As the ex-arditi were not a monolithic block, a crisis broke out in the key Roman section of the arditi association. Revolutionary and futurist arditi abandoned Fascism, turning to the left. Ferruccio Vecchi himself would be expelled from the association and from the Fascio. The arditi became splintered in
very divergent political tendencies. D’Annunzio had been Mussolini’s rival in leading nationalist veterans, so when Giolitti decided to put an end to D’Annunzio’s adventure of Fiume (as a consequence of the Rapallo treaty) in the ‘ Bloody Christmas’ of 1920 (Natale di Sangue), Fascism did not do anything to impede it. In November 1920, Mussolini had finalized a pact with the Prime Minister Giolitti that marked the definitive stance of Fascism in defence of the social order.

The fascist turn to the right provoked an abrupt renovation of the rank and file of the fascist movement on the basis of the myths of arditismo and the youth. Whereas many syndicalists, interventionist socialists and anarchists fled the Fasci they had joined in 1919, it is interesting to note that ‘veterans’ (combattenti) usually maintained their allegiance to the movement. And now, many young men and students adhered to Fascism. This phenomenon had begun as early as October 1920, for example, in Bologna and Ferrara, where the reconstituted Fasci acquired a distinct anti-leftist character, and veterans composed the core. Likewise, in Sesto San Giovanni, near Milan, the board (direttorio) of a new fascist section was formed by all veterans — including one ex-Fiuman legionary— alongside enthusiastic young people. This new element, middle-class youngsters who had not fought in the war, composed the ranks of the movement. They were sons of land proprietors and urban bourgeois families who were ready to obey the orders of admired men with military experience. They had only a mythic and indirect knowledge of the reality of war, but influenced by the fascist discourse that exalted youth and action, desired to emulate the way of life of the daring arditi. Thus, as a few fascist veterans had anticipated, many Fasci became schools of arditismo.

From the end of 1920 on, Fascism fostered the development of what would be historically its most decisive political instrument: squadism (squadrismo). Squadism would provide a very important cultural reference for the rest of its history, easing the

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27 Il Fascio, 11 December 1920.
28 The non fascist press used to note this reality; see Il Fascio, 6 January 1921.
29 See also Paolo Nello, L'avanguardismo giovanile alle origini del fascismo, Bari, Laterza, 1978.
way to totalitarianism. Landowners, above all in the central and northern agrarian provinces, promoted and financed this form of political violence, supported also by the petty bourgeoisie. Squadrism was employed to ruthlessly destroy socialism and its network of civic and political centres, since socialist agitation was believed to constitute a revolutionary threat to the dominant social classes. Apart from being a by-product of arditismo, squadism had other connections with the constructed symbol of the veteran. An example of this is provided by the violent events of Palazzo D’Accursio in Bologna, 21 November 1920, considered as the starting point of agrarian squadism. The killing of a nationalist veteran—a councillor of the city—presumably at the hands of socialists was an excuse for the Fascist squads—composed of many ex-servicemen—to launch a wave of violent reprisals against ‘Bolsheviks’.

Officially, after the Bologna events, the ANMIG condemned violence and made a public call for calm. Carlo Delcroix poetically talked about love and forgiveness. But at the same time, the association had entered into a dynamic of anti-governmental radicalization, and was preparing a wide protest campaign to obtain material improvements for the disabled. The anger against the socialists had spread. In an ANMIG meeting in Milan, the mere suggestion of collaborating with the socialists during the protests was received with an overwhelming hostile response from the majority of the 2000 attendees; after that, the disabled organized a demonstration that ended in a fight against the Royal Guards. Three days before, in a meeting of the Milanese Fascio (where Mussolini discussed accepting the Rapallo treaty), Piero Bolzon had called for support for the agitation of the ‘glorious disabled veterans’ (gloriosi mutilati); consequently, the Fascio decided to provide the veterans with any kind of resources they would need. There were more, similarly aggressive, protests of disabled veterans during December 1920. Finally, the disabled demonstrated in Rome, in front of the Parliament, the same day that in the Chamber some socialist, liberal and popolari MPs came to blows in a quarrel motivated by the news of the aggressions against the socialists in Bologna. As the disabled violently threatened to invade the Chamber, a draft bill to reform the pensions system was urgently approved. The

socialists voted favourably, as a proof of their recognition to the disabled, but they shouted ‘Down with war!’ during the session, while the MPs of the veterans’ group yelled back ‘Long live the war!’

As we see, the disabled veterans’ campaign intertwined with the initiation of the fascist offensive of violence, and in both conflicts the socialists were seen as the enemy of the veterans.\textsuperscript{33}

By the end of 1920, the Fiume occupation had been terminated, the veterans’ movement was divided and without a clear political orientation; but Fascism had again the opportunity to gather veterans’ support through the use of violence against the constructed enemy of the veterans—the socialists. Initially, some ANC leaders, who blamed the socialists for the ‘devaluation’ (\textit{svalutazione}) of the victory, saw in the fascist reaction another evil phenomenon. Later, opinions clearly sympathetic to the fascists proliferated inside the ANC. Fascist violence was considered a spontaneous manifestation against the previous socialist violence and ‘anti-national’ attitude. Pride for having fought the war, in addition to sorrow stemming from the ‘devaluation’ of the victory, made it likely—according to those commentators—that ‘unremorseful veterans’ would join the fascist movement. The phenomenon was believed to be a ‘noble and legitimate reaction’.\textsuperscript{34}

The symbol of the veteran offered the fascists a justification, and also a pretext to carry out their squadrist actions. In the fascist argumentation, violence was now exerted against the socialists because they had previously brutalised army officers, because they had disturbed veterans’ meetings and commemorations of the fallen soldiers, because they had dishonoured the national flag.\textsuperscript{35} However, in fact, the emerging fascist movement was not just a reaction against previous socialist abuses, even if many contemporaries understood it as such. Very few veteran leaders realised

\textsuperscript{33} Il Bollettino, 1 November 1920, 1 January, 1 February 1921; Telegram of the \textit{prefetto} of Milan (5 December 1920), and other documents, ACS, MI, PS (1920), b. 104, f. ‘Milano. Associazione mutilati e invalidi di guerra’; telegram of the \textit{prefetto} of Milan (9 December 1920), ACS, MI, PS (1921), b. 102, f. ‘Milano. Fasci di Combattimento. 1 Fascicolo’; (‘\textit{Abasso la guerra!’}, (‘\textit{Vivva la guerra!’}), La Stampa, 19 December 1920.

\textsuperscript{34} (‘\textit{non pentiti combattenti}, ‘\textit{reazione, nobile e legittima}’) Rodolfo Savelli, ‘La svalutazione della vittoria’, I Combattenti, 6 November 1920; Ferruccio Lantini, ‘Il fenomeno fascista’, I Combattenti, 3 January 1921.

\textsuperscript{35} Fascist manifesto to the country, quoted by the \textit{prefetto} of Milano (20 December 1920), ACS, MI, PS (1921), b. 102, f. ‘Milano. Fasci di Combattimento. 1 Fascicolo’; see also C. C. dei Fasci Italiani di Combattimento, Barbarie rossa. Riassunto cronologico delle principali gesta commesse dai socialisti italiani dal 1919 in poi..., Roma, 1921, passim.
later that Fascism was something more: a very serious threat to the authority and stability of the state.  

Squadristism, the key of the fascist success, has been widely studied by historians, who have assessed the real and symbolic role of war veterans within it. In fact, the overwhelming majority of the provincial fascist leaders who commanded the *squadre* had fought in the First World War (70%), comparatively more often in the *arditi* (22%). This was the case of Dino Grandi, Italo Balbo, Roberto Farinacci, Cesare Maria De Vecchi, Giuseppe Bottai, Achille Starace, Augusto Turati and several other future politicians of the Fascist regime. Certain squadrist leaders—such as Aurelio Padovani in Naples—had already played a political role in the ANC. Local studies show that within the *squadre* the percentage of people who had been conscripted during the war fluctuated between 56% and 68%; these figures should be considered as a high involvement of veterans, thus confirming the statements of the fascists themselves and the perceptions of the authorities. It was, above all, the youngest front generation (born from 1890 onwards) that was most prone to become squadrist. In Sven Reichardt’s opinion, this was because the younger men, who had a stronger need to give a meaning to their war experience, had probably been more highly influenced by the patriotic war propaganda, particularly developed after Caporetto. In addition to this, since the *squadristi* typically did not come from a proletarian background and attained officer status during the war, they had experienced war in a less horrifying way, even though it had marked them deeply. It should also be noted that these younger men had waited more time than others to be demobilized during 1919, thus remaining longer under the influence of the army and its officers.  

Whilst Fascism unleashed the squadrist offensive, the divided ANC made some halting attempts to reorganize and reunify. The fascist leadership was not interested in interfering in the ANC leaders’ quarrels, but rather in maintaining the *apoliticità* of the association as long as possible, so that it would not hinder the campaign against the left. It was not by chance that the *northern* ANC leaders wanted to consolidate the apolitical essence of the association, since Fascism was growing as a mass movement in the north.  

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38 Sven Reichardt, *Faschistische Kampfbünde*, pp. 366-367; ‘The fascists are almost all war veterans’ (*i fascisti sono quasi tutti ex combattenti*), a government inspector wrote in Porderone, 1921, quoted by Marco Mondini: *La politica delle armi*, p. 127.  
Paradoxically, some of those northern ANC leaders were either fascists or fascist-friendly (i.e.: Agostino Lanzillo in Milan). Yet the ANC did not wish to become a victim of what actually was a civil war situation. In fact, many anti-fascist veterans were members of the ANC sections, and even more of them would join it later, seeking a refuge from the fascist aggressions. Not all the fascist ras (local fascist leaders) were tolerant towards veterans. In Cremona, the intransigent fascist Roberto Farinacci, whose veteran credentials were even less heroic than those of Mussolini, had his first dispute with the veterans at the end of February 1921: he accused the veterans of being the combatants of the bourgeoisie.

The rise of the fascist movement paved the way for quarrels between fascist and non-fascist veterans of the ANC. While playing the card of apoliticità in the north, in other southern regions the fascist veterans exerted pressures to debilitate and disband the leftist or democratically-oriented ANC sections. This was the case of Puglia, where the ex-interventionist socialist Gaetano Salvemini, a member of the Parliamentary veterans’ group, led the veteran movement. The fascists labelled him as a ‘renounciator’ (rinunciatario) in relation to the Dalmatian question. Within the space of a few months, the fascist Araldo de Crollalanza succeeded in expelling Salvemini from the ANC section. In Naples, March 1921, the local ANC elections for a new board also gave victory to the fascist veterans. The fascist infiltration into the ANC was a route for Fascism to expand in the Mezzogiorno. Conversely, some veteran leaders of the ANC opted to join the Fasci; this was the case for Giacomo Acerbo in the Abruzzo province. Fascists and veterans walked on the streets of Teramo chanting patriotic and fascist hymns together, having just inaugurated the new local ANC section with a speech by Acerbo. In Florence, the collaboration of the ANC section was most clear;

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40 Lanzillo, editor of the Milanese veteran’s review La Nuova Giornata was criticised for his fascist credentials, which in that moment he tried to deny; La Nuova Giornata (Milano), 31 August 1921. He had actually abandoned the fascist movement at the beginning of 1920, due to the rightist turn, but later in 1921 he would be collaborating again on the pages of Il Popolo d’Italia, now as an ideologue of Fascism as a middle class party. See Emilio Gentile, Storia del partito fascista, pp. 68, 252-255.


42 Il Popolo d’Italia, 1 October 1920; Il Fascio, 5 February 1921; for the context, Simona Colarizi, Dopo guerra e fascismo, pp. 15-26.

43 Il Fascio, 5 March 1921.


45 Note of the prefetto of Teramo (2 May 1921), ACS, MI, PS (1921), b. 89, f. ‘Teramo’.
squadrists were seen leaving the local ANC offices before committing their attacks.\textsuperscript{46} (The criminal actions of the Florentine fascists led to a popular uprising in the city, between late February and early March 1921, which was reported in numerous international newspapers). The ambiguous stance of the ANC and its members regarding the fascist movement was a cause for the increasing fascistization of the symbol of the anti-Bolshevik veteran.

The contacts of disabled veterans with the fascists contradicted the officially non-political posture of the ANMIG. During the spring of 1921, the disabled veterans launched a set of actions in the main cities, pressuring the authorities to favour the veterans’ employment in different administrations, especially the state railway (\textit{Ferrovie dello Stato}). Disabled veterans assaulted and occupied the state railway offices in Rome, obstructing the work of the women that they wanted to replace. Although the left argued that this conflict was another example of the class struggle, the disabled did not assume this discourse, and expelled the communist agitators from their demonstrations. In contrast, in many cities the disabled required the help of the fascists, and thus the agitation increased. Their actions succeeded in Rome, Florence, and other northern cities. In Brescia, for example, a group of disabled, along with veterans, fascists and ex-Fiuman legionnaires occupied the post offices, expelling all the women working there. In Padua a similar action was ended with the hoisting of the Italian flag (\textit{tricolore}) over the occupied offices building—a gesture that contrasted with the use of the red flag in the socialist \textit{comuni}. In Milan, the fascists and disabled veterans erected barricades and fought against the Royal Guards (\textit{guardia regia}). All this agitation actually pushed the authorities to discuss new measures in favour of the disabled veterans, who therefore saw in the fascists their successful defenders. An ANMIG message regarding the agitation alleged that it had not required the help of any organization, but, in fact, cooperation between fascists and disabled veterans had been widespread.\textsuperscript{47}

This initial goodwill of some veterans towards Fascism could be traced to the process of appropriation of the war memory that the fascists undertook as squadism was coming into force. In this endeavour, the fascists took advantage of the difficulties

\textsuperscript{46} Phonograms from the \textit{prefetto} of Florence (26 and 28 January 1921), ACS, MI, PS (1921), b. 96, f. ‘Firenze. Fasci di combattimento’.

\textsuperscript{47} ACS, MI, PS (1921), b. 88; \textit{Il Bollettino}, 1 May 1921; \textit{Corriere della Sera}, 13, 14, 15, 17, 20, 21, 23, 30 April, 4 May 1921; \textit{Il Popolo d’Italia}, 13, 16, 17 April 1921; \textit{Avanti!}, 17, 20, April, 8 May 1921; \textit{I Combattenti}, 21 April 1921; \textit{Il Bolscevico. Organo settimanale del Partito Comunista d’Italia} (Novara), 28 April 1921.
of the Italian state in developing a commemorative settlement. Finding a shared symbolic framework for a national commemoration of the Italian victory was an extremely onerous mission.\(^48\) Firstly, because in all belligerent countries the construction of the war memory — including the role of veterans within it — was always marked by contradictions, struggles, negotiations and fractures.\(^49\) In this sense, the boycotts perpetrated by the Italian socialists and revolutionaries against several patriotic celebrations should not be considered as an exclusive characteristic of postwar Italy. Furthermore, celebrating victory in Italy was more controversial than in other countries, since the persistent divisions between interventionists and neutralists converted the war memory into a clearly divisive issue. The disappointing outcome of Versailles had prevented the Italian state from emulating the celebrations of the allies in 1919. Still, during 1920 the state did offer a variety of symbolic rewards to the authors of victory, as other victorious nations did. Medals were created and bestowed on veterans, namely the Commemorative Medal of the Italian-Austrian War — created in July 1920 for practically all Italian ex-soldiers —, and the Interalleate Medal — coined in December 1920 and given to many veterans of the victorious nations. Italy belatedly (in comparison with its former allies) celebrated the war victory for the first time in 1920. Although the ANC had been an interlocutor of the authorities in the development of many of these initiatives, the veterans still did not have a central role in the official ceremonies. The ANMIG leaders bitterly lamented that the celebrations came too late.\(^50\)

The fascists made the most out of the gaps in the Italian symbolic approach to the war memory, and a set of symbols linked to the veterans were the first elements that the fascists misappropriated. The squadre adopted militaristic pennants as a sign of their unity and faith.\(^51\) Since so many members of the squadre were ex-soldiers, the veterans’ most easily recognizable identifying symbols — the soldiers’ helmet and medals —, overlapped with the symbolic squadrist garments — the black shirt and the black beret. By examining photographs of the squadrists and fascist leaders, it is possible to verify that fascist veterans frequently bore, attached to their uniforms, the commemorative medals created in 1920. Using the helmet during a squadrist action was less a physically protective measure than a means of self-representation for the fascist veterans.

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\(^{50}\) *Il Bollettino*, 1 December 1920, 1 November 1921.
\(^{51}\) Sven Reichardt, *Faschistische Kampfbünde*, pp. 563-566.
The amalgamation between the veterans’ and the fascists, whose power became overwhelming in certain provinces —especially in the Po valley—, raised concerns among some of the veterans’ leaders. The fascists were proud, on the contrary, to highlight the alleged general sympathy and fraternity between both entities, owing to their common programmatic points. The fascists patronizingly reassured the veterans clarifying that they ‘never had the whim [...] of reducing the ANC sections to nothing more than local branches of the *Fasci di combattimento*’.\(^52\) This arrogance was possible when the national elections of May 1921 had given Fascism an important victory. After the first bloody squadrist wave, Fascism entered in the Parliament, walking hand in hand with the Italian conservatives of Giolitti’s National Bloc. In the new legislature, the fascist group was composed of 35 MPs; 28 of them (80%) were war veterans, although this time —a lesson learnt after the failure of the November 1919 elections— the veteran credentials were exhibited with moderation. In contrast, the Nationalist Parliamentary group was composed of 9 MPs; 8 of them were veterans. The so-called *Partito dei combattenti* still survived, but with only 10 seats. In total, in the Chamber there were 135 veterans, 25.76% out of 524 seats.\(^53\)

**The fascist veterans: a travelling stereotype**

Fascism was booming, and violence was the key to its success; the violent symbolic appropriation of the veteran by the fascist movement produced a stereotype: the fascist veteran. Once this emblematic figure became recognisable to foreign observers, the perceived meaning of the fascist movement started to be communicated to other geographical spaces. The agents of these transfers were, above all, diplomats and journalists from different countries; witnesses who chose to accentuate the veteran element of Fascism, to define its essence. In this sense, France and Germany, adjacent countries with an enormous number of war veterans, were highly exposed to Fascism.

The French government was well informed about the Italian disturbances through its ambassador in Rome. At the end of October 1920, for example, the ambassador described the Italian nationalist reaction as something produced by the *arditi* associations, and by ‘fasci di combattimento’ that ‘grouped war veterans and

\(^{52}\) (*i fascisti non hanno mai avuto la velleità [...] di ridurre le Sezioni della ANC in tante succursali dei Fasci di combattimento*) *Il Fascio*, 9 July 1921.

nationalist militants’. On 22 March 1921, having sent a number of reports about the fascist anti-revolutionary, violent reaction, the ambassador Barrère wrote to the Ministry of Foreign Affaires suggesting it would be ‘convenient’ to devote a press article about Fascism in the French journal Temps. The French diplomats had a very positive opinion of the movement, in part because of the perceived importance veterans played in it. Hence, the fascist deeds attracted the attention of French journalists as well. Among the first foreign explanations about Fascism was an article published in the Parisian Le Figaro at the end of March 1921. There, it was highlighted that the ‘fascio di combattimento,’ has been constituted after the war by veterans who wanted to safeguard their interests. They soon assumed the task of fighting all the saboteurs of the victory’. Thus, a hegemonic interpretation of the origins and causes of Fascism, which was related to the Italian veterans, consolidated in France.

Not only biased French journalists assumed this judgment. In April 1921, after the Italian Parliament had been dissolved and new elections had been called, the Swiss ambassador in the capital city transmitted the following description of Fascism:

The word comes from ‘fascio’, faisceau or league. In the aftermath of the war, leagues of war veterans were constituted everywhere with the aim of maintaining solidarity among the veterans and defending their interests. These leagues very quickly took on a political character as a consequence of the violent antimilitaristic campaign unleashed in the country by the socialists and the frequent attacks against officers and other soldiers. In small villages, for example, there

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57 (‘Le fascisme, fascio di combattimento, a été constitué après la guerre par des anciens combattants qui voulaient sauvegarder leurs intérêts. Ils se sont bientôt donné pour tâche de combattre tous les saboteurs de la victoire’) Jacques Roujon, ‘La contre-révolution en Italie’, Le Figaro (Paris), 28 March 1921.
were cases where the local socialists refused to honour with a monument the memory of the fallen soldiers. Decorated military or junior officers during the war were insulted or relegated by the socialists to some form of public contempt. These facts would produce a reaction, which was very slow to take shape. […]

This document and the above mentioned press article, apart from containing a misleading simplification of the veterans’ role in the origin of the fascist rise, show two things. Firstly, they demonstrate that by the spring of 1921, Fascism had been successful in imposing a perception: that of Fascism as the reaction of the war veterans against the pacifist and anti-militarist socialists. And secondly, they testify that this constructed image started to transcend national boundaries. In addition, these French and Swiss examples illustrate the widespread satisfaction of conservative circles regarding fascist violence, understood as a simple reaction against the revolutionary leftist ‘excesses’. The reality rather was that Fascism was attacking the same alleged internal enemy of the war period: pacifists, neutralists and *rinunciatari* whose annihilation was a step necessary to resume the fight for the nationalist objectives. The veterans who were protagonists of this reaction were violent, although their numbers were very limited in overall terms —only those who, apart from believing in the expansionist aims, saw their primordial class enemy in the left. But most foreign spectators did not capture the complexity of the origin of Italian Fascism.

In this manner, the stereotype of the fascist veteran began to circulate outside Italy, influencing extreme right and veterans’ associations. Taking as true the dominating belief that the Italian First World War veterans were a seamless nationalist and anti-Bolshevik collective, observers were ready to assume the characterization of the fascist as a war veteran. This assumption might have been also a conscious discursive strategy of right-wing groups, to conveniently convince the public that veterans were inclined to conservative and counter-revolutionary positions. In any case, the example of Italian Fascism contributed to give relevance to the inclination of veterans towards conservative and reactionary politics. In other words, it furthered the symbolic appropriation of the veterans by the right in other countries. In France, nationalist students and ex-officers were elements of existing rightist groups, but after the example of Fascism, this reality was increasingly highlighted and put in relation with the Italian case.
Paradoxically, the left was also giving relevance to the veterans’ input into Fascism. Maurice Pottier, a war veteran and member of the leftist French group Clarté (founded by Barbusse), realised that the Italian veterans had quite diverse political orientations, but that ‘a certain number’ of them, ‘above all ex-officers’ had sided with the ‘conservative elements’. This commentator considered that this phenomenon was also happening in France, and in other countries. He thought that the ‘conservative and violently anti-proletarian attitude’ of some veterans was a ‘dangerous aberration’.\(^{59}\) But his article was actually a concession to the fascists’ self-characterization as veterans.

Leftist Italian observers also detected the participation of war veterans in the fascist movement, and this perception contributed to the European circulation of the prototypic image of the fascist veteran. As the primordial target of fascist violence, the Italian socialists were among the first people who rationally analysed the origins and nature of Fascism. One of those intellectuals was the moderate socialist Giovanni Zibordi. Like other Marxists, Zibordi sought the causes of the fascist reaction in the economic and social contradictions of the postwar period, yet without underestimating the role of the war experience. At the beginning of April 1921, Zibordi’s article on the ‘elements and motives’ of Fascism, published in the review *Critica Sociale*, argued about the participation of ‘professionals of violence’ within the fascist movement. These people, ‘maladjusted from war’, were young men who had gone to war at less than 20 years old, and now they were unable to resume their studies or jobs.\(^{60}\) He claimed that, during the war, the petty-bourgeoisie had experienced the capacity to give orders, as well as the adventure of combat, and now they were reluctant to return to their humble civil occupations. Later on, socialists’ analyses of the fascist violence in different regions insisted on the role of ex-arditi, ex-officers, and ex-combatants in the movement.\(^{61}\) These leftist perceptions were likely to be transferred outside Italy.

In Germany, socialists and communists paid attention to what was happening on the Italian left, particularly since the beginning of 1921.\(^{62}\) German newspapers of every

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\(^{59}\) (‘un certo numero di ex combattenti, soprattutto di ex ufficiali smobilitati, si è schierato con gli elementi conservatori’, ‘atteggiamento conservatore e violentemente antiproletario’, ‘pericolosa aberrazione’) *Il Paese* (Roma), 2 July 1921.


political hue had transmitted information about important postwar Italian events. As early as January 1921, the social-democratic paper of Munich, Münchener Post, reproduced an article about Fascism, recently published by the Austrian Arbeiter-Zeitung. It was a first-hand report about the fascist violence, where it was noted that the fascists’ support was ‘based on the returning soldiers and their discontent’. However, the author argued that the fascists were the responsible for having forced the Italian Parliament to discuss and approve a new disabled veterans’ benefits law. This misapprehension proves that veterans and fascists were sometimes undistinguishable to foreign observers. Shortly after, a communist paper in the Bavarian capital mentioned the existence of the ‘white guard terrorist organization of the fascists’. Die Rote Fahne explained that the Fasci main programmatic point was the ‘glorification of the front combatant’. And reports about the fascist violence followed in other leftist papers, and later in liberal ones as well. At the beginning of May 1921, an article written by the Vorwärts correspondent in Italy vividly described the fascist violence that had disturbed the normal electoral process. Some days later, a translation into German of the above mentioned Zibordi’s article about the components of Fascism was published in Vorwärts, and the editors of this socialist paper suggested that such political phenomenon could be found also in Germany, not only in Italy. Revealing the veterans’ input to the fascist movement, this translated article contributed to simplifying the German perceptions of Fascism, which hereafter would be based on recognisable stereotypes.

Thus, the German public became aware that Fascism was a phenomenon of young ex-combatants and ex-officers, groups of individuals widely present in Germany. As the German anti-republican terrorist organisations led by ex-officers, such as the Orgesch and the Organisation Consul, committed deadly attempts to assassinate

63 (‘Die Fascisten stützen sich auf die Heimkehrer und die unter ihnen herrschende Unzufriedenheit’) ‘Die “Fascisten”’, Münchener Post (Munch), 5 January 1921; Cf. Arbeiter-Zeitung (Vienna), 31 December 1920.
64 Neue Zeitung. Organ für das arbeitende Volk (Munich), 11 January 1921.
68 ‘Was ist Fascismus?’, Vorwärts (MA), 21 May 1921.
politicians in mid-1921, German left-wing opinion qualified these actions as ‘fascist’. At the same time, perceiving the outrage that the fascists provoked on the German left, the anti-republican extreme right might have tended to stress the distinguished common features with Italian Fascism — namely, the veteran factor.

The hypothesis that early German perceptions of Italian Fascism may have played a crucial role in the evolution of the Nazi movement has been underexplored by historians. The NSDAP, as we know, was born later than the Fascist movement, and its growth as a mass movement was posterior to the expansion of squadristism in Italy. I have demonstrated that the violent practices of Italian Fascism were known in Bavaria at least since the beginning of 1921; hence it is reasonable to believe that Italian Fascism did influence the evolution of the early Nazi movement, even if this influence was not based on direct contacts. While taking into account that Nazism was a product rooted in German extreme right traditions, and that the German post-war experience was of paramount importance in the origins of Nazism, here I will assume that the early Nazi movement was also influenced by its predecessor, Italian Fascism. Particularly, I will explore the role of veterans in the transfer of the fascist political example into Germany. As the stereotype of the fascist veteran had reached Germany in January 1921, at the very latest, it is important to observe how the Nazi movement’s stance regarding the war veterans changed around this time.

By January 1921, the NSDAP had around 3,000 members, most of them inhabitants of Bavaria attracted by Hitler’s oratory during his propaganda tours. Although veterans might have made up a substantial part of the membership and leadership, the party did not have any particular programme regarding them. In the Völkischer Beobachter, there had been invocations to the youth (Jugend) as the last heroic resort to save the Fatherland. At the end of 1920, when this journal became the official organ of the Nazi movement, the veterans’ issues were rather absent from its pages. At that time, in a brief description of the veterans’ organizations published in their paper, the Nazis just showed preference for the so-called Frontkriegerbund, a small veterans’ group from Munich that was opposed to the socialist, communist and

69 For example, ‘Landstagsabgeordneter Gareis ermordet. Eine faschistische Mordtat’, Münchener Post, 10 June 1921.
Jewish veterans’ associations. But there was no direct connection between both organizations yet. Hitler obtained the control of the NSDAP in July 1921. Immediately, he took the initiative to reform the party’s ‘sports section’, to create what later would be known as the Sturmabteilung (SA). Even though it is difficult to give an empirical demonstration, it is plausible that Hitler, who used to read the Munich press, were inspired by the descriptions of the squadrist’s violence to create the SA. Would the veterans in the early SA play the same role as in Fascism?

Although the Bavarian context determined the lower inflow of war veterans into the Nazi movement, the circulating stereotype of the fascist veterans most probably contributed indirectly to shaping the membership of Hitler’s party. According to NSDAP sources, the first group of the SA was composed of 25 men, but only 8 of them were veterans or disabled veterans. However, in June 1921 the government took the decision to dissolve the Bavarian Einwohnerwehren. Apparently, many of the members of this paramilitary organization, as well as returning volunteers of the dissolved Freikorps Oberland, flocked to the SA. At that time, Freikorps members (like Rudolf Heß and Ernst Röhm), as well as other ex-soldiers, trained and directed the younger men of the SA. Yet the Nazi calls for membership were still directed towards the youth, rather than towards the veterans. It is true that veterans were given free entrance to some Nazi meetings, and invited to join the party, but this does not mean that they were the primary target of the NSDAP mobilizing discourse. The Nazi party was still a minor anti-Semitic organization, without any special interest in the war veterans. Therefore, even if some German veterans joined the NSDAP in the Bavarian environment, this was not the result of a conscious political strategy, but the consequence of the German and Bavarian contexts. Still, as has been said, the Italian example of the fascist veterans was an element that already circulated, and was part of such a political environment.

Foreign policy was another factor that predisposed the Nazi movement towards Italian Fascism. In general, among the German extreme-right groups, the perception of Italian Fascism was not positive, given the fascist aggressions towards the German

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72 ‘Kriegsteilnehmerorganisationen’, Völkischer Beobachter, 1 January 1921.
73 ‘Frontkriegerbund-Reichsbund’, Völkischer Beobachter, 20 January 1921.
74 ‘Deutschlands erste S. A. Turn- und sportabteilung 1921’, BArch (Berlin), NS 26, 300.
77 Ibidem, p. 25.
78 Niels Löffelbein, Ehrenbürger der Nation, p. 120.
minority in Südtirol, which had outraged the German nationalists. In contrast, Hitler had shown, already in 1920, his preference for an alliance between Germany and Italy. As he explained in a meeting of war veterans, this rapprochement would drive a wedge between Italy and France, thus debilitating Versailles status quo. The Völkischer Beobachter usually expressed support for the Südtirol Germans; but in November 1921, when for the first time the violent actions of the Italian fascists in Südtirol were mentioned, the paper emphasized the ‘patriotism and spirit of sacrifice’ of the fascists to defend the fatherland from Bolshevism, as a positive facet of the movement. Yet no particular relevance was given to the participation of veterans in the movement.

The NSDAP of 1920-1921, therefore, was neither a simple imitation of the Italian fascist movement, nor a party that oriented its politics and programme towards the veterans. It is very difficult to know when exactly Hitler knew about Fascism, and how this knowledge influenced his political conduct. In the first half of 1921, the stereotype of the fascist veteran had started to circulate in Germany and Bavaria, and it is likely, albeit difficult to prove, that it became an inspiration for the early Nazis. At any rate, during 1921, the example of Italian Fascism was not yet decisive for the trajectories of the German extreme right and war veterans’ paramilitary organizations. However, as Italian Fascism continued its violent and successful path towards power, this political model, conveyed by the symbol of the fascist veteran, would become crucial to understand future German developments.

**Italian war veterans and the fascist seizure of power**

Despite the symbolic appropriation of the veteran by the fascist movement, we should not believe that the majority of Italian veterans were either fascists or sympathisers of Fascism. In fact, the open armed confrontation between fascists and socialists can be seen as a civil war between veterans. Lega proletaria centres and meetings, as a part of the socialist network, were systematically attacked. The fascists made no distinctions between socialists and communists, even if in January 1921 an important scission in the PSI had taken place, whereby the Italian Communist Party was born. Veterans had also

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79 ‘Mussolinis Kampfansage gegen das deutsche Volk’, Gewissen (Berlin), 16 May 1921.
81 ‘Rede auf einer Versammlung des Bundes Deutscher Kriegsteilnehmer’ (Nürnberg, 1 August 1920), Adolf Hitler, Sämtliche Aufzeichnungen, pp. 167-169.
82 (‘der Vaterlandsliebe und dem Opfermut’) Ruprecht Stimer, ‘Das vergessene Deutsch-Südtirol’, Völkischer Beobachter, 2 November 1921.
83 Gianni Isola, Guerra al regno della guerra, p. 144.
set up leftist defence organizations (*guardie rosse*). The *Arditi del Popolo* appeared in the summer of 1921, at the initiative of the anarchist ex-ardito Argo Secondari, ready to defend the working class from fascist aggression. This anti-fascist organization spread quickly, reaching 20,000 members in the summer, most of them in the region between Rome and Ancona, Lazio, Umbria and Le Marche.\(^8^4\) Despite being immediately persecuted by the authorities and attacked by the fascists, their achievements cannot be overlooked. In discursive terms, for a short period, this leftist reaction was successful in snatching the symbol of the *arditi* and the ethos of *arditismo* from the fascist dominion. Among Italians, the notion of *arditismo* would become a category to make sense of the overlapping violence between the fascists and the left.\(^8^5\)

In this increasingly worrying situation, the ANC officially welcomed the so-called ‘pact of pacification’ (*patto di pacificazione*) between fascists and socialists in the summer of 1921, which had been promoted —among others— by Acerbo.\(^8^6\) At the local level, sections of the ANC worked to reach an agreement, though during these efforts they blamed the socialists for their ‘hate propaganda’; the conditions proposed for the pacification meant concessions to fascist objectives.\(^8^7\) Soon, the official ‘pact of pacification’ became a dead letter. Fascist violence did not stop, but increased during the autumn of 1921 and 1922, beyond Mussolini’s control.

Amidst this turmoil, the northern ANC group —endorsed by the fascists— was able to impose the thesis of the *apoliticità* of the veterans’ organization, marginalising the dissident ANC splinter groups. Through a series of internal struggles, the fascists gained a presence within the veteran organization.\(^8^8\) In Rome, Adolfo Schiavo, an ex-officer from an aristocratic background and a member of the *Fasci di combattimento*, took over the ANC provincial section, and launched a set of actions to debilitate the national directing board of the ANC situated in Rome.\(^8^9\) When the III Congress of the ANC was organized in the *Augusteo* of Rome, in November 1921, the old directing board was expelled, and the association reconfirmed its non-political nature. It is eloquent by itself the fact that, just a few days after this declaration, the fascist congress

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\(^{85}\) Benedetto Migliore, *Le convulsioni dell’arditismo*, Milano, 1921.

\(^{86}\) *La Nuova Giornata*, 14 August 1921.

\(^{87}\) (‘*propaganda di odio*’) Documents about Navaccio (Pisa), July 1921, ACS, MI, PS (1921), b. 107, f. ‘Pisa. Fascio di Combattimento, fascicolo 2’.


in the same place transformed the fascist movement into a party: the PNF. Although Fascism had neither absorbed nor subjugated the veteran movement, there had been a palpable displacement of the centre of gravity of the political action of the Italian war veterans. In other words, Fascism had become the main expression of veteran politics.

The reason why the ANC and the fascist congresses coincided in Rome in November 1921 is that on this date, Italy performed the transnational ceremony of the entombment of the Unknown Soldier (Milite Ignoto) in the Roman Vittoriano (Altare della Patria). The ANMIG was very critical of the government, considering that the celebration came too late. Although the entombment ceremony of the Milite Ignoto had the potential to transcend political divisions, the fascists presented themselves as defending the commemorative process from the subversives’ attacks. After this celebration succeeded in Rome, Mussolini took the opportunity to declare at the fascist congress that the Milite Ignoto rested in peace thanks to the fascist movement. Thus, in November 1921, the fascists took a further step in the appropriation of the veterans’ symbolic representation. Fascism had decided to impose its own version of the victory, and it would not allow the country to transform the next celebration of the 4 November into a date of national reconciliation.

Throughout 1922, the PNF continued its efforts to absorb the support of veterans, while the ANC increased its protests to obtain benefits and privileges from the government. In April 1922, the national council of the PNF requested the Fasci that the veterans, mutilated, and the mothers of fallen soldiers be given the highest honours in every national celebration: the fascists were allowed to employ ‘any means’ to force the authorities to fulfil this measure. At the time, in many cities the ANC veterans were expressing their determination to make real once and for all their aspirations; it was time, they said, to give justice to the ‘heroes of yesterday, atrociously mocked today’; they announced a wide protest campaign. The fascists tried to offer the veterans the recognition they craved. In order to widen the antithesis between the veterans and the left, Il Popolo d’Italia used the misleading image of the heroic but crippled war veteran (Image 16).

90 Giovanni Sabbatucci, I combattenti, pp. 357-358.
92 Il Bollettino, 1 November 1921.
93 (‘qualsiasi azione’) Il Popolo d’Italia, 6 April 1922.
94 (‘eroi di ieri, oggi atrocemente beffati’) Ordine del giorno of the ANC (9 April 1922), ACS, MI, PS (1922), b. 99, f. Massa e Carrara.
This discursive and symbolic dynamic, fostered above all by Fascism, served to exacerbate the frustrations of the veterans. The fascist position in defence of a patriotic and nationalist version of the war memory, together with the fascist defence of the alleged special rights of the ex-soldiers, and the PNF stance in favour of social order, seemed to facilitate further recruitment from the veterans to the fascist movement. By May 1922, the PNF would reach 322,310 members, the majority from the centre and the north of Italy. The middle classes were predominant. Workers composed 40% of the Party membership, and 24% were agriculture workers; these groups being most probably attracted to the party as war veterans imbued by myths like that of the peasant-soldier. 88 out of 136 national and provincial fascist leaders were war veterans; and among these, 32 had been war volunteers, 73 had been officers, 31 hold silver medals and 40 hold bronze medals. Many Italian men who felt moved to political action as veterans did so by joining the PNF, thereby supporting squadrism.

However, violence was the factor that contributed the most to the consolidation of the symbolic link between the fascists and the veterans. From the summer of 1922 on, veterans literally assaulted the offices of public and private institutions where they wanted to be employed, expelling women from their jobs. In an echo of the disabled veterans’ protests of the spring of 1921, the fascists joined the veterans’ demonstrations, threatening the authorities and trying to impose the veterans’ will. In August 1922, this

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95 These data from Emilio Gentile: *Storia del partito fascista*, pp. 556-557, 562-563.
strategy especially succeeded in cities where the fascists had a bigger influence on the veterans: Bologna, Florence, Pisa, Rome.\footnote{ACS, MI, PS (1922), b. 99, fascicles Bologna, Firenze, Pisa, Roma; Federico Gabelli, \textit{Adolfo Schiavo}, pp. 83-108.} In Genoa, the veterans’ ringleader stated that if their energetic action — the occupation of offices — yielded no results, they would ‘also have recourse to violent means, requiring the participation of the fascists and nationalists’.\footnote{\textquote{\textit{ricorso a mezzi anche violenti, chiedendo il concorso dei fascisti e nazionalisti}}’ Note from the \textit{prefetto} of Genova (2 August 1922), ACS, MI, PS (1922), b. 99, f. Genova.} Still, in many other provinces, particularly in the \textit{Mezzogiorno}, the fascist tactics found no followers.

Not only was violence the key to forging a sense of community among veterans and fascists; violence also served to destroy the leftist veterans’ organizations. The \textit{arditi del popolo} offered strong resistance to the fascists in Livorno, Genoa, Ancona; they were largely involved in the combats of the 24 May 1922 in Rome, and in the defence of Parma from fascist assault in August 1922.\footnote{Eros Francescangeli, \textit{Arditi del Popolo}, passim.} Yet the connivance of the army and the police with the fascists made resistance hopeless. After the failure of the leftist strike movement of August 1922, the organization of the \textit{arditi del popolo} faded. Furthermore, the squadristi attacked any organization that challenged their monopolization of ‘patriotic’ politics and symbols: even the headquarters of the Catholic ex-servicemen association, the UNRG linked to the PPI, were vandalized, and its members brutalised.\footnote{Emilio Gentile, \textit{Storia del partito fascista}, pp. 513-514.} This strategy foreshadowed what would happen in the following years to the whole of the ANC.

Considering the influence that several fascists had attained inside the ANC, it does not seem a mere coincidence that, while rumours and comments about a fascist ‘March on Rome’ (\textit{Marcia su Roma}) freely circulated since August 1922,\footnote{Giulia Albanese, \textit{La marcia su Roma}, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2006, pp. 58-65.} the fascist veterans decided to step up their agitation. Special veterans’ committees were formed, and violent actions continued; for example, the occupation of bank offices. A large demonstration of ex-servicemen teachers took place in Rome.\footnote{\textit{L’Idea Nazionale}, 22 and 24 September 1922.} In Tuscany, in Ancona, and other places, action squads (\textit{squadre di azione}) of veterans appeared decked out in helmets and green-grey shirts.\footnote{Notes of the \textit{prefetto} of Livorno (7 October and 23 October 1922), ACS, MI, PS (1922), b. 99, f. Livorno; \textit{Il Combattente. Settimanale. Organo dei Combattenti Mantovani} (Mantova), 21 September 1922.} At the end of September 1922, the national board of the ANC planned to launch a simultaneous campaign of agitation across Italy to tackle
the problem of veteran unemployment. On 2 October 1922, the ANC, in accord with the ANMIG, sent a memorandum giving instructions to prepare a wide coordinated demonstration that should take place at some point after the 20 October 1922. This document was signed, in the name of the ANC national board, by the secretary [Angelo] Zilli, and by [Nino] Host-Venturi, both members of the fascist movement.

Although there was no direct connection between these preparations by the veterans and fascist plans to carry out the March on Rome (they started to take shape later in mid-October), the veterans’ agitation contributed to destabilizing public order. The veterans were, at the same time, taking advantage of the state crisis to push for special privileges. In doing so, they did not refrain from replicating fascist methods or—at the local level—directly asking the fascists for help. Furthermore, their presence in the public sphere, many times in tandem with the fascists, helped to consolidate the perception that the fascists had the support of the Italian veterans. Undoubtedly, however, the masses of Italian ex-soldiers had very diverse opinions about Fascism, ranging from opposition to indifference and full support. But the struggle of the veterans and the fascist campaigns were combining and mixing in the symbolic realm.

During the fascist mass meeting of Naples prior to the March on Rome, the fascists publicly clarified their political plans in relation to veterans. Giacomo Acerbo was in charge of detailing this programme. (As we know, Acerbo was a provincial ANC leader). Firstly, he declared that the problems of the veterans had a substantial importance for the PNF, because—according to him—the great majority of the veterans were fascist militants, and because Fascism placed the valuation (valorizzazione) of the war ideals and the victory at the core of its doctrine. Acerbo said that Fascism would definitely resolve the veterans’ problems. Fascism would not place veterans in syndicates, since the PNF actually was ‘the true party of the Italian veterans’. He said that Fascism was the only movement capable of enforcing veterans’ rights. He predicted that soon all the Italian veterans would flock to Fascism. In the subsequent discussion, several veteran leaders who were present raised more precise questions. It was predicted that the ANC would soon constitute one of the biggest forces of the PNF. It was suggested that the PNF contact the organizations of the veterans abroad, because they regarded Fascism as the ‘purest interpreter of their feelings’.

104 Copy of ANC memorandum, transmitted by the prefetto of Rome (17 October 1922), ACS, MI, PS (1922), b. 99, f. Roma.
Another attendee, Vittorio Arangio Ruiz, an ANC northern leader, stated that the ANC desired to come into contact with the PNF, to ensure that the ANC remained free of ‘antinational’ members, and to avoid conflicts with the fascists. After each side made these promises, the expected veterans’ agitation did not take place.

The involvement of certain groups of veterans, sometimes as an emanation from ANC sections, in preparing the final fascist assault on the state, seems unquestionable. Apart from the inaction of the army in front of the fascist challenge, not only the myth of the war experience and the squadrist ethos, but also the military training acquired during the Great War by the squadrist veterans—transmitted to younger generations—paved the way for the March on Rome. For example, in Florence, a group of 13 members of the ANC section, led by the fascist veteran Fernando Agnoletti, had been responsible for squadrist actions in the Tuscan countryside since 1920. They had grown in numbers, and formed the so-called ‘Cesare Battisti’ squad (named after the irredentist martyr). By September 1922 this veteran group was equipped with military gear (grey-green shirts), and in October they participated in the March on Rome. The ANC federation of Bologna, where veterans like Angelo Manaresi (ex-alpino) and Umberto Guglielmotti (nationalist) were influential, also participated in the operation with a group of men. For their part, the arditi of the Federazione Nazionale Arditi d’Italia (created by Mario Carli that month to gather the fascist arditi) declared their interest in finding an agreement with the PNF, to further their collaboration prior to the March on Rome. The ANC section of Naples, similarly, decided to join the fascist action, even if the fascist leaders would not ultimately need their help. In total, they were a few small veterans’ groups, but their important symbolic presence cannot be overlooked.

Meanwhile, the official apoliticità of the ANC made the members of the association bystanders in the conquest of power of October 1922. The guarantors of apoliticità within the ANC boards exhorted the rest of the veterans to maintain themselves silently outside of the struggle, invoking the veterans’ loyalty to the king

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107 Note of the prefetto of Bologna (1 January 1923), ACS, MI, PS (1923), b. 75, f. Associazioni excombattenti, sf. Bologna.
We have seen that despite the official neutrality of both the ANC and the ANMIG, a certain rapprochement and collusion between important groups of veterans and the fascists had already started before the March on Rome.\footnote{This fact introduces nuances to the conclusion of Giovanni Sabbatucci, \textit{I combattenti}, p. 360, that the March on Rome surprised the veterans’ organizations being ‘absent and substantially passive’ (‘assenti e sostanzialmente passive’).} What historically was far more decisive, however, is that in the symbolic realm, the veterans had become an imaginary subject not clearly differentiated from the fascist phenomenon.

**Veterans and the transnational impact of the March on Rome**

The emblematic images of the fascist regime’s founding myth, the March on Rome, are tough men dressed in a militaristic manner, wearing the black shirts of the squadrist, their chests ostentatiously covered with medals, martially parading along the streets of Rome and other Italian cities. The four men who led the March on Rome (Michele Bianchi, Emilio De Bono, Cesare Maria De Vecchi and Italo Balbo) clearing the way for Mussolini, could be perceived as victorious war veterans imposing their will to rescue the country from the hands of decadent liberal politicians and from the revolutionary communist threat. Photographs and illustrations of this kind slowly flowed into the European information networks, after the fascist seizure of power (Image 17).\footnote{See also, \textit{Zeitbilder. Beilage zur Vossischen Zeitung} (Berlin), num. 44, 5 November 1922, where meaningfully the squadrist groups are referred as the “fascist Freikorps” (Fascisten-Freikorps). In France, see \textit{L’Illustration} (Paris), 4 November 1922.}
In fact, the fascists auto-represented themselves in their proclamations as ‘mostly the combatants of the Carso and the Piave who wanted to liberate Italy’.\(^\text{113}\) When the seizure of power was celebrated in several Italian cities, war veterans joined the fascist parades.\(^\text{114}\) Observing the fascists’ ordered processions and their ‘patriotic chants’, people recalled the ‘glorious ranks of our valorous combatants’.\(^\text{115}\) The fascists claimed to have achieved victory on behalf of the fallen soldiers (caduti). An illustration in *Il Popolo d’Italia* represented the squadristi raising their arms in Roman salute to the resurrected corpses of the trenches, who responded with a military salute (Image 18).

\(^\text{113}\) (‘*Siamo in gran parte i combattenti del Carso e del Piave che vogliamo liberare l’Italia*’) Document from the *Fascio* of Cervignano (28 October 1922), ACS, MRF, b. 146.
\(^\text{114}\) ACS, MI, PS (1922), b. 106, fascicoli Aquila, Chieti,
\(^\text{115}\) (‘sfilarono serrati perfetto ordine ricordando schiere gloriose nostri valorosi combattenti, al canto di inni patriottici’) Note of the prefect of Cosenza (1 November 1922), ACS, MI, PS (1922), b. 106, f. Consenza.
In reality, the March on Rome had not strictly taken place: the fascist seizure of power was due to Mussolini’s double strategy of violence and political intrigue, and the entry of the fascists to Rome was a violent dramatization to convince the public that the blackshirts had conquered power through their march on the capital.\textsuperscript{116} Besides, the manly icon of the \textit{quadrumviri} represented squadrist, not the veteran movement. On 30 October, the king appointed Mussolini to be the new Prime Minister (\textit{presidente del Consiglio}). Mussolini broadly presented himself as representative of the Italy of Vittorio Veneto rather than as the war veterans’ voice. In the government he formed together with other political parties, two thirds of the members were military personnel or veterans. Half of the Undersecretaries of State, nine in total, were fascists. But there were only three fascist ministers, plus Mussolini who assumed both Interior and Foreign Affaires Ministries. In any case, the war and the victory were the shared legitimizing symbols of the coalition.\textsuperscript{117}

Despite the symbolic role of war veterans in the rise of Italian Fascism, practically none of the main contemporary commentators interpreted the March of Rome as solely a ‘revolution’ or coup d’état of the Italian veterans. Indeed, some ANC leaders were sceptical regarding the fascist ‘revolution’; they did not consider the

\textsuperscript{117} \textit{L’Idea Nazionale}, 31 October 1922.
triumph of Fascism a product of the veterans’ will. They intelligently realised that—as historians nowadays confirm—Fascism was able to succeed because of the opposition’s errors, because of the Italian liberal state’s weaknesses, and because Fascism had enjoyed the benevolence and support of the Italian armed forces.\footnote{For example, Rodolfo Savelli, ‘La rivoluzione fascista’, I Combattenti (Genova), 15 September 1922 and Il Combattente (Bologna), 1 October 1922.} At that time, inquisitive observers such as Antonio Gramsci identified in the original Fasci the same ‘petty-bourgeois character of the veterans’ associations’. During the fourth congress of the Communist International, celebrated shortly after the March on Rome, the Italian representative Bordiga explained that ‘Fascism assembled all the discharged soldiers who could not find their place in society after the War and put their military experience to work’.\footnote{John Riddel (ed.), Toward the United Front. Proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International, 1922, London, Leiden, 2012, p. 408 (translation by John Riddell).} Yet the internal debate about Fascism within the Italian and international left was rather focused on the class struggle, and around the interpretation of Fascism as the ‘white guard’ (guardia bianca) of capitalism. Other analysts recognised the role in the fascist movement of the war-experienced petty-bourgeoisie, but this factor was just part of a broader and much more complex phenomenon.\footnote{Luigi Salvatorelli, Nazionalfascismo, Torino, 1923.} The German socialist journalist Oda Oldberg put it clearly: without the war, Fascism would have been unthinkable, but this relationship was not in the sense the fascists affirmed: ‘Many of today’s fascist leaders had not fought in the trenches; ‘the ratio of combatants and shirkers in Fascism should coincide on the whole with the overall national average’.\footnote{\textquotedblright Viele seiner heutigen Führer haben sich seinerzeit in Sachen Front und Schützengraben einer strengen Enthaltsamkeit befließigt. Das Verhältnis von Frontkämpfern und Drückebergern dürfte im Fascismus sich im großen ganzen mit dem allgemeinen Landesdurchschnitt decken	extquotedblright \ Oda Olberg, Der Fascismus in Italien, Jena, 1923, p. 11.} For the Italian people, and for some intelligent external observers, the veterans’ input to squadism and their participation in the March on Rome did not constitute the explanatory key of the phenomenon, but only a constituent element of its wider origins. Yet from outside Italy, commentators often highlighted the veteran presence at the core of the movement when they explained Fascism to a non-Italian public.

The symbol of the victorious war veteran was a powerful means to spread the idea of Fascism in Europe, but the multiple perceptions of this myth were conditioned and modelled by those to whom it was communicated. As we will see, the impact of the March on Rome was deeply felt by public opinion and political forces in France,
Germany and Spain. In these and other countries the awareness of the veterans’ role in Fascism manifested at different levels and manners, shaped by the prism of the domestic situations, thus contributing to different political consequences in the course of 1923. We already saw how, very soon, external observers characterised fascism as a veteran phenomenon, and as a reaction against the left. Thus, in Belgium, for example, as the Italian diplomatic representative transmitted to Rome, the March on Rome was seen positively by all political Belgian groups except the socialists, because it had been carried out by a ‘party created by the veterans of the common war in order to annihilate the Bolshevik efforts dangerous for the whole Europe’.

These perceptions were relevant even in Portugal, where eminent personalities immediately visited the Italian ambassador to consult with him on the possibilities of creating a Portuguese fascist party. I will discuss how these discourses and symbols circulated through France, Spain and Germany.

**France**

In France, public opinion generally believed that the Italian veterans were the precursors of the fascist movement. This opinion consolidated when Fascism obtained its violent victories against the left, which provoked reflections about whether fascism was also possible in France. The conservative French press appreciated Fascism basically as a reasonable reaction against leftist excesses.

In *L’Action Française*, Léon Daudet wrote that, in Italy, there was a wide middle-class, ‘comprising numerous war veterans’, who resisted the socialist threat; it was said that the same social dynamic could be found in France. In fact, after the March on Rome, the *Action Française* member Georges Valois started to contact economic lobbies that were searching for a French Mussolini. For his part, the French ex-socialist Gustave Hervé—who since 1914 had gone through an ideological and political evolution parallel to that of Mussolini—also considered that the fascists were the Italian war veterans organized against the left.

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123 Ibidem, p. 15.


According to Hervé, in the elections of 1921, the fascists had contributed to the victory of the Italian national bloc — the ‘brother’ of the French Bloc national. During the March on Rome days, Hervé again praised the nation-saving fascists: ‘They were militarily organized with a strong discipline […] Between the workers—who remained during the war in the factories, completely castrated by the bleating pacifism of defeatists—and the legions of veterans who had stood during four years in the infernal trenches, the street battle did not last long’. Hervé stated that the lesson of Fascism should be taken not only by the weakly-governed Germans, but also by the French government, which had to reinforce its internal politics. The perception that the Italian veterans were involved in Fascism inspired sympathy among different rightist sectors in France. And this awareness made the French right believe that a similar movement was possible in France as well.

By 1922, the powerful and diverse French veterans’ movement could not ignore the Italian veterans’ involvement in the fall of democracy. When the dust of the March on Rome had settled, serene commentators in the French veterans’ press still affirmed that Fascism had been, ‘originally, the veterans’ armed protests against the antinational forces that wanted to “sabotage the peace”’. This view was also sustained by the accounts of writers like Paul Hazard, a traveller who had gone to Italy in 1921 and 1922. Hazard had seen first-hand the rise of Fascism. His depictions of the Italian fascists included reflections on the particular fascist psychology and style. According to him, the fascists were ‘young people full of vehemence or war veterans’, whereas the ‘extremists’—meaning the leftists—were recruited among the ‘bad soldiers, deserters and cowards’. For this author, the March on Rome was a positive and youthful achievement, and a characteristically Italian phenomenon. Would the French veterans and extreme right groups feel pushed to follow this Italian model?

128 La Victoire (Paris), 18 May 1921.
129 (‘Ils s’organisaient militairement, avec une discipline de fer […] Entre les ouvriers, qui avaient fait la guerre dans les usines, complètement émasculés par le pacifisme bêlant des défaitistes, et les légions d’anciens combattants, qui avaient tenu bon pendant quatre ans dans l’enfer des tranchées, la bataille de rue ne fut pas longue’) La Victoire, 28 October 1922.
130 La Victoire, 30 October, 1 November 1922.
The attitude of the large numbers of French veterans and their vigorous associations remained unchanged. Despite the sympathy of many veterans, the main organizations, the UNC and the UF, kept their distance and preferred to point out that Fascism was a purely Italian product, which would not resonate in the French environment. They thought Fascism was not something to ‘export’, or ‘import’. The chief reason for this detachment was to avoid frightening the authorities, as French veterans were protesting to get material improvements. Furthermore, the French veterans were initially suspicious of Fascism, because they were striving to maintain international peace and the status quo of Versailles. This concern dominated the FIDAC congress of November 1922. In this situation Mussolini soon appeared as a potential destabilizing —revisionist— weight in the international relations system. Following the March on Rome, the resignation of the Italian ambassador in France, Carlo Sforza — hated by the fascists—, was polemical. The Italian fascists were a very different and aggressive force in the international sphere. In November 1922, the opening of the conference of Lausanne made the allied statesmen believe that Mussolini could be a gentleman, but in the summer of 1923 the Italian occupation of Corfu revealed the real fascist impulses. From October 1922, Mussolini tried to achieve his imperial goals, though he did not follow the most direct path to achieving his dreams of Empire.

Hence, at the beginning, Fascism was a controversial label from which the French veterans needed to dissociate themselves. Paul Vaillant, administrator of the UF, clearly stated ‘We shall not wear the black shirt’. Subsequently, over the course of the first year of the Fascist dictatorship, the French veterans’ movement became accustomed to referring to Fascism as a point of reference in the political debate. For instance, Henri Pichot employed it in a negative way to criticize the veterans’ inclination towards political actions. Nevertheless, on other occasions, fascism was wielded as a veiled menace to exert pressure on the French authorities. As the Italian example proved, discontented veterans could be the harbingers of a dictatorship, but the French veterans did not expect this outcome.

The extreme right, Action Française, did not change its old approach to veterans either. The theme of the veterans’ right to a ‘share of the victory’ (la part du

134 La Voix du Combattant (Paris), 5 November 1922, 19 November 1922; La France Mutilée, 7 January, 17 June 1923.
136 (‘nous ne voulons pas revêtir la chemise noire’) La France Mutilée, 7 January 1923.
137 La France Mutilée, 1 July, 29 December 1923.
combattant)—allegedly unrecognised by the Republic—, continued unchanged. Veterans’ representations were not transformed (Image 19).

Image 19: The French veteran and the “veterans’ share” (“Part du combattant”). “— Are there olives already in my armistice olive branch? — But, Marianne, you are wrong: they’re nèfles!”

L’étudiant français. Organe mensuel de la Fédération Nationale des Étudiants d’Action Française, November 1922.

In Action Française meetings, when Georges Valois addressed the bourgeois students, he mentioned that the veterans should impose their spirit of victory onto the state, but he did not employ any powerful mobilizing discourse. The fascist model for the veterans’ political mobilization against the internal enemy—the left—was not being adopted in France yet. For many, some actions of the Action Française paramilitary branch, the Camelots du Roi, in 1923 mirrored fascist violent techniques, but, as it was noted in a confidential report for the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ‘violence had been always the line of conduct of the Camelots du Roi’, and the programme of Action Française remained very different from that of the PNF.

Spain

If in France the myth of the fascist veterans did not provoke any consistent reaction mimicking the Italian model over the course of 1923, in Spain any threat to the liberal

139 (‘l’esprit de la victoire’) Action Française, 30 November 1922.
order lacked a mass base of veterans to mobilize. Yet the March on Rome did play a catalysing role in Spanish politics. When Fascism took power in Italy, Spain had not yet overcome the postwar crisis. Violent confrontations between anarchists or syndicalists and ‘civic guards’ like the Somatén or Acción Ciudadana persisted during 1922. In this context, the news of the rise of the fascists was interpreted through the lens of the Spanish conflicts. For the Spanish left, the ‘Italian fascists are nothing more than the somatenistas or civic guards from that country’. It is not by chance that at the end of 1922 the first rumours about a military coup started circulating in Madrid, and in Barcelona politics by the pistol (pistolerismo) resumed, as a symptom of the crisis that lasted during 1923.

In this period, the Spanish press captured the connection between the veterans’ agitation and the rise of Fascism. A concerned Spanish observer witnessed and reported on the assaults to institutional headquarters by the fascist veterans in Rome in a Spanish newspaper. At the same time, there were correspondents in Italy transmitting a very positive image of the fascist movement to the Spanish newspapers. The journalist Rafael Sánchez Mazas, writing for the conservative and monarchist paper ABC, was enthusiastic about the fascists; he vividly depicted the fascist acts of aggression and parades as festivals, and described the fascists as disciplined anti-communist men, ‘virile, funny and generous’. During the March on Rome, Sánchez Mazas represented the Italians as cheering the cohort of ‘100,000’ fascist volunteers, along with ‘war disabled and athletes’ who were ‘recreating the blood fraternity of the dark days of the trenches’. Although the relevance given to the veterans’ responsibility in the fascist movement was smaller than in France, the diverse Spanish press did not overlook this reality. Therefore, the impression that Fascism was mainly a veterans’ movement would become commonplace among Spaniards. Some years later, a regional republican paper continued to explain the ‘incredible fascist rise’ by saying that ‘the capitalist

143 (‘los fascistas italianos no son otra cosa que los somatenistas o guardias civicas de aquél país’) La Acción. Periódico republicano. Órgano de las izquierdas de Tarrasa y su distrito (Tarrasa), 3 November 1922.
144 Cf. Eduardo González Calleja, El máuser y el sufragio, pp. 216-240, 260.
145 Andrenio, ‘Los ex combatientes’, La Vanguardia (Barcelona), 6 September 1922.
146 (‘viriles, divertidos y generosos’, ‘mutilados de guerra y los atletas’, ‘repetía la fraternidad de la sangre en las horas difíciles de las trincheras’) Rafael Sánchez Mazas: ‘ABC en Italia. La victoria fascista y la marcha sobre Roma’, ABC (Madrid), 15 November 1922. See also Id.: ‘ABC en Roma. La revolución a paso gentil’, ABC, 28 October 1922.
strongboxes had been opened to arm thousands of unemployed veterans who—just by the fact of having taken part in the war—believed they were supermen’.  

In Spain, as in Italy, the relationship between the military and the liberal state experienced a period of crisis. The Spanish army remained profoundly divided between junteros and africanistas. In 1921, to recover from the military setback of Annual, the army had created an elite corps, the Legión; its promoters were the Africanist officers José Millán Astray and Francisco Franco. The Legión was based on the French Foreign Legion model. Its members largely mirrored the Italian arditi, often ex-convicts or adventurers. And the young Franco, holding ‘heroic’ combat decorations, became an idol for the colonialist and rightist opinion. The Legión became a patriotic reference for the nationalist groups, antagonistic towards the Peninsula-based military officers (junteros). In November-December 1922, General Picasso’s report on the responsibility for the disaster of Annual raised bitter discontent among the africanistas. At that moment, the extreme right backed Millán Astray and portrayed him as the Spanish Mussolini. In November 1922, while Millán Astray’s legionnaires paraded in the metropole, he lobbied the government to resolve the military crisis in favour of the africanistas. He was able to gather support among students, and after a series of riots the government agreed to dissolve the Juntas. The tough legionnaires were not war veterans, and Spanish returning soldiers from Morocco played no role in these developments. But the political use of the soldiers mirrored the Italian case. The philosopher Miguel de Unamuno affirmed: ‘the bare-chested men of Millán Astray are like the blackshirts of Mussolini’.  

Furthermore, the March on Rome provoked other anti-liberal reactions in Spain. At the end of 1922 and in 1923, the first attempts to create a Spanish fascist movement saw the foundation of the obscure group La Traza and the one-single-issue review La  

147 (‘subió el fascismo de modo increíble. Las arcas capitalistas se abrieron para armar a miles de excombatientes desocupados que por el hecho de haber tomado parte en la guerra se creyeron super-hombres’) La Acción. Periódico republicano, 9 September 1927.  
148 José Luis Rodríguez Jiménez, ¡A mi la Legión! De Millán Astray a las misiones de paz, Barcelona, Planeta, 2005, pp. 81-140.  
149 Laura Zenobi, La construcción del mito de Franco. De jefe de la Legión a Caudillo de España, Madrid, Cátedra, 2011, pp. 21-58.  
Camisa Negra. These short-lived organizations were promoted by army officers and supported by employers, but they only recruited some petty-bourgeois students. Some evidence suggests direct involvement of Italians in these political manoeuvres: already in December 1922 a fascist military officer gave a conference in the House of Italians based in Barcelona, for an audience composed of many Spanish sympathizers.152 Yet the fascist leadership did not promote this dissemination. It was said that Fascism was not transplantable. The rumours about a visit of Mussolini to Madrid were not confirmed.153 Those Spanish fascist cells would soon disappear.

In any case, this agitation preceded the final collapse of the Spanish liberal state. In mid 1923, liberal politicians planned to foster a decisive reform, diminishing Spanish military involvement in the Moroccan Protectorate. General Miguel Primo de Rivera’s coup d’état on 13 September 1923 put an end to these detrimental changes for the Spanish africanistas military.154 Like in Italy, dictatorship was imposed with the connivance of the king. A few weeks later, in November 1923, the king and the new dictator paid a visit to Fascist Italy; by then, many were seeing the Spanish regime as a reflection of the Italian example.155 The dictator Primo de Rivera initially seemed interested in getting support from La Traza, but the more conventional Somatén, and later a party created from above—the Unión Patriótica—, would finally represent the much more conservative Spanish version of the blackshirts and the PNF during the 1920s.156

All these events, according to historians, demonstrate that a ‘real’ fascism was unable to take root in Spain, though there existed conditions for the imposition of an authoritarian nationalist regime.157 The predominance of Catholicism, the receding revolutionary menace, the influence of conservative militarism and, indeed, the absence of a strong veterans’ movement have been pointed out as the main causes of the failure

152 El Debate (Madrid), 6 December 1922.
156 Eduardo González Calleja and Fernando del Rey, La defensa armada, pp. 169-177.
of the first wave of Spanish fascism. Moreover, it should also be mentioned that the arrival of the intellectual and cultural trends that fermented in all European Western countries before 1914 had not been galvanised in Spain by the cathartic ‘total’ war experience. The Spanish literary elites did not undergo the initiation to politics that was the First World War. The artistic vanguards came to Spain belatedly and devoid of the political inclinations of the Italian futuristi and arditi. But the question of the veterans needs further analysis.

Despite this arid cultural ground, there were writers and intellectuals who, after an experience of war in Morocco, developed a set of discourses that represented in Spain the proto-fascist veterans’ worldview by 1922-1924. This was the case for the writers Luys Santa Marina and Ernesto Giménez Caballero, who would be promoters during the 1930s of the Spanish fascist party Falange Española. The poet Luys Santa Marina published Tras el águila del César, a book whose violent aesthetics served the purpose of singing the praise of the troops of the Legion, and reminds the prose of the ardito Mario Carli. It was his experience as a soldier in Morocco that motivated Ernesto Giménez Caballero, a student born in 1899, to compose his first important literary work, Notas marruecas de un soldado. In the last pages of this account, written in Madrid during December 1922 (he could not have been unaware of the agitation of those days in the Spanish capital), he offered a manifesto addressing other ex-soldiers. Giménez Caballero rejected the possibility of a silent reintegration, because he and his comrades had ‘common tasks in the new civilian life’. The veterans should influence national opinion about Morocco, and they should strive to obtain a purge of those responsible for the ‘thousand errors and dirty tricks’ that they had seen in the protectorate. As we see, writing in the wake of the March on Rome, Giménez Caballero launched a clear call to veterans to intervene in Spanish politics.

158 Francisco J. Romero Salvadó and Angel Smith (ed.), The Agony of Spanish Liberalism, p. 19; Manuelle Peloille, Fascismo en cierres, p. 46; Eduardo González Calleja and Fernando del Rey, La defensa armada.
160 Luys Santa Marina, Tras el águila del César: elegía del tercio, Duero, 1924; cf. Mario Carli, Noi arditi, Milano, 1919.
161 (‘tareas comunes en la nueva vida civil’, ‘mil errores y canalladas’) Ernesto Giménez Caballero, Notas marruecas de un soldado, Madrid, 1923, pp. 247-252. Sixty years later, in a new edition of this book (Barcelona, Planeta, 1983), Giménez Caballero wrote in the preface that in 1923 he still did not know the ‘social nationalism’ (‘nacionalismo social’) of the war veterans from different European countries.
By the end of 1922 the image of Fascism in Spain was that of a nationalist anti-leftist and anti-democratic movement whose members were first and foremost war veterans; a characteristic that endowed Fascism with a popular and revolutionary facet. However, the immediate imitative attempts to develop a Spanish fascist movement did not take root, due to the absence of a proper large group of veterans to form a mass membership, or rather due to the impossibility of any move to fully manipulate the symbol of the veteran. Primo de Rivera’s regime was rather conservative and Catholic reactionary. The dictatorship did not permit the diffusion of the nationalist books of both Giménez Caballero and Santa Marina due to their subversive potential.\textsuperscript{162} Yet the Italian and Spanish dictatorships shared many other features towards the end of 1923. Fascism continued to influence Spain, and the symbol of the fascist war veterans would play a role in the future. Furthermore, the events taking place in Spain during 1923 also had an impact on Germany. It is not unimportant that the Nazis understood the imposition of the military dictatorship in Spain as a ‘fascist solution of the Spanish crisis’, just two months earlier than their own putsch attempt took place.\textsuperscript{163} The antidemocratic thrust after the March on Rome affected different European regions, and Bavaria was one of the most alarming cases.

\textit{Germany}

In Germany, the March on Rome exacerbated the already tense politics. From January 1923, the increasing problem of hyperinflation and the French occupation of the Ruhr intertwined with the war reparations issue. Thus the difficult conditions of the country worsened. As a reaction, there was a powerful revival of German nationalism. This situation represented a blow to the republican and pacifist groups, which had neither been able to consolidate an organizational network, nor to fully establish a pacifist discursive framework for the war remembrance.\textsuperscript{164} As in other countries, the public had attentively observed the March on Rome, perceiving the potential turn in the international relations that it implied.\textsuperscript{165} The situation of the German population in South Tirol (\textit{Südtirol} or \textit{Alto Adige}) would be especially worrying, for the fascists had

\textsuperscript{162} Dionisio Viscarri, \textit{Nacionalismo autoritario y orientalismo. La narrativa prefascista de la guerra de Marruecos (1921-1927)}, Bolonia, Il Capitello del Sole, 2004.

\textsuperscript{163} (‘fascistischer Einschlag der spanischen Krise’) \textit{Völkischer Beobachter}, 15 September 1923.


\textsuperscript{165} See, for example, \textit{Vossische Zeitung}, 28, 29, 30 October, 1 November 1922.
shown their intentions to pursue Italianization.\textsuperscript{166} Whereas the Weimar authorities distrusted the new political actor that was Fascism, the German nationalists now praised the fascist achievement, as potentially beneficial for themselves.\textsuperscript{167} The fascist rise to power October 1922 also led to a reassessment of the anti-parliamentarian threat in Germany, conceptualized as a fascist phenomenon that had taken its first steps since 1919.\textsuperscript{168}

It is very clear that the March on Rome became the admired model that the German extreme right desired to imitate in order to overthrow the Weimar Republic.\textsuperscript{169} This longing was captured by the Latin expression ‘\textit{Italia docet}’ (Italy teaches), employed by the radical conservative review \textit{Gewissen}.\textsuperscript{170} These anti-Semitic, \textit{völkisch} nationalists wondered whether fascism was possible in Germany, and considered its causes. As they stressed the fact that the Italian young men had made possible a profound transformation of the Italian state’s ‘spirit’ (\textit{Staatgeist}); they consequently appealed to the young Germans to follow the same goal of a conservative reaction. This counter-revolution would reinforce the state, order and discipline.\textsuperscript{171} It was the young people who were represented as the protagonists of Fascism, rather than the veterans. Nevertheless, in Germany the anti-republican stance was already hegemonic in the galaxy of the veteran associations. The March on Rome surprised the members of \textit{Stahlhelm} in a moment of disorganization, due to the governmental preventive ban after Rathenau’s murder (June 1922); but by the end of January 1923 the association recovered its freedom and continued its progression, establishing close contacts with the military circles that were preparing a coup.\textsuperscript{172} The agitation and competition of anti-revolutionary combat leagues like the \textit{Jungdeutscher Orden} (Order of Young Germans),

\textsuperscript{168} Paul Kampffmeyer, \textit{Der Faschismus in Deutschland}, Berlin-Stuttgart, 1923.
\textsuperscript{172} Volker R. Berghahn, \textit{Der Stahlhelm}, pp. 39-53.
virulently confronted with the communists, characterised the background where the Hitler’s putsch of November 1923 took place.

Hitler was among those who saw in Fascism and Mussolini an example to follow. Common features between both movements were clear. In April and May 1922, the Nazis had organized special propaganda meetings for veterans, where Hitler decried the fact that the returning soldiers had been dishonourably received at the end of the war. Although the Bavarian press had pointed to the similarities between the fascists and the Nazis, the Nazis preferred to stress their own anti-Semitism as a singularity, regretting that the fascists did not undertake the fight against the Jews. Nonetheless, at the end of September 1922, Hitler sent an emissary to Milan, Kurt Ludecke, who made Mussolini aware of the NSDAP. According to Ludecke’s memoirs, in their conversation, the Duce appreciated the common anti-Marxism of both the fascists and the Nazis, but was intransigent regarding the Alto Adige question, and unconcerned about the Jewish ‘problem’. Even so, once he had returned to Munich, Ludecke confirmed to Hitler the many commonalities existing between both movements and, in fact, mentioned that both Mussolini and Hitler were war veterans, as a motive for an understanding between them. Hitler probably was delighted.

After the March on Rome, the Nazi imitation of the fascist style became all too evident for increasingly anxious republicans in Munich. Both the German and Bavarian left, and some leading Nazis, saw in Hitler the ‘Bavarian’ Mussolini. As the Nazis saw how the resolute fascists finally imposed their will, Hitler’s speeches pointed to the exemplary Italian ‘fascist fight’. Hitler’s notion of heroism developed now, and he started to highlight the example of the frontline soldiers to his SA men. Furthermore, the Italians’ alleged ‘national rebirth’ (nationale Wiedergeburt) pushed Hitler to reinforce his ideas for an agreement with Italy. He was even ready to abandon

173 *Völkischer Beobachter*, 3 and 18 May 1922.
the Südtirol question in order to construct a relationship with Mussolini, even if this attitude raised criticism among his Austrian followers.\(^{180}\)

Although the Nazis wanted to walk the same path as their successful Italian counterparts, in practical terms their strategy was conditioned by a different context, that of Bavaria during the year 1923.\(^{181}\) The symbol of the March on Rome, mixed with Hitler’s obsessions and prejudices, shaped the developments leading to the Beer Hall putsch. The March on Rome made clear for many rightist circles in Europe that the officers mobilizing anti-Bolshevik youths could build an imitation of the Italian fascist reaction.\(^{182}\) Accordingly, old German officers offered themselves as instructors for the Nazi assault troops. Yet Hitler preferred ‘instinctive young men, who possess recklessness and idealism’. Mussolini’s example simply meant for Hitler ‘willingness for action’, since fighting was necessary to reach victory.\(^{183}\) Despite this insistence on the youth and the allegedly stark differentiation from the army, the adoption of uniforms and symbols for the SA members, who publicly paraded in Munich at the end of January 1923 during the Day of the NSDAP Party (Parteitag), clearly emulated the fascist style.\(^{184}\)

While the Nazi movement grew in this fashion, external observers identified it as a part of a fascist German movement composed of war veterans and of people who fully assumed their image. This perception was predominant in Spain, where newspapers of every hue noted the uneasiness produced by the nationalistic groups in Bavaria, parading with their ‘Prussian helmets’ and ‘wearing the uniform of the German trench soldier’; the political manoeuvres of Hitler and Ludendorff were labelled as the ‘fascist plot in Germany’.\(^{185}\) Certainly, in a parallel to the fascist movement of 1921-1922, the protagonists of the Bavarian agitation were mostly young men, many of them veterans, trained and armed by military officers. In Spain it was explained that Hitler’s party was composed of veterans (excombatientes), employees and students.\(^{186}\) In Italy, it

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\(^{182}\) For example, in Sweden, 3 November 1922, army officers published a call to the young to follow the fascist example: see DDI, *Settima serie*, Vol. I, p. 22.
\(^{184}\) Werner Maser, *Frühgeschichte*, pp. 326-327.
\(^{186}\) *ABC* (Madrid), 4 October 1923.
was known and particularly reiterated that anti-Semitism was the main characteristic of
the NSDAP. Yet the Italian left understood this phenomenon as fascism: as in Italy,
German fascism recruited —apart from a few idealists— many opportunists,
‘injudicious youngsters’, and ‘war detritus’. Again, the stereotype of the fascist
veteran, now referred to the Nazi movement, circulated.

The French veterans, in contrast, did not fully take this feature into
consideration. Focused instead on the question of the reparations, the veterans’ of the
UF longed for peace and rejected any imperialistic inclination; but at the same time they
required that the peace were built on the France’s right to compensations. These
French veterans avoided expressing support or rejection to the occupation of the Ruhr.
Their first timid contacts with German veterans had completely stopped with the
 crisis. They seemed unaware of the nationalist agitation that spurred on their German
counterparts. When Hitler’s putsch came, veterans of both the UNC and UF were
absorbed by the celebrations of the French victory of 11 November and paid little
attention to the events in Germany.

At the beginning, this coup d’état was conceived as a March on Berlin. For this
reason, by November 1923 the Italian public was expectant. Actually, such a
manoeuvre did not take place: the military organizers understood that there had been
insufficient preparation in northern Germany and that the cooperation of the regular
army was unsure. In spite of these hesitancies, the pressure of Hitler’s fanatic followers,
the brown shirts of the SA, precipitated action in Munich. A Nazi leader guaranteed
to the Corriere della Sera that they would obtain success. But the putsch failed, and
the press across Europe did not hold back in its depiction of this shameful adventure as
a tragicomedy. This abortive imitation also embarrassed the Italian fascists, who
consequently abhorred the disastrous Nazi venture. The fascists distanced themselves
from the Nazis, stressing the important differences between them. They said that

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187 La Stampa, 19 February 1923.
188 (‘giovani spensierati’, ‘detritti della guerra’) Avanti!, 5 July 1923.
189 La France Mutillée, 8 April 1923; cf. Corriere della Sera, 4 April 1923.
“Reichsbundes” und ihre Kontakte zu den französischen anciens combattants 1919-1933’, in Wolfgang
Hardtwig (ed.), Politische Kulturgeschichte der Zwischenkriegszeit 1918-1939, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck
& Ruprecht, 2005, pp. 183-204.
191 Avanti!, 1 November 1923; Corriere della Sera, 3 November 1923.
192 James M. Diehl, Paramilitary Politics, pp. 149-150.
193 Corriere della Sera, 8 November 1923.
194 Renzo de Felice, Mussolini e Hitler. I rapporti segreti (1922-1933) (2nd ed.), Firenze, Felice Le
Monnier, 1983, p. 23.
Fascism was an essentially Italian phenomenon, and likewise, the Spanish example of Primo de Rivera dictatorship was another proof of this differentiation.\textsuperscript{195} However, it is difficult to deny that the fascist movement had liberated forces that did not respect national boundaries. Even if November 1923 saw the German attempts to overthrow a democratic regime in the fascist manner end in deadlock, the idea of a March on Berlin would remain present among the Nazis and the anti-republican groupings like the veterans’ \textit{Stahlhelm}, as a notion that synthesized their fight for power until 1933.\textsuperscript{196}


\textsuperscript{196} \textit{Der Marsch auf Berlin}, Berlin, 1932.
Part II
Fascism and Veterans during the 1920s

This section is devoted to contrasting, on the one hand, the complex and uneasy relationship between the veteran groups and the fascists within Italy, and, on the other hand, the wide and effective circulation of the ‘myth of the fascist veterans’ throughout Europe during the 1920s. The consolidation of the dictatorship in Italy and the apparition of groups that sought to emulate Fascism in France and Germany were related to the mythical construct of the fascist veteran and its political communication.
Chapter 3
The Process of War Veterans Fascistization (1923-1925)

Having explained the stereotypical construction of the fascist veteran and the mythmaking process surrounding the ‘veteran’ March on Rome, it is necessary to assess the extent to which, in historical reality, the Italian veterans were transformed into fascists, and how this happened. A detailed observation of the actual relations between veterans and Fascism is needed, for it will allow us to understand the deep cleavage between reality in Fascist Italy and the mythic discourses that circulated in Europe at that time. This chapter analyses what I call the process of war veterans’ fascistization, which took place in Italy roughly between 1923 and 1925. Here, ‘fascistization’ refers to the process whereby social groups and institutions, willingly or forcibly, adopted, or acquiesced to, ideological and organizational fascist principles and commodities. The relationship between veterans and Fascism in this period should be conceptualized as a process of fascistization of Italian veteran organizations and discourses.

The fascistization of Italian veteran politics must be understood in the historical context of 1923-1925. In Italy, things did not change suddenly after the fascist takeover of October 1922. Although the legal political order had been broken, this shift was, above all, a compromise between Fascism, the king, liberals and conservatives, to form a coalition government. The construction of the dictatorship was slow-paced, and the transformations that affected Italian war veterans progressively evolved from late 1922 to early 1925. This period was a paradoxical context, full of contradictory situations, internal tensions and struggles. Its outcome —the establishment of a fully-fledged dictatorship that displayed totalitarian traits and would lead again to war— was not determined from the beginning, though there existed forces which steadily pushed towards a political radicalization.

In the first year of Mussolini’s government, two main impulses sought to shape the agenda, with the projected ‘normalization’ of the fascist movement struggling with the pressure from radical fascist sectors who aspired to the implantation of a full fascist state (Farinacci being the most important representative of them). While the Chamber functioned precariously with the sword of Damocles hanging over it, the squadrist

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1 Cf. Aristotle Kallis, ““Fascism”, “Para-fascism” and “Fascistization””.
continued exerting violence in several provinces. In December 1922, the bloody events of Turin (fatti di Torino) demonstrated that it would be very complicated to appease Fascism. Unrestrained violence could endanger the order-restoring ambitions of the recently formed fascist government. In response, Mussolini and his close collaborators created the *Milizia Volontaria per la Sicurezza Nazionale* (MVSN) in January 1923. This kind of partisan army inside the state was an attempt to bring squadrism under control, overcoming the resistance of intransigent provincial leaders like Farinacci. Thus many Italian veterans who had been squadrist now became MVSN members. 70% of MVSN officers were between 24 and 38 years old, came predominantly from the central northern Italy, and had experienced the war as junior officers or NCOs. This institutionalization of squadrism can be understood as a demobilization of veteran groups, but it cannot be considered as a disarmament, and the tasks assigned to the MVSN, basically the persecution and surveillance of the internal enemy, did not imply a demobilization of the practices and discourses of violence rooted in the war experience.

Another step in the ‘normalization’ of Fascism was the creation of the *Gran Consiglio del Fascismo* (Great Council of Fascism), as the new supreme organ of Fascism at the end of 1922. Among its first members, surrounding Mussolini, were the four *quadrumviri* of the March on Rome — Balbo, Bianchi, De Vecchi, De Bono — and men like Giacomo Acerbo, Achille Starace, Nicola Sansanelli or Pietro Bolzon, all of them fascist veterans. This decision-making institution remained an instrument in the hands of Mussolini, and its actual influence over the regional fascisms was reduced. In order to extinguish both the opposition and the resistance of dissident fascists, Mussolini relied on new *prefetti*, who represented the state in the provinces.

The political left, persecuted both by the fascists and by the state authorities, was not the only victim of this situation. The Catholics were soon to meet a similar fate. The process of absorption of the Italian Nationalist Association by the PNF, especially relevant in the South, was not free of violence until its conclusion in February 1923. But voluntarily fusing with the powerful PNF yielded many advantages for nationalist politicians. ‘Normalization’ was also desired by political sectors ready to collaborate with Mussolini’s government in the restoration of social order. These groups were called *fiancheggiatori* (supporters), and they intended to collude with Fascism without

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losing their own political identity and autonomy. Having absorbed these elements, the PNF saw its ranks swollen with new members.

In this situation, towards the summer and autumn of 1923, ‘revisionism’ emerged as a new ideological fascist current, represented by Giuseppe Bottai and the review Critica fascista. The revisionists tried to develop a new fascist doctrine, adjusted to the changed context after the March on Rome. They considered the violent revolutionary phase over, and saw the necessity of creating a new state and an intellectual fascist class. The leading figure of the revisionist trend, Bottai, was himself an ex-ardito who now advocated for a sort of fascist attitudes that were far from the virulent arditismo. Bottai’s insistence on discipline, obedience and hierarchy symbolized the ‘normalization’ process, since it implied the transformation of former fascist values. With this shift, the militaristic ethos did not vanish. As Bottai said, discipline and hierarchy made Fascism something similar to a marching victorious army.⁴ Confronting revisionism, squadism and intransigent Fascism were still active, embodied in Farinacci, and ex-arditi like Mario Carli and his review L’Império.⁵ In the wake of the Matteotti crisis and in 1925, this intransigent trend would contribute to the imposition of the dictatorial fascist regime, under the rule of Mussolini and the PNF.

It was against the background of this ideological and political ferment that the main Italian veteran organizations firstly sought to collaborate with Mussolini’s government, becoming progressively fascistized. I will analyse the process of organizational and political negotiation between the ANMIG, the ANC and the PNF, which lead to the fascistization of these veteran organizations, and, in response, to the apparition of anti-fascist veteran trends. Concurrently, ideological and discursive developments also interweaved in a powerful dynamic, which became a whirlwind in the context of the Matteotti crisis during the summer of 1924, leading to a drastic resolution in 1925. It was this year that saw the fascistization of the Italian veterans culminate.

The beginnings of a relationship: veterans and Mussolini’s government

Just after the March on Rome, the veteran associations celebrated the Victory of 4 November. Il Popolo d’Italia stated that Mussolini had made the celebration possible.⁶

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⁵ Emilio Gentile, Le origini della ideologia fascista, pp. 323-396.
⁶ Il Popolo d’Italia, 5 November 1922.
However, it had been the last liberal government that some weeks previous, had declared the 4 November as a national holiday, following a petition of the ANC. At that time, there had been plans for a demonstration of disabled veterans, with the participation of D’Annunzio and the collaboration of Aldo Rossini (ANC member and Undersecretary for War Pensions in the last liberal government). This was a pacifying and reconciling initiative, planned to pre-empt the imminent fascist assault on Rome. It might have been another steppingstone towards a nationally shared war memory, since D’Annunzio intended to talk about ‘peace, labour and faith’ (di pace, di lavoro, di fede). Some disabled veterans’ leaders, such as Delcroix, had offered their collaboration. But the March on Rome came too soon, allowing the fascists to appear as the main patrons of the celebration of 4 November 1922. In the end, many ANC and ANMIG leaders were equally enthusiastic about having the fascists in the government as the promoters of the 4 November anniversary.7 But Italian politics had changed dramatically.

The disabled veterans of the ANMIG were the first to experience the difficulties of a close relationship with Fascism.8 Beyond a common patriotism and nationalism, the particularities of the fascist ideology disturbed the harmony that the veterans expected. When the time came to transform the promises into concrete concessions, conflicts arose. A revision of the Pensions Law for maimed veterans had long been demanded by the ANMIG, and studied by government experts like Rossini in collaboration with the association. A law project designed by Camillo Peano (Minister of the Treasury) was already under discussion in October 1922.9 This new law intended to refine the levels of the pensions granted, not according to military rank (although some progressive percentage were maintained according to rank), but in relation to the seriousness of the wounds. Furthermore, disability caused by actual combat service —caused by enemy weapons— was to be better rewarded than those disabilities resulting from non-front-line service. The ANMIG played a role in the discussion of these stipulations, which largely corresponded to the wishes of the organized disabled veterans. The dramatic arrival of the fascists to the government suddenly jeopardized this process.

7 Antonino Répaci, La Marcia su Roma, Milano, Rizzoli, 1972, pp. 448, 794-795, 947-952; L’Idea Nazionale, 28 October 1922; Il Combattente Romagnolo (Ravenna), 1 November 1922; Il Combattente (Bologna), 4 November 1922; Bollettino della Sezione Provinciale fra Mutilati ed Invalidi di Guerra (Rovigo), 31 October 1922; Bollettino della sezione provinciale di Ferrara fra mutilati e invalidi di guerra (Ferrara), num. 1, January 1923; Emilio Lussu, Marcia su Roma e dintorni, Torino, Einaudi, 2002 [1945], pp. 51-52.
9 Il Mutilato (Cremona), num. 2, November 1922.
In fact, the fascist seizure of power made the fate of disabled veterans’ issues unclear. One of the fascist quadrumviri, Cesare Maria De Vecchi, was appointed to be the new State Undersecretary for War Pensions. De Vecchi was a military man and a squadrist, but despite all his ‘heroic’ records, he was not the appropriate person to deal with the delicate and complicated problems of the disabled war veterans. De Vecchi was more interested in setting up a militia from squadristism, and he would later become a general of the MVSN. Initially, he declined Mussolini’s offer, but finally, according to his account, and in honour of his monarchism, he accepted the post at the request of the king. He followed the instructions of Mussolini and worked together with experts in furthering the reform of the pensions. The main guiding principle was the removal of the alleged ‘demagogic principles’ of the previous law, revising the categorization of disabilities on the basis of the war sacrifices, and reducing the interference of the ANMIG in these affairs. Mussolini pointed to the scandalous situation of many deserters presumably living at the expense of the state.10

It is interesting to analyse how De Vecchi as Undersecretary for War Pensions approached disabled veterans after the fascist seizure of power, for this examination reveals the Fascist ideology, discourse and organizational projects regarding veterans by the end of 1922. In the first message delivered by De Vecchi to all the Italian veterans, he started by invoking the fallen soldiers and introducing himself as ‘an artilleryman, a bomber, an infantryman, an ardito’, a discourse that reflected the basic characteristics of the fascist approach.11 As we will see next, this new paradigm supposed a radical shift from the old discourses about the trincerocrazia, originally directed towards the disabled veterans, who in 1917 had been said to be the ‘vanguard of those who returned’ and supposedly bore the right to lead the new Italy. Mutilated veterans had not forgotten Mussolini’s speeches in 1919 demanding for them an authentic recognition and material reward to them.

Now, the fascists considered the state as a superior entity, to which disabled veterans owed obedience and service. The state, in De Vecchi’s words, was like a father and a master that had the ‘duty’ of assisting his sons. Thus, the disabled would conserve their ‘right to live’; their possibilities to still give and donate would be encouraged. The

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11 (‘Artigliere, Bombardiere, Fante, Ardito di guerra’) De Vecchi’s message can be read in Il combattente romagnolo, 30 November 1922.
state had a moral duty but not an obligation: pensions should not be considered as a compensation for suffering. The state was not an entrepreneur, but a father. Hence, the state had the right to ask its son to sacrifice his life, and the son had the duty of cheerfully giving his life for the fatherland’s salvation and grandeur. On this basis, De Vecchi announced a full revision of all the pensions, which would inexorably proceed against profiteers such as disertori, autolesionisti, imboscati, who supposedly abused the system. The pensions would recover, therefore, their moral and integrative function. In pursuing these objectives, De Vecchi called for a consolidation and unification of the various entities that offered assistance. He suggested that spirit-corrupting organizations that represented the disabled (supposedly the ANMIG) would not be exempted from the reform.\(^{12}\)

The debate among interest groups and specialists on the matter developed in December 1922. It was said that the revision would not yield much savings, and that it should be avoided, as it would sow discord among the persons affected.\(^{13}\) De Vecchi had to clarify his position. He reaffirmed the three guiding principles of the government: reform and revision of the pensions, and unification of services. Moreover, he pointed out that according to the fascist conception of the state, all citizens had the ‘absolute, natural and indispensable obligation of offering themselves to the defence of the fatherland’; ‘therefore, no right to indemnity’.\(^{14}\) The disabled veterans’ leaders met this radical position with outrage. Since the fascist Undersecretary of War Pensions ignored their complaints, the ANMIG leaders ‒ particularly Delcroix ‒ personally visited Mussolini to inform him about their displeasure (rammarico) regarding De Vecchi’s outlook. This situation provoked the first serious clash between Mussolini and De Vecchi. Mussolini decided to yield to the disabled veterans’ pressure. Momentarily leaving fascist principles to one side, Mussolini said to De Vecchi that he considered it inconvenient to ignore the disabled veterans’ association, and that the representatives of the disabled should be accepted in the discussions on the law project. Significantly, De Vecchi justified his stance by saying that he wanted to precipitate the ‘purification’ of


\(^{13}\) Corriere della Sera, 6 and 14 December 1922.

\(^{14}\) (‘l’obbligo assoluto naturale e imprescindibile di offrire se stessi alla difesa della patria’, ‘Quindi nessun diritto al risarcimento dei danni’) Corriere della Sera, 19 December 1922.
the ANMIG in a ‘national’ sense.\textsuperscript{15} The fascist Undersecretary was willing to renounce to his charge, but he continued his task despite the satirical criticisms of the disabled veterans, and the reproach of some fascists.\textsuperscript{16}

And yet, the ANMIG leaders, particularly Delcroix, reaffirmed their confidence in Mussolini and the national government, while carping at De Vecchi’s technical ignorance and views.\textsuperscript{17} Disabled veterans’ leaders wrongly made a differentiation between Mussolini and his subordinate in the government. This contradiction was possible because in reality the orientation of the ANMIG was, on some ideological points, not different from that of the fascists. The association rejected the charitable character —labelled as ‘socialist’— of material benefits, even if the ANMIG wanted these advantages to be increased. During this period, the ANMIG section of Milan expelled 500 of its 5,000 members because they had not fought at the frontline or because they lacked a clean record.\textsuperscript{18} In any case, what seems evident is that Mussolini and most fascists highly valued the symbolic fact of having the disabled veterans behind them and not against them. The material and discursive negotiation between the disabled and the fascists can be seen as a step in the process of fascistization.

Mussolini was very interested in stressing the common points between his government and the disabled veterans. He resorted to the concession of material rewards in order to obtain the support of the disabled veterans’ leaders, and thus transmit to them the fascist ideology. In March 1923, Mussolini inaugurated the new ANMIG Headquarters in Rome. This ceremony concluded with an embrace between him and Delcroix, who made the meaningful statement that ‘sacrifice’ was the first duty of every citizen. Mussolini, after introducing himself as a trench comrade, stated that he admired and respected the mutilated veterans, and that he considered all the ex-combatants and the families of the fallen soldiers as the aristocracy of the new Italy, whose rights would never expire.\textsuperscript{19} This symbolic union marked the beginning of a definitive collusion between the ANMIG and Mussolini’s government: in June the ANMIG was institutionalized as \textit{Ente Morale}, the official Italian disabled veterans’ organization.

\textsuperscript{15} (‘\textit{purificazione in senso nazionale}’) Mussolini’s and De Vecchi’s letters (18 and 19 December 1922), ACS, SPD, CR, b. 4, f. ‘Sen Prof Cesare Maria De Vecchi di Val Cismon’; see also Luigi Romersa (ed.), Cesare Maria De Vecchi di Val Cismon, \textit{Il Quadrumviro scomodo}, pp. 90-91.

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Corriere della Sera}, 22 December 1922; \textit{L’Idea Nazionale}, 23 February 1923.

\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Il Popolo di Trieste}, 6 December 1922; \textit{Il Popolo d’Italia}, 3 January 1923; \textit{Corriere della Sera}, 24 February 1923.

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Corriere della Sera}, 20 February, 1 March 1923.

\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Il Popolo d’Italia}, 13 March 1923; \textit{Corriere della Sera}, 13 March 1923.
Soon after, in July 1923, the new pensions law was finally promulgated. By then, Mussolini had defenestrated De Vecchi for political reasons. In any case, as Mussolini said, the position of the Undersecretary for War Pensions could be abolished without concern. The task of drafting the pensions law was assigned to the nationalist lawyer Alfredo Rocco, and the final text, supported by the veterans’ associations, remained firmly grounded in the legislative tradition of provision for veterans. The only significant novelty in the law was the distinction between combatants and non-combatants: to receive a pension, individuals should have either suffered physical injury at the hands of the enemy, or fallen ill in combat zone, or suffered damage in non-combat zone by the effect of weapons — on condition that they had actually fought in combat zone at some moment. It was a rather broad definition of what was considered a combattente. And the Fiuman legionaries were also included in the benefits system. After this law was published, the position of the Undersecretary for War Pensions was abolished. In this period, the one-eyed poet and ANMIG leader Carlo Delcroix was publicly honoured and very kindly treated in the salons of the Milanese high society. He had consolidated an amicable relationship with Mussolini, and the ANMIG had become fully integrated in the early fascist regime. Something similar was happening to the ANC.

The ANC engaged in negotiations with Mussolini’s government during this early period as well, establishing a relationship that initially seemed easy-going and straightforward. Shortly after the March on Rome, on 9 November 1922, the ANC leaders (namely Giulio Bergmann) expressed their aspiration to Mussolini for a concord between Fascism and the war veterans. They requested that the government define the ANC as an Ente Morale (i.e.: an official entity). This quality would mean the recognition of the ANC’s specific role in the moral and economic management of the war veterans, and in their ‘education’ in relation to the patriotic cults. The ANC leaders were interested in safeguarding their clientele faced with a potential competitor — Fascism —, while also, simultaneously, they expected to take advantage of Fascism in power. The association boasted that it had expelled certain groups of veterans since

20 Mussolini’s letter (1 May 1923), ACS, SPD, CR, b. 4, f.: ‘Sen Prof Cesare Maria De Vecchi di Val Cismon’.
21 Corriere della Sera, 5 July 1923.
22 Giuglielmo Pocaterra, La pensione di guerra nella sua legge base (R. Decreto 12 luglio 1923 n. 1491) e successive integrazioni, modifiche e aggiunte (preparazione a un testo unico), Roma, 1936.
23 Corriere della Sera, 6 and 8 July 1923; Il Popolo d’Italia, 6 July 1923.
24 Il Combattente (Bologna), 15 December 1922; La Nuova Giornata, 30 November 1922.
25 La Nuova Giornata, 30 November 1922.
1921. At the beginning of 1923 the main ANC regional sections, Lombardy and Liguria, unified their press organs in one unique newspaper that would often show satisfaction with the fascist government.26 With the expectation of a positive response, ANC representatives (Bergmann, Savelli, Host-Venturi, Zilli and others) visited Mussolini to specify their demands. Giacomo Acerbo, who had been an ANC provincial leader and now was a member of the government as Undersecretary of the Presidency, introduced them to the Prime Minister. The veteran representatives requested that the ANC be officially defined as an Ente Morale. If this was secured, the ANC would work in the fields of pre-military and post-military education, popular cultural education, production cooperatives, and social assistance particularly regarding migrants and agricultural zones. Mussolini agreed to pursue this transformation, and predicted that the ANC would become a sourcing ground for state officials.27 In fact, different legislative measures were undertaken during 1923 to promote war veterans’ privileges, reserving vacant positions for them at the state administration.28

The ANC national congress of Naples in February 1923 saw important steps taken towards the political alliance between the fascist government and the veterans. A new directing board was appointed, joined by fascists like Nino Host-Venturi (ex Fiuman legionnaire) and Ponzio di San Sebastiano (Gold Medal and ex Fiuman legionnaire). A government representative, the moderate fascist Giovanni Giurati (ex Fiuman legionnaire) was also included in the ANC national committee. The leaders asserted the ANC’s ‘loyal, devoted, powerful and dignified adhesion’ to the fascist government. All these enthusiastic adjectives sharply contrasted with the declaration, at the same time, of the ANC’s non-political stance (apoliticità). Nevertheless, this apoliticità was understood purely as a non-partisan position, neither agnostic nor neutral.29 Despite the contradictions of the ANC position regarding the fascist government, it was very clear that there existed a compromise between Fascism and the veterans.

This mutual rapprochement was facilitated by Mussolini’s discursive abilities in dealing with ex-soldiers. The president addressed them in a very flattering way, and he always introduced himself as a comrade (camerata, commilitone, compagno).

26 I Combattenti. La Nuova Giornata (Genoa), 18 January 1923.
27 Il Bollettino dell’Associazione Nazionale Combattenti (Roma), num. 1-2, 15-30 January 1923.
29 (‘leale, devota, potente e dignitosa adesione’) Il Bollettino dell’Associazione Nazionale Combattenti, num. 3-6, February-March 1923.
January 1923, when Mussolini received some veterans, holders of the Gold Medal (Medaglia d’oro), in the Palazzo Chigi, he called them the ‘highest aristocracy of the Nation’; he talked about a future ‘second victory’, a ‘second Italian mission’. This endeavour would come in the form of Italian expansion in the world, in which the veterans would be, once more, the craftsmen. After the ANC congress in Naples, Mussolini received the veterans’ leaders again and confirmed to them that he would deal with their demands. He also declared that he desired the combattenti and mutilati to be at the head of the Fasci. The ANC leaders were very satisfied with the resolution of the pensions crisis in favour of the disabled veterans. Mussolini predicted that he and the veterans still had ‘further to go together’. Likewise, the aristocratic veterans of the Istituto del Nastro Azzurro (an institution of highly decorated veterans) paid a visit to Mussolini and avowed their devotion to him. While visiting a work house for the war blind, Mussolini paid tribute to them by stating: ‘the Government will guard your sacred rights: it will meet your legitimate desires […] and as a trench comrade I exhort you to be confident in what the government will do for you’. Fascist propaganda depicted Mussolini constantly stressing his war accomplishments, with his war diaries published as a volume in 1923.30 The target of these discourses were the veterans’ elites and the maimed veterans, who theoretically composed the aristocracy of the nation in the fascist worldview.

The period of mutual courtship between the ANC and the fascist government concluded with the decision, taken on April 1923, of institutionalizing the ANC as an Ente Morale. The same measure was taken regarding the ANMIG and the ad hoc-created Families of Fallen Soldiers Association (Associazione fra le famiglie dei caduti). ANC leaders like Giulio Bergmann were very happy, since they believed the ANC acquired significant strength, assuring its own autonomous role and rights.31 With a decree on 24 June 1923, this transformation was definitive. The conversion of the ANC into an Ente morale meant granting official recognition of the ANC’s exclusive activity in the realm of social assistance. Tasks of this nature previously developed by the ONC were transferred to the ANC. However, in reality, the control of the three


31 Giulio Bergmann, ‘L’Associazione dei Combattenti verso la sua nuova potenza’, I combattenti. La Nuova Giornata, 12 April 1923; also in Il combattente (Cremona), 1 May 1923.
associations was handed to the *Presidenza del Consiglio*, namely to Mussolini. Furthermore, the recognition of the ANC and the ANMIG as the only official veteran associations implied the marginalization of others like the Catholic *Unione Nazionale Reduci*, and marked the death knell for the *Lega proletaria*. Any political orientation of the ANC was also omitted. It was clear that the veteran leaders were politically satisfied with Mussolini’s government, because after a succession of unpopular liberal prime ministers there was at last a war veteran at the head of the government. 32

During this time, the partial neutralization of the PSd’A can be considered as another achievement for Mussolini and Fascism regarding veterans. This Sardinian party had been the only successful outcome of the veterans’ failed attempt to set up a democratic party. Yet the party had remained limited to its autonomist aims defended by leaders such as Camillo Bellieni and Emilio Lussu. Although veterans had also set up the first *Fasci* of Sardinia (Cagliari and Sassari), most Sardinian veterans had manifested a predominantly anti-fascist attitude until the March on Rome. After October 1922, the Sardinian fascists insisted on attracting the veterans from the PSd’A to their own ranks, with renewed vigour. A first attempt to fuse the PNF and the PSd’A took place in January 1923, but remained incomplete. Lussu continued to direct the original PSd’A as an active political movement. Later, Mussolini himself visited the island in June 1923 to praise the Sardinian people with his speeches, emphasizing that they had demonstrated their patriotism in the trenches of the Great War. 33 In the end, what allowed the gradual subjugation and fascistization of the veterans in Sardinia was a combination of the dominant trend among veterans towards *apoliticità*, together with the political manoeuvres of the *prefetto* designed by Mussolini, and the squadrist’s harassment. 34

The next steppingstone in the fascistization process was the symbolic staging of the faithful relationship between the veterans and the government. Veterans’ parades in some cities had marked the celebration of the 24 May (day of Italy’s intervention in the First World War). Later, on 26 June 1923, in Rome, a great demonstration of an estimated 30,000 war veterans commemorated the River Piave battle. It was the first

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time that veterans had the exclusive protagonist role in a ritual of this nature, but it was Mussolini who actually occupied the centre of attention. He stated that it was an honour for him to be among his trench comrades. Even if during the ceremony the anti-fascist veterans’ group *L’Italia Libera* gave its first signs of existence, this occasion can be considered the peak in the popularity of the fascist government among the Italian war veterans.

Despite fissures in the allegedly indissoluble link between Fascism and the veterans, the principal ANC leaders continued to firmly endorse Mussolini. These leaders, filo-fascists and fascists included (Savelli, Ponzio di San Sebastiano, Arangio Ruiz), faithfully expected that the normalization and depuration of Fascism would be completed. They hoped that Fascism would be fully integrated into a reinvigorated Italian state. Some veterans’ leaders saw the Acerbo electoral law, discussed since the summer of 1923, as another step in this direction. But at the same time, there were concerns about the dictatorial thrust of the regime and the persistent squadrist intimidation and violence. From the summer of 1923 to the Fascist victory in the elections of April 1924, the political history of the ANC was marked by ideological debates and internal struggles. On the one hand, the ANC aspired to obtain high returns for its loyalty to Mussolini. On the other, Fascism progressively absorbed the ANC; the ANC suffered a loss of identity, influence and agency in favour of the PNF. In the next two sections I will focus on organizational, discursive and symbolic developments that marked the relationship between veterans and Fascism in this period and played a key role in determining its future.

**The struggle for organization: the ANC and the PNF**

While the solid discursive harmony between the fascist government and the veterans was very clear in the first half of 1923, the relationship between the ANC and the PNF had to be articulated in social and political practice as well. Veterans from the Italian provinces demanded solutions for their problems by directly visiting Mussolini. The

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35 (‘commilitoni delle trincee’) *Corriere della Sera*, 9 and 25 May 1923; *I Combattenti. La Nuova Giornata*, 21 and 28 June 1923; *Il Combattente* (Cremona), 30 June 1923. Initially organized for the 17 June, the celebration of the Piave battle was postponed to match with the publication of the decree transforming the ANC into *Ente Morale*.


37 See, for example, *I Combattenti. La Nuova Giornata*, 2 August 1923.


president appeared to the veterans as an approachable and brotherly leader. Yet on a daily basis the real issues that affected veterans had to be tackled through dealing with the provincial fascist authorities. And within this less visible sphere, the relationship ANC-PNF proved to be much more problematic. The first documented contacts established between ANC and PNF cells, particularly between the Lazio federations of both organizations, date from the end of April 1923. At the beginning of May, there were meetings in Rome and Milan between the ANC spokespersons (i.e.: Arangio Ruiz) and PNF leaders (most notably, the fanatical fascist Michele Bianchi, secretary general of both the PNF and the Ministry of Internal Affairs) to approach this question. They knew that some clashes between fascists and combattenti had taken place, but the leaders wanted to prevent such cases in the future, acting along the lines decided in the last ANC congress. Stressing that Mussolini’s government was that of the combattenti and the valorizzazione of the victory, the fascist and veteran leaders planned a closer collaboration. With this accord, the fascists secured a commitment from the veterans to effectively stop their activities in the sphere of syndicalism, transferring that task to Fascism. Both organizations should cooperate at the local level, and Bianchi announced that he would propose that all fascist federations would make their veterans become members of the ANC.

The fascists named these agreements the ‘pact of the trench’ (patto della trincea). Taking into account that ‘the best’ members of Fascism were veterans, and that Mussolini’s government had enhanced the victory, the fascists considered it logical that veterans identified with Fascism; their commonality of ideals would lead veterans to give Mussolini a loyal and unshakeable support. These views were widespread among the fascists. A member of the PNF hierarchy argued that Fascism, having emerged from the war, was closely related to the veterans; through them, Fascism should permeate the whole nation. ANC leaders also thought this link existed, but they rather implied that it was Fascism which should be integrated into the nation, instead of the nation being converted to Fascism. Furthermore, some veterans warned that any kind of collaboration with the fascist government should be based on two conditions: the

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40 They probably took place as a result of a proposal of the ANC: see Archivio della Camera dei Deputati, Archivio Ettore Viola, Corrispondenza, b. 3, f. 70.
41 Il Popolo d’Italia, 1 and 2 May 1923.
42 Il Popolo d’Italia, 8 May 1923; L’Idea Nazionale, 8 May 1923.
44 I Combattenti. La Nuova Giornata, 19 July 1923.
45 Arturo Codignola, ‘Ciò che è stata e ciò che rappresenta l’ANC, II’, I Combattenti. La Nuova Giornata, 5 April 1923.
purification of the fascist ranks, and the respect of liberties. Beyond the myth of the trench community, the basis of the ‘pact of the trench’, there existed different opinions that complicated the relationship between the ANC and the PNF.

It is not surprising that relations between fascists and veterans turned sour, even violent, if we take into account the agitation of the fascist movement in the Italian provinces. The party was riddled with internal disputes, such as the crisis in Alessandria, where Nicola Sansanelli was sent to impose order among the fascists. New cases of fascist violence against veterans emerged in the province of Cremona, where Farinacci had harassed veterans since 1921. In some southern provinces like Agrigento (Sicily) or Terra di Lavoro (northern Campania) the confrontation also became a thorny issue. In Palermo, where the mutilati and combattenti were numerous and independent from the few fascist militants, the veterans buttressed Mussolini because they considered him as their equal rather than as a fascist. Furthermore, outright opposition to any ‘pact of the trench’ with the fascists appeared in September 1923, because these pacts were actually subordinating the ANC sections to the Fasci. In spite of this violence, the veterans’ leaders, dazzled by the fascist ‘revolution’, they would usually ignore these problems, downplaying them as ‘little disputes’ (piccole beghe).

It was often said at the time that the fascists attacked the veterans because the ANC had become a refuge for anti-fascists in some places. There was a certain element of truth to this claim. However, the ANC grew in numbers during this time not merely due to the flow of anti-fascist and non-fascist veterans, but also thanks to the planned introduction of fascists into the ANC cells, which probably was more significant. Joining an organization whose national leaders were publicly connected with the fascist government and collaborated with the PNF was no safe option for anti-fascists; it was only possible in some occasions or in isolated localities. In some cases, anti-fascist veterans detached from the ANC and tried to create their own organizations, but the

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46 I Combattenti. La Nuova Giornata, 2 Agosto 1923.
48 Il Combattente (Cremona), 31 May, 21 June 1923.
49 ACS, MI, PS (1923), b. 75, ff. Girgenti, Roma and Caltanissetta.
50 La Stampa, 4 June 1923.
51 I Combattenti. La Nuova Giornata, 23 September 1923.
52 Cf. Giovanni Sabbatucci, I combattenti, p. 364. The ANC reached perhaps 500,000 members by December 1923.
prefetti moved to immediately disband them. In contrast, in newly-founded ANC sections, the fascists seemed to be predominant.\textsuperscript{53}

In this context, for the first anniversary of the March on Rome, the fascists obtained the participation of the veterans’ associations. For the fascists, it was very important to be on good terms with the veterans during the commemorative cycle of the March on Rome and the 4 November. The veterans’ involvement was possible thanks to the political orientation of leaders like Arangio Ruiz and Delcroix. The memorandum the ANC sent to its veterans gives some insight into their underlying reasoning. For them, the celebration of the March on Rome transcended the mere partisan ritual; it supposedly was an exaltation of values ‘emerged from the dual work of war and peace’. Therefore, veterans should solemnly partake in the rite, while this should not be understood as a challenge to the ‘untouchable political independence’ of the association. In fact, it was not by chance that this message included greetings to the ‘youth that realised the March on Rome and reached the vibrant national renovation coming from the indestructible glory of the trench’.\textsuperscript{54} This ambiguous sentence in the ANC message implied that—from the veterans’ point of view—the March on Rome had not been an achievement of the veterans but rather an act carried out by younger people, even if their inspiration had been the trench soldier’s wish for a renovation of the fatherland.

For the subsequent celebration of the 4 November in Rome, the ANC and the ANMIG invited Mussolini to take part in the commemoration that they organized in the Augusteo, after the customary homage to the Milite Ignoto.\textsuperscript{55} In his speech, Delcroix justified the recent participation of the disabled veterans in the March on Rome celebration. The presence of mutilated veterans had given a colourful symbolic prominence to the fascist celebration.\textsuperscript{56} Delcroix associated the 4 November victory with the ‘historical necessity’ of intervention. In his view, veterans had the role of transmitting ‘new forces’ to the Italian people, and the mission of safeguarding the fatherland’s conquests.\textsuperscript{57} Beneath the high-flying rhetorical flourishes, Delcroix had established a symbolic link between interventionism, the victory and the March on Rome, and had bestowed upon the veterans the role of transmitters of Fascism. Rather

\textsuperscript{53} ACS, MI, PS (1923), b. 75, ff. Lecce, Potenza and Livorno.
\textsuperscript{54} (‘usciti dal duplice travaglio della guerra e della pace’, ‘inataccabile independenza politica’, ‘giovinezza chè compii la Marcia su Roma ed attinse il fremito dei rinnovamento nazionale dalla gloria indistruttibile della trincea’) Il Popolo d’Italia, 19 October 1923.
\textsuperscript{55} Corriere della Sera, 3 November 1923.
\textsuperscript{56} Cremona Nuova (Cremona), 1 November 1923.
\textsuperscript{57} (‘necessità storica’, ‘nuove forze’) Corriere della Sera, 6 November 1923.
than Mussolini, it was a more publicly neutral figure, Delcroix, who was in charge of making such discursive connections. Meanwhile, anti-fascist veterans separately commemorated this date, but their impact was extremely limited, since the principal national symbolic spaces (Altare della Patria and the Campidoglio in Rome) were occupied by the official ceremony and by veteran associations friendly to Fascism. (The Istituto del Nastro Azzurro held its first national congress in the Campidoglio in those dates). The most prestigious military men (Badoglio) had also stood alongside the royal and governmental representatives, whereas a public appearance of Cadorna (the figure held responsible for Caporetto) around the same time in Florence was put in relation to the anti-fascist demonstrations.

It was in Cremona where the incomplete integration of the veterans into the commemorative fascist cycle provoked virulent reactions by Farinacci. His intransigent attitude deserves attention, since this approach would finally be imposed onto the ANC during 1925, as we will see. Farinacci presumed that the ANC section of his city was mainly composed of anti-fascist veterans, despite the fact that the ANC section had approved of the participation in the March on Rome commemoration, and wanted to establish a cordial relationship with the PNF in line with ANC national directives. The fascist ras proposed that the ANC local leader should dissolve the section, reconstructing it later without ‘anti-national’ (antinazionali) elements. Then, the fascists would grant the section with a truly national orientation (indirizzo veramente nazionale). As the circumstances in Cremona demonstrated, the ANC was maintaining an unstable dual position, with one attitude regarding Mussolini’s government, and another regarding Mussolini’s party.

The situation was serious enough to urgently reopen the debate within the ANC and within the fascist Gran Consiglio to find a clear settlement for the ANC-PNF relationship. At the meetings between the main leaders of both sides, a new agreement was reached, although it now implied a set of important symbolic and discursive concessions made by the ANC under the fascist pressure. The ANC recognised that the ‘fascist revolution’ had been the ‘concrete and definitive revaluation and re-consecration of the victory’; for this reason the ANC loyally collaborated with

58 Avanti! (Milan), 4 and 6 November 1923.
59 Il Popolo d’Italia, 4 November 1923.
60 Cremona Nuova, 6 and 8 November 1923; Cf. Corriere della Sera, 9 November 1923.
61 ACS, MI, PS (1923), b. 75, f. Cremona; Cremona Nuova, 10 November 1923; Avanti!, 11 November 1923.
62 Avanti!, 14 November 1923.
Mussolini’s government. For its part, the PNF just proudly recalled that it had emerged from the war experience. The party merely expressed ‘sympathy’ towards the ANC. In conclusion, it was agreed that both organizations would cordially continue developing their activities, and, in case of conflict, they would try to reach new agreements and to establish normality as soon as possible. However, the tasks of both ANC and PNF were not demarcated, and it was not clear how they would resolve disputes. Farinacci bluntly stated that his fascist veterans would just obey the orders of his party. Within the ANC, it was said that the ‘pacts of the trench’ were something ridiculous, since they would never permit to reach any sincere agreement at the local level. What attitude would the fascist members of the ANC adopt?

Later, when the intention of creating a ‘fascist veterans’ association’ emerged from the intransigent fascist circles, the ANC had to yield again to the fascist pressure. In mid-December 1923, the ANC national board (Arangio Ruiz) decided to expel the Italia Libera dissident group, which became an independent anti-fascist organization. Moreover, the ANC reaffirmed once more its collaboration with Mussolini’s government, and ‘therefore, with the PNF, of which the government is an expression’. In the new elected ANC national board there was a significant fascist presence (Host-Venturi, Schiavo, Ponzio di San Sebastiano). Still, this was not enough for Farinacci, who even had a physical duel against Arangio Ruiz, which resulted in the ANC leader being injured. In Torino, the ANC provincial leaders said that implementing the collaboration with the PNF was extremely difficult, since they lacked precise instructions. Meanwhile, in the South, where the ANC-PNF pacts had never really functioned, the antagonism increased. In Lucca (Tuscany), the fascist leader Carlo Sforza pushed the fascist veterans to abandon the ANC en masse, creating an independent federation that only recognised the Duce’s orders. The alleged reason for these fascist steps was that, under the cover of the ANC apoliticità, the veteran

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64 I Combattenti. La Nuova Giornata, 18 and 26 November 1923, 2 December 1923; Avanti!, 15 November 1923; Il Combattente Maremmano (Grosseto), 5 December 1923.
65 (‘sodalicio di combattenti fascisti’) Corriere della Sera, 16 November 1923; La Stampa, 23 December 1923.
68 Il Primato, 25 May 1924.
69 I Combattenti. La Nuova Giornata, 6 January 1924
70 L’Intrepido (Lucca), 24 December 1923.
organization did not fully collaborate with the fascist government. These politically astute manoeuvres furthered the fascistization of Italian veterans.

With the elections of April 1924 fast approaching, a resolution of the crisis was needed. Finally, Arangio Ruiz was removed from his leading position in the ANC, and the fascist captain Host-Venturi was imposed as the provisional president.\(^71\) Host-Venturi stressed the ANC role of assistance in purely social and economic terms, while the political debates among veterans abated, or moved into the press of veterans groups that had divorced from the ANC (as it happened in Florence).\(^72\) Nonetheless, the drawing up of the fascist ‘big’ electoral ticket (listone) was another fascist method to attract relevant veteran leaders to the fascist plans, while marginalizing others. As some commentators noted at that time, mere inclusion on this listone represented a direct pass into the Chamber, thanks to the particularities of the Acerbo Law.\(^73\) The inclusion of several ANC and ANMIG leaders (like Delcroix) on the listone can be considered as the result of a long negotiation between the veterans and Fascism. They obtained a seat in the Chamber, but their associations lost their autonomy and political dimension. As the elections were an overwhelming success for the fascists, the new Chamber was finally full of war veterans, who occupied 264 out of 535 seats (49.34%).\(^74\) These electoral results persuaded many Italian veterans to consider Mussolini as the president ‘who made real the promises and aspirations of the trenches’.\(^75\) Furthermore, many veteran leaders probably believed that a process of political ‘normalization’ of Fascism would definitely begin.

The struggle for ideology: combattentismo and apoliticità

When analysing the Italian veterans’ movement until now, I have avoided employing the concept of combattentismo (‘veteranism’), although historians identify this phenomenon as typical of the Italian postwar period and as an ideological component of early Fascism. In the historiography, combattentismo has been described as a ‘state of mind’ — characterised by dissatisfaction and discontent — that found an expression in the rhetorical exaltation of war as a school for life, in the belief that veterans constituted

\(^71\) Volontà (Rome), 15 March 1924; I Combattenti, La Nuova Giornata, 14 March 1924.
\(^72\) Fanteria (Florence), num. 1, January 1924.
\(^74\) Andrea Bavarelli, La vittoria smarrita, pp. 187-188.
\(^75\) (‘che realizza le promesse e le aspirazioni della trincea’) Battaglie. Libera voce dei combattenti della provincia di Alessandria (Alessandria), 3 March 1924.
a privileged category of citizens with special rights and virtues, and in the idea that veterans would form an autonomous political force. These mentalities and ideals supposedly converged into Fascism, as did *arditismo*. However, if Fascism soon absorbed the ideology of *arditismo* as a codification of the *arditi* war mentality and demeanour, the word *combattentismo* practically does not appear in historical sources until 1923. This absence does not mean that the concept *combattentismo* would not serve, from 1923 on, to represent events that actually took place earlier. As I will demonstrate throughout this work, *combattentismo* had an extremely important role in the history of Fascism. Here, however, I will approach *combattentismo* as a discursive device that historical actors developed and utilized to interact with their context. I will historicize the notion of *combattentismo* to understand how a connection between this cultural element and Fascism was established, and what the consequences of this conjunction were.

The paradigm of the veterans’ *apoliticità*, which restricted the ANC agency to the realms of social assistance and commemorative ceremonies, was in crisis after the March on Rome. Earlier, as we know, the initial ANC ideological project of completely renovating Italian politics had failed by 1920. While the veterans’ movement went through its non-political phase, the fascist movement grew and took power. This alleged *apoliticità* became a blatant contradiction when the ANC collaborated with the fascist government and with the PNF. The institutional changes and the agreements between both organizations were part of a process of fascistization of Italian veterans, which raised concerns among veteran leaders across the country. Since the ANC was constantly performing political actions, it was absurd to define the association as a non-political entity. For this reason some leaders suggested that the ANC should limit its activity to social assistance. This current of thought was increasingly adopted by the fascists inside the ANC and it would be imposed in the spring of 1924 (during Host-Venturi’s temporary presidency).

However, at the beginning of 1923, a different line of thinking also emerged: the development and adoption of *combattentismo* as the ideology of the veterans. The origin of this notion is not clear. (The first mention in written sources dates from 1920, as we saw, used by Priamo Brunazzi). Apparently, after the March on Rome, people...
started to use ‘combattentismo’ in a pejorative way to refer to the veterans’ new relevance in Italian politics, which was a product of Mussolini’s government and was noticeable in the disabled veterans’ agitation against De Vecchi’s pensions project.\textsuperscript{78}

During 1923, as the decrees and laws granting the veterans special privileges in the sphere of public employment proliferated, many professional bureaucrats considered these measures an injustice. They spoke about \textit{combattentismo}. The veterans conversely saw a bureaucracy ranged against them.\textsuperscript{79} The notion of \textit{combattentismo} had, therefore, materialistic and negative connotations.

Nonetheless, the first codification of \textit{combattentismo} as an ideology of the Italian veterans can also be found in the spring of 1923, sometime after the ANC had declared its adhesion to the government in the congress of Naples. Lio Rubini, a war veteran writing in the pages of the most important veteran organ, tried to clarify the position of the ANC. He placed the veteran association into a tradition that came from 1848 and was based on service to the Nation. According to him, the ANC had ‘a spirit, a mindset, a political base, an ideal’ that he would call \textit{combattentismo}. He connected the hero of the Risorgimento Garibaldi, the poet Carducci, the irredentist martyr Oberdan, with the interventionist students of 1915. The ‘religion’ of \textit{combattentismo} was ‘the style of Italy’, the guardians of which were the veterans. As a religion, \textit{combattentismo} could be adopted by any party or government. \textit{Combattentismo} represented the Nation with a human face; it was as ‘popular’ as the Italian ‘saints’ Garibaldi, Mazzini and even Mussolini and the king. The ANC was the institution incarnating the idea of \textit{combattentismo}. For all these reasons, the fascist party should be ‘loyal to \textit{combattentismo}, feeling the blood of combattentismo coursing through its veins’. The ANC should not be dissolved into the fascist party.\textsuperscript{80}

Having coined this notion —\textit{combattentismo}—, it was possible to open a debate among the veterans’ educated elites. The new concept spread successfully, and the discussions that ensued were tinged with the controversy about the ANC-PNF relationship. The correlation between \textit{fascismo} and \textit{combattentismo} was the predominant question that many commentators approached (some of them coming from

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{78} I Combattenti. La Nuova Giornata, 1 March 1923.
\item \textsuperscript{79} See ‘Burocracia e combattentismo’, La Vittoria. Organo dell'Associazione Nazionale Combattenti di Palermo (Palermo), num. 17-18, 16 November-1 December 1923.
\end{itemize}
the Salveminian veteran sector of the PSd’A).\(^{81}\) Yet, regardless of some generic assumptions, a single uncontested definition of *combattentismo* as an ideology of war veterans was not reached. The meaning of *combattentismo* varied widely in accordance with the context in which it was used, and depending on the political aims that the argumentation pursued. Thus, this concept became a symbolic framework to frame discussion around the relations between the PNF and the ANC.

At the beginning of 1924 the debate was intense.\(^{82}\) The anti-fascist veterans of Italia Libera denied that Fascism emerged from *combattentismo*, whereas fascists within the ANC adopted the intransigent position of considering Fascism as the only faith of patriotic Italians. As one member of the Italia Libera wrote, the topic of *combattentismo* had been obfuscated, and *combattentismo* as an expression of ideals of liberty and justice had never crystallized. Instead, a different *combattentismo*, which was a continuation of the war, had clearly consolidated: Fascism. This connection was in no case positive, for Fascism had made use of the warlike characters of *combattentismo* to pursue a fratricidal fight. Unjustifiably naming its struggle as *combattentismo*, Fascism had obtained power and improperly defined itself as the government of the veterans. The Italia Libera veterans regretted that the fascist *combattentismo* had nothing to do with the fight for liberty, justice and for the end of the military oligarchies that had animated the soldiers during the Great War.\(^{83}\) The anti-fascist veterans highlighted that the origins of *combattentismo* were pure, arguing that Fascism had abused it. But the democratic spirit of *combattentismo* had been removed from the ANC, and confined to a few independent veteran journals.\(^{84}\) The maturing of *combattentismo* as an ideology of the veterans came too late, when it was already in the hands of Fascism.

Since *combattentismo* became a discursive device likely to be employed in favour of Fascism, some critics endowed *combattentismo* with a completely negative meaning. The review *Volontà*, in which veterans like Camillo Bellieni had given life to their autonomist and reformist political projects, resumed publication at this time. In March 1924, this review published a very critical examination of *combattentismo*. The

\(^{81}\) For example, ‘Polemica interna. Combattentismo e Fascismo’, *I Combattenti. La Nuova Giornata*, 10 November 1923.

\(^{82}\) Unfortunately, due to a gap in the historical sources, it is possible to know only indirectly the content of the speech by Umberto Mancuso, ‘Il Combattentismo: sua origine, sua essenza, suoi limiti, sua funzione politica’, delivered in the National Council of the ANC in December 1923, see *I Combattenti. La Nuova Giornata*, 6 January 1924.

\(^{83}\) *L’Italia Libera*, 8 January 1924.

\(^{84}\) Luigi de Grazia, ‘Combattentismo’, *Fanteria*, 27 January 1924.
key to the phenomenon—it was said—was the veterans’ appropriation of an allegedly essential role in the national political life, which had a set of appalling implications. In contrast with the veterans’ conceited pretensions, the actual political input of *combattentismo* was very marginal, limited to a certain political-military jargon, with which any political discussion ended in brawls and the launching of hand-grenades. The article denounced the veterans for holding a deceitful political attitude, ignoring the actual destruction of liberties. Lamentably, *combattentismo* was the sole political patrimony of those who had gone to the war without a previous moral and ideological background; these young people had been transformed into both combatants and political men during a unique spiritual process—war. Hence, *combattentismo* was their only politics. But it was a very flimsy ground from which to lead the country. *Combattentismo* was an expression of ingenuity and political virginity. The only form of *combattentismo* in force was Fascism, and the fascists had taken advantage of that to obtain power. Now, the veterans had to choose, either joining Fascism, or constructing their own political path. In a sense, anti-fascist veterans were renouncing to the concept of *combattentismo*, handing it over to the fascists.

Alongside this aborted conception of *combattentismo* as a veteran ideology differentiated from Fascism, the reawakening of a political consciousness of the veterans themselves was silenced by the fascist victory in the elections of April 1924. At this stage, the ANC preferred to underline its primordial role in social assistance. As Fascism seemed to consolidate with a Chamber full of veterans, the myth of *apoliticità* gained importance once more for different sectors of the veterans. In June 1924, a new ANC/ONC monthly review, *Problemi d’Italia*, was created (directed by Umberto Mancuso, Carlo Battistella and Domenico Galante). It was a publication devoted to technical and generically patriotic questions, where ideological and political debates were absolutely absent. The lack of public controversies in this journal suggested that a stable political settlement for the complex veterans-Fascism relationship had been reached. On the left, anti-fascism had renounced *combattentismo*. In the hypothetical centre, the ANC had been emptied of political meaning. In power, Fascism framed the activity of all those veterans willing to exert political action. The intransigent fascists

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85 *Volontà*, 31 March 1924.  
86 See *Il Primato*, 20 April 1924.  
87 *Problemi d’Italia. Rassegna mensile dei combattenti* (Roma), num. 1, June 1924.
seemed content with this balance. Would this standstill allow the final ‘normalization’ of Fascism? A new important crisis would prevent this.

The assassination of Giacomo Matteotti, a socialist MP that maintained a critical line of opposition to Fascism, badly affected the process of fascist ‘normalization’.

Historians have said much about the crisis that opened at this point. Its solution would imply the definitive establishment of the fascist dictatorship, with Mussolini’s infamous speech of 3 January 1925. In the following pages I will analyse how the accumulated discursive contradictions and organizational tensions in the veterans’ sphere found a difficult and drastic resolution in this context.

Evidently, the Matteotti crisis had great impact on the relationship between Fascism and veterans. This crime outraged many of the ANC veterans that had fully supported Mussolini up until this point. Although some ministers resigned and Mussolini yielded the Ministry of Interior to the moderate nationalist Federzoni, many veteran leaders became conscious of the impossibility of a ‘normalization’ of Fascism within the existing stat structure. Fascism—it was said—seemed finished, and the fascist conceptions about the veterans came under harsh criticism. Anti-fascist veterans convincingly argued that the fact of being a veteran did not imply the right to exert political power; decorations and mutilations, if glorious, were not titles of professional or political competence; the ‘profession of veteran’ must disappear. Camillo Bellieni, disheartened, wrote a famous article in which he argued that the original project of the ANC—that of a renovation of Italian politics—had painfully failed. In contrast, within the ANC, few leaders were in favour of definitely withdrawing the political support to the government; some of them (like Manaresi in Bologna) were confident that Mussolini’s government could recover its prestige and restore order. Although ANC leaders like Savelli or Giulio Bergmann expressed severe criticisms against the

88 Matteotti, in fact, had repeatedly denounced fascist violence that affected war veterans as well; see Giacomo Matteotti, Un anno di dominazione fascista, Sala Bolognese, Arnaldo Forni, 1980, (1st edition 1923), passim.
92 Cremona Nuova, 19 July 1924.
fascist illegality and violence, they did not join the opposition that abandoned the Parliament (the group of the *Aventino*).\(^93\)

The ANC Congress of Assisi at the end of July 1924 would hypothetically serve to clarify the veterans’ stance in this state of affairs. Members of the Aventinian opposition like Giovanni Amendola hoped that veterans would align in Assisi against the anti-democratic drift.\(^94\) There was also much expectation and nervousness among the fascists regarding the congress. Many fascists, Dino Grandi among them, went to Assisi, to be present at the sessions. The discussions were very heated and tumultuous, and especially bitter was the confrontation between the outgoing leaders Arangio Ruiz and Ponzio di San Sebastiano. Despite the weighty fascist presence, Giulio Bergmann presented a crude motion of condemnation of the government that attracted support of various representatives. In contrast, the representative of Udine, Luigi Russo, calmly talked about maintaining all confidence in Mussolini, admitting that the veterans had always collaborated with the ‘fascist revolution’. Finally, the convention passed a compromise conciliatory resolution (*ordine del giorno*), proposed by Ettore Viola—a former officer of the *arditi*, a fascist MP and a holder of the Gold Medal. The *ordine del giorno* of Assisi stressed the ANC’s autonomy above all else; support for the government was implicitly left in suspension pending the re-establishment of legality and sovereignty of the state. This ambiguity left room for interpretation, and even the subsequent formation of a new ANC Central Committee (*Comitato Centrale*) was complicated. In the end, Viola took over the presidency, together with other four fascists, including Luigi Russo. These fascist positions were counterbalanced by four anti-fascists such as Livio Pivano (a republican from Alessandria). The main leaders of the new *Comitato Centrale* were also members of the Parliament. The Aventinian opposition interpreted the *ordine del giorno* of Assisi as a symptom of the veterans’ anti-fascism. The fascists showed disappointment with its cold and distant tone. Farinacci stated that it was necessary to come out of this equivocal situation.\(^95\)

When, some days later, the National Council of the PNF met, Mussolini very clearly declared that he did not like the *ordine del giorno* of Assisi (*l’ordine del giorno*

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\(^93\) *I Combattenti. La Nuova Giornata*, 22 June, 17 July 1924


\(^95\) *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 27, 29, 30, 31 July, 1 August 1924; *Cremona Nuova*, 29, 30, 31 July, 1 August 1924; *Problemi d’Italia*, num. 2 (September 1924), num. 3 (October 1924); *Il Giornale dei Combattenti. Organo dei Combattenti Nazionali del Piemonte* (Turin), 26 July, 2 August 1924; Ettore Viola, *Combattenti e Mussolini dopo il congresso di Assisi*, Firenze, 1975, pp. 13-20.
This reaction bore testament to the political turn that Fascism was experiencing at the time, linked to the ascension of Farinacci and the intransigent fascists. Importantly, Mussolini argued that the ANC owed a lot to him, and that it had been only after the March on Rome, during 1923, that ‘political manifestations of combattentismo’ had taken place; earlier there had not been such a phenomenon in Italy. The Duce’s argumentation claimed that the veterans’ movement had been weak between 1919 and 1922, and that only Fascism in power had made combattentismo possible, by benefiting the veterans and the ANC as their comrades of the trenches.°° This was not an absolute rupture, but the situation was on the edge. Furthermore, whereas the debilitated moderate and revisionist fascist groups remained in the background, the most radical sector of Fascism aggressively broke into the veterans’ debates through the pages of new fascist newspapers. Roma fascista directly attacked the opposition’s speculations about the ordine del giorno di Assisi by clearly affirming that Fascism was equal to the veterans, and the veterans were equal to Fascism: there were no differences between them.°°° Other fascist veterans and several leaders of ANC sections in the Lazio spoke in the same terms.°°° The Roman fascio made clear that it was composed of more than 3,000 veterans out of more than 9,000 members; some holders of the gold medal among them (for example, Amilcare Rossi).°°°° A big demonstration of the veterans in Rome exhibited their confidence in Mussolini.°°°°° The fascists were mobilizing resources to maintain their monopoly over the symbol of the veteran.

Thus, the discursive struggle escalated. The term combattentismo, lacking any concrete definition, became polyvalent, and a source of dispute between anti-fascist veterans, the ANC, and the fascist veterans. The anti-fascist veterans of Italia Libera, expelled from the ANC, opted to continue their attacks on the idea of combattentismo, accepting that it already was a concept married to Fascism. As there were opinions that anti-fascist combattentismo was not different from fascist combattentismo, Italia Libera veterans renounced to the notion. By this time, they had come to understand this veteran ideology, not as positive political action, but as the plain demand of rewards in the name

°° ‘manifestazioni politiche del combattentismo’) Cremona Nuova, 5 August 1924; Il Popolo d’Italia, 5 August 1924.
°°°° L’Idea Nazionale, 6 and 7 August 1924.
°°°°° Roma fascista, 9 August 1924.
°°°°°° Il Popolo d’Italia, 8 August 1924.
of the war experience. *Italia Libera* veterans sought to carry out an anti-fascist political activity, but paradoxically they shared the fascist view that the ANC should recover its *apoliticità* and its exclusive function of social assistance.\(^{101}\) Meanwhile, some fascists also disowned the notion of *combattentismo*, disregarding it as a degeneration, and arguing that having fought the war did not give rise to rights, but rather to duties.\(^{102}\) All this complex and intertwined discussion is a proof of the unclear position that the veterans maintained at the time of the Matteotti crisis. Unsurprisingly, the *Duce* was hesitant, and seemingly preferred to wait until the general situation became clearer.\(^{103}\)

In 1924, as had happened the year before, the two symbolic dates of 28 October and 4 November served to test the level of the veterans’ commitment to Fascism. The commemoration of the March on Rome revealed profound divisions among the Italian veterans. Correctly considering that it was a partisan celebration, and for the sake of *apoliticità*, the ANC *Comitato Centrale* refused to join the fascist celebration. Confronting the ANC withdrawal, the fascist response was bitter and solemn. In *Critica fascista*, it was argued that the veterans were acting ‘outside of their historical function’. The fascists considered the hostile attitude of the veterans very disappointing, since ‘the historical function of the so-called *combattentismo* has been incarnated by Fascism for since the last four or five’. They stated that Fascism would complete its cycle even if the veterans were stood outside of this endeavour; it was not in vain that Fascism had emerged from the war to resume the Risorgimento.\(^{104}\) The veterans, disappointed with Fascism, argued the other way round: ‘the historical mission of Fascism —which was not a party but a state of mind— was completely finished’.\(^{105}\) In the days prior to the March on Rome anniversary, the fascists made important efforts to convince the veterans to join the celebration. Paradoxically, now the fascists attacked the concept of *apoliticità* (Image 20).\(^{106}\)

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\(^{102}\) Nicola Moscardelli, ‘Combattentismo e pescecanismo’, *La Conquista dello Stato* (Rome), 1 October 1924.

\(^{103}\) *La Stampa*, 15 August 1924.

\(^{104}\) (‘fuori della loro funzione storica’, ‘la funzione storica del cosidetto combattentismo è in atto nel Fascismo da quattro o cinque anni’) Nino Sammartano, ‘I ‘combattenti’ fuori della loro funzione storica’, *Critica fascista*, 15 October 1924.

\(^{105}\) (‘La missione storica del fascismo, che non è un partito ma uno stato d’animo, è da un pezzo terminata’) *Il Primato*, 7 December 1924.

\(^{106}\) *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 21 October 1924.
In reality, important sectors of veterans across the Italian provinces joined the ceremonies for the March on Rome regardless, as was the case in Rome and in several northern towns. Mussolini obtained endorsement from other veteran associations than the ANC, namely the war volunteers and *arditi*. It came as no surprise that Delcroix maintained his loyalty to him. Forty-four bearers of the Gold Medal publicly declared their full support to Mussolini. Likewise, many other *combattenti* wanted to reinforce the links with Mussolini instead of breaking with the government. Their disobedience of the ANC was ascribed to the view that its *Comitato Centrale* practiced an equivocal *apoliticità*. In other words, the decision of not participating in a celebration because of the *apoliticità* of the ANC was criticized precisely as a *political* reaction. Furthermore, the belief in the mythical link between Vittorio Veneto and the March on Rome was widespread. And many were convinced that the veterans had actually been ‘pioneers of the fascist gospel’ by participating in the war propaganda, and that Fascism

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107 *Roma fascista*, 8 November 1924; *Il Combattente Maremmano*, 31 October 1924.
108 *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 1, 7, 16, 19 October 1924.
110 *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 18, 21 October 1924.
was a phenomenon that had emerged from the war.\textsuperscript{111} But in general, veterans joined the 28 October celebration moved by their fascist membership rather than by their status as veterans. In any case, the fascists were disappointed.\textsuperscript{112} In the end, in many Italian cities, violence broke out between the fascists and the veterans who independently performed the 4 November commemoration.\textsuperscript{113} The commemorative cycle of October-November 1924 provoked a violent conflict that reveals the deadlock at which the veterans’ ideological evolution had arrived.

In conclusion, the two fundamental discursive elements that entered into the ideological veterans’ world during this time, \textit{combattentismo} and \textit{apoliticità}, did not lead to any widely and uniformly shared political position, neither for the veterans organizations, nor for their members and leaders. Yet, at the same time, both themes favoured the fascistization process. The original 1919 project of \textit{rinnovamento} was long since forgotten. The ideologies of the ‘anti-patriotic’ left had been rejected. The republican (\textit{Italia Libera}) and the Salvemini trends (PSd’A) had been marginalised.\textsuperscript{114} Therefore, by October 1922, Fascism was the main ideological and discursive framework that was left for those veterans who desired to exert political action. Soon displeased by the totalitarian impulses of fascist ideology (already present in De Vecchi’s project), most veterans tried to maintain themselves in an idiosyncratic discursive framework, or strived to find a new one, while they negotiated with Fascism. It was necessary to define an ideological position for the veterans, because otherwise their organizational independence was at risk. \textit{Combattentismo} and \textit{apoliticità} were two tools for this discursive negotiation, which would allow the accommodation of the veterans into Fascism. However, Fascism did not allow accommodation but only assimilation; or in other words, fascistization.

\textit{Combattentismo} and \textit{apoliticità} did not help militate against the fascistization of war veterans for several reasons. Firstly, there was no consensus about what \textit{combattentismo} meant, although it was clear for everybody that such a phenomenon existed. This protean concept allowed for the channelling of the political struggle around the war veterans’ organizations and the PNF; but its contradictions teach us that

\textsuperscript{111} (‘pioneri del verbo fascista’) \textit{Il Combattente d’Italia}, 5 September, 3 November 1924.
\textsuperscript{112} Leo Polini, ‘Combattenti e fascisti’, \textit{Il Popolo d’Italia}, 2 November 1924.
\textsuperscript{114} In the south, veterans who wanted to pursue a reformist programme had to become independent from the ANC, creating their own press organs; see \textit{Il Combattente. Politico indipendente dell’Italia Meridionale} (Naples), 20 October 1924.
veteran ideology and politics, as well as the veteran organizations, were plural by nature. *Combattentismo* was a kaleidoscope through which it was possible to observe the veteran movement and its political role. Furthermore, *combattentismo* seemed to be a fruit of (and it was a consequence of) the fascist seizure of power. Either in its negative definition—as the exaltation of the veteran condition in order to obtain political and economic rewards—, or in its positive meaning—linked with the Italian fighting spirit coming from the Risorgimento—, *combattentismo* was soon characterised as an ideological feature related to Fascism. Yet the fascists themselves did not offer a singular interpretation or definition for this phenomenon either.

Secondly, *apoliticità* was another polyvalent concept used by all veteran sectors in one way or another. It was much more clear what *apoliticità* meant (non-political action), but as any historian would understand, the actions of the veteran associations hardly could be seen as devoid of political consequences.115 Veterans soon realised that pretending to maintain an apolitical position was hypocrisy, even if *apoliticità* was understood as non-partisan action. However, the appeal to *apoliticità* inside of the organization was an effective means of restraining the political actions of rivals. *Apoliticità* initially allowed for the maintenance of political diversity inside the directive boards of the ANC, in spite of fascist pressure. It is a paradox that, after some time, *apoliticità* rendered unlikely the adoption of any political position independent of Fascism, and facilitated the full fascistization of the ANC directive boards, as we will see. In any case, in the years 1923-1924, both discursive tools—*combattentismo* and *apoliticità*—permitted the final consolidation of Fascism as the perceived real political manifestation of the veterans’ spirits and voices, even if this bond was far from being translated into reality.

**The fascistization of the ANC (1924-1925)**

Understanding the final stage of the Italian veterans’ fascistization is crucial, because it was integral to the imposition of the fascist dictatorship in 1925. Both the establishment of the dictatorship and the process of the fascistization of the veterans should be understood in the context of the political ascension of Farinacci—who would go on to become the General Secretary of the PNF on 15 February 1925— and in the climate of

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115 It is interesting to note that in English there is no possibility of translating *apoliticità*: ‘apoliticism’, being an –ism (a non-political –ism) would be an oxymoron in itself.
the ‘second wave’ of fascist violence.\textsuperscript{116} Most importantly, Mussolini’s infamous speech on 3 January 1925 made the non-fascist veterans’ resistance highly difficult, since Italy was formally converted into a dictatorship. Thereafter, any opposition could be illegalized or completely marginalized. Despite the relevance of the Italian war veterans’ fascistization in the process of the formal installation of the fascist dictatorship, historiography has only provided concise accounts of Italian veteran politics in this period. Veterans’ memoires of this crucial moment are usually contradictory and tend to be self-justifying.\textsuperscript{117} In this section, I will provide a new and more detailed analysis of the process, offering a view from below, and also focusing on its discursive and symbolic features. This analysis will allow us to reassess the real role played by veterans in the consolidation of the fascist dictatorship during 1925.

**Unleashing fascistization**

The above-discussed events of 4 November 1924 represented a symbolic breaking point that unleashed the definitive offensive to fascistize the ANC. In the following weeks, some ANC leaders, such as Ponzio di San Sebastiano, broke off their relationship with the PNF; some of them even approached the anti-fascist parliamentary opposition.\textsuperscript{118} To reverse the situation, some fascists suggested a policy of a slow and pacific impregnation of the ANC. They recommended that fascist veterans, taking advantage of their superiority in numbers, enrol in the veteran association, frequent its headquarters, make themselves known; the objective was not to ‘conquer’ (conquistare) the ANC sections, but to make their ideals prevail within the association.\textsuperscript{119} Farinacci, in contrast, was in favour of a far more intransigent tactic to resolve veterans’ issue. As we know, in Farinacci’s Cremona the confrontation between veterans and fascists was particularly hostile.\textsuperscript{120} According to the radical ras, there was no space for intermediate positions; the veterans should be either with Fascism or against it. As we will see in this section,

\textsuperscript{116} Adrian Lyttelton, ‘Fascism in Italy: the Second Wave’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 1 (1966), pp. 75-100.


\textsuperscript{118} Cremona Nuova, 8, 9 November 1924; *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 9 November 1924; *L’Impero* (Rome), 9 November 1924; *L’Idea Nazionale*, 11 November 1924.

\textsuperscript{119} See Rino Landi’s articles in *Il Fascio*, 4, 11, 18, 29 November, 20 December 1924.

\textsuperscript{120} Arturo Codignola, *La resistenza de ‘I combattenti di Assisi’*, p. 114; Cremona Nuova, 22 October, 7 November 1924; also in Roberto Farinacci, *Andante mosso. 1924-25*, Milano, 1929, pp. 125-132 and 140-142.
the fascists not only pursued a strategy of silent infiltration, but also employed violent, ruthless methods to finally fascistize the veteran organization.

The fascists launched a campaign of propaganda and local manoeuvres in order to discredit the ANC. For this purpose, they set up an alternative veteran platform, called Unione Nazionale Combattenti (UNCi). The UNCi emerged in Turin at the end of October 1924, promoted by the fascist veteran Aldo Bertelè, who was part of a group of fascists expelled from the ANC. The new association emanated from some local Fasci and tried to attract veterans who were unhappy with the political attitude of the ANC Comitato Centrale. Thus, during November and December 1924, the first sections of the UNCi appeared at the initiative of certain fascist leaders in the province of Turin, and in some villages near Florence; shortly after, UNCi cells emerged in Palermo and Rome. In the capital, Adolfo Schiavo reaffirmed the ANC section’s loyal collaboration with Mussolini’s government —‘donor of the greatest value to the Victory’ (valorizzatore della vittoria)— during a meeting attended by influential bearers of the Gold Medal such as Amilcare Rossi. Meanwhile, sections of the UNCi started to appear in many other Italian regions from January 1925, though it was a phenomenon confined to small towns. According to a circular sent by a fascist organizer in the Sicilian province of Caltanissetta, this strategy had to be very subtle, but the objectives were straightforward. The fascists saw that, due to the uncertainty of the veteran leaders’ political positions, the ordinary veterans were in a ‘state of mind’ that could be exploited ‘in the interests of the consolidation and development of the PNF’.

In principle, the key issue was to depoliticize these veterans and to direct them towards welfare tasks only, and for this reason the UNCi veterans had to maintain very weak links with the PNF sections. In reality, however, veterans were not expected to continue being ‘agnostic’ in the political realm. Veterans had to be submitted to the fascist will across Italy.

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121 La Stampa, 29 October 1924.
122 According to Giovanni Sabatucci, I combattenti, p. 373, the UNCi had scant success, but I will demonstrate that the whole political move was successful.
123 L’Idea Nazionale, 7 November 1924; Il Giornale dei Combattenti. Organo Ufficiale dell’Unione Nazionale Combattenti (Turin), 25 November, 28 December 1924; Il Popolo d’Italia, 16 November 1924; Cremona Nuova 16 November 1924; Cf. Il Primato, 7 December 1924.
124 Il Giornale dei Combattenti, 28 December 1924.
Spaces of veterans’ fascistization

Fascism launched a countrywide operation in January and February 1925, in order to debilitate the ANC and to reinforce the position of Mussolini, whose fully-fledged dictatorship had recently been installed on 3 January. In a subsequent swift repressive action, most groups of Italia Libera were dismantled.\(^{126}\) Having broken the anti-fascist veterans’ platform, the rest of Italian veterans would also be brought under the control of the regime. This process can be seen not just as a fascist mobilization against a neutral ANC, but also as the first campaign to gather support and manufacture consent to Mussolini’s dictatorship. However, the presence of fascist veterans was far from widespread in the country. It is, therefore, interesting to carefully examine the geographical distribution of the fascist support among the Italian veterans.

The pages of Il Popolo d’Italia and other fascist journals testified to the constitution either of local UNCi sections or of sections that were independent from the ANC Comitato Centrale. The newspapers divulged the veterans’ declarations of fidelity to the Governo Nazionale, even if the sections remained linked to the ANC. In local meetings, the ANC sections decided to adopt an official position, stating whether a scission would take place. In Map 1, red dots show the provincial sections (big dots), or local sections/splintered groups (small dots), in which veterans either a) wholly or partially declared adhesion to the fascist government, or b) established UNCi sections, or c) made the ANC section split. This data can be confronted with the information — given in the paper I Combattenti — about ANC sections loyal to the Comitato Centrale; green dots show these cases. In addition, the reports from the prefetti to the Ministry of Interior —Federzoni, a figure opposed to radical fascism— help us to gain an overall view of the situation in Italy. The resulting image yield an idea of the extent and depth of the fascist veterans’ campaigning by the end of February.\(^{127}\)

\(^{126}\) Luciano Zani, Italia Libera, p. 125.

Two poles of fascist agitation among veterans were especially important: one in Tuscany, between Florence and Pisa, and another around Milan. In addition, the fascist strongholds in Emilia-Romagna were musculely opposed to the ANC *Comitato Centrale*. Unsurprisingly, the fascist veterans were powerful in these zones, where the fascist movement had been born and first flourished. These pro-governmental groups often mushroomed in medium-sized localities around urban centres. For example, in the case of Tuscany, the fascists controlled the veteran movement as early as 1919 or 1921 in cities like Siena, Pisa and Florence. In the latter city, the first fascist reactions against the ANC had started towards December 1924 in certain neighbourhoods. From there, the fascists expanded their control to the urban centre, physically attacking rival veteran centres, then intervening in other villages. Veterans from Lucca also came under fascist control thanks to the aggressive actions of the squadrist leader Carlo Scorza. In the rest of the Tuscan region, the fascist expansion among veterans was also dependent on squadrist coercion (Map 2).
In the province of Cremona the process was similar. It started with a demonstration of fascist veterans promoted by Farinacci on 23 January 1925 in the capital city.\footnote{Cremona Nuova, 21, 23 January 1925; ACS, MI PS, 1925, b. 107, Ass. Naz. Combattenti, sf. Cremona.} Subsequently, the fascists imposed their rule in a set of local veterans’ sections in the north of the province.\footnote{Cremona Nuova, 24 January 1925.} The next step was expanding eastwards and westwards; members of the initial fascist veterans’ group from Cremona were responsible for creating the new fascist veteran sections, mobilizing veterans from these villages (we can notice this expansion through the Maps 3 to 6).\footnote{Cremona Nuova, 25 January 1925.}
These fascist offensives can be put in direct relation with the existence of previous conflicts between veterans and fascists. Such quarrels had arisen as early as 1922-1923, especially in Farinacci’s province. In other northern regions, there was a smaller need to mobilize veterans against the ANC, since the masses of veterans had already been brought under fascist control. For example, in Veneto there was less agitation, for Fascism had already dismantled the erstwhile predominant Catholic UNRG. In Brescia, the Catholic veterans of the countryside remained mainly loyal to the fascist government, while veteran leaders in the city remained loyal to the ANC Comitato Centrale; Augusto Turati —the fascist ras of Brescia— preferred to wait until the
decree of 2 March (see below) to dissolve this ANC section. All these cases (Tuscany, Cremona, Brescia) show that the fascist reaction against the ANC was not spontaneous; instead, it depended on the personal initiative of fascist leaders to mobilize the veterans.

Seemingly, some zones remained only slightly affected by the fascist drive, especially in the centre and south of Italy. Veterans from Lazio and the Marche may have shown little sympathy for Fascism for several reasons. In these zones, the veterans had been involved in agrarian activism during the *bienio rosso*, and both the *arditi del popolo* and *Italia Libera* organizations were well rooted. Further south, the same causes for a less significant fascist penetration can be pointed out. In the *Mezzogiorno* and in Sicily, fascist veterans tried to drum up support in a generally hostile environment. In Sardinia, the masses of veterans of the PSd’A probably remained unconvinced by Fascism. Anti-fascist veteran leaders like Lussu were still influential. Several ANC federations from Campania, Calabria and Sicily declared their loyalty to the *ordine del giorno* of Assisi. However, in these regions, the fascists made efforts to mobilise veterans in different local sections, confronting the non-fascist groups.

In reality, the fascist veterans were present in the south as well. Several ANC section leaders from Lazio were among the promoters of the pro-fascist agitation in Rome. In the province of Lecce (Puglia), a local section adhered to the government on the grounds of rejecting ‘faction ideologies’, and denouncing the ‘disintegrating action of subversive forces’. At the end of February 1925, in this provincial federation, 16 out of 36 local sections supported the fascist government, counting on 3,762 votes. In the case of Trapani (Sicily), the veterans’ assembly had divided into four groups: fascists (69 votes), ‘pro-fascists’ (140 votes), and two anti-government groups (134 votes in total). In Catanzaro, too, down on the sole of the boot-shaped Italian peninsula, a division between two trends was reported: one favourable, and the other critical of the ANC. In Cagliari (Sardinia) there was an important inclination towards Fascism among the veterans: 105 out of 115 sections (containing 12,000 out of 15,000

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133 L’Idea Nazionale, 3 February 1925.
veterans) supported Fascism. In general, in the South, whereas some urban, squadrist-connected veteran elites underpinned Fascism, the large numbers of peasant ex-soldiers did not.

In the north, inversely, Fascism was a mass movement, but there were places with a predominantly anti-fascist tendency among the veterans (Alessandria, Genoa). For instance, writing from Imperia, on the Ligurian Coast, the prefetto reported that the ANC provincial section had voted in February in favour of an anti-fascist position, gathering 860 votes against 460 votes and 330 abstentions, though seven pro-fascist sections decided to create their own independent federation. On some occasions, the decision of the provincial or local section just depended on the personal choice of the leaders. Most veterans were indifferent or incapable of discerning any real differences between either supporting the Comitato Centrale or stating loyalty to the fascist Government. In Reggio Emilia, for instance, during a meeting in mid-February, a new pro-ANC committee prevailed over the fascist list of candidates by a difference of circa 400 votes, but the prefetto noted that there were names common to both lists. It is difficult to discern the local political controversies that swayed the ANC sections to tilt towards the fascist government or towards the ANC Comitato Centrale. Beyond a superficial division between north and south, many other factors divided the Italian veterans.

Discourses and symbols

The kind of reasoning and discourse with which veterans legitimised their support for Mussolini’s government is easier to understand. As they launched their campaign to fascistize the ANC, the fascists were again taking advantage of the apoliticità motif, which was deeply engrained in the veteran discursive framework. Veterans were, in the fascists’ view, bound to the future task of safeguarding superior, national interests; for this reason, they should be controlled, tamed by the idea of apoliticità, until that exceptional moment arrived. In the fascist discursive strategy of this moment, it was only the attitude of the ANC Comitato Centrale and the ordine del giorno of Assisi that were considered perniciously political, whereas adhering to the Governo Nazionale and Mussolini as Presidente del Consiglio was considered a wholly national and patriotic

(non-political) position. Naturally, any real war veteran was expected to support Mussolini. For the fascists, ‘the combattenti worth of this name should not forget and should maintain their supportive help, their recognition and fidelity to the PNF and to its great leader’.  

The manipulated notion of apoliticità and myths about the fascist seizure of power explain why many veteran sections sided with fascism, and stood against the ANC Comitato Centrale. The veterans’ statement in La Spezia on 2 February 1925, illustrates this point. According to them, the members of the Comitato Centrale, such as Ettore Viola, had abused the right to carry out a political action in the name of the veterans, thereby discrediting and dividing the ANC. By forgetting the statutory principle of apoliticità, the Comitato Centrale had favoured the victory-sabotaging political groups. In order to save unity, the veterans disavowed their leaders. In contrast, they considered that Mussolini’s government had ‘been always a jealous guardian and defender of their moral and economic rights’, and that ‘only after the coming of the fascist government the veterans saw their heroic sacrifice recognised’. For them, the national government had made real the victory and given sense to the heroic sacrifice of the soldiers. This kind of declaration proves that the fascist discourse had permeated veterans to a certain extent; that the measures taken by the Mussolini’s government had been received positively; and that the discourse of apoliticità was effectively benefiting Fascism.

The fascists were the victors of the discursive and symbolic struggle of this period. At a moment when Fascism or anti-fascism were the only available political options, the pitfall of apoliticità was detrimental for the veterans. The ANC leaders were less successful than the fascists in employing the myth of the veterans’ political neutrality. The veterans wrongly thought that impartiality would lead to demands for the discontinuance of the fascist ‘revolution’. As a cartoon published in the ANC organ shows, the veterans tried to represent themselves as independent spectators in the ‘theatre of Italian politics’; they overemphasized the typical veteran attributes, the grey-

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140 (‘i combattenti degni di questo nome non dimenticano e mantengono al Partito fascista ed al suo grande Capo l’ausilio solidaile della loro riconoscenza e della loro fedeltà’) Il Popolo d’Italia, 8 January 1925.
144 Cf. L’Idea Nazionale, 4 February 1925.
green uniform, the helmet and the medals strip, as something very different to the fascist model of squadrist political actor (Image 21).

Image 21: ‘Theatre of Italian Politics. – They are right saying that we do not represent anything... In the theatre of war they allowed us a discreet role, but here they represent everything’, I Combattenti, 22 February 1925.

However, after 3 January 1925, the anti-fascist veterans’ leaders had a very low probability of winning the symbolic and discursive struggle, given that the independent veteran press constantly suffered attacks and confiscations. Indeed, the fascists appropriated the same symbolic representation of the veteran. Their publications also represented the veterans without fascist traits, as well-behaved soldiers, whose loyalty was bound to the government and not to the vile, self-interested ANC leaders (Image 22). Thus, during this process, a shared representation of the veteran consolidated: that of the loyal soldier. It was a symbol rather typical of the nationalist patriotic discourse. But now this symbol remained tied to Fascism in power.

145 I Combattenti, 22 February 1925.
Actors, practices and strategies

Who exactly were the agents of the process of veterans’ fascistization? Sociologically, this phenomenon was in essence the same as the fascist reaction of 1920-1922. It differed from squadristism in the nature of the actions they performed, although violence was eventually used. As mentioned above, the first pro-fascist veteran sections appeared in January 1925 in the centre-north of Italy.\(^\text{146}\) There is evidence to demonstrate that the protagonists were typical fascist veterans, officers, young junior officers, and ex-arditi. For instance, in Trieste, three former lieutenants and one frigate captain established the UNCi cell on 25 January.\(^\text{147}\) In Pavia, on 5 February, a colonel, a lieutenant colonel, a captain, a major, and some professors, lawyers and doctors set up the local UNCi cell recruiting 200 members.\(^\text{148}\) Some groups of arditi were also involved in the UNCi associative operation.\(^\text{149}\) The anti-Bolshevik veterans of 1919 were again in action.

Nevertheless, the fascist veterans did not rely on the violent squadrist practices during the campaign against the unbowed ANC. They made their voices heard, but they did not assault the ANC headquarters as they had done earlier to socialist centres. In Turin, on 19 January, after an assembly in the Fascio headquarters, there was a demonstration of fascist veterans in front of the ANC premises, which were guarded by

\(^{146}\) ACS, MI PS, 1925, b. 107, Ass. Naz. Combattenti, fascicles by provinces, ff. Firenze, Cremona, Ancona.

\(^{147}\) ACS, MI PS, 1925, b. 108, Ass. Naz. Combattenti, fascicles by provinces (II), f. Trieste.


\(^{149}\) Il Giornale dei Combattenti, 21 February 1925.
soldiers and carabinieri. They sang fascist and soldiers’ hymns (Giovinezza and Inno del Piave), but there were no incidents.\textsuperscript{150} In other towns, fascist veterans publicly protested, rallied and demonstrated against the ANC, but there were no physical attacks yet.\textsuperscript{151} In the biggest cities where anti-fascist ANC leaders still controlled important provincial sections, the division between fascists and veterans was more troublesome. This was the case of Milan, where Giulio Bergmann was the main leader. On 10 February, tumultuous brawls took place during a veteran meeting, yet without bloodshed.\textsuperscript{152} On 15 February, the prefetto of Milan reported that another electrifying meeting ended with the approval of the fascist ordine del giorno by a narrow margin (2,165 against 2,039 votes). Giulio Bergmann defended the ordine del giorno of Assisi and protested, but the fascist commissaries occupied the ANC establishment without incidents.\textsuperscript{153} A common denominator of shared symbols and discourses prevented violence between the fascists and ANC veterans.

However, violence was an important vector for fascist success, eventually exploding during clashes for the control of the ANC headquarters. The ANC establishments symbolized the control of the sections and, in fact, contained the archives, funds and materials necessary to carry out assistance tasks. The fascists never wanted to destroy, but rather to seize them. Nonetheless, in certain places throughout the Mezzogiorno, groups of peasant ex-soldiers either had socialist inclinations or had rivalled the fascists for the control of towns and syndicates. Here, the level of violent behaviour was higher. In fact, in Puglia, squadrist violence against veterans associations had continued after the March on Rome, and now conflicts stepped up.\textsuperscript{154} In Bari, for example, a provisional ANC committee riddled with internal controversies tried to keep the section united. The pro-fascist leaders, however, occupied the headquarters by force, and mobilized 43 out of 50 local sections in their favour. The prefetto of Bari believed that future violent skirmishes were likely.\textsuperscript{155}

Perhaps the most important confrontations took place in Rome, although physical violence did not yet break out. In the capital city the ANC central headquarters coexisted with the fascistized ANC local section. On 1 February 1925 a group of 200
veterans organized a meeting in the Teatro Argentina to declare their hostility to the ANC Comitato Centrale. After this demonstration, they moved on to the Altare della Patria to venerate the tomb of the Milite Ignoto, stopping en route to protest in front of the ANC national headquarters en route (in Palazzetto Venezia). Their attempt to invade the building was only prevented by the intervention of the police. The following day, they gathered again in Piazza Venezia, and a group of around twenty of them tried to approach the ANC headquarters, again with hostile intentions. Once more, however, the police blocked their way. Further north, in Forli (Romagna), veterans suffered fascist aggressions at the end of January 1925. In Pavia, fights between anti-fascist and fascist veterans took place on several occasions, while fascists were carrying out a campaign to affiliate veterans to the PNF. In the province of Verona, the fascists attacked some veterans who were members of the Italia Libera or even ANC members. However, physical attacks against persons were not common, unless they took place against veterans clearly considered to be socialists or anti-fascists.

The ANC establishments were the objectives of the fascist violence, rather than the veterans themselves. In Tuscany, this kind of attacks became more systematic than in other areas. The first violent explosion took place in Florence on 31 December 1924, when a fascist gathering ended with the destruction of several centres of the anti-fascist middle class, for example the printing press of the combatants’ weekly Fanteria. At the end of February, in the province of Pisa, the ANC offices of at least three localities were devastated, and this strategy continued into March until several fascists were charged and arrested. Coercion seems, however, to have worked, since many veterans joined the new UNCi sections created in Tuscany at around this time (see Map 2). It was in the province of Lucca that conflicts reached a peak. By the end of February, the 84 ANC sections registered 8,300 members in this province, whereas the 55 pro-fascist UNCi sections numbered 5,000. On 1 March, after a UNCi meeting, there was a veterans’ parade; some fights took place, and the fascists attempted to occupy the ANC headquarters. In light of these clashes, the prefetto opted to close them down. Finally,

156 ACS, MI PS, 1925, b. 108, Roma e provincia, ex combattenti autonomi, f. Roma città; L’Idea Nazionale, 3 February 1925.
157 Avanti!, 29 January 1925.
159 I Combattenti, 23 January 1925.
160 Cremona Nuova, 1 January 1925; Fanteria, 6 December 1924 was the last issue.
the fascist leader Carlo Scorza demanded control of the premises, arguing that the UNCi section had already exceeded the numbers of the ANC. In reality, the fascists had subjugated the veterans through a series of arson attacks, aggressions, occupations and robberies committed against several local ANC headquarters all throughout the province.\(^{163}\) The objective was to take over the organizational structures of the ANC.

The fascists seemed to be looking for a confrontation. The ANC national congress was arranged for 5 March in Viareggio. With this meeting, some ANC leaders headed by Viola wanted to gather veterans’ support, probably in order to proclaim a strong opposition to the fascist government. However, the pro-fascist UNCi leaders called the veterans to a national congress in the same town. In the last days of February, the UNCi threateningly expanded all throughout Italy; its leaders stated that they wanted ‘just to show their forces’.\(^{164}\) The prefetto and the Ministry of Interior, fearing the consequences of this showdown, disposed 400 soldiers and 200 carabinieri ready to intervene in Viareggio. Many interpreted the situation as a fascist attempt to silence veterans’ criticism (Image 23). When the ANC decisive congress was moved to Rome, the UNCi correspondingly summoned their veterans to Rome.\(^{165}\) It was very clear that an agreement between the two factions would not work. Luigi Russo, a pro-fascist member of the Comitato Centrale, had resigned from his position, declaring that no compromise was possible.\(^{166}\) Russo and Host-Venturi blamed the Comitato Centrale for having abandoned the mission of social assistance; the ANC was not fulfilling its duties.\(^{167}\) It was also said that Freemasonry had infiltrated the ANC.\(^{168}\) On the basis of these allegations, some sections started to clamour for government intervention.\(^{169}\) Two days before the ANC congress in Rome commenced, this meeting was banned by the prefetto of Rome and, crucially, Mussolini made use of his powers to decree the dissolution of the ANC Comitato Centrale.\(^{170}\)

\(^{164}\) (‘fare semplicemente una dimostrazione delle proprie forze’) Il Giornale dei Combattenti. Organo dell’Unione Nazionale Combattenti, 28 February 1925.
\(^{166}\) Il Popolo d’Italia, 8 February 1925.
\(^{167}\) Il Popolo d’Italia, 20 February 1925; L’Idea Nazionale, 1 March 1925.
\(^{168}\) Il Popolo d’Italia, 28 February 1925; Roma fascista had since 1924 suggested this connection, see also 7 and 9 March 1925.
\(^{169}\) Il Popolo d’Italia, 26 February 1925.
\(^{170}\) Il Popolo d’Italia, 3 March 1925. The prefetto of Rome also vetoed on 3 March the celebration of the UNCi congress.
Mussolini’s decree of 2 March 1925 dissolved the central administrative organs of the ANC, and entrusted a triumvirate with the temporary mission of administering the association. This action was the result of the previous fascist campaign of slander, coercion, disturbance and political disintegration at the local level, which encouraged groups of veterans to mobilise against the Comitato Centrale. As a foreign observer noted, this was a ‘new coup de force of Mussolini, carried out under the pressure of the extremist elements’. 171

The fascist manipulative manoeuvre had succeeded. When the decree came, it was alleged that more than a half of the veteran sections had stated their position for the government and against the ANC. The leaders of the Comitato Centrale were only able to maintain certain zones under control, like Genoa, Alessandria or Naples. Their anti-fascist reaction came far too late. By contrast, the fascists were reaping their rewards for having cultivated the support of the veterans since the beginning of Mussolini’s government. After the decree was passed, the symbolic and economic measures taken in regard to veterans were recalled once more in the fascist press. 172 Fascism had fostered the perception that it had placed great value on the victory (valorizzato la vittoria); that

171 (‘il s’agit d’un nouveau coup de force mussolinien, exécuté sous la poussée des éléments extrémistes’) Report of the special commissary in Menton (5 March 1925), AN, F/7/13456, Italie. 172 Il Popolo d’Italia, 5 March 1925,
apoliticità should be the expected attitude of veterans; and that the fascists really cared about veterans.

Despite its significance as a political move, the dissolution of the ANC Comitato Centrale roused little indignation, or even interest, among most Italians. The prefetti, thoroughly questioned by Federzoni, answered in almost all cases that the population was widely indifferent. For many, the measure gave ‘an inevitable, logical solution to an unsustainable situation’.173 But the veterans harboured a wide variety of feelings. In some places, they met after the decree to declare their support for the government. In Cremona, the fascist veterans were very satisfied with the resolution. By contrast, in some zones, like Rome and Campania, veterans raised protests, and remained supportive of the position of the Comitato Centrale, trying to stay united and keeping contact with politicians from the opposition. However, neither anti-fascist reorganization, nor challenges to the public order were in sight.174 Throughout the rest of March, the fascist press published articles justifying the decree, and introducing to the public to the mission of the renewed ANC. But the process of fascistization, however, was not yet complete.

Completing fascistization
The triumvirato appointed by Mussolini was composed of Amilcare Rossi, Luigi Russo and Nicola Sansanelli (Image 24). Only Luigi Russo had been a leader of the ANC before; he and Sansanelli were also MPs. During the congress of Assisi, Russo had demonstrated his commitment with the fascist government, supporting an enhancement of the ANC social assistance tasks. Sansanelli had some experience in resolving internal disputes inside the provincial Fasci. Amilcare Rossi, the key figure in the triumvirato, was a war veteran, a lawyer and a professor, and a holder of the prestigious Gold Medal as the result of his actions during the war. Rossi was known in Rome’s aristocratic nationalist circles, in the Roman section of the ANC, and also in the PNF, of which he was a member since 1923. His most important position was as a member of the leading triumvirato of the Gold Medal Group (Gruppo Medaglie d’Oro al Valor Militare d’Italia), which endorsed Mussolini. Rossi had expressed his views on the veterans’ question during the summer 1924, saying that all the veterans should be disciplined and

maintain their loyalty towards Mussolini.\textsuperscript{175} With this leadership, it is not surprising that the first actions of the \textit{triumvirato} were exclusively related to a very prosaic social assistance, detached from any political stance. The fascist hierarchies were satisfied. The PNF would not tolerate treachery like that of the dissolved \textit{Comitato Centrale}; the fascists ‘did not want enemies inside the ANC’.\textsuperscript{176}

![Image 24: The fascist ANC \textit{triumvirato}. Rossi, Russo, Sansanelli (the three men with medals on, Rossi in the centre). Amilcare Rossi, \textit{Figlio del mio tempo}.](image)

The veteran crisis of 1925 also reinforced the political position of Mussolini as dictator. After the decreed fascistization of the ANC a number of local veteran sections from across the country sent telegrams to Mussolini giving him their support, thus demonstrating the extent to which ‘consent’ towards Fascism had spread (Map 7 shows where the telegrams were sent from).\textsuperscript{177}

\textsuperscript{175} An insight into the character of Amilcare Rossi can be found in his autobiography, Amilcare Rossi, \textit{Figlio del mio tempo. Prefascismo, fascismo, postfascismo}, Roma, 1969; \textit{Il Combattente d’Italia}, 5 September 1924; Nicola Brancaccio et allii: \textit{Le Medaglie d’Oro (1833-1925)}, [1925].

\textsuperscript{176} (‘\textit{Nell’Associazione dei Combattenti non vogliamo nemici’}) \textit{Il Popolo d’Italia}, 7 March 1925.

\textsuperscript{177} \textit{Il Popolo d’Italia}, 12-14, 20 March 1925.
The reliability of this source is only relative, but we should concede some value to this data. In some provinces (Varese, Isernia, Bari) a large number of sections joined in the initiative, probably at the behest of the provincial fascist leaders. However, we can see that large parts of the south, the north and Sardinia still did not manifest any support for the fascist Duce. It can be argued that in some zones, the veterans’ ‘consent’ was due to fascist coercion. In contrast, the more homogenously spread geographical origin of these messages also suggests that Mussolini —after his apparently firm role in the crisis— had a wider popularity than the PNF among the Italian veterans.

Indeed, the fascistization of the Italian veterans was incomplete. After the decreed dissolution of the ANC Comitato Centrale, further measures including violence and persecutions were needed to marginalize the anti-fascist veteran groups. In Alessandria, whose provincial section remained committed to the spirit of the ordine del
giorno of Assisi, several violent incidents were reported between April and August 1925, until all resistance was finally extinguished. In the province of Genoa, the unrepentant ANC headquarters resisted to the fascist attacks until August 1925. Ettore Viola and the rest of the dissolved Comitato Centrale had been forced to transfer their powers to the new triumvirato, something that took place peacefully immediately after the decree. Yet during the spring and summer 1925, Ettore Viola continued his activism trying to create new independent veteran organizations against Fascism. He and his followers were closely watched by the police, and harassed by the fascists; in the Parliament, according to Viola, he and the fascists Bottai and Giunta came to blows. However, as the prefetto of Bari informed, the anti-fascist veteran leaders attracted little support, and armed resistance seemed unlikely.

In order to definitively submit the veterans to fascist control, different strategies were employed. For example, violent fascist attacks served as an excuse for the prefetti to order the closure of the veteran sections. Following these closures, a fascist commissario took over the section, ‘fascistizing’ it. Even in Lucca the claims of ANC leaders regarding the anti-Bolshevik, heroic and monarchist past of their sections did not serve to save them from fascistization. Moreover, pro-fascist leaders blackmailed veterans, threatening to leave them unprotected if they maintained an anti-government stance. In a meeting of disabled veterans in Belluno, 28 April 1925, some veterans reported the persecutions they suffered because of their political opinions, but the president bluntly answered that ‘the ANMIG was able to intervene, impose respect and protect its members only when these members do not adopt any charge or attitude confronted with the politics of the government’. These procedures served to enforce the veterans’ submission to Fascism everywhere in Italy.

In the south, ending the veterans’ crisis proved more difficult than in the north. The fascistization of the ANC was reached by employing a persuasive propaganda,

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178 Battaglie, 8 March 1925.
181 Amilcare Rossi, Figlio del mio tempo, p. 87; Il Popolo d’Italia, 4 March 1925
182 Ettore Viola, Combattenti e Mussolini, p. 31-fl.
186 “(‘l’Associazione mutilati ed invalidi può intervenire e far rispettare e proteggere il socio quando questi non assume alcuna carica o atteggiamento in contrasto colle direttive politiche del Governo’), ACS, MI PS, 1925, b. 111, f. ‘Mutilati e invalidi di guerra’, sf. Belluno.
violent tactics, and deepening the collaboration between the state authorities and the fascist veterans. A latent war between veterans took place during the spring and summer of 1925 in some places of the Mezzogiorno, where the majority of veterans were anti-fascist peasant ex-soldiers (contadini combattenti). Fascists behaved aggressively and were helped by the prefetti to bring the ANC sections under control. In several places and on several occasions, the fascists fired shots in veteran meetings, causing panic among the audience; they provoked numerous fights and disturbances. These conflicts not only broke the veterans’ resistance, but also provided an excuse to the state authorities to dissolve the ANC sections. Thus, in Lazio, where the majority of veterans had barely supported Fascism, the prefetto solved the crisis: between April and June 1925, he closed down a set of ANC sections. Later, in October-November 1925, once the fascist ANC had been reorganized, he allowed the sections to form again, since they would now have a ‘neatly national colour’. In the south, the fascist discourse of apoliticità and the authoritative actions of the prefetti were decisive in fully realising the fascistization of the ANC. Thus, the organization was transformed into a kind of annex of the PNF.

After the summer of 1925, the crisis finally ended with the rehabilitation of a profoundly fascistized ANC, which implied in many cases the transformation of the veterans into PNF members. In Lecce, veterans began to meet again in the local Fascio. In Bari, the UNCi section with its 60 members decided to return to the ANC, since the association had ‘recovered its initial programme of patriotism’. In Caserta, near Naples, the enrolment of all the veterans into the PNF section took place in April 1925. In Lecce, after a long struggle, the renewed ANC section met at the end of August. In the meeting, it was stated that only Mussolini’s government strived to give value to the Italy of Vittorio Veneto, and impose the respect and gratitude towards the veterans, who had been despised in 1919 […] that no different views or aims exist between the ANC and the PNF, and that both

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the qualities of veteran and fascist are compatible and possible to be hold at the same time.

The members of this section declared their complete and unconditional support (adesione) for the PNF, and they took the decision to enrol all the veterans into it.\(^1\) In Naples, in June 1925, the arditii —duly invited by the fascists— joined the PNF and the MVSN. Many arditii were already affiliated to the PNF in the centre and north of Italy.\(^2\) Converting veterans into members of the PNF was an old fascist aspiration that now was becoming true.

By the autumn of 1925, Rossi, Russo and Sansanelli, the fascist triumvirate in charge of the ANC, were, after a few months of activity, in a position to demand complete control of war veterans in Italy. They asked the prefetti that all independent veteran organizations stop their activities.\(^3\) By the end of 1925, therefore, any real possibility of maintaining an independent veteran movement or association had been destroyed. When in 1926 the fascist provvedimenti per la difesa dello Stato were approved, none of the veteran leaders who had tried to oppose the process of fascistization dared to contradict Mussolini.\(^4\) The dictatorship had consolidated its control over the ANC and the ANMIG, through which Fascism maintained a tight grip on the Italian veterans of the First World War.

In conclusion, the process of fascistization of the Italian war veterans during 1925 was not easy; it was long and difficult. In the first phase, propaganda, local political manoeuvres, and coercion created an appropriate climate for the decree of 2 March 1925. In this phase, there was also pressure from below, carried out by groups of fascist veterans in the provinces. Most likely, these groups were not very large, and they emerged from the local and provincial Fasci rather than from the ANC sections. In any case, this movement was successful in gathering enough support to take over an important number of ANC sections, thus justifying the intervention of the government. After the decree of 2 March 1925, the second part of the process consisted of the gradual isolation of anti-fascist veterans’ leaders and the submission of the ANC sections.

\(^1\) (‘soltanto il governo di S E Benito Mussolini seppe valorizzare l’Italia di Vittorio Veneto, ed imporre il rispetto e la gratitudine verso i Reduci dalla trincea, dileggiati nel 1919 […] che nessuna divergenza di vedute e di finalità esiste tra l’Associazione Nazionale Combattenti ed il Partito Naz. Fascista, e che le due qualità di Combattente e di Fascista sono compatibili e cumulabili […]’) ACS, MI PS, 1925, b. 107, Ass. Naz. Combattenti, fascicole by provinces, f. Lecce.
\(^2\) ACS, MI PS, 1925, b. 107, Arditi d’Italia, fascicole by provinces, ff. Genova, Modena, Napoli.
\(^3\) ACS, MI PS, 1925, b. 107, Ass. Naz. Combattenti, Affari generali.
\(^4\) Ettore Viola, Combattenti e Mussolini, p. 53.
sections all over Italy to fascist rule. Propaganda, violence, and the help of many prefetti were the key instruments in achieving the final success. This was the historical reality of the relationship between veterans and Fascism between 1924 and 1925, but in other countries veteran organizations remained largely unaware of the conditions in which fascist control had been achieved.
Chapter 4
Veterans and Fascism: Consolidation and European Expansion (1925-1929)

The second half of the 1920s was the time of a trans-continental circulation of discourses and myths about the fascist veterans, as I will analyse in this chapter. These years have passed into history as a period of stabilization for the European continent. After the turbulence of 1923, which had made evident the failure of the status quo orchestrated in Versailles, the international powers sought a new settlement. The United States and Britain were interested in resolving the Franco-German dispute and in attaining the financial security that would assure their geopolitical influence. The arrival of Herriot to the presidency in France, after the victory of the French left (cartel des gauches) in the elections of May 1924, facilitated an international agreement on the basis of the Dawes Plan to reshape the reparations issue. At the end of 1925, the treaties of Locarno constituted the ‘real peace’ settlement in postwar Europe, inaugurating a phase of political and economic stability.1 France abandoned its intransigence regarding its security concerns, and Germany was integrated into the international system, joining the League of Nations in 1926. In this year, both the French and the German foreign ministers, Aristide Briand and Gustav Stresemann, were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. However, in these European countries, ‘recasting bourgeois Europe’ implied not only the promise of peace and the neutralization of the leftist threat, but also the weakening of parliamentarianism and a shift towards corporatism. The class struggle may have lost its preponderance as a political issue, but social structures remained unchanged.2 Meanwhile, the culture of consumption developed. On the fringes of Europe authoritarianism advanced: in 1926, dictatorships were imposed in Poland (Pilsudski) and Portugal (Salazar).

In Italy, the evolution of the fascist dictatorship responded to this context, and at the same time exerted an influence on it. After the dictatorship was officially imposed, a series of legal and institutional measures constructed a totalitarian regime.3 Although the moderate Augusto Turati replaced the radical Farinacci as the Secretary General of the PNF in March 1926, the Provisions for the Defence of the State (Provvedimenti per

3 Renzo De Felice, Mussolini il fascista, II; Philipp Morgan, Italian Fascism, pp. 96-124.
la Difesa dello Stato, the so-called leggi fascistissime) in November 1926 assured the repression of any non-fascist political force. These legal measures institutionalized violence against political enemies. The PNF purged its ranks, and around 60,000 early fascists and squadristes were expelled from the party in 1928-1929. The party was submitted to the authority of the state, and fascist syndicalism faded. The Chart of Labour (Carta del Lavoro), published in April 1927, talked about ‘class collaboration’ and reflected the conservatism of the corporatist system. Mussolini and the fascist leaders were determined to transform the press and the schools into an ‘instrument of the regime’. The fascists perceived these years with optimism, even if there were plenty of internal political struggles and intrigues among them, and the living standards of the Italian population did not considerably improve.

Consolidation pushed the fascists to stretch their tentacles abroad. There were important reasons for this policy. The total number of Italian emigrants in the mid 1920s probably surpassed 9 million. From the end of the war until 1926, the traditional flows of Italian emigration had not abated, but rather increased due to the migration of anti-fascist political exiles (fuoriusciti). France was the main European destination, particularly the south-eastern regions and Paris. Many Italian migrants in France and other countries deplored Fascism, but from 1921 on, and especially after the March on Rome, little cells of the fascist movement had proliferated in several European (and indeed non-European) cities. Usually, their founders were Italian war veterans. These Fasci all’estero (Fasci abroad) were officially organized into a centralized structure during 1923. By 1925, its leader, Giuseppe Bastianini, dreamed of a fascist international organization that would unite different European fascist movements. Groups such as the NSDAP in Germany were enthusiastic regarding this project. But Mussolini was more cautious and did not permit the establishment of contacts with any foreign movement. The Fasci all’estero enjoyed very little autonomy. Probably, rather than the Fasci all’estero, the ANC cells in foreign countries were the main link between the Italian migrant veterans and their fatherland. Well before its fascistization, the ANC had become aware of the importance of assisting the Italian communities abroad.

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4 (‘strumento del Regime’) ACS, SPD, CR, b. 29, f. ‘Situazione generale interna e internazionale (1927)’.
6 Völkischer Beobachter, 2 May 1925.
social and patriotic activities of the ANC cells constituted an asset for the ‘peaceful penetration and expansion of Italy’. As the ANC was placed under fascist control, the Italian veterans residing in foreign countries went through the same process of fascistization as those in the mother country. Thus, the fascists gained a new and fully elaborated structure through which they could exert influence and operate outside Italy.

In this chapter, I will show that the war veterans were a decisive element for the dissemination of the fascist idea in Europe during the mid and late 1920s. On the one hand, in the realm of discourses and representations, different political and veteran groups abroad absorbed and reworked the Italy-born myth of the fascist veterans. In the cases of France and Germany, the fascist-veteran symbolic complex was synthesised into ideologies and political parties. I will analyse the two most important expressions of this transfer: the French Faisceau, and the German Stahlhelm, though these organizations did not eventually succeed in their political objectives. On the other hand, with the fascistization of the ANC, the fascists entered the FIDAC, an international veteran association through which Fascism, as we will see, exerted an international influence. In this context, Italian Fascism continued transforming veteran discourses and organizations towards a totalitarian goal.

**The myth of the fascist veterans in France: the Faisceau**

The political myth of fascism as an ideology of war veterans was most clearly adopted in France by the earliest precursors of French fascism. In France, perceptions of Italian Fascism had overemphasized the participation of the war veterans in the movement. The French extreme right was very pleased with this effective anti-leftist reaction. Yet fascism was not needed, since the French conservative government acted firmly in foreign policy to defend the convenient status quo of Versailles. This situation changed at the end of 1923, when the quest for a more equitable international order commenced, and especially when the cartel des gauches won the elections of May 1924, while simultaneously the value of the French currency tumbled. The first French fascist movement, the Légion, was created in June 1924 by a war veteran and ex-officer, Antoine Rédier. Between July and December 1924, a group of war veterans and young men set up another organization, the Jeunesses Patriotes, led by the ex-captain Pierre

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9 (‘penetrazione e l'espansione pacifica dell'Italia’) *La Nuova Giornata*, 11 May 1924.

10 See for example, the case of Barcelona in Claudio Venza, ‘El consulado italiano de Barcelona y la comunidad italiana en los inicios del fascismo (1923-1925)’, *Investigaciones Históricas*, 17 (1997), pp. 265-283.
Taittinger. Both groups mobilized middle-class war veterans who were opposed to the politics of Herriot and the *cartel des gauches*.\(^{11}\) Also, at the end of 1924, some intellectuals started to propagate political theories that became the ideological basis of the *Faisceau*.

How was the Italian fascist model transferred to French politics paving the way for these fascist groupings? In the first place, the visits of French veterans to Fascist Italy in many cases reinforced formerly-constructed perceptions. In January 1924, a group of *Action Française* members arrived in Italy in order to get a first-hand impression. Georges Valois —the *Action Française* specialist on economic matters— participated in the visit; he was introduced to Mussolini by Curzio Malaparte.\(^{12}\) This contact did not immediately produce any imitation fascist movement in France; after his return from Rome, Valois continued writing about purely economic issues, such as the monetary crisis.\(^{13}\) Yet the conception of a new political force maturated slowly in the mind of George Valois. He was a decorated war veteran, ex-junior officer who had spent 25 months at the front. This experience had reinforced his nationalism and anti-pacifism. The Italian example mirrored some of the thoughts that Valois had developed since the war, particularly the consideration of the ‘social’ organization of the army as the mould for a flawless productive and hierarchic society.\(^{14}\) Similarly, another writer in the orbit of Valois, Jacques Arthuys, visited Fascist Italy in 1924.\(^{15}\) That year, Valois’ publishing house, the *Nouvelle Librairie Nationale*, translated a book by Pietro Gorgolini into French, who described the ‘revolutionary’ work of Fascism as a movement composed of ‘veterans, students, artists […]’.\(^{16}\) However, no proto-fascist party was launched in France while Italy went through the Matteotti crisis.

\(^{11}\) Robert Soucy, *French Fascism: The First Wave*, pp. 27-86. Rédiet *Légion* was incorporated into the *Jeunesses Patriotes* in July 1925.


Alongside the political tourism in Fascist Italy and the new publications praising the achievements of Mussolini, the political situation in France during 1924 and early 1925 witnessed the escalation of the veterans’ protests and the radicalization of the right. There were contacts between the UNC and anti-communist groups such as the Jeunesses Patriotes. In 1924, given the rise of the cost of living, the celebration of the armistice in Paris was marked by a demonstration of more than 30,000 disabled veterans in favour of an increase of their pensions. Later, when the ashes of Jean Jaurès—the socialist politician assassinated in 1914 because of his pacifism—were transferred to the Pantheon at the end of November, the nationalist right was outraged. While the working class celebrated this ceremony, L’Action Française depicted the official cortege as a parade of anti-patriots (antipatriotes) and revolutionaries with red flags ‘insulting the army and the fatherland’.

This symbolic confrontation reminds us of the Italian disputes of 1919-1922 around the meaning of the war and the victory. But now the situation of 1919 appeared to be inverted. In 1924, while in Fascist Italy the religion of the fatherland was imposed and veterans entered the Chamber in significant numbers, in France the socialists dominated the Chamber, and pacifism and internationalism were publicly expressed.

In France, as in Italy, the protagonists of the outburst against non-nationalist or socialist pacifism manipulated the symbols of the dead soldiers and the veterans, in order to pursue radicalized political aims. During late 1924 and early 1925, the conservative veterans’ organizations (UNC) and the extreme right stepped up their appeals to the veterans to intervene in the civic and political life, talking about a ‘mutilated victory’. In their attacks against the leftist government, they employed an array of representations of the veterans and the fallen soldiers that recalled the Italian experience of 1919-1922. Three examples shall illustrate this point. Firstly, the image of a soldier (in this case dead), standing defeated in front of a rally of politically victorious leftists who were waving red flags, was deployed in the Action Française circles (Image 25, compare with Image 11 in chapter 1, and Image 17 in chapter 2).

17 See also Giuseppe Prezzolini, Le fascisme, Paris, 1925.
18 Chris Millington, From Victory to Vichy, pp. 34-37.
20 (‘qui insulte l’armée et la Patrie’) L’Action Française, 23 November 1924.
21 Ernest Pezet, Combattants et Citoyens. Les Combattants dans la Cité branlante devant la Victoire mutilée, Paris, [1925].
Secondly, conservative veterans used the myth of the helpless and impoverished — though decorated— disabled war veteran begging on the street (Image 26, compare with Image 16 in chapter 2), during the so-called ‘battle of pensions’ (bataille des pensions).
And thirdly, the masses of dead soldiers in heaven, watching from above and lamenting that their sacrifice had served for nothing (Image 27), were represented by supporters of an authoritarian Republic—such as Gustave Hervé.

Image 27: ‘– Died for nothing!... We died for nothing!...’ *La Victoire*, 2 November 1925.

Although the portrayal of the masses of dead soldiers was a traditional and transnational symbolic reference that had originated in the war, now it conveyed the need of giving a new value to the victory of 1918. Among the members of the *Jeunesses Patriotess*, these kinds of perceptions and representations of veterans and dead soldiers served to justify their political project. For many, fascism was the solution.

Some commentators, indeed, asserted that France was on the verge of disintegration, and that only two outcomes were possible: bolshevism or fascism. The first option was presented as a threat to civilization that swooped down on France in 1924, as it did in Italy during 1920. Fascism, on the contrary, was depicted as the veterans’ solution originating from Italy: a form of political order, the religion of the

fatherland. Fascism had been ‘born from the rage of the veterans’. On the contrary, in France, so this argumentation continues, the veterans had been swindled, and they did not enjoy the fruits of their victory, nor their rights to lead the country. The chamber of 1924 —it was argued— had expelled the veterans of 1919, giving way to a number of deserters and traitors. But now, the time of the veterans had come.

Georges Valois and his group of collaborators, having broken with Action Française, took advantage of all this discursive and symbolic background to develop a new political movement: the Faisceau. Initially, at the end of 1924 and the beginning of 1925, a set of publications paved the way for the movement. Georges Valois’ book La Révolution Nationale laid the guidelines for his new ideological project. The motivation for Valois’ manifesto was the decadence he saw in all the sectors of French society, and the menace he perceived to the very existence of the nation. The cause of this bleak situation was, according to Valois, the removal of the veterans from public affairs. The victory had been nullified, not just by Herriot, but also by Poincaré. ‘We should have assumed command of France the day of the armistice’, Valois wrote. Now, the solution was national revolution. Criticising the bourgeois spirit, Valois advocated the ‘heroic spirit’, for the ‘spirit of the victory’. The veterans should throw out all the deserters and shirkers who had taken the power. The veterans would organize ‘the recovery of the victory to create the French greatness’.

It is astonishing how the veteran discourses and representations employed by the French fascists matched the arguments and symbols developed since 1919 by the Italians.

The next relevant publication was Jacques Arthuys’ book, Les combattants. While Valois was a modernist inspired by fascist syndicalism, Arthuys was rather a traditionalist; but the anti-parliamentarian spirit of the ‘combatants’ was an important point common to both. Arthuys talked about the essential differences that the war experience had engendered between those who had fought at the front and those who had not. If the soldier had become a warrior, the non-combatant had stayed a simple patriot. After the war, however, the predominant notion that the veteran was a former

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23 (‘Le fascisme est né de la colère des combattants’) Camille Aymard, Bolchevisme ou Fascisme?... Français, il faut choisir!, Paris, Flammarion, 1925, pp. 188, 273-279.
combatant transformed into a civilian had facilitated the veteran associations’ sole focus on material claims. Furthermore, according to Arthuys, the Cartel des gauches had placed France in the worst situation possible; she was exposed to every kind of danger. He said that the veterans must reverse this situation. Arthuys agreed with Valois: ‘soon after the war, the veterans should have taken the power’; the ‘veteran spirit’ should dominate the state; this was their mission. The means for the seizure of power were very simple: ‘organized force’.26

The group formed by Valois, Arthuys and other collaborators launched the newspaper Le Nouveau Siècle on 26 February 1925 —only two weeks after the French veterans succeeded in their ‘battle of pensions’. The paper benefited from the financial support of some industrialists. This younger generation of activists lamented the passivity of Action Française, from which they separated to progressively become avowed rivals.27 Their chief ideological novelty was the full use of a new discursive and symbolic system, rooted in Italian Fascism, at the core of which were the veterans. They went far beyond the old conservative notion of ‘the combatant’s share’. From the beginning, they expressed the intention of enforcing the unrecognised political rights of the veterans (Image 28).28 This was particularly explicit in the ‘Appeal to the combatants’ (Appel aux combattants’), published on 16 April 1925. This was a clear call to construct a fascist reaction, led by the veteran spirit that brandishes a sword (Image 29).29 It was envisaged as the ‘dictatorship of the veteran’.30 The veterans were pitted against politicians and embusqués, in order to restore the victory.31 These combative representations of the veteran, appealing to his aggressive will to take power,32 coexisted in the paper with the more conservative representation of the veterans’ spirit of sacrifice and work, bulwarks against leftist revolutionaries (Image 26).33

29 Le Nouveau Siècle, 16 April 1925.
Both representations corresponded to different manifestations of the fascist veteran myth.

Image 28: ‘Under the Arc du Triomphe. – And now, give way to the unknown combatant’, Le Nouveau Siècle, 26 February 1925.

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Image 29: ‘– He is resurrected!’, *Le Nouveau Siècle*, 16 April 1925.
After this phase of propaganda, on 11 November 1925 — Armistice Day — the Faisceau was born. However, the organization suffered financial difficulties; Le Nouveau Siècle was unable to transform from a weekly into a daily newspaper. Although the Faisceau reached 10,000 members in February 1926, and during this year several big fascist-style ceremonies were organized, the communists sabotaged many of the Faisceau activities, attacking its paramilitary branch — the Légions.\(^{34}\) Despite its efforts, the movement was unable to attract many veterans from the associations. At the peak of its activity, when a meeting was organized in Reims on 27 June 1926, the UNC and the Jeunesses Patriotes for the first time sent a group of militants to hear the fascist orators.\(^{35}\) Though Le Nouveau Siècle talked about an attendance of 14,000, in reality the fascist sympathizers in Reims numbered no more than 4,000 and the anti-fascist counter-demonstration was equally numerous.\(^{36}\)


\(^{36}\) AN, F/7/13210, ‘Manifestation Fasciste de Reims’.
gathered 20,000 men in Paris during a protest against the governmental accords with the United States for the payment of the French debts.37 As the Italian fascists had previously done, the Faisceau tried to capitalize on the veterans’ movement potential.

Once the veteran associations organized a giant inter-associational meeting in Versailles —les États généraux de la France meurtrie— on 11-13 November 1927, the Faisceau increased its propaganda and attracted new members.38 Many in France and even in Italy expected that this veterans’ meeting would result in the creation of a kind of fascist unifying movement, but they were disappointed.39 Still, the Faisceau leaders ordered the members of the Légions to join the veteran associations, in order to convince them to embrace the fascist ideology.40 However, if the veterans’ attempt to create a unified platform in Versailles did not completely crystallized, the Faisceau was incapable of significantly growing or imposing its doctrine on the veterans. In time, the Faisceau came to appeal, not only to veterans, but also to ‘producers’ (producteurs), workers, civil servants, heads of families.41 The erstwhile preponderance of the veteran mystic diluted into a more diversified fascist project. Still, regarding the veterans’ associations, many in France believed that ‘the fascist spirit, the spirit of dictatorship have little by little penetrated them’.42

What were the role and the perceptions of the Italian fascists in this process? It can be argued that the fascist discourses and representations of the veterans were transferred into the French rightist political culture, while the fascist and ANC cells in France did not directly intervene. Although there are only a few pieces of evidence to demonstrate that members of the Parisian Fascio provided some funding for Le Nouveau Siècle,43 initially, the Italian fascists were pleased to see the emergence of fascist organizations in France, the prominence of the veterans and the ‘politics of the Victory’. If at the end of 1923 the fascist theorists had underlined the essentially Italian character of Fascism, at the beginning of 1926 they argued about its universality.44 Valois’ articles in Le Nouveau Siècle were translated into Italian.45 However, the Italian

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38 Reports of 28 November and 6 December 1927, AN, F/7/13212, ‘Notes sur le Faisceau’.
39 La Stampa, 16 November 1927.
40 ‘Notes sur le Faisceau’ (report of 8 December 1927), AN, F/7/13212.
42 (‘L’esprit fasciste, l’esprit de dictature les a peu a peu pénétrées’) François Berry, Le fascisme en France, Paris, 1926, pp. 41-45, quote in p. 45.
43 Report signed on 18 November 1925, AN, F/7/13208, ‘Le Nouveau Siècle 1925-1926’.
45 Georges Valois, Il fascismo francese, Roma, 1926, preface by Mario Carli.
fascists soon realised the incapacity of the Faisceau to gain momentum. A very critical article published in Roma fascista ironically noted that the March on Paris was always in development; where was the will of action and violence required to conquest the fatherland? The Faisceau lacked what was essential for the rise of Fascism: not the veterans—though Valois and his men believed they were the keystone—but political violence and the possibilities of exerting it with impunity.

In the end, the Faisceau faded. Its collapse was mainly due to the change of government. In July 1926 the Cartel des gauches succumbed to the financial crisis, and Poincaré became Prime Minister. The political right in the government managed to overcome the economic difficulties. Thus, the reasons for the existence of fascism in France diminished considerably. Although the Action Française and the Jeunesses Patriotes lived on, the first wave of French fascism receded from 1927 on. Different structural, political and social reasons explain this failure. In respect to the veterans, the power and diversity of their associative movement was another obstacle for their absorption into the fascist movement. It was in 1928 that the veteran movement entered into a more assertive phase. But the time of exposure to fascist discourse had consequences as well, and Italian Fascism continued to be considered an example either to admire or to analyse for French veterans of different political tendencies.

Clearly, the myth of the fascist veterans, originated in Italy and communicated to France, was a key factor for the emergence of the French fascists groups, especially the most important of them—the Faisceau. In the first phase, the insistence on the political role of the veterans in this party even outweighed the importance that Italian fascists had given to the veteran identity during 1919-1923. Yet the Faisceau just reworked, adapted and applied a whole cultural device that had been gradually developed in Italy. These discourses and representations persisted. As we will see, myths about war veterans had a longer shelf-life than political organizations.

The myth of the fascist veterans in Germany: the Stahlhelm and the NSDAP

The German developments during the mid-1920s in the realm of veteran cultures and organizations reveal some points in common with the French case, such as the influence of Italian Fascism. In the aftermath of November 1923, after the anti-republican plot

46 Manilo Pompei, ‘Cher monsieur Valois…’, Roma fascista, 27 March 1926.
48 See the first issue of La Revue des vivants. Organe des générations de la guerre (Paris), February 1927, devoted to the topic ‘L’Italie et nous’.
had been defeated, some republican and leftist groups adopted a defensive stance. On 22 February 1924, in Magdeburg, a group of social democrats and republicans founded the *Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold* (*Reichsbanner* Black-Red-Gold). It was a republican defence league for war veterans. Four days later, the trial against Hitler began; in April, he was condemned to four years of prison. The NSDAP had to survive clandestinely, as did other paramilitary rightist organizations such as the *Frontbann* — founded by Ernst Röhm in May 1924. In contrast, the KPD recovered its legal status. As violence between the communists and the extreme right continued, the communists created another defence organization theoretically composed of war veterans: the *Rote Frontkämpferbund*. While in the autumn 1924 the republican *Reichsbanner* probably reached almost 1 million members throughout Germany, the communist veterans’ group proliferated only in the KPD strongholds, with a maximum 15,000 members by February 1925. As regards the *Stahlhelm*, it was obliged to moderate its public attitude, and adopt legalist strategies. It declared its non-partisan position (*Überparteilichkeit*), but at the same time it tried to influence politics. The *Stahlhelm* was internally divided between moderate (Seldte) and radical (Duesterberg) leaders. The rivalry and competition between different anti-republican groups during this period, the *Stahlhelm* included, made it very difficult to create stable platforms uniting all these splintered organizations. They were incapable of imposing their views in spite of their numbers. For example, at the end of August 1924, the Reichstag ratified the Dawes plan, which the nationalist veterans disliked.

Despite this disadvantageous situation, anti-republican ideas remained popular among some German veterans, and reinforced in part by the perceived good health of Italian Fascism. The example of Italy roused the curiosity of travellers and scholars in these circles. The conviction that Fascism had been ‘constructed by Italian war veterans, by the representatives of a tragic-heroic way of life’, solidified also in

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50 Kurt G. P. Schuster, *Der Rote Frontkämpferbund*.
Germany.\textsuperscript{54} The intellectual Oswald Spengler, author of the influential \textit{Der Untergang des Abendlandes}, talked about the combative character of Fascism; he would visit Fascist Italy in early 1925.\textsuperscript{55} The jurist and \textit{Stahlhelm} member Rudolph Schaper travelled to Italy to gather impressions too.\textsuperscript{56} These men reconsidered their memories from the time of the defeat and the revolution, not only in the light of the failures of 1923, but also in light of the Italian fascist example. It was in these circumstances that the so-called soldierly nationalism (\textit{soldatische Nationalismus}) developed.\textsuperscript{57}

The case of Helmut Franke is representative. He was a \textit{Stahlhelm} leader and a former \textit{Freikorps} volunteer. In 1924, his book \textit{Staat im Staate} gathered together published and unpublished writings from the years 1918 to 1921, representing his militaristic political views as a front officer (\textit{Frontoffiziere}). The earliest version of these writings had talked about the army as an exemplary entity, embodied by its front officers and independent from capitalists or socialists: a ‘state within the state’ (\textit{Staat im Staate}). In 1921, Franke had also fantasized about a revolution starred by front soldiers and front officers.\textsuperscript{58} Nevertheless, in his 1924 book, he introduced new political concepts previously absent. In a letter of 16 April 1920, supposedly sent to a \textit{Stahlhelm} leader and published in his 1924 book, Franke talked about the foundation of a front soldiers party (\textit{Frontsoldaten-Partei}). He wondered: ‘why is the formation of the party of veterans not successful in all countries, \textit{like in Italy, the party of those who have bled for the state, of those who have the preference before everyone else to form and to dominate the state for which they have sacrificed themselves?’.\textsuperscript{59} Even if references to a government of frontline soldiers had not been uncommon among \textit{Freikorps} members and Kapp-putsch supporters in 1920, the mention of Italy was in all probability introduced later, after the rise of Italian Fascism. Furthermore, at the end of his 1924 book, Franke employed another political concept: the \textit{Frontsoldatenstaat} (the veterans’

\textsuperscript{56} Volker R. Berghahn, \textit{Der Stahlhelm}, p. 76.
\textsuperscript{57} This ideological trend can be understood as part of the so-called Conservative Revolution; see Armin Mohler, \textit{Die Konservative Revolution in Deutschland 1918-1932}, Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1994 (1\textsuperscript{st} ed. 1949).
\textsuperscript{59} (‘Warum erfolgt nicht in allen Ländern, wie in Italien, die Gründung der Partei der Frontsoldaten, der Partei jener, die für den Staat geblutet haben, die das Vorrecht vor allen anderen haben, den Staat zu formen und zu beherrschen, für den sich geopfert haben?’) Helmut Franke, \textit{Staat im Staate}, p. 164. I have introduced the cursive.
state). He suggested that such a new regime must be realised by the veterans, in the name of the fallen soldiers. In line with French representations of the dead soldiers at that time, Franke evoked ‘the dead, the dead!’, who watched from the heaven and did not rest in peace wondering ‘for what did we die?’.

The roused memory of the dead, and the concepts of a veterans’ party and a veterans-led state appeared in Germany at the same time as in France, both driven by the inspiration of Italian Fascism.

In the first half of 1925, Franke’s ideas became the ‘spirit’ of the Stahlhelm (Stahlhelmgeist). After having abandoned the violent path of 1919-1923, in the new stage of the struggle, realising the state of the front soldiers (Der Staat den Frontsoldaten) required technique and organization. Thus, the example of Fascist Italy was carefully studied through academic research and personal visits. Franke also travelled to Italy. Regarding the fascist model, he stated that the Stahlhelm members ‘should hear, try, criticize, examine, learn and —what is useful—, adopt’. Fascism and the Stahlhelm, despite acting in different conditions, shared a common goal: ‘the seizure and penetration of the state through the front soldiers’.

Ernst Jünger, a young ex-officer with an intense war experience, was the author that best represented the soldatische Nationalismus. His political awakening came late, but it was in some measure influenced by Italian Fascism, as I will point out. Jünger first started a literary career, writing about his own war experiences, embellished with a posteriori philosophical reflections. In Im Stahlgewittern (1920), he presented war as an interior experience that transcendentally transformed individuals into hardened soldiers. Reading Nietzsche, Jünger interpreted war as a way of life, as a Dionysian fight for life and death. Spengler and probably Barrès were among his other intellectual influences. He had a brief contact with a Freikorps unit, but he focused on his studies. During 1923, in Munich, he heard of Hitler and Ludendorff. Thus, his first political article, talking about a völkisch revolution that was coming soon, was published in the Nazi newspaper —Völkischer Beobachter— in August 1923. The failure of the putsch was

60 (‘Die Toten, die Toten!’, ‘Wofür starben wir?’) Helmut Franke, Staat im Staat, p. 248.
surely a big disappointment for him. He did not publish any other political article until April 1924, when he talked for the first time about ‘we front soldiers’. 63

It was in August 1925 that Jünger published a new political article, ‘Revolution and front soldiers’, in the national conservative review Gewissen. Jünger attacked the revolution of 1918, denouncing the fact that the front soldiers had been disregarded and held in contempt. The best men, the young front officers, had been left aside, in contrast to what had happened in the Russian revolution of 1917. The motive was, according to Jünger, that the German revolution of 1918 completely lacked ideas. The revolution ‘lacked the race, the martyrs, the dramatic development’. For Jünger, front soldiers were not just those men forced to be at the front, but also those who fought for ideals; therefore, the German young men that matched this spirit were accepted into the front soldiers community. Young officers and front soldiers had joined the Freikorps, the only worthy endeavour at that time in Jünger’s view. But this service had not been appreciated either. Jünger wondered whether the front soldiers should have acted differently, as the fascists in Italy. However, in Germany, the front soldiers did not find men like Mussolini, even if the forces were available. Jünger regretted that they lacked a ‘genuine party of the front soldiers’. They had to find a political leadership, in order to make a real revolution. 64

When this article was published, the collaboration of Jünger with the Stahlhelm review directed by Helmut Franke had already been agreed. It is known that Jünger wrote a letter to Spengler, on 7 August 1925, announcing that he wanted to write in Der Stahlhelm about ‘the front soldier and his duty’; he wanted to make a call for a ‘conscious politics’. 65 The interest of Jünger, Franke and Spengler in Fascist Italy, as well as their perception of Italian Fascism as a state led by war veterans, is clear.

In September 1925, Jünger inaugurated a series of articles in Der Stahlhelm new ideological supplement, Die Standarte. 66 In these radical texts, politics was—inverting Clausewitz’s aphorism—‘the continuation of war by other means’. First of all, Jünger clarified his conception of the front soldier: as already mentioned, it was not an exclusivist notion empirically based on the war ‘lived experience’ (Erlebnis). Instead,

65 (‘Der Frontsoldat und seine Aufgabe’, ‘zu einer bewussten Politik aufzurufen’) Quoted by Helmut Kiesel, Ernst Jünger, p. 283.
being a front soldier was a matter of ‘character’ (Charakter). A front soldier was every man that felt himself to be so, ready to fulfil his national duties. The class of the front soldiers — Frontsoldatentum — was a fighting community — Kampfgemeinschaft. Its members were not characterised by their past, but by their present and future.\(^{67}\) Mussolini was presented as an exemplary leader whose followers were officers and workers together.\(^{68}\) The front soldiers were considered as neither reactionaries nor pacifists; they harboured a revolutionary potential, but their revolution was not of the same type as that of 1918.\(^{69}\) However, when it came to defining the political strategy of the war veterans, Jünger did not signal one unequivocal path; he pointed to two possible options. On the one hand, a legalist position, recognising the Weimar state. On the other hand, the revolutionary path, conquering the state and making real the ‘national ideals’. Certainly, the goal of both paths was the ‘national dictatorship’.\(^{70}\)

The Stahlhelm made the choice of walking legalist paths.\(^{71}\) Initially, in the first half of 1926, there was a period where the movement seemed inclined towards a violent seizure of power. Some of Jünger’s views were implemented, for example opening the Stahlhelm membership to men who had not experienced the war. Later, however, the ideology expressed in the pages of Die Standarte seemed too revolutionary and inconvenient, so the supplement ceased publication in April 1926. From this point on, Jünger and Franke published their radical nationalist texts in other journals, such as Arminius — named after the Germanic hero of ancient times. This review adopted, as its cover, a more aggressive symbol than the Stahlhelm helmet — the sword (Image 31). The rupture with the Stahlhelm took place in terms of doctrine as well. In a bitter article, Franke resignedly stated that after seven unsuccessful years they would never again believe in the front soldiers as the vanguard for the conquest of the state. The ‘new nationalism’ (neue Nationalismus) that they would continue to preach would target other forces, for example, young men.\(^{72}\) The myth of the fascist veterans was thus abandoned.

\(^{67}\) (‘Für uns ist die Politik eine Fortsetzung des Krieges mit veränderten Mittel’) Ernst Jünger, ‘Unsere politiker’ and ‘Wesen des Frontsoldatentums’, Standarte. Wochenschrift des neuen Nationalismus (Berlin), 6 September 1925.


\(^{69}\) Ernst Jünger, ‘Die Reaktion’ and ‘Der Pazifismus’, Standarte, 1 and 15 November 1925;


\(^{71}\) Volker R. Berghahn, Der Stahlhelm, pp. 91-142. See also Alois Klotzbücher, Der politische Weg, pp. 72-164.

For its part, the *Stahlhelm* adopted the motto ‘Inside the state’ (*Hinein in den Staat*), and inaugurated a legalist strategy based on negotiations with the rightist parties, contacts with Marshal Hindenburg (the new Reich president since May 1925 who was a venerated honorary member of the *Stahlhelm*), and yearly mass demonstrations —‘Day of the Front soldier’ (*Frontsoldatentag*)— which served to publicize political programs. They talked about *Frontsozialismus*, which described an allegedly patriotic common experience of the trenches, considered as the base of the *Volksgemeinschaft*. At this time, the *Stahlhelm* visual representation of the veteran was always that of a virile front soldier with the steel helmet, an image conveying conservative and authoritarian values (Images 32 and 33). However, the *Stahlhelm* was not politically successful, and the hypocrisy of its allegedly non-partisan nature (*Überparteilichkeit*) was evident. After the disappointing results of the 1928 elections, certain *Stahlhelm* sectors embraced once more an acutely anti-republican attitude.

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73 *Der Stahlhelm*, 10 October 1926.
The *Stahlhelm*’s stance regarding Italian Fascism soon became evidently contradictory; the sustained exaltation of Fascism collided with the *Südtirol* question.74 As the fascist oppression against the German-speaking minority in this region continued, the *Stahlhelm* was moved by its nationalism to react. The veterans combined admiration and condemnation. On 21 February 1926, when the *Stahlhelm* journal published a translation—commented by Franke—of the fascist syndicalist law, on the long frontpage of the same issue Mussolini was harshly attacked for his most recent declarations about *Südtirol*. This article contained at once a threat and an overture: while saying that in Germany there existed the same patriotic youth than in Italy —ready to defend the Germans of *Südtirol*—, it was said that Mussolini should not seek a confrontation with them, but desert France and Britain —countries lacking that kind of patriotic young men— to find an understanding with the Germans.75 This ambivalent attitude would be maintained in the years that followed,76 while the attraction of authoritarianism and

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74 For a general overview on the *Südtirol* question see BArch, R 72/891.
76 For example, see *Der Stahlhelm*, 11 March 1928.
Fascism did not abate. In the *Stahlhelm* organ, the fascist-inspired Primo de Rivera dictatorship was described with praise, and democracies were scorned.\(^{77}\)

While there was a partial and conflictual fascistization of the discourses, representations and political aims of the nationalist veterans in Germany, the Nazi movement was much slower to develop a symbolic and discursive frame to approach war veterans. The Nazis were rather reluctant to appeal directly to the front soldiers. The NSDAP was relaunched in February 1925, after Hitler’s release from prison in December 1924. For this new stage, Hitler abandoned the idea of a March on Berlin, inaugurating a course of legality. In fact, *Mein Kampf*, the book he conceived in prison, did not include any passage in which the veterans were clearly presented as the instrument for the conquest of the state. As is widely acknowledged, Hitler exalted the heroism of the soldiers of the First World War; he understood himself as a former soldier, and he wanted to instil the fighting mentality into his SA. However, Hitler did not assign any specific political role to the veterans. In *Mein Kampf*, we can only find a set of common stereotypes: the front ‘heroes’ versus the ‘deserters’ of the revolutionary soldier councils, and the insulted and spat-upon veterans whose decorations were torn. These unoriginal representations justified the restoration of the Army’s honour, but there were no evocations of a future state of the front soldiers.\(^{78}\)

In this period marked by the growth and expansion of the NSDAP, the myth of the fascist veterans played no role at all. Since 1925, the *Völkischer Beobachter* had included a supplement entitled *Der deutsche Frontsoldat*, but it was largely devoted to military politics and technical questions. In the NSDAP meetings, Hitler often introduced himself as soldier who had fulfilled his duty for ‘four and a half years’, and he used to address the audience as though it were composed of equally self-sacrificing ex-soldiers; the target of his diatribes were the Jews and traitors of the home-front, who had stabbed the heroic soldiers in the back.\(^{79}\) However, there were no appeals to the veterans to seize power, nor depictions of the front soldiers as the elite of the nation. Furthermore, the leftist NSDAP group in northern Germany, represented by the Strasser brothers and Joseph Goebbels, ascribed no relevance to the veteran identity. For the Nazis, the front soldiers embodied a set of values: ‘spirit of duty’, ‘sacrifice’,

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\(^{77}\) See the section ‘Auslandrundschau’ in *Der Stahlhelm*, 8, 22 May 1927, 12, 19 June 1927


‘patriotism’, ‘comradeship’, ‘subordination’, as Georg Strasser put it. But even for this ex-officer and ex-Freikorps member, neither the veterans nor the front soldiers personified the national socialist ideology.80

Recently, Nils Löffelbein has argued that Front soldiers and war victims (Kriegsopfer) were dominant themes in NSDAP propaganda before 1933;81 but this assertion should be nuanced by taking into account chronology. From 1924, the national-socialist representative in the völkisch bloc in the Reichstag, Hans Dietrich, a severely mutilated ex-soldier, defended the disabled veterans and war victims in some of his public interventions; but this course of action was far from prominent. For the Reichstag elections of May 1928, Hitler and the Nazis invoked the front soldiers’ support through speeches and electoral posters. It was even said that they represented the Germany of the future, which would be governed ‘by the representatives of the front-troops’.82 (Note that he referred to the representatives and not to the front-troops themselves). Yet this propaganda was not original either discursively, or iconographically (images 34 and 35). Representations and slogans scarcely differed from those formerly employed by the Stahlhelm. In any case, the electoral results were very poor for the Nazis. Up to the early 1930s, the Nazis did not develop any substantial doctrine regarding the veterans, nor any precise political strategy to approach the war victims.


81 Nils Löffelbein, Ehrenbürger der Nation, p. 110.

Different reasons explain why the Nazi movement did not absorb the myth of the fascist veterans. In Germany, due to the 1918 revolution, the front soldiers — rather than the veterans in general — became the group idolized by the nationalist extreme right. They were believed to have crushed the Spartacist uprising and the short-lived communist *Räterepublik* of Bavaria. But organizations such as the *Stahlhelm*, not the NSDAP, had assumed the political representation of these men. Hitler’s credentials as a front soldier allowed him to state that he had fulfilled his duty, but not much more. In the case of Goebbels, it was evident that he had not served as a soldier in the First World War, due to his leg disability. The Nazis were conscious that some Jews also represented themselves as front soldiers. In fact, the Nazis pointed out the difficulties in clearly defining who was a front soldier. Furthermore, when the fascist veterans myth was being transferred into Germany and France during 1924 and early 1925, the Nazi movement had been dismantled. Subsequently, to enhance its membership, the NSDAP primarily targeted not the veterans, but the working class, the unemployed and the youth. Meanwhile, the preponderance of the veteran mystic among the anti-republican

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83 ‘Wer ist Frontsoldat?’, *Völkischer Beobachter*, 17 September 1927.
groups generally receded. In contrast, the pacifist memory of the war persisted through the ‘No more war!’ (Nie wieder Krieg!) movement and the activities and publications of republican veterans.\(^8^\) It was not that the Nazis did not copy ideological and behavioural patterns from the Italian fascists. Despite of the absence of fascist discourses about the veterans, the Nazis paid a lot of attention to Italian Fascism. However, the knowledge about Fascist Italy grew more complex and nuanced; people realised that Mussolini’s regime was much more than a veterans’ state.

If the Nazis progressively took interest in the veterans’ political mobilization and indoctrination, it was after the precedent set by those around the Stahlhelm. The transmission of ideas from the soldatische Nationalismus to the NSDAP is beyond question in the second half of the 1920s, yet it was also inconclusive. In 1926, Ernst Jünger sent some of his works to Hitler, and the Führer read them, becoming interested. However, a planned personal meeting between them never took place.\(^8^5\) In 1927, the Völkischer Beobachter created a new section —‘The New Front’ (Die neue Front)— where the soldatische Nationalismus trends were commented from the Nazi point of view. In its first issue, Jünger, who had just broke with Der Stahlhelm, wrote an article about the ‘new nationalism’ (neue Nationalismus). There, the category of the front soldier was absent from the argumentation, though the example of Mussolini and Fascist Italy remained. Now, meaningfully, the key protagonist was the ‘class of nationalistic workers’.\(^8^6\) In the late 1920s, Ernst Jünger was active in establishing these contacts with the Nazi movement, especially with its leftist branch; but the preponderance of the front soldier in his writings gave way to the exaltation of the worker (Arbeiter).\(^8^7\) As with Jünger’s writings, the Stahlhelm concept of Frontsozialismus was also known and discussed by the Nazis, but they did not adopt it.\(^8^8\) Many Nazis had been soldiers or/ex-Freikorps volunteers; therefore they were not impermeable to the myth of the fascist veterans conveyed by Jünger and others. Indeed, the autobiographical book of Ernst Röhm, published in 1928, was ‘dedicated to the front soldiers’, whom ‘the SA comrades should emulate’. The declared goal of Röhm was ‘to give the veterans through acts of combat their due share of the state

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\(^8^4\) Benjamin Ziemann, *Contested Commemorations*, passim.
\(^8^5\) Helmut Kiesel, *Ernst Jünger*, p. 280.
\(^8^6\) (*nationalistische Arbeiterum*) Völkischer Beobachter, 23/24 January 1927.
leadership, and to make sure that the real spirit of the front soldiers is politically enforced. Yet in this period Röhm was not taking part in the Nazi movement. While the renewed SA was mainly set up by men with combat experience, the bulk of its membership was composed of younger people who had no direct knowledge of war.

The fascist veterans’ myth was not transferred to the NSDAP, but rather to the Stahlhelm, as I have shown. The Stahlhelm did not transform into a political fascist party (as the Faisceau in France did), but it tried —without success— to influence German politics. This history recalls the trajectory of the ANC in Italy before its fascistization. Also, the relationship between the NSDAP and the Stahlhelm during the second half of the 1920s resembled that of the fascist movement and the ANC in the Italian early postwar period. The Nazis, particularly the leftist group of Gregor Strasser, paid attention to the Stahlhelm veterans, but in the end, their relationship was defined by a profound rivalry. However, once the Stahlhelm had been the platform for the development of new political discourses rooted in the fascist veterans myth, these representations freely circulated, and the Nazi movement was not indifferent to them in the long term.

By 1927, echoes of the highly fascistized political discourses and representations of the German veterans had reached back to Italy. In April 1927, the new Stahlhelm demonstration in Berlin was described in Italy as a revolutionary albeit peaceful ‘march on Berlin’. This information attracted Mussolini’s interest, although the Italian ambassador in Berlin told him that ‘a peaceful march on Berlin without arms makes no sense’. A report about the German veterans’ organization was prepared for the Duce, where the fascist inspiration of the Stahlhelm was described. The question of the Südtirol, however, seemed an important obstacle between the fascists and the German veterans. In contrast, Hitler was establishing indirect contacts with Mussolini, and making explicit that the Südtirol would never represent a hurdle to reaching an


91 Peter Longerich, Die braunen Bataillone, pp. 45-77.


93 (‘marcia su Berlino’, ‘Né una ‘marcia su Berlino’ pacifica e senza armi ha alcun significato’) AMAE, Affari Politici 1919-1930, Germania, b. 1174, f. ‘Congresso “Stahlhelm” “elmi d’acciaio” a Berlino’.

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understanding between the Nazis and fascist Italy. In any case, the myth of the fascist veterans had greatly helped to establish this circuit of ideological and political dialogue and exchange.

The main origin of these discourses and representations was Fascist Italy, where a set of transnational elements had first politically synthesised. The rise of Italian Fascism had been understood as the seizure of power by a party of veterans, which had restored the victory, redeemed the neglected, smashed communism, and given the veterans their deserved leading role in the state. This was the fascist veterans’ myth. As I will demonstrate next, the fascists were active propagators of this legend in the international sphere.

The fascist veterans and the FIDAC

The *Fédération Interalliée des Anciens Combattants* (FIDAC) had been created by conservative French veterans in late 1920. The initial core of this association had been French, Belgian, British, North American and Italian veterans, while Czechoslovakian, Yugoslavian, Polish, Romanian and Portuguese representatives progressively signed up in the years that followed. In the beginning, the FIDAC strived to strengthen the ties between ex-allied veterans. By doing so, it expected to exert an international political influence, in order to improve the war victims’ social benefits and to preserve the peace. In a somewhat contradictory policy that clashed with this goal, and in contrast to other international veteran platforms, the FIDAC openly excluded the former enemy veterans. This discriminatory position, zealously held by the three-times-re-elected president Bertrand, was reaffirmed in the FIDAC congress of Brussels in September 1923, where the opinions of the French and Belgian leaders predominated. However, by this year, the international instability began to resonate also in the FIDAC. The Italian representatives were unable to join the congress, because the transformation of the ANC into a state organization contradicted the expected political independence of the FIDAC members.*94* However, the Italian veterans would soon recover and increase their influence.

In 1924, when the international peace settlements were being restructured, the debates inside the FIDAC became heated. Between March and April 1924, Mussolini

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and the British Legion vice-president Colonel Crosfield had arranged the return of an Italian delegation to the FIDAC.\(^{95}\) Thus, in September, the ANC reappeared inside this organization. In the wake of the London conference on the reparations issue, the FIDAC representatives met in the same city. Meanwhile, in Italy the Matteotti crisis had developed and was still unresolved. Ettore Viola personally headed the Italian committee, and this participation can be viewed as further evidence of Viola’s intention of making the ANC an influential institution independent from the fascist government. The association did not ask the fascist government to adhere to the congress. Nonetheless, the Italian ambassador in London received instructions from Mussolini to show interest in the veteran gathering.\(^{96}\)

Even though the London meeting had little impact on the British and international public, it was important for the FIDAC trajectory, as well as for Fascism. At the congress, the French veterans’ intransigent viewpoint was thwarted by the more open opinion of the British representatives, who suggested that German veteran associations should be invited to join the FIDAC. Faced with the difficulties reaching an agreement on this question, Viola’s conciliatory proposal for an intermediate resolution resolved the impasse. The congress approved the Italian suggestion of permitting an inquiry about the German veteran associations as the first step towards potential voluntary contacts between the FIDAC and the ex-enemies. In addition to this success, the Italian delegation had the opportunity to boast about the favourable fascist legislation for the disabled. As a result, the rest of the national representatives agreed to urge their governments to develop similar measures. Furthermore, it was decided that the next FIDAC congress would be celebrated in Rome; a decision to which Mussolini gave his acquiescence after being consulted from London through the Italian ambassador.\(^{97}\)

Most probably, all these facts constituted another reason for Mussolini and the fascists to unleash the final fascistization of the ANC. The representation of the Italian veterans in the international sphere should not be left in the hands of non-fascists. The


\(^{96}\) AMAE, Società delle Nazioni, b. 66, f. ‘Federazione interalleata ex-combattenti FIDAC’.

\(^{97}\) La Voix du Combattant, 4 October 1924; La France Mutilée, 5 October 1924; Problemi d’Italia, num. 6 (November 1924), num. 7 (December 1924); I Combattenti. La Nuova Giornata, 5 October 1924; La Stampa, 20 September 1924. AMAE, Società delle Nazioni, b. 66, f. ‘Federazione interalleata ex-combattenti FIDAC’.

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expeditious purge of the ANC and the absolute exclusion of Viola and the anti-fascist veteran leaders (see chapter 3) would be completed just on time before the next FIDAC congress in Rome. In April 1925, the ANC triumvirate member Nicola Sansanelli met in Paris the FIDAC international representatives, and convinced them of the legitimacy of the fascist government measures regarding the ANC. By September 1925, the Italian veteran organizations offered a fully fascist united front to the international veteran delegates who gathered in the Italian capital. The list of the Italian representatives spoke for itself: Amilcare Rossi, Luigi Russo, Nicola Sansanelli, Adolfo Schiavo, Aldo Bertelè, Angelo Zilli, Bruno Biagi and other fascists, none of them present in the previous FIDAC congress, composed the Italian host delegation. The fascists had so thoroughly prepared the event, that the foreign veterans were delighted. Among the visitors were the FIDAC president —the North American Thomas W. Miller—, and French veterans like Marcel Héraud (UF), Paul Vaillant (UF), Charles Bertrand (UNC) and Jean Goy (UNC).

During the congress, the fascist veterans managed to conduct the discussions towards topics and conclusions that matched their interests. When the question of international migrations was approached, the Italians requested to the North American delegates that a higher number of Italian veterans be allowed to emigrate to the United States. The fascists also requested to the French delegates that the Italian veterans in France enjoy preference in being hired in agricultural and construction work. Talking about organizational matters, the fascists proposed that in the hypothetical case that veteran associations obtained the official recognition of a State —as had happened in Italy—, no other association from that country should be admitted into the FIDAC. Regarding the sensitive inter-allied debts issue, the Italians —endorsed by the North Americans— pointed out the necessity of a solution (since Italy was a debtor country). Yet the French succeeded in subordinating the revision of the inter-allied debts to the payment of reparations by the ex-enemies. In the conclusions of the congress, it was stated that communist propaganda was an international threat; the FIDAC leaders defined the solidarity of their associations as ‘the greatest enemy of communism’. The FIDAC, following the demands of Polish and Czechoslovak representatives, denounced German militarism; but this anti-German stance included a positive assessment of

98 AMAE, Società delle Nazioni, b. 66, f. ‘Federazione interalleata ex-combattenti FIDAC’.
99 FIDAC. Bulletin mensuel de la Fédération Interalliée des Anciens Combattants (Paris), num. 1 (January 1926); La France Mutilée, 27 September 1925; Problemi d’Italia, num. 9 (September 1925); AMAE, Società delle Nazioni, b. 66, f. ‘Federazione interalleata ex-combattenti FIDAC’.
Mussolini’s intransigent attitude regarding the Alto Adige question. Besides these discussions, the congress attendees visited Roman sights, paid tribute to the *Milite Ignoto*, and met fascist leaders such as Farinacci. All this propaganda paved the way for the FIDAC to send a message of support to Mussolini, calling him ‘saviour of Italy’, when he survived an assassination attempt in November 1925.\(^{100}\)

The next FIDAC congress was held in Warsaw and Krakow, in September 1926, being the British Colonel Crosfield the president of the association. Earlier, during the spring, Crosfield had travelled through Fascist Italy, visiting Genoa, Turin, Milan, Naples and other cities; he had paid visit to the *Milite Ignoto* monument, raising his arm in roman salute.\(^{101}\) The FIDAC congress in Poland came only three months after Pilsudski’s coup d’état, and this situation mad it necessary to eliminate certain delicate issues from the agenda.\(^{102}\) The Italian committee sent to Poland was headed by Nicola Sansanelli, and composed of Gianni Baccarini, Angelo Zilli, and other fascists, including Mario Dessaules, leader of the ANC in France. In this congress, the division at the heart of the FIDAC was acute, since now the British position close to the Locarno spirit contrasted the French attitude of diffidence to Germany. Those French veteran associations that preferred a rapprochement with the Germans, such as the UF, paid more attention to their own international conference in Geneva (CIAMAC). In contrast, when the FIDAC finally agreed to invite German associations to the next meeting in Luxemburg in competition with the CIAMAC, some French representatives abandoned the sessions in protest.\(^{103}\) The planned Luxemburg meeting would imply a grave crisis in the CIAMAC-FIDAC relations.\(^{104}\) Thus, while the real advances towards European peace took place rather in the CIAMAC than in the FIDAC, the latter organization became more and more influenced by the fascists. The fascist veterans within the FIDAC did let any opportunity pass ‘to show to their comrades how lucky their country

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\(^{100}\) Problemi d’Italia, num. 10 (October 1925), num. 12 (December 1925); La Voix du Combattant, 26 September 1925; Il Popolo d’Italia, 12, 16 September 1925; FIDAC, num. 2 (February 1925), Num. 3 (March 1926).

\(^{101}\) Italia Augusta. Problemi d’Italia. Rassegna dei combattenti (Roma), num. 3 (May 1926); FIDAC, num. 5 (May 1926).

\(^{102}\) Julia Eichenberg, Kämpfen für Frieden, p. 178.


\(^{104}\) Julia Eichenberg, Kämpfen für Frieden, pp. 190-191.
was to have a war veteran as the head of state. As a result, the international veterans made for potentially easy converts to the fascist veterans’ myth.

The FIDAC review, published in English and French, became another organ for the diffusion of the fascist discourse and policies regarding the war veterans. The veteran organ described, for instance, Italian veterans’ visits to the Duce, and their mutual declarations of admiration and loyalty. In this way, veterans of all the ex-allied countries learnt that the bearers of the Gold Medal in Italy were addressed by the Italian president himself as the ‘flower of your race, the real aristocracy of the generation which on land, on sea and in the sky has achieved acts of prodigious heroism’.

Mentioning the circular to the prefetti sent by Mussolini in January 1927, it was said that the Italian veterans were considered ‘the Aristocracy of the Victory’.

Italy, writes Mr. Mussolini, contrary to some countries, has known how to guard in its ex-service men’s associations the incomparable inheritance of victory. The mothers and widows of the soldiers, fallen on the field of honour, the Association of the Disabled and Invalids, the Gold Medals and Blue Ribbons, the National Association of Ex-Service Men, that of Volunteers and others of less importance, constitute a valuable force for the regime. They give it the disinterested and sincere approval of millions of Italians. It is these Italians who left hundreds and thousands of their glorious dead on the battlefields; it is these Italians who fought and bled during forty months; it is these Italians who bear on their bodies the irrevocable marks of sacrifices and duty accomplished.

The example of Italy radicalized the political orientation of the FIDAC. It was considered natural that the war generation of each country exerted a preponderant influence on public affairs: ‘In two of our countries, Italy and Poland, this generation already holds the power in its hands’. The FIDAC bulletin exalted both regimes and their ‘popular’ leaders Mussolini and Pilsudski, arguing that ‘under these circumstances it is difficult to speak of dictatorship’. The FIDAC tinged its pacifism by conveying the positive opinions of Mussolini about the war. The new FIDAC president, the French Marcel Héraud, travelled to Italy, being magnificently welcomed in Turin by Zilli, in Rome by Rossi and Russo (visiting the Milite Ignoto), and in Naples by Sansanelli.

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105 (‘insegnare ai loro camerati quale fortuna sia per il nostro apese aver per Capo un ex combattente’) Il Popolo d’Italia, 12 September 1926.
107 FIDAC. Bulletin of the Allied Legions, num. 3 (March 1927).
Héraud came back to France convinced that ‘the same spirit moved all the veterans’, and that in Italy the veterans participated in the management of the public affairs, and had ‘the responsibility of power’.

The culmination of this evolution was the nomination, at the congress of London in September 1927, of Nicola Sansanelli as the president of the FIDAC. This decisive accomplishment was achieved in spite of the resistance of some FIDAC members, particularly the French representatives from the UF who disliked Fascism. Having obtained the presidency of the FIDAC, the fascists had the opportunity to be the official representatives of the inter-allied war veterans in Europe and also in the United States. In fact, the American Legion leaders, who had visited fascist Rome at the end of September 1927, invited Sansanelli to their country for a propaganda trip in the spring of 1928. Needless to say, Sansanelli used his travels to publicize not only the FIDAC, but also ‘Fascism as a political-social doctrine and as a government system’; in passing, he denied the description of the Duce as a dictator. The loyalty and obedience of the ANC to Mussolini, as well as the alleged great achievements of the fascist regime in the realm of social assistance, were exhibited during this time through the FIDAC.

However, during Sansanelli’s presidency, the FIDAC international relevance in Western European affairs declined. The FIDAC Luxembourg conferences, where ex-enemy veterans were invited, cannot be portrayed — in spite of the fascist triumphalism — as successful. For example, the FIDAC had sent invitations to the Stahlhelm, but it plainly rejected the offer, on the basis of its radical opposition to Versailles and to the Dawes plan. The Jungdeutsche Orden joined the conversations with the ex-allies, but defended its nationalist views with intransigency. These discussions among convinced patriots with completely opposed opinions did not reach any consensus at all. At the end of the second Luxembourg meeting, the biggest success had simply been maintaining a ‘polite ambiance’. In a sense, as the Nazis shrewdly noted, it was a contradiction to organize an international veteran movement if the objective was to consolidate peace. Faced with these complications, and having used the FIDAC for their interests during some time, the fascist predominance inside the organization faded. In September 1928, the president Sansanelli excused his absence

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from the congress celebrated in Bucharest; he prioritized joining the fascist *Gran Consiglio*. It is not surprising that his mandate in charge of the FIDAC was not renewed.\(^{110}\)

**The fascist ANC**

During the second half of the 1920s, once the fascistization of the ANC had been completed, Italian veteran politics experienced a period of relative tranquillity. There were also cultural and organizational transformations, as we will see, but the main struggles around the Italian veterans had been resolved, and obedience imposed by force and censure. In a journal interview, Amilcare Rossi, asked about the recent debates about the role of *combattentismo*, opined: ‘this ugly word do not refer to any real force present in our nation: in any case, if this kind of shapeless soul existed —and I doubt it— it has forever disappeared’.\(^{111}\) In October 1925, the directors of the veteran news review *Problemi d’Italia* were obliged, in unclear circumstances, to resign.\(^{112}\) Their posts were occupied by Umberto Guglielmotti (a nationalist veteran who became head of the Roman *Fascio* at the end of 1926) and Nicola Sansanelli. These fascists changed the title and the content of the review in keeping with the regime’s needs.\(^{113}\) Any kind of veteran expression was subject to fascist control, so that it makes sense to talk about a fascist ANC from this point onwards.

This phase was the most stable in Italian veteran politics during the interwar period. Social assistance and agricultural reform were the most common activities at this time. The ONC was also put under fascist supervision; directed by Angelo Manaresi, it sought to reclaim agricultural lands through hydraulic works.\(^{114}\) At the same time, it carried out propaganda, through cultural activities such as a travelling cinema. All these projects aimed towards the ‘ruralisation of Italy’.\(^{115}\) The ANC, enjoying direct funding from the government, conceded limited credits to veterans,

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\(^{110}\) (‘*atmosphère courtoise*’) *Der Stahlhelm*, 11 March, 15 April, 30 September 1928; *Le Matin* (Paris), 1 April, 11, 12, 17, 18, 21 September 1928; *La Stampa*, 18 September 1928; *Völkischer Beobachter*, 15 September 1928.


\(^{112}\) *Problemi d’Italia*, num. 12, December 1925.

\(^{113}\) *Italia Augusta*, num. 1, March 1926.

\(^{114}\) *L’Opera Nazionale Combattenti*, Roma, 1926.

\(^{115}\) (‘*la ruralizzazione dell’Italia’*’) *Codice della terra*. *Biblioteca agraria dell’Opera Nazionale Combattenti*, Roma, 1928, p. 11.
distributed agricultural machinery, and contributed to the ‘Battles for Grain’ (*Battaglie del Grano*) that the regime promoted since 1925 to spur production. The association also offered healthcare assistance to veterans, and gave subsides to the needy. Thus, it pretended to be ‘an instrument for the elevation of the agricultural classes’. The goal of ruralisation was part of the regenerative mission that Fascism wanted to fulfil, and thus, in order to discipline agrarian society, the ideal of the obedient ‘peasant soldier’ was employed. However, while there were certain technical and economic achievements, neither the ONC nor the ANC resolved important regional and class inequalities, and the problems of Italian agriculture persisted.

The fascist ANC consolidated in the second half of the 1920s. Another step in this development was the adoption of a new statute, in November 1926. This reform coincided with the modification of the PNF statute, which restricted the party autonomy and suppressed every kind of electoral process inside it. Conversely, the new ANC regulations liquidated the electoral system within the ANC apparatus, with the pretext of sparing internal competitions. Unsurprisingly, Mussolini nominated the temporary triumvirate Rossi-Russo-Sansanelli as the new definitive directing board of the ANC.

In this new phase, the ANC consolidated as an effective manager of the veterans’ material interests, remaining focused on assistance tasks. Even though the *Carta del Lavoro* had made no mention of the veterans, the ANC successfully defended the rights of the veterans to preferentially obtain jobs when unemployment started to steadily rise during 1927 and 1928. In May 1928, having heard the veterans’ concerns, Turati sent a memorandum to the PNF federations, reminding the preferential right to work of those who had been in the trenches.

The changes within the regime structure saw a major militarization of politics and a politicization of the army. It is significant that the dictatorship promoted an association of discharged officers (*Unione Nazionale Ufficiali in Congedo*), whose function was maintaining the ties of retired officers with the army and the War

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118 *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 19 October 1926.
121 *Bollettino della Federazione Provinciale di Terni dell’Associazione Nazionale Combattenti* (Terni), nums. 1 (May 1928) and 2 (June 1928).
Ministry. This entity was soon granted the same official status than the other veteran associations. Thus, Italy was progressively assuming the ‘physiognomy of a warrior nation, dynamic, spiritually and physically armed, ready and impatient to affront any challenge’. According to official data, the ANC reached more than 400,000 affiliated in 1927 and continued growing. In this context, some fascist leaders argued about stressing the political function of the veterans, through the strengthening of their military spirit. It was said that the ANC should go beyond the assistance tasks, and transform into a kind of reserve army in close contact with the military. This opinion was expressed by Guglielmo; but it was contradicted by the ANC leaders, who did not desire a change in the main role of the association yet. Even so, the expectations of some fascists for a deeper involvement of the veterans in the military or economic affairs endured.

In general, during the second half of the 1920s, a process of power concentration took place in Italy, not only in Mussolini’s hands, but also in the fascist and veteran organizations. There was a feeling that the multiple state entities and associations should start to fuse, in order to avoid duplicities and to favour discipline and simplicity. This question applied particularly to the multiple veteran groups. Furthermore, since the PNF members dominated the ANC structures throughout Italy, these men simultaneously held several positions, as Members of Parliament, leaders of the MVSN, directing members of the fascist corporations, etc. To give only the most noteworthy examples, Augusto Turati presided the ANC federation of Brescia, Italo Balbo the federation of Ferrara, and Achille Starace the federation of Lecce. Sansanelli was the head of Fascism in Naples, Rossi led the fascist federation of Terni, and Russo was appointed to be prefetto of Chieti. By 1928, in many provinces it was impossible to make a distinction between the veteran organization and the PNF structures. The erstwhile diverse and numerous veteran press progressively declined. Even the

122 Esercito e Nazione. Rivista per l’ufficiale italiano (Rome), num. 6-7 (June-July 1926), num. 8 (August 1926), num. 11 (November 1926).
123 Esercito e Nazione, num. 3 (March 1927).
124 (‘la fisionomia di una nazione guerriera, dinamica, armata nello spirito e nelle braccia, pronta a tutte le prove, e impaziente di tentarle’) La Stampa, 16 October 1926.
125 This debate, through Roma fascista, 12, 19 November, 3 December 1927; Il Popolo d’Italia, 22 November 1927.
127 Cf. the list of provincial ANC leader annexed in Palo Ceci, I Gerarchi dell’Associazione, and political biographies in Chi è? Dizionario degli italiani d’oggi, Rome, 1936 and 1940, ad nomen.
128 ‘Italia Augusta’. Rassegna dell’Opera Nazionale per i Combattenti (Rome), num. 8 (August 1928).
innocuous ‘Italia Augusta’ veteran informative review disappeared at the end of 1928, transformed into a purely technical and illustrated monthly publication for the ONC propaganda.\textsuperscript{129} All these steps moved the veteran organizations closer to a totalitarian ideal.

The discourses, practices and representations of the Italian veterans evolved in harmony with this totalitarian drift, while the fascist liturgical system developed and consolidated.\textsuperscript{130} Thus, the official war memory experienced a clear fascistization since 1925. Commemorative rituals and monuments were the two instruments for the imposition of the fascist interpretation of the war and the victory. These factors reinforced the symbolic link between the intervention, the victory and the March on Rome, in which many veterans believed.

The veterans were both an agent and a target of these cultural expressions. In 1926, the ANC leadership gave instructions to make the veterans participate in the celebrations of the March on Rome under the orders of the PNF, and also in the local commemorations of Vittorio Veneto. In 1927 and 1928, official messages from the ANC commemorated simultaneously both concurrent dates. The association sent messages expressing loyalty to the King and the Duce for the occasion of the 4 November. In 1928, the tenth anniversary (\textit{decennale}) of the Victory featured the inauguration of the Mother Home of the Disabled in Rome (\textit{Casa Madre dei Mutilati}), and a big demonstration of veterans. In his discourse, Mussolini stated, as if it were true, that the Italian people had desired the war —that the intervention had not been due to a foreign unexpected aggression, but to a conscious voluntary act. Mussolini addressed thousands of \textit{combattenti} and \textit{mutilati}, affirming that in 1922 ‘a handful of men issued from the trenches’ had forever restored the victory. The commemoration of the Italian intervention in the First World War was another important annual ritual introduced by the fascists. In this exaltation of the interventionist spirit, the fascist veterans exerted a crucial role. In 1927, there was a meeting in Rome to celebrate the 24 May, where not only ministers and PNF authorities were present, but also ANC leaders and bearers of the Gold Medal. Turati, saluting in the Roman style, reviewed the veterans of the ANC, before paying homage to the \textit{Milite Ignoto}. Disabled veterans, and decorated veterans of the Institute of the Blue Ribbons (\textit{Nastro Azzurro}) —association transformed into \textit{Ente morale} in 1928— sent messages of exaltation and loyalty. And

\textsuperscript{129} ‘Italia Augusta’, num. 12 (December 1928).
\textsuperscript{130} Emilio Gentile, \textit{Il culto del Littorio}, pp. 61-103.
veterans abroad also celebrated these commemorations in a sympathetic environment; for example, French *anciens combattants* attended the banquet celebrated for the *decennale* of the victory in Paris.\(^{131}\)

Inaugurations of new monuments to the memory of the fallen soldiers were constant in all the Italian regions during the second half of the 1920s. Probably, the most famous of them was the monument to the Victory in Bolzano (in the *Alto Adige*), finished in 1928.\(^{132}\) This construction commemorated the irredentist martyrs of the Trentino region, and therefore was a symbol of the oppression of the German-speaking population of *Südtirol*. On this occasion, the yearly congress of the ANC was convened in Bolzano too. In this period, rituals around the monuments to the fallen soldiers, as well as veteran congresses — erstwhile heated and tumultuous meetings where radical and disparate political discussions were held — became routine and elitist meetings that once and again declared loyalty to the king and Mussolini.\(^{133}\) Publicly, the fascist veterans shared their devotion between both personalities. It is interesting to note, however, that during this period, Mussolini commenced to surpass the king as the symbolic receptor of the veterans’ and the army officers’ loyalties (Images 36 and 37).

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\(^{133}\) *Numero unico per l’inaugurazione. Monumento della Vittoria*, Bolzano, 1928; *‘Italia Augusta’*, num. 8 (August 1928); *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 18 September 1928.
Images 36 and 37: Representations of the king and Mussolini in the veteran press, Italia Augusta, num. 1, March 1926.

The stylization and standardization of the fascist identity and aesthetic continued throughout these years. There was an interest in defining the model characteristics of a fascist person, and in transmitting these traits to the next generation. Put simply, the new Italians had to be created in the likeness of Mussolini.\(^{134}\) The fascists extolled values such as faith, discipline, sacrifice; and pointed at the exemplary arditi as the most desirable figures to imitate. Even bodily attitudes and gestures with a militaristic appearance were recommended: ‘a straight and agile posture, rather proud than modest. Head held high, straight back […].’\(^{135}\)

Publications of veterans’ memoirs and narrations of war heroic deeds served as well to this purpose. The ‘trench’ was represented as the ‘school of schools’; young children had to learn its meaning.\(^{136}\) In fact, the ANC, its


leaders and other fascist veterans actively supported initiatives to reinforce and transmit these models of masculinity and political attitude.\textsuperscript{137}

All this preoccupation for the fascist education of children and youths was not new,\textsuperscript{138} but it was growing exponentially. The fascist youth organizations were expanding. It was an indication that a different era had begun. New generations who had not fought the war were reaching their maturity. This required the actualization of fascist identity, and particularly the revision of the myths round youths.\textsuperscript{139} Subsequently, the myth of the fascist veterans was progressively displaced, although the veterans did not lose their political relevance. As we will see, they would assume new political functions. At the end of the 1920s, a whole phase of the history of fascism closed, opening a new era for the relationship between fascists and veterans.


Part III

Fascism and Veterans during the 1930s

This section examines the transnational fascistization of veteran politics in Europe during the 1930s. A complex web of contacts, cultural transfers, and organizational networks of fascist or fascist-friendly veterans reveals the extent to which a transnational fascist phenomenon took shape in Europe, in a context marked by the increasing confrontation between fascism and anti-fascism and by a series of new wars. I show how the fascist model of veteran politics was transferred into Germany by 1933-1934, and into Spain and France as late as 1939-1940.
Chapter 5
Transnational Fascism and Veterans (1929-1935)

It is very significant that whereas the decade I have discussed hitherto passed into history as the ‘Golden Twenties’, the 1930s are remembered as a period of deep crisis and wars, starting with the Great Depression. As we know, for many social and political groups, and even for war veterans, the ‘Happy Twenties’ were not so pleasant as this image may suggest, and the 1930s would be much more distressing. The first half of the decade was marked by an unprecedented global crisis of capitalism. Although European countries —such as Italy— had shown signs of economic decline earlier, the major shock came from the United States and the Wall Street Crash of October 1929, which resonated across the old continent. With Weimar Germany deprived of North American loans, the reparations schedule and the European financial networks were severely disrupted. Industrial production slumped and unemployment rocketed. The affected states were obliged to search for new solutions, but in general, protectionist measures were implemented, and international trade collapsed. Working class syndicalism gained momentum. At the same time, corporatism was further developed in Fascist Italy as an alternative economic model and was increasingly regarded as a solution by certain lobbies and by political groups abroad.

The dramatic political consequences of this economic crisis brought a crisis of legitimacy in many countries. This situation was the breeding ground for new fascist or proto-fascist movements and parties. And now, their evolution was not just influenced by Italian Fascism; the German Nazis also inspired them. In the context of the Depression, National Socialism grew steadily in Germany. Hitler would obtain power in January 1933. This event constituted a further shock to both international and domestic affairs in all European countries; in particular, Fascist Italy and the French Republic had to reorient their positions regarding the German III Reich.

Far from disappearing from the political scene, the veterans of the Great War became more involved in European politics. The war memory did not fade, rather it was substantially transformed. New discourses and representations of the war came to the fore in the first half of the 1930s, inaugurating symbolic struggles for the signification of the war experience, in which the veterans of different countries would be heavily involved. Fascism continued to monopolize the political and cultural expression of the Italian veterans, and a process of Nazification of German veteran politics and discourses
took place. All these developments had an important transnational dimension across the continent, as fascist and non-fascist veterans constructed international networks and were the agents of cultural transfers.

This chapter analyses this multifaceted historical process, in order to discern what role war veterans played. In the first section, I show that the years 1929 and 1930 initiated a new phase in the historical evolution of the relationship between veterans and Fascism, marked by a set of changes that took place in Italy and elsewhere. In the early 1930s, the relationship between fascism and veterans took very different forms, as an examination of Spanish and French fascist groups will reveal. In Germany, as I will discuss in the third section, a process of Nazification of the German veterans ended circa 1934. In the last section I will focus on the contacts and relations between fascist, French and Nazi veterans until 1935, highlighting the consequences of this transnational process. I will argue that the fascist veterans constructed a wide and complex network that had an impact on the overall evolution of international affairs. As a result, the fascist idea further expanded in Europe, heightening international tensions, and making the outbreak of new wars more likely.

**New directions: 1929-1930**

For several reasons, 1929-1930 can be considered as a pivotal year. It was the end of one historical period, and the beginning of another for both the European continent and Fascist Italy. In this section I shall discuss the substantial changes that took place in the realm of fascist veteran politics; namely, the irruption of the Italian fascist veterans as active participants onto the scene of European international relations, and the emergence of transnational entanglements regarding veteran discourses and organizations, in both cultural and political terms. As we will see, this transnational process also marked the beginning of the development of a National-Socialist model for war veterans in Germany.

**Fascist veterans and the leap into Europe**

In a sense, the consolidation of the fascist dictatorship culminated with the Lateran Pacts of February 1929, whereby a concordat regulating the relations between the Vatican and the fascist state was reached. Taking advantage of the prestige that this accord gave to Mussolini, an electoral plebiscite took place in March 1929. Italians were given the opportunity to say ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to the list of deputies drafted by the
Grand Council of Fascism. Perhaps unsurprisingly, due to the conditions and the context of the voting, very few of the more than 8 million electors voted against the fascists. After this magnificent success, the national leaders of the ANC sent a public message to Mussolini, mentioning how the veterans had participated in the elections: ‘ranged like battalions’ to renovate their ‘oath of loyalty’ to the Duce.\(^1\) There were many fascist veterans among the new members of the Chamber; Amilcare Rossi himself was one of them.\(^2\) The victory in the plebiscite can be seen as a signal of the complete stability of the regime, and as the beginning of the years of the so-called ‘consensus’ (consenso).\(^3\) The fascist veterans had contributed greatly to this.

As a symptom of the propitious moment that the fascist veterans and the ANC were enjoying, a new press organ was launched in May 1929: *L’Italia grigio-verde*, based in Rome and directed by Ugo Trombetti (a fascist veteran from Bologna). It aspired to be the national newspaper of the Italian veterans. In the journalists’ words, it was the newspaper of the ‘fascist combattentismo’ (combattentismo fascista). By this time, the ANC had reached more than 400,000 affiliated (tesserati) in Italy. As can be understood by observing the provincial provenance of the ANC members (Map 8), their presence throughout the territory was not homogeneous, even if this uneven regional distribution was to some extent due to an unequal population density and to the greater human contribution of the northern regions to the war effort. It is not surprising that the bulk of the members came from the north of Italy, and from the biggest cities. Still, the total membership of the ANC was a small fraction of the huge number of Italian men who fought the Great War — around 10%.

\(^1\) (‘inquadrati come battaglioni’, ‘giuramento di fedeltà’) *Bollettino Associazione Nazionale Combattenti* (Pavia), 30 April 1929.
However, if in the early postwar period the basis of the veterans’ movement had been the peasantry of the Mezzogiorno, now the fascist ANC was a rather urban phenomenon, close to the centres of political and economic power (Rome and Milan). The regions with the highest rate of veteran affiliation to the fascist ANC were Tuscany (above all, Pisa), and Lombardy (particularly the northern provinces). The lowest affiliation rates were in the South: Abruzzi, Campania, Puglia, Calabria, and the islands. An interesting phenomenon that should be highlighted is the growth of the affiliation abroad: by 1929, the ANC counted more than 12,000 members in foreign countries.4

According to the fascists, the main reason for the sharp rise in affiliations, which numbered 500,000 at the end of 1929, was the ‘spiritual factor’, rather than the work of social assistance carried out by the ANC. However, there undoubtedly were material motivations for the increase, since the association reached several agreements for the preferential employment of veterans in some provinces. In the summer of 1929, while the deterioration of economic conditions provoked the first strikes of the period, the Confindustria, the fascist industrial syndicates and the ANC decided to give preference on the labour market to veterans from fascist syndicates that were affiliated to the ANC. Later, the Minister of Corporations, Bottai, confirmed these benefits, which were extended to all branches of production. In addition, the president of the National Board of the ANC obtained the right to sit on the High Council of Corporations. The prestige of the veterans association increased within the regime.

The fascist veterans reinforced their presence within the state institutions. In September 1929 a new government was formed. Not only fascist personalities who had fought the Great War such as Dino Grandi (Minister of Foreign Affaires), Italo Balbo (Minister of Aeronautics), Giuseppe Bottai (Minister of Corporations), Giacomo Acerbo (Minister of Agriculture) or Michele Bianchi (Minister of Public Works) conserved much power in their hands, but also others like Angelo Maranesi (president of the ONC until now) and Araldo di Crollalanza (former ANC leader) were nominated to the position of Undersecretary of State.

When the VI National Council of the ANC was celebrated in Rome a few days later, Mussolini attended the meeting, and outlined his vision for the political future of the war veterans. ‘Fascism and Combattentismo —Mussolini said to the veterans— are two bodies and one soul, but tomorrow, when the day of the final test arrive, Fascism and Combattentismo shall be one body and one soul’. This prophecy, as we will see, would shape the development of the veteran organization. Although there was no explicit exegesis for that sentence, it was rooted in the long-held but frustrated fascist

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Provinciale Valtellinese dell’Associazione Nazionale Combattenti (Sondrio), num. 6 (August-September 1930).
5 (‘fattore spirituale’) Bollettino della Federazione Provinciale Mantovana dell’Associazione Nazionale Combattenti (Mantova), num. 3 (January 1930).
6 Simona Colarizi, L’opinione, p. 39.
7 L’Italia grigio-verde, 15 July 1929.
8 L’Italia grigio-verde, 20 January 1930.
9 (‘Fascismo e Combattentismo sono due corpi e un’anima sola, ma domani, nel giorno della prova, Fascismo e Combattentismo saranno un corpo solo e un’anima sola’) Il Popolo d’Italia, 17 September 1929; L’Italia grigio-verde, 15 September 1929.
desire that Fascism would be the unique expression of the veteran identity, both in ideology and organization. In this sense, it is interesting to note that, in organizational terms, a project for the fusion of all the Italian veteran associations had already been sponsored by Ugo Trombetti in the paper *L’Italia grigio-verde*. A debate about the possibilities of the formation of a Green-grey Federation (*Federazione Grigio-verde*), embracing all kinds of veteran groups, was prolonged during 1930. From the point of view of the clandestine Italian Communists, Mussolini’s words were another proof of the drift towards war; the ‘fascist-bourgeois regime’ was the ‘regime of war’.

The year 1929 was also marked by a major change in the fascist stance toward the rest of Europe. Fascism began trying to expand its influence abroad. This new orientation contrasted with the previous focus on internal consolidation and with the old affirmation of the purely Italian and non-exportable nature of Fascism. If now the fascists looked beyond the borders, it was a result of the need to give new national goals to the youth, and a consequence of the fascist quest for international prestige, leverage, territorial expansion, and imperial domination. The perceived good health of the regime inside the country allowed the fascists to dream of a fascist Europe. During 1928-1929, Mussolini had supported the Austrian Heimwehr, a paramilitary league composed of voluntary home guards of demobilized soldiers. The new will to intervene in European politics, and to combat the ‘democratic, communist ideas’ that according to the fascists dominated the European spirit, was keenly represented by the new review *Antieuropa*, directed by Asvero Gravelli, a fascist leader who had experienced the Great War as a teenager, later joining the Fiuman endeavour. It is true that moderation prevailed in Italian foreign policy until 1932, but Mussolini himself would gradually implement a fascistization of foreign affairs. His brother, Arnaldo Mussolini, director of *Il Popolo d’Italia*, published a set of articles arguing that the moment for the fascists to fulfil ‘their responsibility’ regarding Europe had come.

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11 (‘il regime borghese-fascista, che è il regime della guerra’) *L’Unità* (clandestine edition), 1929, num. 1.
15 *Antieuropa. Rassegna mensile* (Rome), num. 1, April 1929.
what is more interesting here, the fascist veterans intensified their foreign activities in accordance with the new political guidelines.

As the veterans had to fulfil a European mission, Amilcare Rossi devoted time to reinforcing the ANC abroad. His trip to France and Switzerland on the occasion of the 24 May celebration in 1929 served that purpose. In both countries, the fascist activities developed in a hostile environment where anti-fascism predominated. By 1930, three dozen members of the Fasci all’estero had been killed, and two hundred had been injured by anti-fascist actions. Seemingly, only loose connections existed between the Fasci all’estero and the ANC cells abroad. The activities of the latter were characterized by a generic patriotism, and it was the figure of the king—rather than that of Mussolini—that they most exalted in their bulletins. (Still, within Italy, at the inauguration of new monuments to the fallen soldiers, the fascists employed the same reverential monarchical discourse). But this reality did not contradict the fact that the fascists sought to politically exploit the veterans inside and outside the country. This was particularly true in France, where more than 400 events with veterans were celebrated during 1930. As a cartoon published in Il Popolo d’Italia symbolically suggested, the Italian veterans served as an amplifier for Fascism (Image 38). The fascistization of the ANC and the veterans in foreign countries, which had begun as early as 1925, was unrelenting.

18 L’Italia grigio-verde, 5 and 15 June 1929; Amilcare Rossi, Figlio del mio tempo, pp. 98-100.
19 Fasci italiani all’estero, Trentacinque morti. Duecentododici feriti, [Roma], 1930.
20 Bollettino dell’Associazione Nazionale Combattenti per la zona del nord (Nord, Pas-de-Calais e Somme) (Lille), March 1930.
22 L’Italia grigio-verde, 20 April 1931.
In short, during 1929 veterans acquired a decisive role in the expansion of Fascism, paving the way for a set of new contacts and transfers between actors in the international sphere. This reality transcended the previous unilateral visits and the mere circulation of stereotypes and myths about fascist veterans that had characterized the mid-1920s. Besides, in 1929, the fascist stance regarding the FIDAC changed, for these inter-allied meetings seemed obsolete to them.\textsuperscript{23} Now, Italy embraced an integrationist attitude towards the ex-enemies. Yet the fascist veterans’ propaganda inside the FIDAC persisted. In 1930, Amilcare Rossi represented Italy in the FIDAC congress in Washington, where he tried to rebut the ‘calumnies’ against the fascist regime.\textsuperscript{24} The Italian veterans presented themselves more openly as fascists, and those residing abroad were required to follow the ANC programme. When the French veteran leader Henri Pichot admonished the Italians not to present themselves in the FIDAC as fascists but

\textsuperscript{23} Telegram from Belgrade (place of the FIDAC congress) to Rome, 3 September 1929, AMAE, Società delle Nazioni 1919-1930, b. 66, ‘Federazione interalleata ex-combattenti FIDAC’.

\textsuperscript{24} Amilcare Rossi, \textit{Le tappe gloriose}, Rome, 1933, pp. 65-93; Id., \textit{Figlio del mio tempo}, pp. 101-104.
just as veterans, the fascist veterans replied restating the oneness of combatantino and Fascism.25 A new phase of fascist veteran diplomacy had started.

Transnational entanglements: veteran politics and culture

As the fascist veterans erupted onto the international scene, they also became a symbolic actor in the entangled politics of Europe. It is important to note that the interest in setting up an organizational structure in foreign regions was not an exclusive feature of the Italian veterans; by 1929, the German Stahlhelm had also created cells in a dozen different countries, particularly in Latin America.26 The Stahlhelm cell in Oporto (Portugal) was the most active; following its example, in January 1929, the Stahlhelm sent to its branches instructions about how to carry out nationalist and anti-republican propaganda abroad.27 Fascist and nationalist German veterans were, by this point, ready to establish contacts.

In 1929 and 1930, German veterans from the Stahlhelm came to Italy and opened up lines of communication with the Italian fascists. There were many Stahlhelm members that clearly sympathized with the fascists, even if the Italians had been the enemy during the Great War, and in spite of the Südtirol question. The members of the Stahlhelm group in Venice enthusiastically heralded the appearance of a ‘German Mussolini’, and placed their hopes on an agreement between the Stahlhelm and the NSDAP, which had not yet been achieved.28 Within the veteran association, however, there were sectors that criticised any rapprochement to Italy. In November 1929, when a group of Stahlhelm members travelled to Italy, they had to do so in an unofficial manner, and they were obliged to justify their behaviour by publicly saying —first—that it had been just a leisure trip, and —later—that it was necessary and convenient to get first-hand knowledge about Fascism.29 Many members of the Stahlhelm reasonably feared that establishing political contacts with an ex-enemy country would discredit the organization. In fact, the satirical German review Simplicissimus mocked the contact between fascists and Stahlhelm members by bringing up the contradiction between this German-Italian fraternization and the situation in Südtirol (image 26). The Stahlhelm leadership had to send an internal memorandum to clarify what the official conduct of

26 BArch (Berlin), R 72/250, sheets 6-9.
27 BArch (Berlin), R 72/250, sheets 3-9, 11-14.
28 (‘deutsche Mussolini’) BArch (Berlin), R 72/260, sheet 3.
29 Der Stahlhelm, 17 November, 8 December 1929.
its members who made trips abroad should be: if political contacts were to be established, they needed the prior approval of the political Stahlhelm counsellor.30

![Image 39: ‘Visit of the Stahlhelm to the fascists. – All right, Tirolean. As interpreter you are allowed to speak German!’, Simplicissimus (Stuttgart), 2 December 1929.](image)

Important events taking place in Germany during 1930 would contribute to furthering the fascistization of German veterans. At that time, both the Stahlhelm and the NSDAP were sincere admirers of Fascism, and both tried to be on good terms with the fascist representatives in Germany.31 In fact, since the beginning of 1929, the group of Nazi MPs had been in contact with the fascist authorities, in order to prepare a study trip to Italy. As the Nazi MP Robert Ley explained in a letter, they desired to get first-hand

knowledge from all sorts of political, economic, social, cultural and military aspects of Fascist Italy, including the ‘treatment of disabled veterans’.

In Germany, as the social and economic conditions quickly worsened, the anti-republican forces gathered support, presenting a front of opposition to the payment of reparations scheduled by the Young plan. In March 1930, a new government was formed. It was headed by the chancellor Heinrich Brüning, who was a decorated ex-officer of the Great War. For this reason, Seldte and other Stahlhelm leaders saw the new government positively as a frontline soldiers’ cabinet (Frontsoldatenkabinett). The NSDAP, instead, maintained an intransigent position in its violent quest for power, and it prohibited its members from being simultaneously members of the Stahlhelm. As the economic crisis provoked drastic reductions in the war victims’ pensions system, the Nazis realised that this section of society was potentially a source of NSDAP votes. The Völkischer Beobachter condemned the so-called ‘Front combatants cabinet’ (Frontkämpferkabinett) for purportedly humiliating the disabled veterans (Kriegsbeschädigten); the Nazis also disparaged the allegedly Marxist-inspired assistance to war victims.

This tougher political stance of the Nazis was better rewarded by the German voters. In September 1930, the NSDAP achieved great success in the elections to the Reichstag, increasing to 104 seats in the Parliament, even if Brüning retained power. In this situation, the Stahlhelm veterans, who had been supporters of Hugenberg’s DNVP, radicalized themselves in order to also exploit the Nazi breakthrough. A few weeks after the elections, the Reichsfrontsoldatentag in Koblenz (very close to the Rhine border with France) was a paramilitaristic and aggressive demonstration that shocked many Frenchmen and as the source of much interest among the Italian fascists. The ranks of veterans paraded with a fascist-like salute. That a PNF representative and other fascists joined this Stahlhelm ceremony was another factor to cause panic about an anti-French threat.

This was a turning point in international veteran politics. The Nazi success and the Stahlhelm demonstration had repercussions in France. The French associations of the CIAMAC, presided by Henri Pichot, contacted the

32 (‘trattamento degli invalidi di guerra’) AMAE, Affari Politici 1919-1930, Germania, b. 1181, f. ‘Viaggio deputati hitleriani in Italia’.
33 Volker R. Berghahn, Der Stahlhelm, p. 143.
34 Volker R. Berghahn, Der Stahlhelm, p. 148.
35 Niels Löffelbein, Ehrenbürger der Nation, pp. 142-145; Völkischer Beobachter, 3/4 August 1930.
moderate, non-revanchist German veterans. In contrast, French nationalist groups scorned any rapprochement effort. Since 1929, the Croix de Feu had been hardliners regarding foreign policy. Now, taking the demonstration of the Stahlhelm as typical of the alleged overall German threat, they made no distinctions and condemned any politics of rapprochement or pacifism. This issue fuelled the Croix de Feu dynamic of radicalization during the next years. However, French veterans were reluctant to establish contacts with the nationalist German organizations.

This notwithstanding, the impressive advance of German radical nationalism also paved the way for sectors of the French right to become open to a profound revision of Versailles. Gustave Hervé, after seeing the imposing Stahlhelm demonstration, suggested that the Croix de Feu and the French veterans should adopt the same attitude as the Germans. They had many things in common —such as anti-communism. Moreover, Hervé suggested that an understanding between the German and French veterans should be the first step towards the rapprochement between both nations. He publicly made an overture to Seldte and Hitler, asking their opinions about a potential bilateral agreement that would recognize many of the German nationalists’ territorial claims. This accord would allegedly save Europe from war and Bolshevism. Initially, the Stahlhelm leader Franz Seldte did not disregard the idea of furthering the union of veterans from different nations; he stated ‘Front soldiers of the world, unite’ (Frontsoldaten aller Länder, setz euch zusammen). But later, Seldte declined Hervé’s proposal, since the French would not accept the abolition of the Versailles clause about German responsibility for the war. For the same reason, Hitler rejected Hervé’s revisionist offers as well. Not even the Croix de Feu and other French groups were keen about Hervé’s project. Besides, these debates took place at the same time as the anniversary of the March on Rome was celebrated, and Mussolini took this opportunity to express his own revisionist intentions regarding the Versailles’ status quo. As can be seen, in Italy, Germany and even France, tendencies towards a possible veterans-led international agreement appeared. Yet both the Stahlhelm and the Nazis were much more inclined to reinforce their ties with Italy than with France.

38 Journal des Mutilés et Combattants (Paris), 7 December 1930.
40 Der Stahlhelm, 26 October, 2 and 9 November 1930; La Victoire, 4, 5, 7, 14, 16, 17, 18, 20, 21, 22, 24, 26, 27, 29 October, 2, 3, 9 November 1930; Il Popolo d’Italia, 25, 26 and 28 October 1930; Völkischer Beobachter, 18, 23, 24, 26/27, 28, 29 and 31 October, 7 November 1930.
Taking into account that inclination, it is not surprising that, in November 1930, *Stahlhelm* members travelled to Italy again. The trip was organized in collaboration with the Italian Commerce Chamber in Berlin; or in other words, in contact with Major Renzetti, Mussolini’s agent in Germany.\(^{41}\) The *Stahlhelm* members laid a laurel wreath on the Altar of the Fallen Fascists (*Ara dei Caduti Fascisti*) in the Campidoglio (near to the *Milite Ignoto*), and were received on 13 November by Mussolini, to whom they gave a *Stahlhelm* insignia. Henke, the leader of the group, declared that the ‘fascist idea’ was the ‘cornerstone’ of his organization.\(^{42}\) All these actions and statements aroused indignation and criticism not only among republicans, but also among German nationalists such as those of the Jungdeutscher Orden. There were protests of *Stahlhelm* members who were not eager about making friends in the former enemy country; their memory of the war and their ‘feeling of solidarity’ with the ‘fallen comrades’ were still vivid.\(^{43}\) Because of this inappropriate visit, the *Stahlhelm* came under attack from all sides again. Once more, the national leaders had to send an official memorandum rebuking Henke’s group and its supposedly unauthorized political manoeuvres in Italy. This reprimand was half-hearted because —after all— the Italian government seemed to adopt a pro-German stance as a consequence of the visit. In reality, as was recognised in a private letter sent to Renzetti, the *Stahlhelm* national leaders had considered the underlying idea of the trip ‘correct’.\(^{44}\) In spite of the controversy, the *Stahlhelm* not only did not stop, but even increased the frequency and importance of the contacts with the fascists; Major Renzetti would be a key person in this relationship.

Apart from the reinforcement of the political communication between Fascist Italy and Germany through the *Stahlhelm* and from the newly-acquired preponderance of the NSDAP in the anti-republican politics within Germany, these events also suggest the increasing weight of this country in the renegotiation of the European *status quo*. At that time, the conflicts and cleavages within the Weimar Republic came to epitomise the multiple political and social fractures that riddled other European regions. German cultural wars influenced the conflictive reshaping of the war memory that took place in


\(^{42}\) (‘pietra fundamentale’ or ‘Grundlage’, ‘idea fascista’ or ‘fascistischen Ideen’) *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 14 November 1930; BArch (Berlin), R 72/260, sheet 6.

\(^{43}\) (‘Gefühl der Verbundenheit mit meiner damals gefallenen Kameraden’) BArch (Berlin), R 72/260, sheet 4.

\(^{44}\) (‘richtig’) BArch (Berlin), R 72/260, sheet 45.
the European societies during the early 1930s. Former combatants of the First World War were active actors in this process.

Erich Maria Remarque’s novel *Im Westen nichts Neues* was first published in serial form by the *Vossische Zeitung* between November 1928 and January 1929. Immediately, it was published as a book and became an overwhelming international bestseller — the English version *All Quiet on the Western Front* appeared simultaneously. Since then, much has been said about the crude depiction of warfare, and about the pacifism — rather than anti-militarism — of the novel. Remarque, a writer who had fought the war, transmitted the point of view of the common front soldier. He introduced his work neither as an ‘accusation’ nor as a ‘confession’, but just as an account of ‘a generation that was destroyed by war’.

In this period, the description of war through autobiographical or semi-autobiographical accounts, written by veterans who shared the sense of belonging to a generation, was a transnational phenomenon. In France, the idea of a ‘génération du feu’ was widely diffused, as a decade seemed a proper time for many veterans to reconsider their war experience. Remarque’s book also revived debates about the objectivity or subjectivity of his work and of war novels in general. This question was similarly approached in France, through the well-known study of Jean Norton Cru, *Témoins* (1929). This work systematically analyzed French war literature, in order to discern whether they were reliable or not. As in Remarque’s case, Norton Cru had the objective of avoiding a new war by transmitting the reality of warfare. Remarque’s novel was partially responsible for the subsequent transnational wave of war literature: a great number of veterans wanted to publish their opinions and memories. This phenomenon also reached Spain. Ramón J. Sender’s novel *Imán* (1930), set during the Moroccan war and the disaster of Annual, conveyed the same pacifist message as Remarque. However, this vast literary production was not uniform when it came to the writers’ opinions about war; roughly two polarized positions can be identified: on the

46 (‘Anklage’, ‘Bekenntnis’, ‘eine Generation […] die vom Kriege zerstört wurde’)
one hand, the pacifists, and on the other hand, those who still highlighted the alleged positive values of war by employing the nationalist and patriotic discourse born of the war experience. The war veterans were the only authoritative participants in this wide debate, which was not only literary, but also political. As a matter of fact, in Germany the patriotic and conservative literary war accounts outnumbered the pacifist ones, even if Remarque’s novel was more widely read.

This controversy contributed to the rising awareness of the Nazis about the convenience of developing a more consistent and distinctive veteran politics. After the electoral victory, this strategy was possible. In mid-November 1930, Gregor Strasser, National Organizational Leader (Reichsorganisationleiter) of the NSDAP, transmitted to all the Nazi local leaders that Hitler had decided to found a party department dedicated to this matter. Now, disabled veterans and war victims attracted the Nazis’ attention, as they were a potential pool of votes in the context of the crisis. Hans Oberlindober, a war veteran and NSDAP member since October 1922, was appointed head of this new organization. On 30 November 1930, in a meeting of the Kyffhäuserbund, Oberlindober made public the Nazi programme for the war victims’ care, basically consisting in the rejection of Weimar’s pensions system. But the Nazis decided to carry out their struggle for the war veterans’ support also in the cultural sphere.

It is well known how the Nazis attacked the exhibition of the film Im Westen nichts Neues. Joseph Goebbels, who considered the book to be ‘nasty’ and ‘dangerous’, was responsible for the series of disturbances and demonstrations that took place in Berlin in December 1930 to protest against the projection of the American film of Remarque’s novel. This Nazi campaign was above all motivated by Goebbels’ political strategy regarding internal developments within the NSDAP. The movie was despised as a ‘Jewish’ production. The Nazi attacks were based on accusations about

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50 Ann P. Linder, Princes of the Trenches, Narrating the German Experience of the First World War, Columbia, Camden House, 1996.
51 ‘Organisations-Abtlg.L/Ref. Kriegsbeschädigte (Gregor Strasser) an alle Gauleitungen’ (18 November 1930), BArch (Berlin), NS 22/411.
52 ‘Bericht über den Stand der deutschen Kriegsopfersversorgung’ (26 May 1933), BArch (Berlin), NS 22/1279; on Oberlindober see Löffelbein, Ehrenbürger der Nation, pp. 91-109.
53 Modris Eksteins, ‘War, Memory, and Politics: The Fate of the Film All Quiet on the Western Front’, Central European History, 13 (1980), pp. 60-82.
the film ‘insulting the honour of the German soldier and particularly the heroic youth of Langemarck’. The *Stahlhelm* also demanded the prohibition of the film. As the German government yielded to the pressure and banned the film, despite the *Reichsbanner*’s protests, the Nazis were exultant. This victory marked the beginning of a more direct appeal to the myth of the front soldier in the Nazi political propaganda, but the Nazi discourse about the veterans still lacked originality.

At this moment of anti-Remarque reaction, the similarity between Hitler’s veterans-related discourse and Mussolini’s long-established concept of *trincerocrazia* was noticeable. Rationalizing the Nazi fusion of Nationalism and Socialism, Hitler boasted about his condition of front soldier; this quality was the justification to defend this synthesis. The soldiers had fought the war neither for the Proletariat, nor for the Bourgeoisie, but for the entire nation (*Volk*). As Hitler stated in his speech on 11 December 1930, the soldiers had ‘discovered in the battlefields the synthesis between Nationalism and Socialism’. Yet this claim, most likely inspired by Hitler’s readings about Italian Fascism, did not imply elevating the veterans as the aristocracy of the new Germany. Even though Hitler prefaced Hans Zörbelein’s *Der Glaube an Deutschland*, this answer to Remarque did not approach the veterans as protagonists; it simply introduced patriotic justifications for the murderous reality of warfare.

Something similar can be said about Ernst Von Salomon’s autobiographical novel about the *Freikorps*, published in January 1930. There, the returning front soldiers were aesthetically represented as hardened warriors, profoundly divorced from the non-combatant world. Von Salomon despised the ‘Soldiers Councils without soldiers’ of the hated 1918 revolution; instead, he glorified the *Freikorps*, the real essence of the front soldiers. This ideal of the ‘eternal soldiers’ (*ewige Soldaten*) was much liked by the Nazis, but it had nothing to do with the challenges and experiences of the German war veterans.

In contrast, Remarque’s next novel, *Der Weg zurück*, firstly published in the *Vossische Zeitung* between December 1930 and January 1931 as the sequel of *Im Westen nichts Neues*, directly approached the experiences of the war veterans as the

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56 (‘die Synthese zwischen Nationalismus und Sozialismus auf ihre Weise im Felde gefunden’) *Adolf Hitler: Reden*, vol. IV, part 1, 154-155, 162 (speeches on 7 and 11 December 1930).
main topic. Remarque reinforced his pessimistic and pacifist point of view. In this novel, mainly set in postwar Germany in the year after the armistice, the misfortunes and tragic fate of a group of returning front soldiers were vividly depicted, and their feelings and emotions—strangeness, disappointment, isolation—profundly characterized. No clear political orientation was ascribed to them: they were essentially sceptical and mistrustful of the revolution that was taking place in their country. The story line of the novel was, however, the process of disintegration of the mythical comradeship (Kameradschaft) of the trenches. While the group of veterans tried to maintain their unity, idealizing the past experience of brotherhood, the harsh reality on the ground fatally undermined their hopes. This outcome was, nevertheless, conveyed as something inevitable and necessary. The surviving protagonists recovered their individual identity, while maintaining their friendship. In the last part of the novel (probably set in the early 1930s), Remarque offered a direct criticism to the activities of paramilitary groups that were trying to militarily educate younger generations (i.e.: the Stahlhelm) and making a new catastrophe likely.

In Italy, the hostility of Fascism towards the pacifist depiction of warfare conditioned the reception of Remarque. As we know, since the early postwar period, the fascists had struggled against and suppressed the representation of the war as a senseless massacre. It is not surprising that the reviews of Remarque’s book published in Italy were in general negative and cold. It was said that the stunning commercial success of the novel was a ‘bluff’, and that the book’s description of war was ‘erroneous’, because it ignored the alleged reality of battle as the origin of ‘heroic values’ and ‘self-improvement’. The news about the prohibition of the sale of Remarque’s book inside Fascist Italy soon circulated in Europe. The Italian translation of Der Weg zurück would not be allowed to be sold in either the kingdom of Italy or its colonies. Nevertheless, many in Italy managed to read these novels, and Mussolini himself privately recognized that people were more receptive to this kind of discourse than to the patriotic accounts of officers and generals.

62 For example, La Voz (Madrid), 25/09/1929.
63 Erich Maria Remarque, La via del ritorno, Milano, Mondadori, 1932.
64 Renzo De Felice, Mussolini il Duce. I, p. 27, footnote 2.
Although pacifist war novels did not proliferate in Italy at that time, other kind of war accounts appeared. Since 1929, for example, in the pages of Benedetto Croce’s review *La Critica*, the historian and war veteran Adolfo Omodeo earnestly analysed a set of diaries and letters of Italian fallen soldiers of the Great War. His work, however, served as a refutation of Remarque’s interpretation of the war as ‘mere horror’, by conveying, instead, ‘the breath of poetry, of hope, of justice’ that had animated the Italian soldiers at the front.\(^{65}\) The transmission of positive values attributed to war was also the background theme of several war novels published in Italy at that time. Although the atrocities and some injustices of the war were expounded on and recognised, these books made neither moral nor political judgments. On the contrary, they often expressed a positive valuation of sacrifice.\(^{66}\) On some occasions, as in Adolfo Baiocchi’s book *Generazioni*, the experience of the front was connected with the postwar experiences of the demobilized soldiers. The alleged veterans’ reaction against revolutionaries, organized through the early fascist movement, was narrated as a continuation of the patriotic service of achieving the victory in the war.\(^{67}\) Fascist literary critics described this literature with the explicit name of ‘Antiremarque’.\(^{68}\)

This kind of literary works formed part of the cultural background on which a ‘fascist art’ was forged during the 1930s.\(^{69}\) From this point onwards, both Italian Fascism and Nazism developed a culture in which war literature was included. The target of these accounts was not only the literate, culture-consuming war veterans, but also the younger generations. Discourses about the war experience contributed to shape the idealized model of warrior that both Fascism and Nazism would employ later.

**Different paths through the crisis**

The role of war veterans in the historical evolution of transnational fascism in Europe was far from unidirectional during the early 1930s, and a simultaneous study of the cases of France and Spain helps to understand the versatility of the relationship between

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veterans and fascism. Although fascist and proto-fascist movements now emerged in different European countries, Italy remained the only fascist dictatorship established on the Continent until 1933. Even after Hitler’s seizure of power, the main western democracies — Britain, France and republican Spain — still resisted the fascist or authoritarian surge. However, in these countries, the presence or absence of war veterans as ambiguous or open representatives of fascism conditioned domestic politics.

In this section, I will examine the path towards totalitarianism that the Italian veterans walked during the early 1930s, contrasting it with the cases of Spain and France. In the latter countries, there were attempts to consolidate an anti-democratic, fascist-inspired reaction — relying on war veterans or not —. In particular, I will examine the Spanish organizations that converged into the fascist party *Falange Española y de las JONS*, as well as the case of the French *Croix de Feu*. Thus, I intend to demonstrate that, despite the entangled nature of the fascist phenomenon in Europe, the symbolic link between veterans and fascism was established in very different — often paradoxical — ways, conditioning the trajectory and capabilities of different fascist movements. This analysis will facilitate the understanding of the complexity of the wide network of cross-cultural transfers and cross-border contacts in the realm of fascist veteran politics.

*The transforming model of Fascist Italy*

In Italy, the fascist veterans were a consubstantial part of the dictatorship in its sustained progression towards totalitarianism. After Achille Starace became Secretary General of the PNF, in September 1931, the institutionalization of the fascist liturgy culminated, and its aesthetics were refined. The *Mostra della Rivoluzione Fascista*, inaugurated in October 1932 for the celebration of the *decennale* (10th anniversary) of the March on Rome, was the epitome of the fascist aestheticization of politics. Accordingly, the fascist veterans refined their external appearance to match the official visual displays: the use of black shirts and helmets among the veterans participating in ceremonies and parades was regulated between 1931 and 1932. For the *decennale*, the ANC ensured that many war veterans were able to join the fascist rituals. Starace attended several

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72 *L'Italia Grigio-Verde*, 20 October 1932.
ANC provincial congresses during 1932, and he was in contact with the fascist veteran leaders.\(^{73}\) As a consequence of this evolution, a new ANC statute was published in February 1933, whereby the association reinforced its ritualistic and commemorative functions, without losing its social assistance tasks.\(^{74}\) With this transformation, the triumvirate that had controlled the ANC since 1925 was dissolved, but its members remained in the new directing body: Amilcare Rossi was now the President of the new Central Committee (Comitato Centrale).\(^{75}\) During the economic depression, a combination of fascist ceremonies and the management of benefits characterized the ANC activities, aiming not to enhance the life conditions of the people, but to reinforce the veterans’ loyalty to the king and the Duce, and to tighten the control over the masses of veterans.\(^{76}\)

If the veteran organization kept the pace of the regime’s thrust towards totalitarianism, the evolution of the fascist discourse about the veterans also reflected changes in this direction. The context of the economic crisis rendered the old ways of appealing to the veterans insufficient. At the grass-roots level, the ANC offices in the Italian cities were constantly crowded by veterans, their widows and orphans, who turned to the ANC for help, in the face of unemployment and hardship. The veteran leaders, incapable of resolving the people’s problems, encouraged them to apply the comradeship of the trench to their daily life; the fascists appealed to endurance and patience, confidence and discipline, virtues allegedly issued from the trench experience.\(^{77}\) Whilst they vigorously defended the assumed equation between Fascism and combatteismo as an unquestionable historical fact, the fascists now emphasized the need for ‘iron discipline’. The economic crisis was seen as a new war, and the way to reach victory was the ‘subordination of everyone to the reason of state’. Logic —it

\(^{73}\) L’Italia Grigio-Verde, 20 September-5 October, 20 November 1932.

\(^{74}\) L’Italia Grigio-Verde, 5 January 1933; Bollettino dell’Associazione Nazionale Combattenti. Federazione della Tripolitania (Tripoli), February, March 1933.

\(^{75}\) L’Italia Grigio-Verde, 20 February 1933; Bollettino della Federazione Provinciale Valtellinese dell’Associazione Nazionale Combattenti, January-February 1933. Other six members completed the new central committee: Luigi Russo, Nicola Sansanelli, Michele Barbaro, the count Gustavo Besozzi di Carnisio, Giovanni Cao di San Marco and Adelchi Serena.


\(^{77}\) Bollettino della Federazione Provinciale di Terni dell’Associazione Nazionale Combattenti, 28 September 1932; Amilcare Rossi, Le tappe gloriose, pp. 143-147.
was said—dictated that Fascism absorb the spirit of *combattentismo*, and thus, it was right that Fascism monopolize also the veteran organization.78

The veterans in Fascist Italy during the early 1930s played new roles that added to the repertory of political functions that Fascism had attributed to them since its birth. This evolution sat comfortably with the changes of the regime and of the PNF. For example, the propaganda campaign ‘verso il popolo’ (towards the people) that sought the regime’s rapprochement to the lower classes was matched by measures specifically designed for veterans, particularly in the framework of the ONC, or through the ANC sections’ social activities. The same can be said about the development and consolidation of the fascist symbolic and liturgical universe, into which the fascist veterans were inserted. Yet Italian Fascism was the exception, not the norm, in the European environment.

During the early 1930s, the symbol of the war veteran was a shared commodity in the complex phenomenon of transnational fascism, yet there were different ways in which the fascist movements used this symbol. As Italian Fascism has reached the stage of the exercise of power (its fourth stage according to Paxton’s categorization), the position of the fascist veterans within the Italian regime could not be simply copied and transferred by still-growing fascist movements in other European countries. These other fascist movements, often newly born (still in the first or second stage of Paxton’s model), had two options: either mimicking the old mythical role of the veterans in the rise of Italian Fascism —albeit a decade later and adapted to their own domestic national environments—; or developing an idiosyncratic model for the veterans’ mobilization, in order to destroy the left, suppress democracy, and pursue ultranationalistic aims. As we will see, these contemporary European fascist movements chose the second option—the development of a self-produced model—, even if they could not completely ignore the Italian example. In the early 1930s, historical conditions in countries such as Spain, Germany and —to a considerably lesser extent— France, seemed to present an opportunity for the destruction of the liberal order, similar to the Italian context of 1919-1922. But in the early 1930s, it was not historically possible for the veterans to exert the role they had played in the Italian fascist reaction. In the Spanish case, there were no veterans of the Great War. For the German and French societies, the war experience, the frustrations of the demobilization, the culture

of war, and other postwar elements that Italian Fascism had capitalized on, lay far in the past. How then would they employ the symbol of the veteran? Next, I will go deeper into the cases of Spain and France. There, the anti-democratic reaction—fascism included—was still unsuccessful, and veteran politics partially conditioned this failure.

Before delving into the specifics, a brief exploration of peripheral European fascist movements during the early 1930s is needed. This will allow us to make a preliminary assessment of the veterans’ role in transnational fascism at that time. New fascist parties that were built neither on the myth of the fascist veterans, nor on the direct exploitation of the First World War experience, appeared in Europe. In Britain, the financial crisis had culminated in the abandonment of the gold standard in September 1931. Oswald Mosley, an aristocratic British ex-serviceman, founded the British Union of Fascists (BUF) after a visit to Mussolini’s Italy. The party would receive secret financial support from Fascist Italy. As Mosley’s chief preoccupation was Britain’s economic and imperial decline, his main sources of inspiration were fascist Corporatism and the fascist potential to rally the youth against the ‘Old Gang’ of decadent politicians. Although he was a veteran and his movement attracted some ex-officers, Mosley’s thought was not focused on the war experience. Rather, the motivation of his followers was to avoid a new European massacre. In the BUF program, the attention to ex-servicemen was marginal.79 At the eastern fringe of Europe, in Romania, the Iron Guard was created in 1931 by Corneliu Zelea Codreanu based on the previous Legion of the Archangel Michael. Yet, Codreanu had not been a soldier during the Great War and the Romanian veterans were not the main constituency for Romanian fascism. Religious and patriotic mysticism, as well as anti-Semitism and the mobilization of the youth, were the key features of the Romanian fascist movement.80 It is true that the BUF and the Iron Guard, as well as several other minor fascist organizations in other European countries, remained somewhat marginal. These movements demonstrate, however, that the war veterans—either in membership and

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organizational terms or in the discursive and symbolic sphere—were not essential for the foundation of a fascist movement.

**Spain and Falange Española**

It is interesting to see how the creators of Spanish fascism compensated for the absence of veteran organizations and the inexistence of a Spanish veteran mystic. In Spain, the authoritarian dictatorship of Primo de Rivera had collapsed in 1929. In April 1931 the king Alfonso XIII renounced the throne, and the democratic Second Republic was established amidst the enthusiasm of a great part of the middle and working classes. Very soon, however, while the state tried to implement profound social and economic reforms, monarchists and traditionalists reorganized their opposition to democracy. At the beginning of this process, Catholic fundamentalism was the mobilizing force against the secular Republic. Many military officers were involved in anti-republican activities, but as a report sent to Mussolini in March 1930 stated, Spanish NCOs and troops were absolutely outside of politics. In this context, small fascist groupings appeared. In October 1931, the *Juntas de Ofensiva Nacional Sindicalista* (JONS) were founded, adapting fascist and national-socialist concepts into the Spanish environment. This group was the result of a fusion between certain ultraconservative Castilian organizations—led by the Catholic propagandist Onésimo Redondo—, and the more radical group of the review *La Conquista del Estado*, represented by Ramiro Ledesma Ramos—a student inspired by Italian Fascism. Ledesma Ramos had collaborated with the intellectual Ernesto Giménez Caballero, whose writings had become increasingly political after his trip through Italy in 1928.

The promoters of Spanish Fascism adopted a set of attitudes and ideas rooted in the Italian and German experiences. While Giménez Caballero, profoundly inspired by the imperial myth of Rome, worked to produce an abstract, Catholic ‘general theory of

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Fascism’, 83 Ledesma Ramos was more concerned about making a ‘national revolution’ (revolución nacional), and Onésimo Redondo exalted the use of violence for counter-revolutionary purposes. Ledesma Ramos despised the peaceful ‘electoral revolution that had brought about the Second Republic because it had lacked ‘blood’ and ‘audacity’. 84 Ledesma Ramos—who studied German philosophy, particularly Heidegger—seemed to echo in the Spanish context the opinion once held by Jünger regarding the 1918 German revolution, and in all probability, had read some of Jünger’s works. 85 There were no Spanish front soldiers to make the national revolution, though, and Ledesma Ramos rejected ‘pseudofascist’ organizations like the civic guards. Therefore, he turned wholeheartedly to the myth of the youth, and to the exaltation of violence. Even if he recognised that in Spain there was no communist threat, his appeal to the Spanish youth implied advocating a ‘combative conscience, a warrior spirit, assault spirit’. Spanish young men would give way to ‘combat, to heroism and to war sacrifice’. 86

In spite of this kind of discourse, the groups of Spanish fascists remained small. The anti-democratic threat growing in Spain during 1931 and 1932 took the shape of a more traditional military plot, and maintained an essentially Catholic and conservative inspiration, even if Mussolini promised support to its leaders. 87 In Spain, the main paramilitary potential was that of the traditionalists—the Carlist Requeté—, rooted in the memory of the nineteenth-century dynastic civil wars. After the failure of General Sanjurjo coup d’état in August 1932, the Republic enjoyed some months of political stability, and the Catholic opposition assumed a legalist posture. Yet, the rightist paramilitary agitation and social unrest, including armed insurrections of the revolutionary left, thwarted a more permanent stabilization. Nonetheless, it was Hitler’s seizure of power in Germany that most encouraged the political right during 1933. Over the course of this year, Spanish anti-republican politicians and intellectuals observed

83 Ernesto Giménez Caballero, La nueva catolicidad. Teoría general sobre el Fascismo en Europa: en España, Madrid, 1933.
84 (‘sangre’, ‘audacia’) Ramiro Ledesma Ramos, ¡Hay que hacer la revolución hispánica!, Madrid, 1931, p. 18.
85 Im Stahlgewittern was translated into Spanish and published in Spain in 1930: Ernest [sic] Jünger, Tempestades de Acero, Barcelona, 1930. In Giménez Caballero’s intellectual circles it was known that Jünger developed the ‘idea of the “warrior” as a “hero”, who should be the “leader of the nation”’ (‘desarrollar la idea del guerrero como “héroe”, el cual debe ser “jefe de la nación”’): see R. Kaltofen, ‘La literatura alemana en 1931’, La Gaceta Literaria (Madrid), 1 August 1931.
87 Eduardo González Calleja, Contrarrevolucionarios, p. 118.
and praised the new Nazi Germany, meanwhile, they prepared the recovery of the Spanish right in the elections of November 1933.

In October 1933, José Antonio Primo de Rivera—the son of the deceased ex-dictator—, after a personal visit to Mussolini in Rome, created the Falange Española—a(nother fascist party. A set of journalists and writers—Giménez Caballero and Sánchez Mazas among them—constituted the entourage of Primo de Rivera, and designed the Falangist aesthetics through symbols, hymns and rhetoric that were mainly inspired in Italian Fascism. The Falange directly sought supporters among bourgeois students, and among the working class, employing violent speeches about ‘fists and guns’. It was a rhetoric full of references to military and religious topics. However, no veteran ‘mystique’ appeared, not even referring to the war experience of Morocco. This element was not necessary for Spanish fascism. As a Spanish book about Italian Fascism suggested, the veterans—particularly ex-officers—had been important in the origins of the movement. However, many of the members of the squadre—it was argued—had been ‘younger than twenty years old’. This fact demonstrated that no impediment existed for the emergence of a fascist movement if similar political circumstances concurred. Only ‘moral factors’ were needed: ‘vigour, audacity, spirit of sacrifice, submission to a discipline of iron, patriotism, desperation’.

As this example demonstrates, the ethos of the fascist paramilitary fighters, having roots in the symbolic appropriation of the anti-Bolshevik veteran, had been transferred to Spain, as part of a long and wide circulation throughout Europe.

For the increasingly fascistized monarchist sectors, represented by the party Renovación Española and the review Acción Española, the lack of war veterans to achieve the conquest of the state had to be compensated as well. As the leader José Calvo Sotelo wrote in February 1933, Italy, Germany, Portugal and Poland had been able to get rid of Parliamentarianism thanks to a ‘visceral factor: the war veterans’.
veterans were a ‘mass, and also a spirit, capable of everything, even dying while killing, against the enemy of the Fatherland, either external or internal’. Calvo Sotelo argued that Spain had lacked excombatientes until 1931, when the Second Republic had started —according to him— to victimize the people. Now, organized ‘in phalanxes, in disciplined and courageous human columns, these outraged Spaniards would be, in Calvo Sotelo’s words, the combatants necessary to conquer the state against democracy and Marxism.\(^93\) It is crucial to note that Calvo Sotelo had visited Fascist Italy in the same month, trying to obtain financial support from Mussolini and Italo Balbo; hereafter, he wrote press articles exalting Fascism.\(^94\)

It was the Catholic political option that gathered the greatest number of parliamentary seats in the elections of November 1933; the fascist and monarchist tickets obtained poor results, even if Primo de Rivera and Calvo Sotelo were elected to the Parliament. The subsequent trajectory of Falange was marked by its fusion with the JONS in February 1934, but the resulting party Falange Española de las JONS was no more successful. Even so, the diffusion of fascist newspapers inaugurated a spiral of street violence. By September 1934, a report written for the fascist regime by an Italian observer said that the falangist action squads numbered around 6,000 members, including some veterans of the Moroccan war.\(^95\) (The poet and veteran of the Morocco war Luys Santamarina became leader of the Catalan Falange). The Spanish political left was on the defensive, since a broader process of fascistization and paramilitarization of the Spanish political right was taking place. The socialist insurrection of Asturias in October 1934 must be understood in this context. To crush this revolutionary attempt, the Spanish army, with its anti-democratic, ‘Africanist’ officers and generals (i.e.: Franco) intervened. Thus, rather than the young Spanish fascists —groups of combat-inexperienced employees, practitioners and students who assisted the army during the repression—, it was the military who were viewed by the upper social classes as the

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\(^{93}\) (‘un factor visceral: los excombatientes’, ‘son una masa y también un espíritu, capaz de todo, incluso de morir matando, frente al enemigo de la Patria, sea externo o interno’, ‘en falanges, en haces humanos disciplinados y aguerridos’) Speech of José Calvo Sotelo, quoted by Miguel Herrero García, ‘Actividades Culturales’, Acción Española (Madrid), 1 March 1933, pp. 654-655. It should be noticed that the Spanish word haces, plural of haz, is the most direct translation of the Italian fasci.

\(^{94}\) Eduardo González Calleja, Contra revolucionarios, pp. 119-120; Alfonso Bullón de Mendoza, José Calvo Sotelo, Barcelona, Ariel, 2004, pp. 382-384.

\(^{95}\) Eduardo González Calleja, Contra revolucionarios, p. 222.
exceptional recourse to neutralise the left and eventually dissolve the Second Republic. 96

France and the Croix de Feu

The Third French Republic was a far more solid democratic regime than the Second Spanish Republic or the German Republic of Weimar. In the early 1930s, therefore, the Third French Republic was not threatened by any anti-republican military or paramilitary plots, as was the case in Spain. France did not witness the rise of any powerful fascist movement as had happened in Germany. Physical violence did not significantly characterize French politics, at least until 1934. 97 Nevertheless, fascism remained a latent force inside French politics at that time. Taking into account the relevance of the veteran myth among the French fascist groups of the 1920s, it is interesting to observe certain veteran discourses and organizations of the early 1930s — namely the Croix de Feu and its veteran ‘mystique’— which were seen as fascist by many contemporaries and are considered as such by some historians today.

Historians have extensively debated the question as to whether the Croix de Feu was a fascist organization, as part of the scholarly discussions about the existence and importance of French fascism. 98 The patent lack of consensus is mainly due to the difficulty of employing ‘fascism’ as a label to statically categorize and classify political phenomena. 99 Furthermore, in the case of the Croix de Feu, the ambiguity about its fascist nature was characteristic of the movement since the beginning, and it can be argued that this ambiguity was one of the keys to its success. Here, I will point out how the veteran element was a fundamental part of the vagueness of the Croix de Feu as a fascist movement, and I will describe its process of radicalization.

The Croix de Feu was created as an association for French decorated veterans in 1927, but its origins cannot be understood without taking into account precedents like

the *Faisceau*. Indeed, the patron of the original cell of the *Croix de Feu*, François Coty, a rich entrepreneur and director of the journal *Le Figaro*, had previously backed Valois’ party. Marcel Bucard, a war veteran organizer of the *Faisceau* paramilitary branch, was also involved in the creation of the *Croix de Feu*. Another of its principal leaders, Maurice Genay, was a military officer of the *Jeunesses Patriotes*. The first president of the *Croix de Feu*, Maurice d’Hartoy, a member of the *Association des Écrivains Combattants*, maintained a rather conservative agenda. But his group soon provoked accusations of ‘fascism’ from the left. This is scarcely surprising, since even the emblem of the association was charged with ambiguity: a skull with flames —recalling the *arditi* symbology— on top of a cross with swords typical of the French war medals (Image 27). In the beginning, the organization grew very slowly, gathering support among the Parisian middle class, the military, and aristocrats like Joseph Pozzo di Borgo. The Colonel François de La Rocque, an officer who had served for an extended period in Morocco, entered these circles in 1929. As the moderate d’Hartoy lost the support of François Coty, Maurice Genay and La Rocque gained the control of the association.  

![Image 40: The Croix de Feu emblem](Image 40)

Can the *Croix de Feu* be considered a fascist organization? The answer largely depends on the conceptualization of fascism in use. If we consider that a certain style of self-representation that enhanced the identity of the veteran was characteristic of the origin

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of fascism, the *Croix de Feu* might be considered as fascist movement, though its discourse simultaneously maintained more conservative elements. In the first manifesto of the *Croix de Feu*, published in the first issue of their journal *Le Flambeau*, they exalted the spirit of comradeship and discipline to fight against the internal enemy; they wanted to be a ‘great anti-revolutionary and anti-defeatist force’. Yet there were no calls for the veterans to seize power, nor to impose a veteran government. Their own position regarding Fascism was unclear. They claimed to be ‘fascists’ if this epithet meant to ‘defend the honour and prosperity of their beloved country’, to be ‘supporters of order and discipline’, and enemies of ‘vain agitations’. At the same time, they plainly denied being ‘fascists’ if that implied being ‘supporters of the brutal repression, […] and of the perpetual militarisation of the nation’. Another intermediate stance was that despite their readiness to ‘civic’ defensive action, there was no incitation to violent aggression.\(^\text{101}\)

If we assume a definition of fascism that stresses its transnational nature, and gives value to the transfers, entanglements and contacts, an ambiguous image of the *Croix de Feu* also emerges. It is important to note that—as far as we know—the *Croix de Feu* did not establish direct contact with the Italian fascists. La Rocque publicly disavowed those in France who turned towards Mussolini, and he argued that the French culture and thought were rich enough to render unnecessary the borrowing of ‘expressions and ways of doing’ from the others.\(^\text{102}\) The main ideological inspiration for La Rocque was the French army general Lyautey who, in 1891, had written an essay about the social role of the officer.\(^\text{103}\) In 1930, *Croix de Feu* members travelled to Italy to participate in a ceremony for the Unknown Soldier, but this was an unexceptional activity done together with many other veteran associations, not to establish political relations.\(^\text{104}\) However, it has been demonstrated that *Croix de Feu* members were interested in learning fascist practices.\(^\text{105}\) Even though the *Croix de Feu* tried to accentuate its purely French nature, Italian Fascism undoubtedly was a secondary fount of inspiration.


\(^{103}\) Sean Kennedy, *Reconciling France*, p. 31.


\(^{105}\) See Kevin Passmore, ‘L’historiographie du “fascisme” en France’, p. 496.
Historical circumstances prevented the collusion of the *Croix de Feu* with the international network of fascist veterans, but the league did represent a fascist threat within France. As we saw earlier, the radicalization of the *Croix de Feu* was mainly due to the perception of the German menace embodied by the *Stahlhelm*. Later, the rise of Hitler reinforced these fears. Yet a growing anti-pacifism, anti-communism and xenophobia characterized the association from 1931, when La Rocque consolidated his leadership and took over the presidency. The organization grew substantially (28,903 members in January 1933), and developed its own personality, the so-called *Croix de Feu* ‘mystique’, based on civic parades and patriotic celebrations. Much like the original Italian fascist movement or even the *Stahlhelm*, the *Croix de Feu* became open to non-combatants, such as sons of the members. From the end of 1933, the anti-parliamentarian agitation increased, so that at the beginning of February 1934, the *Croix de Feu* was willing and ready to join the violent demonstrations that were going to jeopardize the stability of the Third Republic.

In general, the radicalization of the *Croix de Feu* was part of a broader process: the beginning of the ‘second wave’ of French fascism.\(^{106}\) If the *Croix de Feu* was not fascist in and of itself, it contained many elements (persons, entities, ideas, symbols, etc.) that either were entangled with French fascism, or could easily approach it in a process of fascistization. The scenario for such an evolution was possible after the left organized a new *Cartel des Gauches*, and won the elections of June 1932. The veteran associations did not welcome this political change, radicalizing their stance against Herriot’s government, as he attempted to reform the pensions system.\(^{107}\) This government fell within six months. French politics started a phase of instability and ineffectiveness. Thus, in 1933 new fascist organizations appeared: the *Francistes* created by Marcel Bucard, the Green shirts of Henry Dorgères, and *Solidarité Française*, founded by François Coty. Personal and ideological continuities existed between these groups and the previous ones. For example, the persistence of the veteran ‘mystique’, not exclusive to the *Croix de Feu*. Paramilitarism and French fascism, however, now had another source of inspiration outside of Mussolini: Nazi Germany.

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The Third Reich

The process by which the Nazis seized power and imposed a totalitarian dictatorship in Germany is one of the most investigated topics in modern European history. Accordingly, questions such as the role of the Stahlhelm in the last years of the Nazi struggle for power (Kampfzeit), the use of the front soldiers symbol in Nazi propaganda before and after 1933, or the fate of the German veteran organizations within the Third Reich, have been widely studied.\footnote{Among others, Volker R. Berghahn, \textit{Der Stahlhelm}; James M. Diehl, ‘Victors or Victims? Disabled Veterans in the Third Reich’, \textit{The Journal of Modern History}, 59, 4 (1987), pp. 705-736; Niels Löffelbein, \textit{Ehrenbürger der Nation}.} For this reason, the process of Nazification of the German veterans that took place between 1931 and 1934 will be succinctly described here. The main purpose of this section is to show the relevance of the veterans in ensuring an important role for Italian Fascism in this process, as well as the high level of entanglement and the numerous cross-border contacts that marked the consolidation of the Nazi dictatorship and its model of veteran politics.

The rise of the NSDAP in Germany implied the assimilation of other rightist sectors into the Nazi movement, including war veteran organizations. As we have seen, the Stahlhelm was one of the spearheads of the anti-republican reaction during the early 1930s; it was a competitor of the NSDAP. In October 1931, the rally of Bad Harzburg, organized by the German nationalists together with the Nazis, presented an allegedly united national front against Weimar. The Stahlhelm, the DNVP, the NSDAP and other ‘patriotic’ organizations would participate. Yet this attempt was a failure, as the uncooperative attitude of Hitler only deepened the existing divisions.\footnote{Larry Eugene Jones, ‘Nationalists, Nazis, and the Assault against Weimar: Revisiting the Harzburg Rally of October 1931’, \textit{German Studies Review}, 29, 3 (2006), pp. 483-494.} Hitler was not willing to establish an alliance. As a consequence of this division, the Stahlhelm nominated its leader Theodor Duesterberg as a candidate for the two-rounds presidential election of March-April 1932, in competition with Hitler and Hindenburg. While the conservative Hindenburg was re-elected as president, and the second-ranked Hitler obtained more than 13 millions votes; Duesterberg was defeated in the first round, with roughly 2.5 million votes —even less than the communist candidate Ernst Thälmann. When it was disclosed that Duesterberg had Jewish ancestors, this völkisch veteran leader was completely discredited. Rabidly attacked by the Nazis, the Stahlhelm reinforced its ties with the DNVP, but its political agency decreased.\footnote{Volker R. Berghahn, \textit{Der Stahlhelm}, pp. 187-229.}
Furthermore, in the struggle to gain supporters, the NSDAP began to win out at the expense of the Stahlhelm. Apart from the aggressive attitude of the SA towards the Stahlhelm, the main cause for this membership transfer was the Stahlhelm’s doctrinal rigidity.\(^{111}\) The Stahlhelm restrictive concept of Frontgemeinschaft (Front Community) had less political success than the Nazi ideal of Volksgemeinschaft (National Community).\(^{112}\) As the Stahlhelm was essentially an organization of war-experienced men, the younger generation had much less prominence within the Stahlhelm than within the Nazi movement. As a result, many young men abandoned the veteran organization to join the more attractive Nazi movement. During these years, the massive growth of the SA was parallel to the sustained decline of the Jungstahlhelm organization.\(^{113}\) Young people without war experience, inspired by the myth of the heroic front soldier, flocked to the SA, where more than 70% of the organizers were ex-soldiers, particularly ex-officers.

The SA was sociologically similar to the fascist squadre, but the input of veterans in the SA was much more reduced. As Sven Reichardt’s comparative research on the fascist combat-organizations has shown, the Italian squadristi of 1921-1922 and the German SA-men of 1930-1932 were almost identical in their average age, despite a historical gap of a decade between both phenomena.\(^{114}\) In the early 1930s, the German veterans were perhaps too old (between 30 and 40 years old) to be involved in political street fighting; their proclivity to join the NSDAP was not greater either, since the average age of the NSDAP members was only a few years older than that of the SA. It is true that Nazism was a product of the Great War, and that many of its main leaders had fought at the front. Even many Stahlhelm members and German veterans probably voted for Hitler and his party. But the majority of Nazis were younger people raised in the home-front, therefore marked by the patriotic propaganda and often by the loss in combat of a father or brother, not by actual soldierly experience. By 1933, most probably, the mass-basis of the Nazi movement was not predominantly composed of war veterans. Membership of these violent political groups, therefore, was not primarily


\(^{114}\) Sven Reichardt, Faschistische Kampfbünde, pp. 346-389; Arndt Weinrich, Der Weltkrieg als Erzieher.
determined by the combat experience, but by myths about such experiences, like the myth of the fascist veteran.

Taking into account these facts, the self-representation of the NSDAP as a front-soldiers movement during the early 1930s should be understood above all as a propagandistic strategy, which responded to the need to widen the party’s mass support during the numerous elections of this period. The sudden, not to say opportunistic, rise of the Nazis’ veterans-related activities and policies during the early 1930s sharply contrasts with the limited importance that this question had within the NSDAP before 1929. Hitler’s crafted image as a self-sacrificing disabled front soldier was systematically employed for the first time during the presidential elections of 1932, but it was swiftly abandoned after Hitler’s seizure of power.\footnote{Cf. Niels Löffelbein, \textit{Ehrenbürger der Nation}, pp. 126-131.} Certainly, the effects of the insistent appeals to the front soldiers to vote for Hitler, through electoral posters for example, should not be underestimated. Due to this campaign, not only an indeterminate number of ex-combatants and disabled veterans were converted into Nazis, but also a characteristically Nazi political discourse about the war veterans, and an original Nazi policy for war victims, slowly took shape. However, this was a protracted process that gained momentum only after 1933, and the antecedent of Italian Fascism was the original matrix of it, as I will demonstrate.

Before 1933, the Nazis were very cautious in their contacts and relationship with Italy, as being publicly identified with Fascism would jeopardize the NSDAP’s rise to power. The French authorities feared an agreement between Italy and the Nazis, for such an understanding would be clearly detrimental for France.\footnote{MAE-AD, Direction des Affaires Politiques et Commerciales, Politique, 329, Italie-Alemagne.} In fact, just like Mussolini and Hitler, many fascists and Nazis showed mutual sympathy. They were prospective allies, but premature fraternization might be problematic. Hence, the direct influence and contacts between the SA and the Italian fascists were sparse and not encouraged by the NSDAP leadership.\footnote{Sven Reichardt, \textit{Faschistische Kampfbünde}, p. 17.} At the end of 1931, the head of the NSDAP Foreign Service (\textit{Auslandsabteilung}) Hans Nieland travelled to Italy.\footnote{MAE-AD, Direction des Affaires Politiques et Commerciales, Politique, 330, Italie-Alemagne, pp. 144-146.} The objective was to bring the German Nazi sympathisers in Italy under the party’s control. The subsequent establishment of a NSDAP organization in Italy, which was not devoid of internal controversies, was principally motivated by the desire to stop uncontrolled

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\footnote{Cf. Niels Löffelbein, \textit{Ehrenbürger der Nation}, pp. 126-131.}
\footnote{MAE-AD, Direction des Affaires Politiques et Commerciales, Politique, 329, Italie-Alemagne.}
\footnote{Sven Reichardt, \textit{Faschistische Kampfbünde}, p. 17.}
\footnote{MAE-AD, Direction des Affaires Politiques et Commerciales, Politique, 330, Italie-Alemagne, pp. 144-146.}
NSDAP members to come to Italy.\textsuperscript{119} Hitler wished to meet Mussolini, but this visit was not possible yet. Although it was difficult to deny the lure of Italian Fascism among the Nazis, direct and overtly political contacts and transfers encountered important strategic obstacles.

In contrast, during the final crisis of the Weimar republic, an elite of nationalist war veterans furthered the introduction the fascist model of politics into Germany. The transfer of political ideology in this direction was constant. \textit{Stahlhelm} members did not conceal their admiration for Mussolini. Franz Seldte and other \textit{Stahlhelm} leaders maintained contacts with the \textit{Duce}, who they visited in Rome, for example, on the occasion of the \textit{Reale Accademia d’Italia} congress in April 1932; they sent him an adulatory and thankful message while crossing the border back into Germany.\textsuperscript{120} In April 1932, the \textit{Stahlhelm} leader Heinrich Mahnken reported his research findings on the military education of the Italian youth, and on the methods of fascist politics. He affirmed that the Italian model had an important meaning for the \textit{Stahlhelm}, regarding not only ‘fundamental concepts but also immediate practical measures’.\textsuperscript{121} Particularly, on the basis of the Italian example, Mahnken suggested that the NSDAP should mobilize the German students. Even if the Nazis were reluctant to appear as debtors of Italian Fascism, the permeability of the boundaries between the NSDAP and the Fascist-inspired \textit{Stahlhelm} contributed to the adoption of fascist commodities by the Nazis.

Linked to the nationalist veteran groups, certain anti-republican personalities set up cultural institutions in order to systematize the study of Italian Fascism, and these Fascist-friendly circles included several notable or would-be Nazis. In December 1931, the Society for the Study of Fascism (\textit{Gesellschaft zum Studium des Faschismus}) was created. Its president was Charles Eduard, Duke of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha, who had lost his nobility with the arrival of Weimar, and had been involved in anti-republican, paramilitary activity. The director of this cultural society was the Major Waldemar Pabst, one of the culprits of the Liebknecht and Luxemburg killings, and later an


\textsuperscript{120} ACS, SPD, CO, 510.977, ‘Germania. Associazione Combattentistica degli Elmi d’Acciaio (Stahlhelm)’.

\textsuperscript{121} (‘grundsätzliche Auffassungen wie für sofortige praktische Massnahmen’) Letter from Landesverband Westmark (Mahnken) (6 April 1932), BArch (Berlin), R 72/28.
organizer of the Austrian Heimwehr. The Gesellschaft aimed to investigate the fascist model of state and economy, in order to offer this knowledge ‘to the future leaders of the coming Germany’. The membership, initially limited to 100 people, was composed of several Stahlhelm leaders, ex-officers and generals, including Theodor Duesterberg, the Nazi Hermann Göring, the erstwhile Freikorps leaders Wilhelm Faupel and Rüdiger von der Goltz, and the militaristic writer Franz Schauwecker. The lectures that this group held were also joined and promoted by Renzetti, whose ‘Italian Reports’ publicized Fascism among the Germans at the time. Through his constant contacts with the Nazis and the Stahlhelm, Renzetti worked to realise his project of ‘transforming the Stahlhelm into Hitler’s party militia’. Renzetti’s activity contributed to the amalgamation of the German anti-republican forces that favoured the NSDAP, while laying the foundations for a future Italian-German alliance after the imminent arrival of the Third Reich.

After Hitler was nominated Chancellor on 30 January 1933, the Nazi veterans-related politics, discourses and representations experienced a remarkable acceleration. In the first Nazi government, Franz Seldte was appointed Ministry of Labour. Stahlhelm members enthusiastically saluted Hitler’s government, and collaborated with the SA in political manoeuvres to entrench the Nazis in power. The Third Reich was presented as inheriting the spirit of the front; it was declared that ‘the right of the front soldiers’ would be enforced, that the ‘gratitude of the fatherland’ owed to the former soldiers would be finally a reality. The Nazi project of transforming the disabled veterans into the ‘First Citizens of the State’, reinforced by Strasser through the NSDAP sections, resulted in the creation of the National Socialist War Victims’ Care organization, Nationalsozialistische Kriegsopfersversorgung (NSKOV), in July 1933. The NSKOV undertook the militarization of the disabled veteran politics, and strived to mobilize the veterans, through propaganda rallies and meetings.

123 (‘den Führern des kommenden Deutschland zur Verfügung zu stellen’) BArch (Berlin), R 72/260, pp. 118-119, 127-129, 130, 131, 139, 163-170.
126 Renzo de Felice, Mussolini e Hitler, pp. 211-258.
127 Volker R. Berghahn, Der Stahlhelm, pp. 250-254.
Fascist Italy was an inspiration for the NSKOV project. In February 1933, the Nazi review for disabled veterans, *Deutsche Kriegsopferversorgung*, devoted a long article describing the Italian war-pensions law. Apart from denigrating the socialist and pacifist approach to the war victims’ care, the Nazis argued that the legislation for disabled veterans reflected the national spirit of each country. In Italy, Mussolini had introduced legislative innovations that were praised by the Nazis; namely, the better consideration of the disabilities caused by service on the front.129 The Italian disabled veterans of the ANMIG embraced these positive comments with enthusiasm. When Hermann Göring, Ministry of Aviation of the Third Reich, made an official trip to Italy in April 1933, he also visited the *Casa Madre del Mutilato* in Rome. Shortly after, another article in the NSKOV review described these friendly contacts, and exalted ‘the spiritual bond’ of Mussolini with the disabled veterans.130 This ambience of Italian-German veterans’ understanding went along with the private and public display of friendship between Hitler and Mussolini, and with the numerous trips by Nazis to directly study Fascist Italy.131

Meanwhile, in Germany the war veterans’ organizations were going through a process of Nazification, which recalls the fascistization of the ANC a decade before. The Nazi exaltation of the *Frontsoldaten* concealed the actual subjugation of the German veterans: new medals and public homage went hand in hand with the destruction of liberties and diversity. These ‘contradictory signs’ led the Jewish veterans of the *Reichsbund jüdischer Frontsoldaten* to wrongly think that they could continue to live their lives without fear under Nazism.132 The *Stahlhelm* was compelled to relinquish its influence to the benefit of the SA, and Seldte placed the organization under the control of Hitler. The accusation that the *Stahlhelm* was admitting ‘enemies of the NSDAP, masons, half-Jews’ as new members only helped Nazification.133 Röhm, the leader of the SA, was expanding its paramilitary power,134 while the Nazis monopolized, step by step, the symbol of the front soldier. In December 1933, during a

129 Alfred Dick, ‘Fascismus und Kriegsopfer’, *Deutsche Kriegsopferversorgung. Monatschrift* (Munich), num. 5 (Februar 1933).
133 (‘Gegner der NSDAP, Freimaurer, Halbjuden’) Information from the Oberster SA Führung in Munich (15 December 1933), BArch (Berlin), NS 6/215, sheets 69-71.
134 Eleanor Hancock, *Ernst Röhm*, pp. 132-140.
talk to the diplomatic corps, Röhm declared that ‘the roots of National Socialism lay in the trenches of the Great War’.\(^{135}\) By 1934, this brutal way of understanding and representing the war experience was deeply ingrained in the minds of many Nazi veterans, as the collection of early Nazis’ autobiographies assembled that year by Theodor Abel demonstrates.\(^{136}\) Despite some resistance from the Stahlhelm members to losing their particular identity, the Nazification of discourses and organizations was unrelenting. In early 1934, the SA brown shirt replaced the green-grey Stahlhelm uniform. In April 1934, the Stahlhelm was transformed into the National Socialist German Front Soldiers Association (Stahlhelm) (Der National-Sozialistische Deutsche Frontkämpferbund – Stahlhelm).\(^ {137}\) In short, the German veterans’ Nazification process was swifter, deeper and farther-reaching than the Italian veterans’ fascistization.

What is most interesting here is to acknowledge the role that the Nazis bestowed on the German veterans in the realm of international relations. In this question, the Nazification of discourses and organizations had the same mid-term purpose that fascistization in Italy: utilizing the veterans as an instrument for the dictatorship’s foreign policy. The Third Reich yearning for ‘vital space’ (Lebensraum), Nazi militarism and imperialism, and Hitler’s own ideology, made the probabilities of war against France very high, even if the Third Reich first needed to consolidate within Germany, and then rebuild a powerful army. The growing German menace, threatening to absorb Austria as one of the first steps towards hegemony in Europe, frightened her Italian ideological ally. Hitler and Mussolini, in their first meeting of Venice in June 1934, did not reach any agreement. Finding a balance of power in Europe would be very difficult. So, in order to gain time for rearmament, Hitler’s official attitude was that of striving for European peace. The discourse of peace helped the Nazis to succeed in the German elections of November 1933, and therefore allowed Hitler to obtain dictatorial powers. Talking about peace was useful against the French, when a plebiscite about the future of the Saar region as either a province of Germany or a part of France took place in January 1935.\(^ {138}\)

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\(^ {137}\) Volker R. Berghahn, Der Stahlhelm, p. 269.

Why were the veterans the instrument of this peace strategy? This choice can be better understood by taking into account transnational factors. For these dynamics of veteran rapprochement could not have worked without the turning point of French politics on 6 February 1934. As is well known, the evening of this day was marked by a massive demonstration by the French conservative veterans (mainly UNC) and extreme right groups (including the Croix de Feu) on the Place de la Concorde in Paris, ending in a violent attempt to invade the French Parliament. In the clashes that ensued, fourteen protesters died.\footnote{Chris Millington, ‘February 6, 1934: The Veterans’ Riot’, French historical studies, 33, 4 (2010), pp. 545-572.} Through the German embassy in Paris, the Nazis were aware of the dramatic irruption of the French veterans into politics. That month, Oberlindober argued for the first time about the convenience of the mutual understanding among veterans from different countries.\footnote{Holger Skor, ‘Brücken über den Rhein’. Frankreich in der Wahrnehmung und Propaganda des Dritten Reiches, 1933-1939, Essen, Klartext Verlag, 2011, pp. 203-277; Niels Löffelbein, Ehrenbürger der Nation, pp. 364-371.}

Yet to start these contacts, the NSDAP needed to complete the monopolization of German veteran politics, in which Röhm and the SA had attained too much independent leverage. Hitler’s need to maintain internal order, and to tighten ties with the German army, led to the violent purge of the SA during the Night of the Long Knives (30 June – 2 July 1934), including the assassination of Röhm. Shortly after, Hitler’s Deputy Führer Rudolph Hess, during a speech in Königsberg, invoked the allegedly proverbial discipline and loyalty of the veterans who, on that basis, had complied with Hitler’s ruthless measures. Moreover, Hess also made an appeal for peace ‘to the front soldiers of the whole world’. He argued that the front fighters (Frontkämpfern) would be the only group able to establish peace, the ‘peace of the front soldiers’.\footnote{‘zu den Frontkämpfern der ganzen Welt’, ‘der Frieden der Frontsoldaten’) Der Stahlhelm, 15 July 1934; Völkischer Beobachter, 10 July 1934.} From the summer of 1934 on, the Nazi Propaganda Ministry would implement this rapprochement. As we will see, all these events were key moments of an important phase of transnational contacts, entanglement and transfers between fascist, national socialist and French veterans.

**The veteran connection Italy-France-Germany**

The series of cross-border contacts among veterans that began in 1934 were a result of the particular historical conjuncture after the establishment of Hitler’s dictatorship. The
new German regime complicated the state of affairs, for Italy was no longer the undisputed lodestar of the European extreme right. Fascist Italy saw that one of its pupils, Nazi Germany, threatened to surpass it. During 1933, debates between those defending the essentially Italian, untransferable nature of Fascism, and those highlighting the necessity to exporting it, came again to the fore. In July 1933, after a long theoretical debate, the Action Committees for the Universality of Rome (Comitati d’Azione per l’Universalità di Roma – CAUR), a kind of fascist international, were created. Eugenio Coselschi, an ex-officer, erstwhile collaborator of D’Annunzio in Fiume, and organizer since 1919 of the small pro-fascist War Volunteers Association (Associazione Volontari di Guerra), was entrusted with the direction of the CAUR. By February 1934, the fascists were striving to enhance the originality of Italian Fascism, underlining the imitative nature of ‘analogous foreign movements’. Yet the attractiveness of Fascist Italy had not decreased; instead, the grandiose propaganda and architectural endeavours of Mussolini, particularly in Rome, blended with the touristic magnetism of the country to bring even more foreign visitors.

If the idea of basing international collaboration in Europe on the war veterans was not new, French veterans now turned to it with renewed interest. André Gervais, a writer, veteran and UF member, was the initiator of these contacts. In early 1933, he had travelled to Germany in order to research the German veteran organizations, thus exploring the general mood for establishing peace-oriented German-French contacts. His conversations with Seldte and other German leaders had only uncovered important obstacles for an understanding. Gervais discovered the troubling reality that the German youth was being systematically told about the allegedly positive values of war. (Gervais also noticed the lack of originality of Hitler’s programme for the veterans). Soon, Gervais’ proposal of furthering contacts with the German republican veteran organizations became absolutely outdated, as Hitler obtained power shortly thereafter. But Gervais did not stop his study trips. At the beginning of 1934, he visited Fascist Italy. After meeting several fascist leaders, he was received by the Duce. The interview was published only two days before the events of 6 February. Mussolini told Gervais

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142 See, for example, several articles in Critica fascista, 1 and 15 February, 1 and 15 March 1933.
144 (‘analoghi movimenti stranieri’) Bruno Corra, ‘L’originale e le copie’, Il Popolo d’Italia, 10 February 1934.
146 André Gervais, La tranchée d’en face. Enquête d’un combattant français chez les combattants allemands, Paris, 1933.
147 Ibidem, pp. 148-149.
that the education of the youth in pacifist values was useless. Asked whether he thought the veterans should contribute to create a kind of ‘European spirit’, Mussolini replied ‘they should, unquestionably!’ And further questioned whether he was partisan of the international collaboration among veterans, Mussolini stated ‘obviously!’.

Mussolini’s support for this veteran connection was not self-motivated, but it encouraged the French veterans’ impulses to engage with the Italian fascists.

The constructed image of the fascist regime and the Duce epitomized the long-standing political desire of French conservative and nationalist sectors, let alone the French fascist groupings. In France, there was an ongoing radicalization towards authoritarianism, and the veteran organizations were not an exception. The events of 6 February were not only a result, but also another catalyst of this process. In their immediate aftermath, Daladier government resigned, and it was replaced by a conservative cabinet headed by Gaston Doumerge. While the 6 February mutiny became a mobilizing myth for the right, the left considered it a kind of coup d’état attempted by French ‘fascism’. In fact, after this political crisis, the veteran associations, and also the Croix de Feu, clearly radicalized their programmes and discourses. In the case of the UNC, new leaders incarnated this trend; Georges Lebecq and Jean Goy endorsed the formation of paramilitary sections—the Action Combattante. Furthermore, now there was another example of ‘national restoration’, that of Germany. The French veterans observed with a certain envy the new Nazi legislation for the German ‘generation du feu’. Yet Italy was the principal referent.

Organizations, direct contacts, and publications were the base for the understanding between French and Italian fascist veterans. Towards mid-February 1934, the monthly review Le Trait d’Union appeared in Italy (Turin), as the organ of the Federal Union in Italy of the Veterans’ Associations (Union Fédérale en Italie des Associations Françaises d’Anciens Combattants). The groups of French veterans who resided in Italy had fused in this single organization, with the aim of maintaining a relationship of ‘comradeship and fraternity’ with the Italian veterans, and thus improving Italian-French relations. As the review’s leading writer, the ex-captain Henry Miraucheaux, made clear from its first issue, this publication highlighted the examples

of ‘national renovation’ that should be the guide to save France. The visit of a group of around 500 French veterans to Fascist Italy definitely strengthened the connection between the French and the Italian fascist veterans. This political-tourism trip took place between the 30 March and the 7 April 1934, including visits to Turin, Rome, Naples, Rome, Venice and Milan. There was also a ‘pilgrimage’ to battlefields of the Carso. André Gervais led this mission, welcomed by fascist veteran leaders such as Carlo Delcroix and Amilcare Rossi. Mussolini received them as well, in a climate of warm comradeship. In the following weeks, as noted in a confidential report sent by the French police in Nice, the ‘manifestations of French-Italian friendship’ in Italy boosted greatly.

Correspondingly, the activities of the fascist veterans in France stepped up. Around the symbolic date of 24 May 1934, fascist ceremonies took place, for example, in Lyon, Metz and Toulouse. Celebrating the Italian intervention recalled the friendship between France and Italy, so leaders of the PNF and the ANC fraternized with the French UF and UNC representatives. The most important rituals were in Paris. There, a homage to the Italian fallen soldiers included igniting the flame dedicated to the French Unknown Soldier at the Arc de Triomphe. Under the cover of a Garibaldian celebration, representatives of the Associazione Volontari di Guerra, and fascists such as the president of the CAUR Eugenio Coselschi were able to express their ‘Italian and fascist enthusiasm’ in the French capital. These public activities developed in a context of rising anti-fascist mobilization of the French working class; leftist counter-demonstrations ended in anti-fascist chanting and shouting, stone throwing, and, in the case of Paris, fights between leftists and policemen. Fears of fascistization were not unfounded.

In June 1934, the French veterans, members of the Italian-based Union Fédérale, organized a congress in Milan. This meeting was intended to be another opportunity to reinforce the Italian-French friendship. Around 300 people participated, joined by prominent fascist veteran leaders, such as Giovanni Baccarini. In his speech,

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152 Le Trait d’Union, March, April 1934; La Nuova Italia. L’Italie Nouvelle (Paris), 12 April 1934; L’Italia grigio-verde, 10 April-5 May 1934.
154 See several reports in AN, F/7, 13465, Italie.
155 (‘entusiasmo italiano e fascista’) La Nuova Italia. L’Italie Nouvelle, 31 May 1934.
156 L’Humanité, 21 May 1934.
the French ex-ambassador Henry de Jouvenel, a pro-fascist journalist, stated that ‘the time of the veterans, which already came to Italy and other countries, is going to come to France’. The fascist-friendly climate of the meeting meant that the expected projection of the 1932 film Les Croix de Bois (based on the homonymous novel of Roland Dorgelès) were suspended because of the anti-German passages of the movie.\(^{157}\)

The relations between French and Nazi veterans were not so easy. At the end of June 1934, the shocking news of the Nazi purge of the SA temporarily chilled the enthusiasm towards Hitler of some French sectors.\(^{158}\) For this reason, they cautiously received the above-mentioned Hess’ suggestion for international veterans meetings. Gustave Hervé was among the few enthusiasts.\(^{159}\) Henri Pichot, whose previous relations with the German republican veterans had been frustrated, understood the contacts with the Nazis as the only way to continue his campaign for peace.\(^{160}\) Yet Pichot still had faith in the League of Nations, and when his first meeting with Oberlindober took place in Baden-Baden, August 1934, there was no agreement. For his part, the UNC leader Jean Goy was more open; he straightforwardly affirmed that a direct German-French veterans’ contact was ‘infinitely desirable’; he said that Hitler’s and Heß’ offers should not be overlooked.\(^{161}\) Finally, during November and December 1934, conversations took place between, on the one hand, Hitler and Oberlindober, and, on the other hand, Goy and Pichot. Regardless of the satisfaction of some, such as Gustave Hervé,\(^ {162}\) French public opinion was divided on the topic of this rapprochement. Many realized that the Nazi propaganda was using the French veterans, and this was an entirely correct perception.\(^ {163}\)

This French-German connection must be put in relation with the French-Italian link that veterans had established. For the French fascists observed this entanglement as the key to European peace. Marcel Bucard, the leader of the Francistes, put it clearly in


\(^{159}\) La Victoire, 10 July 1934.

\(^{160}\) Claire Moreau Trichet, Henri Pichot et l’Allemagne, pp. 145-147.

\(^{161}\) (‘infiniment souhaitable’) Le Petit Journal (Paris), 17 and 18 September 1934; Völkischer Beobachter, 19 September 1934.

\(^{162}\) La Victoire, 2 and 22 December 1934.

an interview published in *Völkischer Beobachter*. According to him, a French-German accord must be reached, and for that, France needed an understanding ally; this was the reason why they strived for an alliance with Italy: on the basis of this alliance, the German-French accord must be born and substantiated.\(^{164}\) Were the veterans realising the imaginary fascist Europe that Mussolini had predicted in 1929?

Undoubtedly, the belief in the imminent consolidation of a kind of peaceful fascist-led international system, based on the mutual understanding between veterans, was a misguided hope. In fact, rather than looking for a triple fascist connection between Italy, France and Germany, the leaders of the pro-fascist French veterans in Italy were trying to consolidate an alliance along traditional lines, namely between the allies of the Great War, Germany remaining as an isolated threat.\(^{165}\) Furthermore, the Nazi coup in Austria and the murder of the chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss disturbed the relations between Germany and both Latin countries. In December 1934, the international fascist conference of Montreux, organized by the CAUR, was a congress of fascist movements’ representatives from different nations, but the Nazis refused to attend it. Although an international commission for the fascist international was created, this project soon declined.\(^{166}\) This would not be the actual mission of the fascist veterans abroad. The ultranationalist agendas of the main European fascist movements excluded an international understanding.

Moreover, the falsity of Mussolini’s and Hitler’s peace discourses became clear at the end of 1934 and during 1935. In Italy, September 1934, important measures were taken to reinforce the citizens’ military education: the avowed aim was to create ‘a military and warlike nation’.\(^{167}\) Mussolini’s verbal threats to Abyssinia followed. The alleged veteran comradeship facilitated these dangerous steps towards war. It is telling the way in which the Franco-Italian agreements of Rome, January 1935, between the French Foreign Minister Pierre Laval and Mussolini, were surrounded by fascist veteran rituals.\(^{168}\) This veterans-praised accord was a French concession faced with Italian imperial aspirations. The French expected to ensure the Italian friendship in the face of the German threat. For the French veterans, the conference of Stresa in April 1935 ‘reigned the old Latin friendship between France and Italy’. Immediately, around

\(^{164}\) (‘Aus dieser Alliance muss der deutsche-französische Akkord geboren und erhärtet werden’) *Völkischer Beobachter*, 30/31 December 1934.


\(^{167}\) (‘nazione militare e guerriera’) *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 20 September 1934.

\(^{168}\) See, for example, *Le Trait d’Union*, num. 1, January 1935.
1,700 French veterans (mainly UNC members) once more visited the fascists in Italy, celebrating their comradeship.169 But the ‘Stresa front’ to contain Germany while giving free rein to Italy would fail.

In Germany, shortly after the incorporation of the Saar into the Third Reich, militarism surfaced again. While the rumours of the Italian preparation for a military attack on Abyssinia circulated, Hitler re-imposed military service in Germany. On this occasion once more, the ideal of international veteran comradeship was an argument for the Nazis to justify their rearmament. Asked during an interview what the reaction of foreign veterans would be, Oberlindober argued that they should accept that their German ‘comrades’ had the same right to security as they had.170 During 1935, the Nazi strategy of talking of peace to foreign veterans continued, and thus the encounters persisted; even the British Legion visited Nazi Germany in July 1935.171 Similarly, over the course of that year, and for the years to come, the contacts between French veterans and Italian fascists continued. If the goal of this relationship was the maintenance of peace, as many French veterans sincerely believed, their expectations would be completely frustrated within months. After the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in October 1935, the French veterans’ Union Fédérale en Italie supported this aggression, and adopted a bitterly critical stance against the sanctions imposed on Italy by the League of Nations.172 In November 1935, the instrumental nature of the Nazi exaltation of the veterans became all too clear when, after Hitler had fully rebuilt a German army, he ordered the dissolution of the Nazified Stahlhelm. Seldte simply obeyed, saying ‘Mission fulfilled!’173

At the end, while the League of Nations was mocked, the hypocritical diplomacy of the veterans only served to the fascist and Nazi interests. It can be said that, by the end of 1935, the myth of the fascist veterans, born in Fascist Italy and largely circulated throughout Europe, reworked and reinforced by Nazism, had fulfilled one of the missions it had in the wider international sphere: preparing the ground for the military expansion of the fascist regimes. In 1929-1930, Mussolini had decided to use the veterans abroad, in order to advance towards a fascist Europe. When a fascist-inspired regime was actually imposed in Germany, the panorama substantially changed. The

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170 (‘Partnern’) Völkischer Beobachter, 19 March 1935.
171 Niels Löffelbein, Ehrenbürger der Nation, pp. 385-393.
172 Le Trait d’Union, num. 11, November 1935.
173 (‘Aufgabe erfüllt!’) Der Stahlhelm, 10 November 1935.
veterans continued to be an instrument in foreign policy, but the Rome-centred project of a fascist Europe had vanished in the advent of the Third Reich. The subsequent veteran diplomacy only served the interest of the fascist powers, and was, in the end, detrimental to the French.

However, the Italian-French veteran friendship was a major source of inspiration for the authoritarian political trends within France. The works of André Gervais, especially his book on the Italian veterans under Fascism, conveyed an extremely positive impression of Fascism. This ideology that was understood as the soul of the veterans. Consequently, Gervais developed his own theories about a kind of French veteran spirit. His ideas were clearly inspired in the Italian example, although he sharply differentiated the French ‘veteran mystic’ from the French ‘fascist mystic’. And yet, French veterans also adopted the cult of the leader. Marshal Pétain, appointed Minister of War after the 6 February 1934, became one of the most acclaimed political figures in the veteran press. Since 1934, the interaction between the veterans’ organizations, such as the UNC, and the French extreme right leagues, including the Croix de Feu and its successor the Parti Social Français, is well known. As has been demonstrated here, this political evolution of the French veterans was rendered possible by the powerful attractiveness of the fascist veteran myth, and by the symbolic appropriation of the veteran that the Italian fascists had successfully implemented since 1921. A misleading belief in a naturally-produced orientation of the war veterans towards Fascism was nourished by multiple contacts with the Italians, yet it was also the key cause of the French veterans’ fascistization.

176 See, for example, Le Trait d’Union, num. 11, December 1934.
177 Chris Millington, From victory to Vichy, pp. 109-138.
Chapter 6
Veterans between Fascism and Anti-Fascism, War and Peace (1935-1940)

From the fascist military invasion of Ethiopia in October 1935 until the Nazi aggression against Poland in September 1939 there was hardly a moment of total peace for Europe. It is not mistaken to state, as some historians do, that the outbreak of the Second World War took place with the beginning of the Ethiopian war.\(^1\) Indeed, armed confrontation in the former Abyssinia did not stop when the Italian troops entered Addis Ababa and Mussolini ‘founded’ the Italian Empire in May 1936.\(^2\) And only two months after this event, the coup d’état of a group of Spanish officers against the Second Republic brought civil war to the Iberian peninsula, which became quickly internationalized. When the Spanish Civil War came to an end in April 1939, Europe was already set on the path towards another great war, which would officially start within a few months. These three sequential wars were the product of different but highly interconnected dynamics driven by fascism. Therefore, the circle of violence that emerged from the end of the Great War and led to a new international armed conflict can be considered closed by 1935-1936. In the previous chapters I have explained the role of the relationship between veterans and fascism in closing this circle.

There are two principal justifications for continuing our analysis beyond this period and into the early 1940s. First, the Ethiopian war allows us to see how the long relationship between Italian Fascism, at the height of its power, and the war veterans reached its peak in organizational and symbolic terms. I will assess whether Italian Fascism successfully perfected a totalitarian definition of its relationship with the veterans in the ideally-fascist context of war, which began with he conflict in Ethiopia and was extended with the war in Spain. As these ‘fascist’ wars amplified the transnational confrontation between fascism and anti-fascism, I will also examine the anti-fascist attempts to break the supposed fascist monopoly of veteran politics in Europe in the second half of the 1930s. At that time, the fascist veterans continuously manipulated the transnational symbol of the ex-soldier, while trying to influence the political orientation of veterans within the non-fascist countries (i.e.: France) through new international veteran organizations and contacts.

The second justification for this chapter is that by 1939 and 1940, the fascist model of veteran politics was effectively transferred, with adaptations, to two countries: Spain and France. This outcome was the culmination of the long history of the fascist use of the myth of the fascist veteran in foreign affairs, and the result of the free circulation of this myth throughout Western Europe. The established relationship between veterans and fascism not only led to war, therefore; it also significantly contributed to the establishment of new fascist or authoritarian regimes in other European countries.

The fascist veterans and the Ethiopian war
The Ethiopian war was, first and foremost, a fascist war for empire. It was fought by more than 200,000 Italian soldiers, who arrived in the region and successfully waged their campaign there thanks to a huge logistical operation. Fascism attained its military objectives within seven months, due to the Italian troops’ technical superiority, and to the employment of modern war weapons —such as poison gas— with no regard for an enemy considered barbarian in racist terms. This war seemed an important victory in foreign policy for the fascist regime, although it was a ‘hollow success’ that brought new problems and international tensions. The League of Nations condemned the Italian aggression and imposed a set of economic sanctions. Yet, instead of impeding Italy’s ability to wage war, the international sanctions contributed to heightening the emotional climate of nationalist, warlike exaltation, and totalitarian mobilization that characterized the country at the time.

The role of the Italian fascist veterans in the origin, development and aftermath of the Ethiopian war was crucial. They not only helped to create a favourable foreign opinion about the war, particularly among French veterans—as we saw—but also contributed substantially to the war propaganda, and discretely to the military effort. New fascist and colonial functions were assigned to the fresh batch of veterans from the Ethiopia war. And the ritualized demobilization of the troops shows us how Fascism continued to use the image of the victorious soldier, at that particular moment of the fascist evolution towards totalitarianism.

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5 H. James Burgwyn, *Italian Foreign Policy*, pp. 125-144.
Propaganda was the main field of activity of the fascist veterans during the war. Immediately after the campaign started, the journal of the ANC changed its title to *L’Italia combattente. L’Italia grigio-verde* (‘The fighting Italy’), and more importantly, all the rest of provincial ANC newspapers were suppressed.\(^6\) Offering as a justification the necessity to restrict consumption, this further limitation of the veterans’ expression was another step towards totalitarianism. The ANC journal became basically one more megaphone for the regime’s war propaganda. The ANC main leader, Amilcare Rossi, was appointed director of the journal, and his numerous articles, written in an obscure, convoluted rhetoric, would echo the regime’s propagandistic discourse. Now, the veteran association changed its activity, and started collecting gold and medals from its members to be donated for the war effort. One of the first measures was asking the veterans to return the old Inter-Allied medal, deemed to have been lost its moral value after the League of Nations introduced the sanctions.\(^7\) The ANC leaders also revoked war insurance policies for the veterans, in order to make a contribution to financing the war. Thus, in a few months, more than 7 million Lira were transferred from the ANC to the *Duce*; and one year after the beginning of the war, the total amount collected by the ANC in form of veterans’ war insurance policies was 16 million Lira.\(^8\) If in the previous decade the ANC had basically assured medals and benefits to the Italian veterans, now they were forced to return this capital to the regime. Furthermore, the ANC provincial leaders made sure that veterans joined demonstrations of enthusiasm and support for the combatant troops.\(^9\) There were also veterans from the association among those who were fighting in the campaign.

Embodying the Fascism-driven closed circle of war violence from 1919 to 1935, some Italian veterans of the Great War fought again in Ethiopia. It is known that the soldiers that Mussolini sent to conquer the empire came from the oldest classes, since the regime did not want to debilitate the army in the Italian peninsula.\(^10\) Only a portion of the military contingent was voluntary, and unemployment and poverty were common reasons to volunteer. Yet members of the fascist militia, the MVSN, joined the campaign. One of the fascist military units, the ‘Tevere’ Division, was composed of four legions; one of veterans, another of war disabled, and two more with members of

the Fasci all’Estero. The total number of veterans that enrolled for the fascist war is difficult to assess. It was claimed that one of the two battalions that composed the veterans’ legion of the ‘Tevere’ Division included 524 ex-soldiers of the Great War.\textsuperscript{11} Even if the total number of veterans serving in Oriental Africa numbered a few thousands (66,000 according to subsequent fascist propaganda),\textsuperscript{12} this was a very small group in relation to the total military contingent during the campaign, and in comparison with the figures of ANC members, not to mention the comparison with the vast numbers of Italian Great War veterans.

Even though the participation of veterans in the Ethiopian war was reduced, a seven-month war was enough for Fascism to forge a new stock of experienced combatants. Mussolini wished to create ‘new men’ out of the fascist war, though reality did not match this expectation. Only certain elites of fascist soldiers understood and experienced the Ethiopian war in line with fascist ideology. Former squadrist and fascist cadre believed they were continuing the fascist revolution in Africa.\textsuperscript{13} But, in any case, the men who either remained in the conquered land or returned to Italy became instruments of the fascist regime.

After Mussolini’s grandiose proclamation of the empire, the heroization of the victorious soldiers followed, through a set of discourses and rituals. The combatants of Ethiopia were represented as renewing the spirit of the equally triumphant Great War

\textsuperscript{11} VI. Divisione Camicie Nere 'Tevere'. Il 219. battaglione cc. nn. in Africa Orientale, Roma, 1937.
\textsuperscript{12} L’Italia combattente. L’Italia grigio-verde, num. 23, 31 December 1940.
\textsuperscript{13} Nicola Labanca, Una guerra per l’impero, pp. 73-225.
soldiers (Image 41).\textsuperscript{14} In fascist rhetoric, ‘the fallen soldiers, disabled veterans and ex-combatants of the African enterprise’ had ‘avenged the sacrifice and realized the hope of the 670,000 dead, 470,000 mutilated and 3 million fighters of the Great War’.\textsuperscript{15} From the beginning of July 1936, the returning troops that arrived to the ports of Naples, Livorno or Genoa, or to the train stations of Rome or Florence, were welcomed by cheerful, deferential crowds, hymns, flowers and bunting, and by the authorities who depicted them as heroes.\textsuperscript{16} In the climate of enthusiasm, the PNF decided to offer party membership to some returning volunteers.\textsuperscript{17}

Taking into account all this pride-inducing rhetoric and political measures, one might ask why the veterans from Ethiopia did not form any new particular veteran organization. The historian Nicola Labanca has advanced some arguments to explain this absence.\textsuperscript{18} According to him, the few months of Ethiopian war experience were not comparable with the long-term sufferings of the Great War soldiers. Traditionally, the Italian colonial campaigns in Africa had not produced any veteran movement. Furthermore, Labanca recognizes that Mussolini would not have been interested in any renewed veteran movement at that time, since the regime desired to reinforce the threatening image of fixed bayonets, not old ex-combatants. But the actual destiny of the Ethiopian veterans under Fascism has remained rather unknown by historians until now.

The truth is that the veterans from Ethiopia were incorporated into the ANC, and therefore were symbolically amalgamated with the Great War veterans. The regime took this decision in October 1936, after a request from ANC leaders.\textsuperscript{19} It was in consonance with the ‘unitary and totalitarian function of the ANC’ that the veterans from ‘all victories’ would be part of the same organization.\textsuperscript{20} With this absorption, the fascists wanted to check the proliferation of uncontrolled veteran groups. The insistence in the instructions of the ANC leaders in this respect shows that they pursued this goal very seriously. They made sure that the new veterans had devotedly served, even

\textsuperscript{14} Il Popolo d’Italia, 24 May 1936.
\textsuperscript{15} (‘i Caduti, i Mutilati e i Combattenti dell’impresa africana […] hanno vendicato il sacrificio e avverata la speranza dei 670.000 morti, dei 470.000 mutilati e dei 3 milioni di combattenti della grande guerra’) L’Italia combattente. L’Italia grigio-verde, num. 9, 15 May 1936.
\textsuperscript{16} For example, see Il Popolo d’Italia, 21 July and 18 August 1936.
\textsuperscript{17} La Nazione (Florence), 9 July 1936.
\textsuperscript{18} Nicola Labanca, Una guerra per l’impero, pp. 217-218.
\textsuperscript{19} Il Popolo d’Italia, 22 October 1936.
\textsuperscript{20} (‘funzione unitaria e totalitaria’, ‘tutte le vittorie’) L’Italia combattente. L’Italia grigio-verde, num. 18, 15 October 1936.
obtained some distinction in combat (medal, injury or mutilation), before being admitted to the association. The ANC also stipulated that the combat volunteers were allowed to wear the emblem of the arditi. In contrast, the ANC refused to affiliate those labourers who had gone to the Horn of Africa and come back to Italy without combat experience. Non-combatants might envy the privileged position of the returning soldiers, even though there is evidence to believe that, by July 1937, the problem of unemployment still affected many of the veterans. The combat veterans from Ethiopia gained access to benefits and privileges by joining the fascist ANC. But in the fascist plans, the war-experienced men were expected to continue serving Fascism, and the fascist leaders assigned further functions to them.

In the fascist colonial dreams, Ethiopia was a new and fertile land that should provide agricultural products for the autarchic empire; the veterans were seen as the archetype of the colonizer. The military conquerors of the region were viewed as settlers, and indeed many of the soldiers were Italian southern peasants aspiring to own land. At the beginning of July 1936, the Army’s High Command in Africa decreed that the soldiers—from the 1911 class and older—who found employment in Ethiopia would be immediately discharged. They were also obliged to join the MVSN at the same time. Thus, the regime expected to give employment to 100,000 veterans, while maintaining an armed force in the colony. After his return from Ethiopia in June 1936, the fascist leader of the ANC, Amilcare Rossi, who had gone to war with the ‘Tevere’ Division, elaborated a vague colonizing project. According to him, the veterans would assume a new mission: the expansion of the Italian nation in Ethiopia, and the agricultural exploitation of this land. In November 1936, during the X National Council of the ANC celebrated in Littoria, Rossi talked about the wealth and vastness of the new territory, predicting that Italian peasants would slowly colonize it. For this reason, the next ANC National Council should be celebrated there. In reality, however, the colonization through peasant-soldiers was doomed to failure. According to the fascist statements, of the 12,000 ‘volunteers’ of the ‘Tevere’ Division, 5,000 requested to remain in Eastern Africa. Yet of the more than 200,000 veterans from Ethiopia, only

22 L’Italia combattente. L’Italia grigio-verde, num. 6, 31 March 1937.
23 Reports from the prefettura of Florence (1 June and 22 July 1937), ACS, MI, PS (G1), b. 32, f. 264 ‘Volontari Guerra Associazione’.
24 Il Popolo d’Italia, 9 July 1936.
26 La Nazione (Florence), 30 May 1936.
13,881 decided to stay in the Empire. The result of the project was a failure, and the resistant Ethiopians constantly raided settlements.²⁷

**Veterans and the crisis of anti-fascism and pacifism**

One of the consequences of the Ethiopian war was a period of disorientation and demoralization for anti-fascists and pacifists in Italy and France. It is important to note that anti-fascism and pacifism were never interchangeable concepts, despite the numerous links between them. Pacifism should not be confused with non-violence, nor with anti-militarism. In France, after the First World War, a traditional conception of pacifism understood as the international rule of law had been progressively eclipsed by a more radical, integral view of pacifism.²⁸ In this country, during the second half of the 1930s, more than 200 pacifist organizations maintained diverse approaches to the question of peace.²⁹ To complicate this panorama, when the fascists invaded Ethiopia, traditionally bellicose political sectors such as *Action Française* declared themselves to be pacifists, not because they opposed this war, but rather because they very much supported it. The French extreme right accused the left and the supporters of the League of Nations of wanting to provoke a war against Italy.³⁰ Obviously, this right-wing attitude was opportunistic and hypocritical. But also genuinely anti-fascist and pacifist organizations made a differentiation between internal anti-fascism and external pacifism, therefore giving free rein to fascist and Nazi expansionism.³¹

This double crisis of anti-fascism and pacifism was the origin of renewed attempts to redefine the symbol of the war veteran in both pacifist and anti-fascist terms. The confusion that riddled the French pacifists and anti-fascists can be detected in Italy as well. The sudden and dramatically successful campaign in Ethiopia and Italian popular enthusiasm puzzled and temporarily discouraged the clandestine opposition.³² Nonetheless, the communists directly appealed to the Italian war disabled and veterans to organize the resistance against the new war; they questioned the alleged fascist

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convictions of the volunteers, and even called on them to fraternize with the Ethiopians.33 Paradoxically, the new fascist aggression, with all its exaltation of the soldier and the veteran, seems to have led these anti-fascists to place their hopes in the Italian veterans’ anti-war feelings as the detonator for a popular reaction against Fascism.34 As the available evidence suggests, however, these hopes were quixotic. Nevertheless, the use of the veteran symbol with anti-fascist and pacifist objectives is worthy of analysis. During the second half of the 1930s, and especially after the Spanish Civil War broke out, the fascist symbolic appropriation of the war veteran came under attack from certain groups.

Different initiatives in this direction came from Italians abroad. In November 1935, a group of Italians residing in New York launched a call for the formation of an ‘Association of Anti-fascist Italian Veterans of New York and Surroundings’. They introduced themselves as men who had ‘worn the green-grey’ uniform, and had promised that the sacrifices and horrors of war would never be repeated. Now, a ‘mad governor’ in their country had ‘dishonoured’ the Italian ‘race’ by attacking a free people. They, the veterans, rebelled against this, aspiring to a great fraternity of all men. They had fought and confronted dangers and horrors on the battlefield, and now they were ‘the vanguard of the international army that demanded peace, justice and liberty’. Recalling the memory of 600,000 dead soldiers, they invoked ‘Peace, Peace, Peace!’.

This rhetoric reminds us of the fascist and Mussolinian discursive repertory (‘race’, invoking the fallen soldiers, ‘the vanguard of…’, etc.), but they introduced key pacifist and democratic elements (‘liberty’, ‘fraternity’, etc.) to make an anti-fascist appeal. As we know, mythic narratives about the veteran were likely to be reworked to serve different aims, and this is exactly what some anti-fascist veterans were doing now.

This kind of small and splintered groupings of pacifist or anti-fascist veterans began to proliferate in France, joined by Italian exiles and migrants. The pacifist Silvio Schettini was the leader of an Italian Association of Veterans based in Paris. A similar cell appeared in Brussels, in January 1936, with a distinctive leftist orientation. This so-called Belgian-Italian Association of Veterans (‘Association Belgo-Italienne des Anciens Combattants’) counted about 30 members, and held weekly meetings. They

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34 L’Unità. Organo del Partito Comunista d’Italia (clandestine edition), num. 12, undated (1935?).
35 (‘un governante folle del nostro disgraziato paese ha disonorato la nostra razza […] Noi che abbiamo combattuto, noi che abbiamo affrontati i pericoli e gli orrori dei campi di battaglia, siamo le avanguardie dell’esercito internazionale che reclama la pace, la giustizia e la libertà’), ACS, MI, PS (G1), b. 309, f. 1081 ‘Stati Uniti Associazione Sovversiva Ex combattenti’.
were veterans who ‘loved their country’ and wanted to overthrow Fascism, in order to establish ‘a proletarian government’. (Anarchist exiles rejected the invitation to join this organization, since they did not want to take part in an organism that remembered the war). The fascist authorities monitored this Belgian group, and noticed that they had contacts with the anti-fascist veterans in France. Confronting the wide network of fascist veterans, a web of contacts among anti-fascist veterans was trying to emerge.

The struggle over the symbol of the veteran, complexly linked to the idea of peace, was determined by the rapidly evolving European context. During the Ethiopian war, the climate of civil confrontation progressively worsened in France, while in Spain the political situation became extremely polarized and agitated. In January 1936, the French government decreed the dissolution of some paramilitary leagues, and, shortly after, the pro-Italian Prime Minister Pierre Laval was obliged to resign. In February 1936, the Spanish republican and leftist coalition known as the Popular Front (Frente Popular) won the national elections, and a period of social agitation followed. The Spanish fascist party Falange Española grew significantly, while the anti-republican military conspired to prepare a coup d’état. In May 1936, it was the turn of the French Popular Front (Front Populaire) to win the elections. At virtually the same time, Italian troops entered Addis Ababa.

It is interesting to track the French veterans’ political evolution during this period of change. One of the first measures of the Front Populaire was the dissolution of the Croix de Feu. At that time, the UNC, lured by the fascist-inspired mystic, had multiple friendly contacts and interactions with this extreme right league, and the pages of the UNC journal exalted the fascist empire. Hence, the UNC’s aggressive attitude against the Front Populaire is not surprising. UNC veterans joined the Parti Social Français (PSF) —the new party that the Croix de Feu leader, Colonel La Rocque, founded in reaction to the ban on the Croix de Feu. The PSF would rapidly become the largest party in France. Unsurprisingly defined as fascist by the left, the PSF was an important threat to the main democracy of the Continent, though in fierce

36 (‘noi siamo tutti dei vecchi soldati ed amiamo il nostro paese dove siamo nati e dove siamo cresciuti; dobbiamo rovesciare quella vergogna che si chiama Fascismo e sostituirla con un governo proletario’), ACS, MI, PS (G1), b. 310, f. 1106. ‘Belgio Associazione ex combattenti antifascisti’.
37 Rafael Cruz, En el nombre del pueblo. República, rebelión y guerra en la España de 1936, Madrid, Siglo XXI, 2006.
38 Chris Millington, From Victory to Vichy, pp. 123-129.
39 La Voix du Combattant, 25 July, 1 August 1936.
competition with other extreme right parties. On the other hand, in the case of the UF, there were no clear connections with the extreme right. Rather, the UF was involved in the struggle for international peace. Not only its leader Henri Pichot, but also the influential intellectual René Cassin—a delegate at the League of Nations—, were fully committed to this ideal. Nevertheless, the ‘patriotic pacifism’ of the UF veterans cannot be considered as anti-fascist, much as they bitterly criticised the fascist breach of international law.

The outbreak of the Spanish Civil War complicated the profound realignment of politics in France and Spain, two countries within Fascist Italy’s sphere of geostrategic interest. At the end of July 1936, after the swift request of Franco—one of the rebel leaders—, both Hitler and Mussolini decided to send military help. German and Italian aircrafts allowed the Spanish rebels to initiate a military offensive towards Madrid. On both sides of the divided country there were hundreds of political assassinations. The rebels, assisted by falangist volunteers, imposed a bloody regime of terror. In Catalonia and other parts of the country, revolutionaries held power, and the Republican authorities lost control of the situation for several months. While nothing really impeded the Nazi and fascist support for the rebels, the initial intention of the French Prime Minister Leon Blum to help the Spanish republicans was thwarted by the bitter opposition of the right. The long Spanish war constituted another source of division in French society. In general, the French veteran movement would advocate non-intervention, and therefore narrowed the scope of its pacifism to the maintenance of peace within France. In contrast, the French anti-fascists would advocate intervention in Spain in the name of international peace.

At this crucial international conjuncture, the fascists and the Nazis turned once again to the veteran connection to exert influence abroad, employing pseudo-pacifist discourses. During the months prior to the Spanish Civil War, while the Italians conquered their empire, the Nazi veterans had publicly declared their commitment to peace. Through this policy, the Nazis were taking advantage of the French veterans’ priority of maintaining peaceful and friendly relations with Germany. Following this course of action, during the first half of 1936, Henri Pichot, the leader of the UF, met

\[\text{\small\textsuperscript{40}}\text{Sean Kennedy, Reconciling France, pp. 120-156.}\]

\[\text{\small\textsuperscript{41}}\text{See, for example, René Cassin, ‘La France combattante et la paix’, Cahiers de l’Union Fédérale (Paris), 20 April 1936.}\]

\[\text{\small\textsuperscript{42}}\text{David Wingate Pike, France Divided. The French and the Civil War in Spain, Portland, Sussex Academic Press, 2011.}\]
and corresponded with Hans Oberlindober, the leader of the NSKOV. The Germans also paid a visit to London, meeting the British Legion, and thus, enhancing the germanophile stance of the British veterans. These kinds of contacts led to the international meeting on the former battlefield of Verdun, in mid-July 1936. There, the Nazi veterans, together with French, British, and comrades from other countries, ‘swore to conserve and to desire peace’.\footnote{‘schwören wir, den Frieden […] zu bewahren und zu wollen’} Völkischer Beobachter, 14 July 1936. The Nazi commitment to this oath, taking into account the date of the partisan German intervention in the Spanish Civil War, lasted roughly ten days.

Just as Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy coincided in their masked albeit indisputable intervention in Spain, they also harmoniously entangled their veteran foreign politics. The Nazi veterans maintained their hypocritical discourse of peace, and continued receiving, over the following months, friendly visits of French veteran leaders, such as Pichot and Béraud.\footnote{Clare Moreau Trichet, Henri Pichot et l’Allemagne, passim; Id., ‘La propagande nazie’; Völkischer Beobachter, 24 November 1936, 23 September 1937.} The Italian fascist veterans dedicated themselves thoroughly to the same discursive strategy. Moreover, the fascists decided to create a new organization to control the veterans’ international contacts. In this fashion, they tried to monopolize the proliferating discourses about peace. It is important to note that this manoeuvre took place shortly after the creation of the Non-Intervention Committee. This committee was designed to isolate war within Spain, but only served to suffocate the Spanish republicans, while the fascist powers continued assisting the rebels.

The first fascist step in this direction was to regain influence over the existing veteran international organizations. As we know, since 1929 the FIDAC has ceased to represent the real fascist interests in foreign policy. During September 1936, both the FIDAC and CIAMAC congresses took place. First, the FIDAC congress was held in Warsaw, in Pilsudski’s Poland, with the participation of the ex-allied nations’ representatives. (The French travelling to Poland used the occasion to pay another visit to the NSKOV leader Hans Oberlindober). In the congress, an anti-leftist and conditional understanding of peace prevailed. The most important consequence of the congress was that the fascist Carlo Delcroix, leader of the ANMIG, was elected new president of the FIDAC.\footnote{Il Popolo d’Italia, 5 September 1936.} (It was the second time during the inter-war period that the presidency of the FIDAC fell to a fascist member). Furthermore, the delegates agreed to continue their conversations \textit{in Rome} during the following month, \textit{outside} of the
framework of the FIDAC and the CIAMAC, and with participation of German representatives. All these unprecedented decisions aimed towards rapprochement with the German ex-enemies, an outcome that fully corresponded with fascist interests. Thus, it is not surprising that the Italian disabled veterans openly ignored the CIAMAC conference in Copenhagen, as did the Germans and Austrians; this international organization was deemed to be dominated by a ‘prevalent socialist-mason tendency’. Obtaining control of the FIDAC had been an important move.

At the same time, the Non-Intervention Committee held its first inaugural meeting in London, although soon it became clear that it would not serve to stop the internationalization of the Spanish War. The Soviet Union withdrew from the committee. Anti-fascist and communist volunteers from different parts of the world, mainly from France, were arriving to Spain, where the carnage continued.

As a proof of the widespread belief that the European expansion of fascism could only be stopped by armed force, the foreign anti-fascist volunteers in Spain composed the International Brigades, supported by the Komintern. The total number of volunteers has been calculated in 35,000. According to George L. Mosse, a romantic myth of the war experience inspired these fighters. This idealistic understanding of the Spanish war represented a counter-model to the fascist glorification of war in and of itself. It demonstrates that, by 1936, the heroic image of the combatant did not pertain exclusively to the fascists or right-wing nationalists. In this sense, it is interesting to note that, motivated by an anti-communist version of the idealization of war, only around 1,000 or 1,500 international volunteers came to Spain to fight for Franco. However, if anti-fascism contested the symbol of the combatant, were the fascists able to keep their transnational symbolic hegemony over the veterans?

With the objective of dominating veteran politics, the fascists employed the same old tactic of discursive manipulation and organizational guile that they had always used. In the strained international conjuncture, the fascists reacted swiftly. The next key

46 La Voix du Combattant, 19 September 1936.
47 (‘prevalenti tendenze massonico-socialiste’), AMAE, Società delle Nazioni 1919-1932, b. 66, f. ‘CIAMAC’.
49 George L. Mosse, Fallen Soldiers, pp. 185-195.
event was the veterans’ meeting in Rome, on 7 November 1936.\(^{51}\) By that date, in Spain, the troops of Franco had arrived at the gates of Madrid. A few days later, the International Brigades experienced combat for the first time, successfully defending the Republican capital. Meanwhile, Mussolini had received in Palazzo Venezia the veterans’ representatives from 14 European nations, including Germany and the United States. The veterans’ encounter was the occasion to launch a new ‘Permanent International Committee of Veterans’ (Comitato Permanente Internazionale dei Combattenti), presided by Carlo Delcroix. The representative of Nazi Germany on the Committee was the Duke of Saxe-Coburg, who had been appointed by Hitler as the head of the surviving German veteran associations. For the first time, an international organization of First World War veterans was bringing together the fascist and Nazi veterans, under the hegemony of Fascism.

The fascists and the Nazis hastened to put the Permanent International Committee of Veterans to work for their interests. Rapidly, Carlo Delcroix prepared the statutes of the new institution secretly destined to supplant the old international veteran platforms.\(^{52}\) The declared aims of the Permanent Committee were, first, to strengthen the relations among veterans from all the nations; second, to ensure that the veterans’ moral force would serve the rapprochement and collaboration of the different nations; and, finally, to promote in all nations ‘the spirit of comprehension and solidarity which is the basis for the maintenance of peace’.\(^{53}\) In record time, another congress was organized, this time in Berlin. On 15 February 1937, Goering welcomed more than fifty international delegates, whom he unoriginally reminded that, since they knew the horrors of warfare, the veterans were the guarantors of peace. The poet Carlo Delcroix was more imaginative; he argued that if war was necessary, it was sacred, but if it was avoidable, it was a crime.\(^{54}\) Unsurprisingly, the delegates confirmed Delcroix as president. As Amilcare Rossi later reported, some opposition from certain delegates of democratic nations arose, but they were overcome and thus the institution consolidated

\(^{51}\) Il Popolo d’Italia, 8 November 1936; Deutsche Kriegsopfersversorgung Monatschrift der Frontsoldaten und Kriegsopfer der National-Sozialistischen Kriegsopfersversorgung (NSKOV) (Berlin), num. 4 (January 1937).

\(^{52}\) L’Italia combattente. L’Italia grigio-verde, num. 2, 31 January 1937.

\(^{53}\) (‘spirito di comprensione e di solidarietà che è la condizione necessaria al mantenimento della pace’) Il Popolo d’Italia, 3 January 1937.

\(^{54}\) Il Popolo d’Italia, 16 February 1937.
on a ‘totalitarian basis’. Then, the delegates went to visit Hitler in Berchtesgaden, and they publicly declared the necessity of defending peace.

The Permanent Committee became the barefaced instrument of the Rome-Berlin Axis, while the war in Spain continued successfully for the fascist powers. The next meeting of the Committee took place again in Rome, in April 1937. There, Delcroix dared to say that, until then, the institutions for maintaining peace had, in fact, exacerbated the misunderstanding between nations. Some weeks later, in Spain, the German Condor Legion bombed Guernica. By this point, the Italian ‘voluntary’ troops that Mussolini was sending to Spain since January 1937 numbered 50,000 men. In Francoist Spain, there was a process of amalgamation of anti-republican sectors, leading to the formation of the fascist unified party, Falange Española Tradicionalista y de las JONS (FET-JONS). Within the Spanish Republic, in contrast, the internal disputes provoked violent clashes between communists and anarchists in Barcelona. By now, it was clear that the Non-Intervention Committee was a complete farce. Similarly, the Permanent Committee of Veterans only benefited the fascist powers, as it became clear on a number of occasions.

In October 1937, the congress of the FIDAC confirmed that the responsibility for advancing towards an international entente was now in the hands of the fascist-dominated Permanent Committee. At this point, the main concern of the FIDAC was just to maintain friendship among the ex-allied countries. In his speech, the outgoing FIDAC president Delcroix justified his efforts to realize rapprochement with the enemies. He also described the kind of peace that the veterans should construct; neither a peace that repudiated sacrifice, nor one of oppression that ignored the necessities of other nations; instead, Delcroix praised a ‘militant’ peace ‘of dignity and justice’ after ‘having set the conditions for its existence’. Implicitly, Delcroix was talking of a peace conditioned by the priority of the fascist powers’ imperial and territorial

56 Il Popolo d’Italia, 18 February 1937.
60 (‘pace de dignità e di giustizia, la pace costruttiva e militante che sa difendere il suo diritto dopo avere creato le condizioni necessarie alla propria esistenza’), L’Italia combattente. L’Italia grigio-verde, num. 18, 15 October 1937. Due to a gap in the sources, I have examined the activities of the congress through Le Combattant des Deux-Sèvres. Organe des combattants... Organe de l’Union nationale des combattants (Niort), num. 210 (November 1937); see, also, Cahiers de l’Union Fédérale (Paris), 20 October 1937.
expansion. The idea of peace that the fascists were defending in the international veterans’ meetings was one subservient to the idea of international justice,\(^\text{61}\) though this conception of justice was concealing the intention of redesigning the map of Europe and the World in accordance with the fascist and Nazi wishes. Some weeks later, the fascists would have yet another opportunity to defend their position in an international veterans’ meeting.

Held in Paris between November and December 1937, the first official congress of the Permanent Committee marked an important victory for the fascist veterans. Among the French delegates were Henri Pichot and Jean Goy, while Oberlin dober was part of the German delegation.\(^\text{62}\) The representatives of the United States were the only ones to decline to participate, correctly understanding that the meeting corresponded with the interests of the dictatorships. Carlo Delcroix, in his confidential report written for the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, considered that the withdrawal of the American Legion was a consequence of Jewish pressure. But in general, Delcroix was delighted with the good result of the congress. The French government, unenthusiastic, had been unable to oppose it, and ‘for the first time the German flag had appeared in a parade through the streets of Paris’. Delcroix judged ‘useful that in the capital of masonry, Judaism and Socialism, the spirit and style of fascism were affirmed, in a meeting of veterans from across Europe, to whom we have taught to what extent and in which tone the soldiers may talk about peace’.\(^\text{63}\) As the messages sent to the French authorities at the end of the meeting captured the fascist views on peace, Delcroix celebrated that, in only one year, they have succeeded in affirming the principles, methods and style of fascism in veteran diplomacy. In the congress, there had even been cordial conversations about the need to ‘suppress every other organization, starting with the [FIDAC]’.\(^\text{64}\) And the fascists also prepared the terrain to make sure that the next president of the Permanent Committee would be the Duke of Saxe-Coburg — the Nazi representative. Thus, this organization should not ‘escape from the hands of its founders, in order to prevent the moral force of the veterans from becoming subjugated

\(^{61}\) See the replies of Delcroix and Rossi to Henri Pichot’s survey about the peace in *Cahiers de l’Union Fédérale*, 20 November 1937.

\(^{62}\) *La Voix du Combattant*, 4 December 1937; *Cahiers de l’Union Fédérale*, 10 December 1937.

\(^{63}\) (‘utile che nella capitale della massoneria, del giudaismo e del societarismo, si affermasse lo spirito e lo stile del fascismo in una riunione di combattenti di tutta Europa, ai quali noi abbiamo insegnato in quali limiti e con quale tono, dei soldati possono parlare di pace’), AMAE, Società delle Nazioni 1919-1932, b. 66, f. ‘Comitato internazionale permanente dei combattenti’.

\(^{64}\) (‘sopprimere tutte le altre organizzazioni a cominciare da quella interalleata’), Ibidem.
to the socialist politics of the so-called democracies’. The fascists not only continued trying to monopolize the symbol of the veterans in the international sphere, and to control the organizations; they were also misappropriating the discourses about peace.

A few days after this meeting in Paris, Mussolini announced to the world that Italy was withdrawing from the League of Nations. The Duce had recently visited Germany, and now the foreign policies of both countries started to clearly and publicly converge. As we have seen, the veteran connections played a role in the evolution towards the formation of the Rome-Berlin Axis. The developing anti-French military threat, coming from Germany and Italy, was fairly clear for the French left, and the terrible events taking place in Spain corroborated this. During this time, for most French leftists, war and fascism fused into the one menace, and fighting against fascism in Spain meant fighting for peace and democracy.

In spite of these disheartening events, sectors of anti-fascism did not renounce to the symbol of the veteran. However, anti-fascist and pacifist veterans in France were not united. In November 1937, the French League of Pacifist Veterans, headed by the socialist MP and veteran Camille Planche, launched an appeal to the Italian veterans in order to create a unique anti-war and anti-fascist veteran front. Actually, this new initiative competed against the communist-inspired veteran associations. In any case, the chief concern was to divest the Italian veterans of their fascist stigma. One of the final lines of the call stated: ‘It is false to say that all Italian veterans want to support the fascist regime!’.

Similarly, during 1938, the anti-fascist Association Franco-italienne des Anciens Combattants issued important propaganda to attract Italian veterans to their ranks, questioning the fascist promises to the veterans. However, all these anti-fascist efforts precisely show the extent to which Fascism had monopolized the symbol of the veteran by 1938.

**Fascist Italy, Francoist Spain and the culmination of the model**

The first case in which the fascist model of veteran politics was transferred into another country, contributing to the establishment of a dictatorship, was Spain. The Civil War experience entailed the arrival of fascist politics on the Francoist side, and the

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65 (‘non sfugga dalle mani di coloro che l’hanno costituita per impedire che la forza morale dei combattenti restasse asservita alla politica societaria delle cosidette democrazie’), Ibidem.

66 (‘È falso che tutti gli ex-combattenti italiani vogliano sostenere il regime fascista!’), ACS, MI, PS (G1), b. 320, f. 1225 ‘Associazione franco-italiana ex combattenti’.

67 ACS, MI, PS (G1), b. 315, f. 1169: ‘Ass. Franco-italiana excombattenti antifascisti’.
discourses and organizations for war veterans were no exception. Now, as a ‘total’ war experience was ending, Spanish fascism could construct a mass support base composed of many men with combat records. In this section I will show how fascist veteran politics was a fundamental element for the incorporation of Francoist Spain into the wider phenomenon of transnational fascism. War, and the formation of the Axis were the key historical occurrences in this process, in which Fascist Italy’s model of veteran politics reached its peak.

During the war, the fascist influence in Spain was not only military, but also political. Since the end of 1937, it became evident that Soviet help was not enough to sustain the Republican counterattacks, and that German and Italian military aid to Franco was permitting him to slowly win the war. This reality ensured the fascist powers had a great reputation among the combatants of the rebel side. In March 1938, the Francoists published a fundamental programmatic text, the Fuero del Trabajo, clearly inspired by the Italian regime.68 In this text, it was stated that, after the war, the new Spain would give ‘positions of work, honour and command’ to the heroic young combatants. The persistence of conservative military men in the power structures notwithstanding, the renewed fascist party —the FET-JONS—, was attaining an important position of power. The ideological evolution of the anti-republican coalition during the war can be perfectly understood as a process of fascistization.69 And the falangists showed great interest in instilling their ideology into the combatants, something that was particularly evident in their own militia units. These combating soldiers were told about the ‘National-Syndicalist Revolution’ (Revolución Nacionalsindicalista), yet loyalty to Franco —the Caudillo— was the key point.70 Franco had nominated himself head of the FET-JONS, while the founder of Falange, José Antonio Primo de Rivera, had been earlier executed in a Republican prison. Around 1,200,000 men fought in the Francoist army. While the military preferred to protect their soldiers from an excessive politicization, the FET-JONS saw in them a potential group of trustworthy supporters.71 Veterans would be agents of the Spanish fascistization.

69 Ferran Gallego, El Evangelio fascista. La formación de la cultura política del franquismo (1930-1950), Barcelona, Crítica, 2014.
70 See the brochure edited by the propaganda office of FET-JONS, Los combatientes y el Caudillo, Bilbao, 1938.
71 Ángel Alcalde, Los excombatientes franquistas.
Meanwhile, the war evolved towards a Francoist victory. The fate of the Spanish Second Republic was not so much decided on the battlefields, as it was in the international conference of Munich, September 1938. Earlier, in March 1938, the Nazis had annexed Austria to the Third Reich, while German air support facilitated the Francoist sweeping offensive on the front of Aragon. Now, faced with the Nazi intention to absorb the German-speaking portions of Czechoslovakia, France and Britain decided to maintain their policy of appeasement. Together with Mussolini, they signed the Munich pact on 30 September, thus allowing the Germans to proceed with the occupation. Opposition from the democratic countries would have probably meant war, and it was said that the agreement ensured peace. However, for the Spanish Republic, it was a death sentence, since it could no longer expect a general European conflict between democracies and fascist powers —this scenario would have allowed them to receive military help against Franco. Nothing hampered the constant inflow of support from the fascist powers to Franco, while the International Brigades had been earlier withdrawn from Spain on the poor advice of the farcical Non-Intervention Committee.

In early 1939, the contacts between the falangists and the fascists stepped up, whilst the Spanish Republic lay on its deathbed. These connections transcended the meetings between a few important personalities, and largely helped to shape Francoist veteran politics. The FET-JONS created a network of headquarters abroad, to maintain relations with the Nazis in Germany and with the fascists in Italy.\(^{72}\) Collaboration was closer with the latter country. In a climate of fascist friendship, some of the Italian soldiers of the Corpo di Truppe Volontarie became members of the FET-JONS during their stay in Spain.\(^{73}\) Among them, there were a few old veterans of the Great War, who thus embodied the fascist ideal of eternal combatant.\(^{74}\) Furthermore, relevant political representatives of the Francoist coalition visited Fascist Italy during the war. For example, during 1938, Millán Astray, the co-founder —with Franco— of the Spanish Legión, and then leader of the Francoist organization of disabled veterans (the Benemérito Cuerpo de Mutilados de Guerra por la Patria), travelled to Italy along with José María Pemán, a conservative writer who developed the exalting mystic about the


\(^{73}\) AGA, DNSE, caja 51/20911, carpeta ‘Excombatientes italianos’.

\(^{74}\) AGA, DNSE, caja 51/20912, carpeta ‘Afiliados extranjeros’.
‘provisional’ junior officers (alféreces provisionales) of the Francoist army. Likewise, an important number of FET-JONS leaders visited Italy, learning first-hand about the functioning of a fascist regime. For example, José Antonio Girón, a young falangist from Valladolid, who was a commander of fighting militia units, spent the last months of the Spanish Civil War in Italy, as part of a political mission. After the war, he would become the main leader of the falangist organization for war veterans. Evidently, all these contacts contributed much to the institutional and political construction of the Franco regime, including the organizational structure for the Spanish Civil War veterans.

In ideological terms, the closeness to Fascist Italy resulted in a clear incorporation of fascist discourses into the Franco regime. As we know, since the early 1920s, some promoters of Falange, such as Rafael Sánchez Mazas and Ernesto Giménez Caballero, had admired Mussolini and the Italian fascists, and emulated fascist culture. Both intellectuals would be figures of reference for the regime during the early 1940s. Falangist rituals and discourses of war were sourced in the fascist heritage; therefore, during the war, the exaltation of youth, the sacralization of violence, the cult of sacrifice and death, became important elements of the falangist ideology. Consequently, the Francoists also turned to the fascist model of discourses to approach the war veterans. Since 1938, the Francoist trench newspapers published articles insisting that the soldiers, after the war, had the obligation to maintain their loyalty to the Caudillo, and to transform themselves into obedient and selfless workers. Not only the organizational structure, therefore, but also the discourses employed to approach the war veterans in Francoist Spain had their origins in Fascist Italy.

The European context marked this long process of transfer, ending with the consolidation of the National Delegation of Veterans of the FET-JONS (Delegación Nacional de Excombatientes – DNE) — the key Francoist veteran organization. On 1 April 1939, with the Republic defeated, Franco announced the end of the war, and a period of military and fascist celebrations followed. The Francoist authorities paid friendly homage to the German and Italian troops, and Spanish emissaries accompanied

75 AMAE, Gabinetto del Ministro e del Segretario Generale 1923-1943, b. 1217, f. Us 6.
76 José Antonio Girón, Si la memoria no me falla, Barcelona, 1994, pp. 44-47 and 56-58.
them on their return home. They were welcomed with great pomp and ceremony in Germany and Italy, in a climate of soldierly brotherhood between the three countries. It was at this time that the Nazis and the fascists signed the Pact of Steel. The displaying of victorious combatants parading through Spanish, German and Italian cities was a warning to the rest of Europe. When Franco formed a new government in August 1939, the fascists of the FET-JONS obtained important positions of power, and some sectors of the army fused with them. The falangist military officer Agustín Muñoz Grandes was appointed Secretary General of the party. It was at this moment when José Antonio Girón became the leader (Delegado Nacional) of the new falangist organization for the war veterans. Francoist veteran policy was designed in a context of intense entanglement between the European fascist powers.

The setting up of the DNE was slow, but it was fully in line with the Italian example. If in Italy, in November 1938, both the ANC and the ANMIG had been officially subordinated to the PNF, in Spain, the DNE was directly born as a dependent organism of the FET-JONS. The Spanish army kept the disabled veteran organization under control, but the organizational duality between war disabled and war veterans was comparable in Italy and Spain. (The Nazis followed the same principle in Germany, after Hitler decided, in March 1938, that all veteran organizations apart from the NSKOV were fused into a national-socialist ‘Kyffhäuser’). The Spanish DNE was a totalitarian structure, based on local and provincial cells subordinated to the national leadership, the same as the Italian ANC. As for the leaders, ex-officers coming from bourgeois background predominated in both the Spanish and the Italian organizations. Moreover, the Spanish regime developed a system of material privileges for the veterans, reserving for them an important quota of job vacancies, as had been the norm in Fascist Italy. In conclusion, the Francoist system of management of veterans’ benefits with political objectives had a precedent in Fascist Italy.

The most striking similarities between the DNE and the ANC regard the political discourse employed at that time. Both organizations insisted on the blind loyalty of the veterans to the Caudillo and the Duce. Both organizations exalted the military virtues of the veterans: obedience, the will to sacrifice. The Italian fascists had employed this kind of discourse before, for example during the worst years of the economic depression. In

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79 Ángel Alcalde, *Los excombatientes franquistas*, pp. 139-155.
81 James M. Diehl, *The Thanks of the Fatherland*, p. 42.
Spain, the economic conditions in the aftermath of war were no better, and the situation of the defeated was appalling, suffering both hunger and political persecution. Apart from certain political elites who occupied positions of power at the local and provincial level, the great majority of Francoist veterans were told to return silently to work. As was written in the main falangist journal, *Arriba*, the veterans should ‘return to work wherever they were ordered, without any other demand than being the vanguard of this distressing moment’. In Italy, Amilcare Rossi had employed exactly the same kind of discourse to explain what the duty of the veterans was: ‘to work and to shut up’, in the line with the fascist consign ‘believe, obey, fight’. These discourses acquired prominence with the outbreak of the Second World War.

The Italian fascist model of veteran politics culminated during the period between the beginning of the Second World War and the Italian intervention of June 1940. The fascist model became, at this point, totalitarian in nature. What marked the context of this final development was the entanglement with Nazi Germany, including the fascist veterans’ week-long visit to the III Reich in June 1939, and the friendship with the Spanish Falangists, exemplified by the huge metal wreath that Mussolini sent to Spain for the funeral of José Antonio Primo de Rivera in November 1939.

The fascist model of the political organization of war veterans can be described as totalitarian, since it implied the elimination of the boundaries between the category of veteran and that of member of the fascist party. This happened both in Spain and Italy, almost simultaneously. The Spanish party FET-JONS was first in taking the significant decision of opening the party membership to all the ex-combatants who had fought the war. On 4 December 1939, the FET-JONS Secretary General Agustín Muñoz Grandes signed a memorandum that awarded this right to those veterans who applied for it. Soon afterwards, in Italy, Mussolini took the equivalent decision of awarding the right to become members of the PNF to all the Italian veterans if they applied for it. On 7 December 1939, the ANC leaders had visited the *Duce* to declare the immutable loyalty

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82 (‘Volveremos al trabajo, allá donde se nos ordene, sin más exigencia que ser los primeros en el dolor y en la angustia de la hora’) *Arriba* (Madrid), 31 January 1940.
85 AMAE, Gabinetto del Ministro e del Segretario Generale 1923-1943, b. 1217, f. ‘Sepoltura e onoranze spoglia JA Primo de Rivera all’Escuriale a Madrid - Novembre 1939’; *Arriba*, 2 December 1939.
86 *Arriba*, 7 December 1939.
of the Italian veterans and to request that they be admitted to the PNF.\textsuperscript{87} Mussolini immediately accepted. Significantly, the veterans would obtain the quality of PNF member with seniority dating back to 3 March 1925, the date of the ANC fascistization. Thus, Fascism was reaching the long-awaited symbolic and real fusion between the fascist and the veteran. According to the fascists, this amalgamation demonstrated that ‘war and Fascism [were] two inseparable terms and factors’.\textsuperscript{88}

What was the meaning of the direct integration of the veterans into the fascist parties? First, it was a measure coherent with the radicalization of politics within the fascist regime and the Spanish dictatorship, as well as a reflection of the fascist ideological worldview. The fascists explained the adhesion of the war veterans from all the Italian ‘victories’ to the PNF as a ‘truly totalitarian’ measure.\textsuperscript{89} In a pamphlet probably written by Amilcare Rossi, it was said that there could not be \textit{combattentismo} outside Fascism, and that the true combatant was necessarily fascist. Fascism was, in fact, ‘a real army’, the expression of the best of the nation; for that reason Fascism must embrace the veterans. The inscription of veterans into the PNF matched all the requirements of morality and security, because the fascists considered the veterans, not only ‘excellent citizens’, but also ‘faithful fascists’.\textsuperscript{90} In their explication of the measure, the fascists recalled the veterans’ role in the origin of Fascism. Yet the fascists had not undertaken the direct integration of veterans into the PNF until now. It was only after nearly twenty years of propaganda and political violence when the fascists felt safe enough to consider any war veteran as a potential fascist militant without further scrutiny. By 1940, the fascists were fully convinced of the veterans’ trustworthiness.

The fascists had other reasons to take the decision of considering all veterans as potential fascist militants. This measure was not only a recognition of the fascist credentials of the veterans, but also a mechanism to attract more veterans to the fascist creed. Of course, being a member of the party implied benefits and privileges, and therefore, material interests probably motivated thousands of Italian veterans who joined the PNF at that time. In Italy, by 24 May 1940, the fascists claimed that more than 1 million veterans had requested to join the PNF.\textsuperscript{91} At a moment when the state

\textsuperscript{87} \textit{La Stampa}, 7 December 1939.
\textsuperscript{88} (‘\textit{Guerra e Fascismo sono due termini, due fattori inscindibili}’), \textit{Il Popolo d’Italia}, 9 December 1939.
\textsuperscript{89} (‘\textit{veramente totalitaria}’), Angelo Amico [Amilcare Rossi], \textit{Il significato dell’ammissione dei combattenti nel Partito}, Caltanissetta, 1940.
\textsuperscript{90} (‘\textit{ottimo cittadino’}, ‘\textit{fedele fascista}’) Ibid.
\textsuperscript{91} \textit{L’Italia combattente. L’Italia grigio-verde}, num. 10, 31 May 1940.
imposed the rationing of food,\textsuperscript{92} being a member of the fascist party could be useful to survive. This situation was particularly decisive in Francoist Spain.\textsuperscript{93} There, starving veterans often begged the falangist leaders for help.\textsuperscript{94} The practically totalitarian control of media that characterized these fascist dictatorships makes it extremely difficult to examine the real opinions of the veterans, but the fascist organizational structures were able to perform their duties without regard to the intimate feelings of their members. The fascist veteran discourse, both in Italy and Spain, was created and delivered by a very restricted elite of fascist leaders, who were, in the end, mere megaphones for the regime’s official discourse. Even in Nazi Germany, the veterans would be utilized for propaganda purposes during the war.\textsuperscript{95} The war veterans were perhaps fully fascistized in Italy, Spain and Germany, but this fascistization converted them, by and large, into a purely symbolic reference, ready for the war propaganda, a mute pawn on the hands of fascist regimes.

Finally, merging fascists and veterans helped to bridge the gap between one war and another, creating the society constantly ready for war for which the fascists yearned. Fascism was creating a system in which war service was rewarded in such a way that new sectors of the population would be prepared and willing to become combatants in subsequent wars, even if not necessarily sharing the fascist ideology. The whole fascist regime, with its multiple organizations and efforts for the military education of the new generations, served this purpose, and the role of the fascist discourses and organizations for the war veterans can be considered a crucial instrument to reach these goals. The actual extent to which the regimes succeeded in this objective was neither total nor insignificant, but rather somewhere in between. In June 1940, Italians went to war again, and according to the fascists more than 140,000 former veterans of the Great War served militarily once more.\textsuperscript{96} However, most of them were obliged to do so. In June 1941, when the Germans attacked the Soviet Union, the FET-JONS organized a Spanish military unit to join the Russian campaign: the Blue Division. Thousands of falangist young men joined it, thus obtaining the coveted condition of excombatiente following their eventual return.\textsuperscript{97} Still, many Spanish soldiers were forced to fight in Russia, and

\textsuperscript{92} L’Italia combattente. L’Italia grigio-verde, num. 2, 31 January 1940.
\textsuperscript{93} Miguel Ángel del Arco, ‘Hunger and the Consolidation of the Francoist Regime (1939-1951)’, European History Quarterly, 40, 3 (2010), pp. 458-483.
\textsuperscript{94} Ángel Alcalde, Los excombatientes franquistas, p. 169.
\textsuperscript{95} Niels Löffelbein, Ehrenbürger der Nation, pp. 414-437.
\textsuperscript{96} L’Italia combattente. L’Italia grigio-verde, num. 23, 31 December 1940.
\textsuperscript{97} Ángel Alcalde, Los excombatientes franquistas, pp. 171-178.
hundreds of former leftists joined the endeavour in order to expiate an inconvenient political past.  

All these nuances notwithstanding, the veterans had become a necessary symbolic link for the reproduction and military expansion of fascism.

**Fascist and French veterans and the path towards Vichy France**

France was the second case in which fascist veteran politics substantially contributed to the establishment of a dictatorship. On 17 June 1940, after the French III Republic had collapsed in the face of the overwhelming German invasion and the opportunistic Italian attack, Marshall Pétain, in his message to the French citizens, offered himself as the new governor of the country. Pétain invited the French to cease the resistance against the invaders, while stating that he was ‘sure of the support of the war veterans whom he had the honour of commanding’. The French veterans, organized in the Légion Française des Combattants, would become one of the pillars of the new collaborationist regime of Vichy. Even if both the Spanish and the French republics were destroyed by war, the historical process by which a dictatorship was established in France was very different to the Spanish path towards a fascist-inspired regime. Correspondingly, the role of the veterans in this French evolution, if fundamental like in Spain, was also quite distinct. Yet one key factor operated in both cases: the influence of Fascist Italy, and in the case of France the fascist veterans had a particular role.

My chief argument here is that without the precedent of Fascist Italy and without the previous numerous contacts and exchanges established between relevant veteran elites from France and Italy, it would not have been possible to establish in 1940 an authoritarian collaborationist regime in France with the participation of war veterans. This introduction of fascist-inspired veteran politics to France presents many particularities, for it was not only an adaptation, but also the end of an endogenous French evolution. Therefore, the transfer did not imply the creation of veteran structures that would be directly equivalent to the Italian system, as had been the case in Spain. The French precedents for unsuccessful veteran attempts of organizational unification, comparable to the unification processes of British and American veteran groups, must be taken into account. Yet saying that the LFC was the natural and long-awaited culmination of the French veterans’ desires for unification would be a fully

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98 José Luis Rodríguez Jiménez, *De héroes e indeseables. La División Azul*, Madrid, Espasa, 2007.
99 (‘sûr de l'appui des anciens combattants que j'ai eu la fierté de commander’)
100 Chris Millington, *From Victory to Vichy*. 

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teleological explanation not sustained by comparative or transnational analysis. The origin of the LFC cannot be understood without the Italian fascist factor, and, as an organization and political entity, it had much more to do with the fascist veteran associations than with the British or American Legions. However, the transfer that we are uncovering took place also in the realm of discourses, practices and representations.

It may be surprising that the adaptation of the fascist model of veteran politics to France culminated amidst a full rupture between the French and the Italian fascist veterans. The status of the bi-lateral relations between France and Italy provoked this break. In the advent of the Front Populaire, Italian-French relations had clearly cooled. With the intervention in Spain, the Italian-German alliance took shape, while Italian ties with her ‘Latin sister’ loosened. During 1937, the meetings between French and fascist veterans on French soil became occasions to reveal profound divergences, particularly with the UF. Even though the UF leader Henri Pichot, maintained cordial relations with the Nazi Oberlindober, the French veteran was very critical of the totalitarian style of politics. In contrast, the UNC still tried to maintain friendly relations with the fascist veterans.

Then, other international events worsened the situation. The German Anschluss pushed the Italians to focus on the Mediterranean as their main, if not only, sphere of influence and expansion. And in this region, the fascists clashed with French and British interests. The German annexation of Austria had been a clear defeat for the traditional interests of Italy on its northern border, but the Italian alliance with Germany was unquestionable. A friendly visit of 500 Nazi veterans to Rome shortly after the Anschluss served to confirm it. And while Mussolini reached a favourable agreement with the British regarding the Mediterranean, relations with France deteriorated further. In May 1938, the London meeting of the Permanent International Committee of Veterans ended with the withdrawal of the French representatives (Pichot, Goy and Desbons) who understood that the Nazi representative —the Duke of Saxe-Coburg— had been appointed the new president as a result of the fascist plan, in spite of open

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101 AMAE, Società delle Nazioni 1919-1932, b. 66, f. ‘Combattenti - Mutilati e Reduci di guerra’, sf. ‘Riunione degli ex-combattenti francesi a Aix-les Bains (maggio 1937)’.
103 L’Italia combattente. L’Italia grigio-verde, num. 4, 28 February 1938; Il Popolo d’Italia, 19 March 1938; Deutsche Kriegsopfersversorgung, num. 8 (May 1938); .
French opposition.\textsuperscript{104} This was a serious obstacle for the French-Italian friendship. Even the Italy-based \textit{Union d’Anciens Combattants France-Italie}, led by Henri Mirauchaux was unable to maintain the unity of French and the fascist veterans. Yet the admiration of French veterans for Fascist Italy did not really fade. In February 1938, the last amicable meeting of the \textit{Union} took place, with a banquet, a speech given by Delcroix, and with André Gervais’ praise of the fascist motto ‘believe, obey, fight’ in the name of the French veterans.\textsuperscript{105} As we will see, the end of the fraternal relationship did not imply the abandonment of fascist discourses among certain groups of French veterans.

The Munich pact momentarily satisfied the pro-Italian sectors of the French veterans who still believed in the friendship with the fascists,\textsuperscript{106} but the final rupture came just a few weeks later. Until then, with certain incredulity, fascist-friendly French veterans had observed the increasing Italian verbal attacks on France.\textsuperscript{107} Still, it could not have come as a total surprise that, at the end of December 1938, following orders from the PNF, the fascist veterans abandoned the \textit{Union d’Anciens Combattants France-Italie}.\textsuperscript{108} (As we know, the Italian veterans’ organizations had been submitted to the authority of the PNF in November 1938). By then, as Henri Mirauchaux regretfully wrote, the international action of the war veterans was ‘dead’.\textsuperscript{109} Within a few months, Mirauchaux saw his own organization disappear. During 1939, the official position of the fascist veterans became frankly hostile to the French, and this reality shows the extent to which the ANC and its newspaper had become mere tools of regime propaganda.\textsuperscript{110} Veterans such as Mirauchaux, and probably also Delcroix, regretted the bringing to an end of their long-lasting friendly relationship, but the decision of the fascist regime prevailed, and not even a last farewell encounter between French and Italian veterans —planned for in Sardinia in January 1939— was allowed to take place.\textsuperscript{111} An exchange of reproachful letters between, on the one hand, Delcroix and Rossi, and on the other hand, Gervais, Mirauchaux and the French representatives of the

\textsuperscript{104} Cahiers de l’Union Fédérale, num. 146-147, 10-20 June 1938.
\textsuperscript{105} Le Trait d’Union, num. 2 (February 1938).
\textsuperscript{106} Le Trait d’Union, num. 9-10 (September-October 1938).
\textsuperscript{107} Le Trait d’Union, num. 8 (August 1938).
\textsuperscript{108} L’Italia combattente. L’Italia grigio-verde, supplement num. 11 to num. 23, 31 December 1938; La Voix du Combattant, 21 January 1939.
\textsuperscript{109} (‘L’action internationale des AC est morte’), Le Trait d’Union, num. 12 (December 1938).
\textsuperscript{110} See, for example, L’Italia combattente. L’Italia grigio-verde, num. 1, 15 January 1939, num. 4, 28 February 1939, num. 5, 15 March 1939; cfr. La Voix du Combattant, 28 January 1939.
\textsuperscript{111} ACS, MI, PS, G1, b. 30, f. 330 ‘Unione Combattenti Francia-Italia’.
FIDAC, did nothing but confirm the official bitter rupture between the fascists and the French veterans.\footnote{La Voix du Combattant, 11 February, 25 March 1939.}

Despite the severed ties with Italy, the French veteran organizations were set on adopting authoritarian traits. The French UF had started to transform its organizational structure in a way that brought it ideologically closer to the UNC.\footnote{Antoine Prost, Les anciens combattants, vol. 1, pp. 195-196.} In other words, the largest French centre-left veteran organization acquired right-wing qualities. The leader Henri Pichot, despite his republican and democratic convictions, began to strive for the formation of a new national government, to concentrate all the forces of French society. Hence, on 20 April 1938, Pichot made a call for the formation of a government of ‘public safety’ formed by the veterans.\footnote{La Voix du Combattant, 20 April 1938.} Recognising that parliamentary democracy was exhausted, he proposed that the veterans help form a capable government. On this basis, the rapprochement between the UF and the UNC was easier, and, after the pact of Munich, both associations converged in a common campaign of ‘civic action’.\footnote{Antoine Prost, Les anciens combattants, vol. 1, pp. 197-198.} In an international context where the security of France was in danger, both associations began to collaborate. After the proposal of Henri Pichot, Jean Goy and the UNC joined this project of ‘national reconciliation’.\footnote{La Voix du Combattant, 7 January 1939.} Both veteran leaders, supported by other minor associations, launched a joint programme of ‘national concentration’ (‘rassemblement national’), which implied working for the rearmament of France and the preparation for its defence.\footnote{La Voix du Combattant, 4 February 1939.} Finally, as a consequence of this convergence, on 12 November 1939, both the UF and the UNC founded the Légion des Combattants Français. This was a reflection of their shared desire of ‘moral revival’ and ‘economic resurrection’.\footnote{‘renouveau moral’, ‘résurrection économique’) La Voix du Combattant, 18 November 1939.} Meanwhile, the French Confederation of Veterans Associations gathered the rest of organizations in a similarly-named platform, the Légion Française des Combattants. Yet the most important historical development was, in short, that the two main French veteran associations had moved together towards authoritarianism.\footnote{Chris Millington, From Victory to Vichy, pp. 194-217.}

Although the political orientation of the main French veteran associations during this period cannot be defined as fascist, it seems clear that the calls for the veterans’ participation in the government of France cannot be understood without the precedent of Fascism. Deeply ingrained beliefs about the leading role that the war veterans had...
allegedly attained in Fascist Italy and even Nazi Germany—the old myth of the fascist veterans—had long since become part of the French veteran worldview. This preconception operated in the minds of French veteran leaders who, furthermore, had direct and frequent contacts with both fascists and Nazis. It was largely thanks to the fascist example that the possibility of practicing authoritarian politics was part of the veterans’ horizon of expectations. However, despite the French veterans’ disposition towards authoritarianism, these political projects still lacked clear fascist-inspired traits. It would be only after June 1940 that French veteran politics would be reshaped in a manner which incorporated more clearly fascist characteristics, both in organizational and discursive aspects.

Does the prominence of veteran politics in Vichy allow us to speak about fascism? The answer is not straightforward. The regime of Vichy was the opportunity to put into practice a ‘National Revolution’ in which the war veterans would play a key role. This project in theory matched the fascist experience. Nevertheless, if authoritarian tendencies had undoubtedly motivated Pétain’s call for the veterans’ support, it is also true that, by June 1940, the real influence of the veteran movement over the country had substantially diminished. Demanding that the war veterans be the basis of a new France did not have the same connotations that such an appeal would have had in the aftermath of the Great War. Veterans were far from the only group rallied to Pétain; many other sectors of society backed the new collaborationist regime, built on the ruins of a discredited Republic. The new Légion Française des Combattants (LFC), created by the law of 29 August 1940 signed by Pétain, would channel this popular support into a structure under the control of the regime, yet this organization implied leaving aside the option of a single-party. Xavier Vallat, a one-eyed veteran and former member of the Faisceau and the Croix de Feu, was appointed head of Vichy’s general secretariat for war veterans, and was the principal mind behind the organisation of the LFC. (Later, he would become the general commissary for the Jewish question, being responsible of the persecutions of the Jews under the regime.) Yet if important personalities of the veteran movement composed the leading cadres of Vichy, the main leaders of the French fascist leagues remained in German-occupied Paris during the

121 Robert O. Paxton, Vichy France.
war. When compared with the fascist powers, the role of the French veterans in Vichy seems to represent simultaneously a commonality and a distinguishing feature.

However, Vichy endowed the LFC with duties and functions that in some aspects matched those of the fascist veterans in Italy. The fundamental point in common was the declared obedience and loyalty to the leader of the nation. In the French case, this charismatic figure was Marshall Pétain, who also became the honorific head of the veteran organization. As the LFC assumed the functions of a single-party, the position of Pétain was homologous to that of Franco and Mussolini. Meanwhile, Xavier Vallat, as secretary general for the war veterans, played in France the role that the secretary general of the FET-JONS and the PNF respectively played in Spain and Italy. (Later, Vallat appointed ass head of the LFC the anti-communist officer Georges Loustaunau-Lacau, who would soon be replaced by Émile Meaux). The legionnaires had to be the ‘partisans of the National Revolution’.124 A rhetoric insisting on the sacrifice and selfless work of the legionnaires was the most common expression of this allegedly revolutionary task, thus paralleling the Spanish and Italian cases. Apart from these aspects, the members of the LFC, with their uniforms and martial symbology, were omnipresent in the militaristic and fascist-inspired rituals of the regime. From November 1941, in a typically fascist organizational development, the LFC accepted members without war experience, organized within the ‘Volunteers of the National Revolution’. Furthermore, an armed militia was created out of the LFC. At its peak, the LFC would reach 1.4 million members in Vichy France, including the colonies.125

Moreover, the construction of the LFC cannot be fully understood without the precedent of the fascist veterans’ organizations and discourses. The emblem of the organization had a clearly fascist aesthetic, particularly as it introduced the sword into the traditional symbology of the French veterans (Image 42). The LFC, a highly centralized and hierarchical structure, was set up, turning on many occasions to the same former leaders of the veteran movement, particularly the UNC, or former leagues like the Croix de Feu and the Jeunesses Patriotes.126 In fact, most of the political discourse and doctrine of Vichy came from the PSF, the heir of the Croix de Feu.127

124 (‘partisans de la Révolution nationale’), La Légion. Organe officiel de la Légion Française des Combattants (Vichy), 20 November 1940.
125 Jean-Paul Cointet, La Légion Française des Combattants.
Moreover, other characteristics of Vichy’s political organization for the *anciens combattants* had their origins in the long friendship between conservative French veterans and the fascists.

The case of André Gervais is perhaps the most significant. As we know, he had been one of the leading figures of the friendship between French and fascist veterans. Particularly during 1934-1935 several of his publications in French and Italian had praised the Italian model of veteran organization. In 1936, Gervais, a member of the UF, had written a programmatic text for the new youth section of this association. This organizational development recalls, for example, the youth section that the *Stahlhelm* had created during its fascist-inspired evolution. In fact, André Gervais had underlined the need for a national ‘mystic’ for the French youth, similar to the spirit of the Italian fascists and the German national-socialists.\(^{128}\) When the LFC was created, Gervais became a departmental leader and continued publishing his writings in the LFC organs.\(^{129}\) For him, the LFC was the hope of France.\(^{130}\) In 1942, Gervais’ book *L’esprit légionnaire* synthesised his thoughts about renewing the spirit of the Great War combatants, in order to reconstruct France at the orders of Pétain.\(^{131}\) This was an attempt to create an original doctrine for the LFC, although Fascist Italy was an influential precedent impossible to ignore.


\(^{129}\) See, for example, *La Légion. Revue Mensuelle Illustrée publiée par la Légion Française des Combattants* (Vichy), num. 3 (August 1941).


For all these reasons, it is not surprising that historians have described the LFC as part of the fascist ‘temptation’ in France.\textsuperscript{132} Whether the LFC represented only a ‘temptation’ or a fully-fledged French fascist phenomenon is a matter of discussion, as part of the wide scholarly debate about the existence and relevance of fascism in France. Here, I have underlined the fact that such a political evolution of the French veteran movement would have been impossible without the imposing precedent of Fascist Italy. France was not ‘allergic’ to fascism, but rather she was a country in which ample social and political sectors had assumed the fascist style of politics and fascist political programmes such as the ‘National Revolution’, by direct contagion from the original source —Italy. And this contagion, as I have demonstrated here, was partially caused by the long history of friendly relationships between French and Italian fascist veterans, implying the introduction of fascist discourses and organizational principles to France.

\textsuperscript{132} Jean-Paul Cointet, \textit{La Légion Française des Combattants}. 
Conclusions

This PhD dissertation has examined the historical relationship between war veterans and fascism during the European interwar period from a transnational point of view. Such a line of inquiry had never before been explored with the range and depth of scope and the amount and diversity of empirical evidence, that this work has sought to provide. In this conclusion, I will summarize the findings of my research, explaining how it contributes to historical knowledge, and then reflect on how this piece of research helps us to better understand fascism as a transnational phenomenon.

Fascism and veterans

Historians have discussed on many occasions the link that there seemingly existed between individual ex-combatants, veteran groups and organizations, and the origin of the fascist movements in Italy, Germany and even France. Scholars assumed that, as the conspicuous cases of Hitler, Mussolini, Röhm, Balbo, Heß, Bottai and many others suggest, the fascists and the Nazis had very often been former soldiers, having served in the trenches of the Great War, or joined paramilitary formations after November 1918. Such realities would reveal the ‘brutalizing’ effect that, according to George L. Mosse, the Great War had on a generation. However, specialists on the history of the veteran movements recalled that, as the examples of Henri Pichot, René Cassin, Erich Maria Remarque, Emilio Lussu, Erich Kuttner, Ferruccio Parri and many others demonstrate, ex-combatants of the First World War predominantly became committed pacifists and democrats. If we concede the utility of Mosse’s notion, we can say that one side of the coin included the fascists and national-socialists, and the other those internationalists and pacifists that avoided, or were not responsive to, ‘brutalization’. Yet in reality, the number of people that served as soldiers during the First World War was so high that, by the same token, we might find examples of war veterans involved in any facet human activity, whether political or not, during the interwar period. And furthermore, thousands of people without combat experience became leading fascists and national-socialists. It is true that the veterans’ know-how was a coveted asset for the fascists in their violent quest for political power, but veterans could also put their combat skills against the fascists, as they did in Italy (arditi del popolo) and Germany (Rote Frontkämpferbund). Put simply, it is misleading to categorize war veterans into defined
ideologies or political sectors, to affirm that veterans were more inclined to have a certain behaviour or mind-set.

Whereas it is true that many war veterans shared a set of common experiences related to mass warfare — and therefore they showed in different societies a rather similar tendency to spontaneously create associations and defend their material interests —, there was no unity of feelings and ideals that defined them. Even in those countries where veteran associations mobilized hundreds of thousands of men, the majority of people who actually had been soldiers during the First World War never joined these groups or did so without a real commitment. It was not only the typical young, bourgeois, nationalist war volunteer — a figure common to France, Britain, Germany and Italy — who had the right to be labelled a ‘veteran’. Illiterate peasant servicemen also were veterans, and their opinions and emotions often differed much from those of their officers. Moreover, the political diversity of the veteran associations in the aftermath of war is impressive. Only as time passed, when the transnational symbol of the veteran acquired certain meanings — as this dissertation has shown —, the veteran organizations in Europe became more homogeneously patriotic, nationalistic, and right-wing, and less democratic, pacifist and orientated to the left than before. The pacifist and republican combatant writer Henri Barbusse, a famous figure in early 1919 among European veterans, was gradually eclipsed by fascist-veteran ‘stars’ during the 1920s, to end up relegated, as a symbol of the veterans of the world, to ostracism. This evolution was, however, by no means preordained.

In addition, the very notion of the ‘veteran’ could embody significantly different meanings depending not only on the nation-state, but also on the language. What was a war veteran? Even before the concept was officially defined by legislation, historical actors had already endowed it with implicit, subjective connotations that varied according to the language employed. It was not exactly the same to say, as in Britain, ex-servicemen, as to use the more aggressive word combattenti, as in Italy. Nor was it neutral to call them Kriegsopfer (‘war victim’) or Frontkämpfer (‘front-fighter’), as the Nazis sometimes did, instead of naming them Ehemalige Kriegsteilnehmer (literally, ‘former participant in war’). In this dissertation, I have utilized the concept of ‘veteran’, most common in the United States, as the most unbiased option available to analyse this part of European history.

Having recognised the constructed nature of the category of veteran, a substantial part of my dissertation has been devoted to explaining the transnational
process of symbolic appropriation of the idea of the war veteran by nationalist, counterrevolutionary and fascist forces. Symbolic appropriation was the core reason why, despite the fact that millions of European ex-soldiers did not become outright warmongers but rather instinctive pacifists during the interwar period, people easily associated the image of the fascist with the symbol of the veteran.

I have argued that it was in Italy during the early post-war period that the process of symbolic appropriation was most consequential. In Italy, the controversy about the meaning of the war was particularly serious, given the bitter confrontation between interventionists and neutralists. The inception of Fascism, therefore, must be understood in its context. Only by taking simultaneously into account Mussolini’s particular ideological position during the war, the precedent of the Russian revolution, and the anxieties after Caporetto, can the connection between the symbol of the veteran and the new emerging ideology of Italian Fascism be fully understood. After 1917, preventing the transformation of the soldiers into socialist revolutionaries became an urgent task in the main belligerent countries, and even more so in Italy. Yet, whereas in a France enthused by victory, the conservative, patriotic and nationalist forces embodied by Clemenceau partially succeeded in maintaining both practically and symbolically the republican allegiance of the masses of soldiers,\(^1\) in a crisis-ridden Italy ex-combatants’ opinions were much more fragmented and inclined to extremes. By the end of 1919 in Italy, after violent physical and discursive confrontations, it was not only the symbol of the *arditi*, but also the symbol of the veteran, that had acquired a strong anti-Bolshevik bias. Paradoxically, the still-unsuccessful fascist movement would go on to be the main beneficiary of this process. Significantly, Italo Balbo wrote in his 1922 diary that ‘without Mussolini, three-quarters of the Italian youth returning from the trenches would have become Bolsheviks’.\(^2\)

The precedent of paramilitary formations crushing revolutions in central Europe became an important element of the transnational process of symbolical appropriation of the veteran in an anti-Bolshevik sense, yet in Germany the connection between veterans and proto-fascist movements and ideologies is not so clear as is often supposed. The conservative *Stahlhelm* slowly defined a political stance regarding Weimar. By the time Hitler started his political career in the DAP (later NSDAP), the

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symbolic appropriation of the veteran by the Italian fascist movement was already crystallizing. In early- and mid-1921, the stereotype of the ‘fascist veteran’ (commonly a patriotic, young, decorated ex-officer with front experience willing to restore ‘victory’ and exterminate socialism) was already circulating from Italy to Switzerland, Austria, France, Spain and Germany, particularly Bavaria. I have argued that this communicative process, disregarded by historians until now, illuminates the transnational formation of non-Italian fascisms, including the German case. Even in Italy, real ex-soldiers started to positively believe that Fascism was the archetypical expression of the veteran spirit, thus reinforcing the nascent stereotype. The self-fulfilling prophecy of Mussolini’s *trincerocrazia* was becoming true, not only in Italy, since it was not a hermetically-isolated country.

After the March on Rome, not just a stereotype, but an outright political myth boosted the transformation of fascism into a transnational phenomenon. The myth of the fascist veterans, drawn from the self-representation and self-stylization of the fascists as veterans and heirs of the fallen soldiers, stimulated the proliferation of fascist-inspired political groups in some of the closest European regions to Italy. Whereas under Mussolini’s government the veteran organizations were ruthlessly forced to accept PNF control and the preponderance of the fascist discourse, symbols, and commemorative framework, in France and Germany fascistization was not initially imposed from above. Legends about the Italian regime and the alleged good life veterans enjoyed under Mussolini’s leadership led to the progressive fascistization of veteran organizations like the *Stahlhelm*, or to the foundation of fascist parties of self-nominated ex-combatants such as the French *Faisceau*. Not even the main international organization of veterans (the FIDAC) was immune to fascist myths. In this context the fascist regime could even further reinforce its monopoly over the symbol of the war veteran, advancing towards new totalitarian goals.

During the 1930s, the fascist veterans acquired new symbolic and practical roles, as the European context fundamentally changed. The Nazi movement irrupted onto the scene, while the *Stahlhelm* became the main German interlocutor of Italian Fascism. New actors also played a role in this international scenario; in particular, French and Spanish fascist movements that had to define a position regarding the transnational symbol of the fascist veteran. This symbolic reference was actually personified by active fascist politicians, such as Carlo Delcroix and Amilcare Rossi, around whom a network of contacts between European fascist-friendly veterans and would-be fascists
was built. It was a period of wide intellectual struggles around the meaning of the past war experience, but as an important backlash replicated the great success of Remarque, fascism continued to be the most influential political option in veteran politics. With the coming of the Third Reich, Germany experienced an upsurge in the special treatment given to honour war veterans, while the veteran organizations were Nazified. Nazi Germany defined its veteran politics following the model of Fascist Italy. Even in France, around 1934, the essentially-republican veteran associations moved towards authoritarianism and paramilitarism. The events in Paris on 6 February 1934 must be put in relation, not only with these processes, but also with the subsequent fascist and national-socialist attempts to construct a fascist European entente, in which veterans had a prominent position. However, geostrategic issues left this dream unfulfilled.

In the end, the persisting transnational identification between the war veterans and fascism in the symbolic realm contributed much to bringing war to Europe once more. If the Italian attack on Ethiopia shocked many citizens across the world into realising the fascist threat to peace, veteran politics remained an instrument through which Italian Fascism could reinforce its power and influence both within Italy and in the international sphere. Pacifism and anti-fascism suffered a long crisis throughout the Ethiopian conflict and the Spanish Civil War. The anti-fascists’ attempts to divest the transnational symbol of the veteran of its ultra-nationalist, aggressive and antidemocratic connotations were not successful. People across the world denounced the clear relation between fascism and war, but the struggle of international groups of pacifist veterans ultimately failed. The fascists’ and the Nazis’ cunning political manoeuvres fundamentally undermined the functioning of the transnational networks of veterans, whose supposed objective was the preservation of peace.

Finally, in 1939-1940, when war waged against democratic states resulted in the imposition of fascist and authoritarian dictatorships in Spain and France, the long-developed fascist model of veteran politics was transferred to these countries. This process, however, was not without selection, adaptation, and transformation. It is reasonable to state that the Spanish and the Italian fascist models of veteran organization evolved in parallel over the course of some months. Both the FET-JONS and the PNF decided, at the same time —December 1939— to promote the transformation of all veterans into members of the party. Veterans had almost identical symbolic roles in Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, and Francoist Spain. After June 1940, it is not surprising, therefore, that Pétain required the French veterans to support the
‘National Revolution’ that Vichy was attempting to enforce. At that time, in the minds of millions of Europeans, the symbol of the fascist and the symbol of the veteran had coalesced.

I have surveyed the main findings of my dissertation, but, what does the transnational history of the relationship between veterans and the fascist movements and regimes teach us about the overall phenomenon of fascism? On the one hand, this dissertation has shed light on the essential link between fascism and war. On the other hand, my research has advanced towards a new transnational definition of fascism.

*Fascism and war*

The focus on the war veterans has allowed us to deeply explore connections between the experience of war and the origin and evolution of fascism. Even though during the interwar period contemporaries still lived in too close a proximity to the past war experience as to fully realize the historical essentiality of war as the main causal and driving force of fascism, there were many early commentators who pointed out that fascism derived from war. And during the 1930s, one of the key arguments of the transnational anti-fascist movement was its assertion of the equation between war and fascism. The fascists themselves had no interest in hiding that correlation; rather they boasted about it. Piero Bolzon, a prominent fascist ex-ardito, wrote in 1930: ‘Fascism without war would be a subtle fraud, grotesque bragging, a wordy exegesis, an empty expression of the fatherland’. Although Hitler deceived many Europeans, his discourses about ‘peace’ were just a smokescreen for the flagrant rearmament and militarization of Germany during the Third Reich. Since there was no actual war during most of the period of the existence of fascism in most European regions between 1919 and 1939 —if we disregard political violence, persecutions and social exclusion—, fascism embraced war above all in the symbolic sphere. Discourse, rituals and symbology were the elements that primarily materialized the idealised marriage between warfare and fascism. This is the reason why cultural analysis must be introduced to understand the relationship between fascism and war; the spheres of culture, social practice and politics cannot be separated.

After decades focusing on other factors, such as economic crisis, class struggles, incomplete modernization, cultural and intellectual developments, historians

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3 Quoted in *Bollettino della Federazione Provinciale Mantovana dell’Associazione Nazionale Combattenti*, num. 7, June 1930.
have turned, in recent years, to highlight the crucial elements of violence and war in their explanations. Yet the cultural perspectives on the relationship between war and fascism have seldom eluded the controversial Mossean paradigm. By describing the typical viewpoint of the fascists as regards the war experience, George L. Mosse was probably right in pointing at the ‘myth of the war experience’ as a key feature that did not survive 1945. However, the war veterans, alleged agents of such ‘brutalization’, did not play the role they are often ascribed. War veterans as a whole were not ‘brutalized’ by the war experience. ‘Brutalization’, I suggest, is a concept with an exclusively descriptive potential, since it serves only to denote the ‘brutal’ political behaviour of people that might have or might not have been ex-combatants. ‘Brutalization’ has no analytical capacity to explain why some war veterans exerted political violence after the war; empirical research often highlights different causes for that outcome. It is not the case that in Italy and Germany war veterans were normally ‘brutalized’ —by war or by ‘defeat’—, while in France, Britain or elsewhere they were not. ‘Cultures of victory’ and ‘cultures of defeat’ do not explain the complexity of the long relationship between war and fascism in the interwar period. The relationship between, on the one hand, war and veterans, and on the other hand, fascism, cannot be explained on that conceptual basis.

As I have argued in this dissertation, it was the manipulation of discourses and symbols that produced the fascist notion of ‘war veteran’ during the interwar period. Indeed, by simply looking at the post-war constructed stereotype and myth of the fascist veterans, the historian can gain a deep insight into the relationship between veterans and fascism. This cultural approach allows us to reach conclusions that correlate with the historical reality. The truth is that in the some regions, particularly in Italy, the symbol of the veterans acquired certain meanings linked to a particular political behaviour — fascism. This constructed ideal circulated, was transferred, reworked and adapted by historical actors in different regions outside Italy. After this symbolic appropriation, therefore, there was a process of transnational political communication. Thus, the mythical construct transformed into extended social and political practices in different European countries. This was the reason why ‘fascist veterans’ emerged in distant places, founding fascist or fascist-like movements and parties.

Hence, we can conclude that the ex-soldiers of the Great War, by and large, were not really transmitters of the war experience to the rest of society. A tiny portion of the whole mass of veterans deliberately strived to exert that role. However, a transnational
constructed notion of the ‘veteran’ did become a fundamental tool for fascism to pursue the politics of war in interwar Europe; I have shown in detail how fascism fabricated and wielded this instrument of politics. Moreover, the multiple versions of the mythical construct of the fascist veteran clearly served the purpose of militarizing society. These conclusions, therefore, are my key contribution to understanding the essential relationship between fascism and war.

Transnational fascism

Further insight into the history of fascism can be drawn from the transnational study of fascist veteran politics. We saw that when the fascist model for the veterans’ organization and political discourse consolidated in Italy, it became a platform for the expansion of fascism on the continent. Contacts between Italian fascist veterans and ex-combatants from other countries, particularly Germany and France, as well as networks of veteran associations, reveal the transnational dimension of fascism. I have demonstrated how fascist veterans’ networks and encounters paved the way for the transfer of the fascist model of veteran politics not only to the Third Reich, but also to the new Spanish and French dictatorships as late as 1939-1940. Fascist veteran politics, therefore, was crucial in transforming an initially Italian phenomenon into a truly transnational one.

In my view, it is more accurate to talk about ‘transnational fascism’ than ‘generic’ fascism. In the historian’s debates on the nature of fascism, there has been a central division between those who defended the idea that fascism was a ‘generic’ ideology, and those who underlined the national, incomparable character of both Italian Fascism and German National-Socialism. But even among the former, ‘generic’ fascism was seen as something composed of different ‘national’ variables or permutations. Moreover, general works on ‘generic’ fascism normally succumbed to the necessity of analysing separately the different national ‘paths’ towards fascism (or totalitarianism), in order to compare them and draw lessons from the resulting picture. Historians designed tables to statically categorize the different national examples of ‘fascist’ or ‘authoritarian’ regimes. By doing so, historians produced the impression that ‘fascism’ had appeared rather independently in distant parts of Europe and even the World, at roughly the same time, as a result of the fears deriving from the experience of crisis.

Instead, this dissertation has tried to stress that fascism had a unique origin, which can be clearly situated in space and time. While pointing to the importance of the
symbol of the veteran in that inception process, I have argued that fascism was the creation of Mussolini and his entourage in the context of Italy 1917-1919—even if transnational factors must be taken into account. Nevertheless, the process of the rise and the maturation of Italian Fascism as an extreme-right movement in Italy during 1921 was paralleled by its transformation into a transnational phenomenon. I have focused on the role of the stereotype of the fascist veteran, and then on the myth of the fascist veterans, to explain what I call the process of transnationalization of fascism.

I affirm that there existed, since 1921, and particularly since October 1922, a process of transnational fascistization of veteran politics in Europe, key to understanding the formation of fascism as a transnational phenomenon. I do not deny that other aspects of Italian Fascism and its ideology and style could become even more influential than veteran politics, and therefore contributed to this transnationalization. Yet my point here is that no other fascism in the interwar period can be understood without taking into account the Italian original model. Not even the NSDAP, in spite of its many particularities—as the case of veteran politics demonstrates. Besides, transnational fascistization implied that Italian Fascism also introduced new features inspired or provoked by what was happening abroad, particularly during the second half of the 1930s when it followed the model of the assertive Nazis. Once the transnationalization of fascism was set in motion, it was a process working in different directions.

Networks of individuals and organizations, political tourism, diplomacy, transfers of knowledge, etc., featured the transnationalization of fascism during the interwar period. At the beginning, accounts of the fascist actions in Italy helped to attract the attention of political actors from different countries to the emerging and unprecedented political movement. Thus fascism spread out beyond its original core in central and northern Italy. Firstly, encapsulated in narratives and images, it passed through neighbouring regions such as Switzerland and Austria, reaching more fertile pastures where it would take root, such as Bavaria. Groups emulating fascism appeared there, trying to re-enact the March on Rome (Hitler’s 1923 putsch can be seen as a failed example of that). Later, fascism was replicated throughout Germany, in Paris, across France, on the Iberian Peninsula, in Britain, in Eastern Europe… And as Italian Fascism consolidated, different political structures worked to create a kind of fascist international. Even if this objective never materialized, transnational fascism did. During the 1930s, as we have seen through the history of the veterans’ networks,
fascism performed in a transnational political space that was not delimited by borders, but by social practice, discourse and symbols. Transnational fascism might be mapped in continental terms, indeed, not looking at national histories, but rather at the web of contacts, transfers and relations which the fascists from many European regions created.

This dissertation has shown how the perspectives of transnational history may contribute to explaining fascism differently, while revealing processes that had been nearly completely disregarded until now. Such a historiographical endeavour has required the examination of new subjects of research like networks, transfers and contacts, adopting a more flexible working concept of fascism, better understood as a transnational notion that historical actors themselves manipulated to pursue their objectives. My transnational perspective led me to merge the cultural analysis of discourse, symbols and myths, with an approach to empirical evidence and facts that is typical of other historiographical practices, such as social history and international relations history. This dissertation has sought to stress that the spheres of culture and society are hardly divisible. Moreover, analytical perspectives based on the nation-state were transcended, to place the explanation of transnational fascism within a different sort of spatial framework. Accepting the innovative concept of ‘transnational fascism’ has meant breaking free from essentialisms and rigid categorization. Also, my dissertation has aspired to be an example of how transnational empirical analysis can be done, overcoming the difficulty of employing multiple languages in a single-author investigation, and surmounting the additional troubles that may result from drawing on very diverse ‘national’ historiographical traditions. It was my desire that my explanation would become acceptable and understandable for any historian from any part of our globalized world.

This research agenda, which tends to focus on transnationalism and globalization, has shaped my research interests for the future. This desire to break free from the customary periodization and geographical framework could have further application in the fields of transnational fascism and the history of the war veterans. The next step, therefore, would be to move beyond the limits of an European perspective to understand fascism as a global network. Investigating the globalization of veteran politics after 1945 would also help to discern whether or not the stereotype and myth of the fascist veterans vanished during the Cold War period, and if yes, how this was possible. However, such ambitious projects, though an exciting challenge for future research, go far beyond the boundaries of this dissertation. This thesis has, hopefully,
achieved its central goal and served to *demystify* the conundrum that was the historical relationship between veterans and fascism.
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