Chapter II. Eugenics and Dysgenics of War
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EUGENICS AND DYSGENICS OF WAR

At the start of the nineteenth century, the dream of a Greater Italy, with a leading role in the construction of modern civilization, was resumed by political movements that rebelled against Giolitti’s liberal so-called Italietta [a petty Italy]. The imperialistic nationalism, the intellectual group of La Voce, futurism, and revolutionary syndicalism all shared the myth of a national regeneration, and transformed it into a project of total, spiritual, cultural and political revolution, to demolish the liberal regime.

Many interventionists conceived Italy’s participation in the First World War as a decisive stage for the regeneration of the Italians through the test of war. Interventionism became a factor of fusion between the myth of revolution and the myth of the nation, producing the conversion of many revolutionary left-wing syndicalists or socialists to nationalism, as in the case of Benito Mussolini. From this, a new revolutionary nationalism sprang out, that conceived the war and revolution as a national palingenesis, which would radically renew not just the political, economic and social order, but also the culture, mentality and character of the Italians. 1 In this context, the Great War also contributed to a notable development in Italy of the eugenic debate. 2


Eugenics was involved in debates concerning not only the health of the nation and the protection of society, but also, ultimately, racial supremacy and survival. The wartime effort was accompanied by the demonization of the external enemy, supported by anthropological and biological arguments to explain the differences between “Latin” and German civilization. The nationalist rhetoric described the Germans as barbaric butchers, brutal Huns, a sub-human race. At the same time, the Germans were also presented as a metaphor of modernity, characterized by an inclination to abstract thought, a morbid attraction to material riches, a lack of interior harmony and moral scruples, and by a dramatic scission between spirit and body, rendering them incapable of rising above animal sensuality. This German materialism, egoistic hedonism, and individualism was contrasted with the “Latin genius,” expression of racial superiority, power of the spiritual element, sense of limit, and virility. Reinforced by the First World War, in the following decades, the “Latin” myth became one of the most distinctive traits of Italian eugenics.

1. War as Counter-selection

Most of the important figures of Italian eugenics saw the First World War as apocalyptic, considering it an irreversible factor in racial decadence. Franco Savorgnan, professor of statistics at the University of Cagliari, was among the first to speak out about the dysgenic danger of the conflict, in an essay titled La Guerra e la popolazione [War and population], in 1917. From the “beginning of humankind,” war—Savorgnan declared—was a rigorous determining factor of selection, eliminating the weakest: “war formed those selected races of warriors, conquerors and dominators that founded the first nations and, with this, the first civilized institutions.”


With the enlargement of nations and their populations, however, war’s selective power was notably reduced, as only part of the population risked death—the “most chosen,” the “best”. “In this way, exhausted by continuous wars, many old aristocracies are slowly extinguished, which had dominated through the centuries with wisdom and a strong hand.” With the advent of modern warfare and firearms, the war definitively lost its selective power, becoming a “factor of anti-selection”: bullets were blind, hitting heroes and cowards, the strong and the weak alike.

The question “is success in war the perfect example of whether the quality of the winning population is higher than that of the conquered?” was, according to Savorgnan, “otiose and scientifically unsolvable,” insofar as it was subjective judgment. Nevertheless, even assuming the winning population were better, modern wars could no longer exercise the same positive influence shown in primitive ages on the “racial development” of humanity. This was due to numerous reasons: it did not result in complete destruction of those conquered; losses were often heavier for the winners; “proliferation” following losses was entrusted, after the war, to “physically and morally inferior reproducers”; destruction of material riches lowered the standard of living and increased poverty, reducing resistance to illness.

To all this could be added the consequences of war on the “physiological wealth of the generations that came to light during and after the conflict.” Beyond the inferiority of those fathering the next generation—with physical defects, in the case of those ineligible for service, or, in the case of discharged soldiers, damaged by overexertion and tainted by venereal disease—the integrity of newborns in the time of war was gravely compromised by complicated, difficult pregnancies, “attributable to both nutritional deficiencies that damage the organism of the mother, and to distress and anxieties that upset the nervous system.” Even those born in the early days of peace could not expect a better outcome, given the qualitative and quantitative reduction of the “racial type of the possible fathers”:

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5 Savorgnan, La guerra e la popolazione, 86.
6 Savorgnan, La guerra e la popolazione, 89.
7 Savorgnan, La guerra e la popolazione, 90.
8 Savorgnan, La guerra e la popolazione, 92.
The great majority will be, without doubt, undermined by privations, venereal diseases and tuberculosis, or, in the best hypothesis, will have brought home from the war a nervous system strongly prejudiced by the ceaseless fire of the artillery.\(^9\)

The average father would demonstrate improvement some years after the conflict, but would once again sink when the “sons of the war” reached puberty. Savorgnan’s conclusion had an apocalyptic tone: “The dysgenic consequences of the war will have distant repercussions, which will weigh as a curse on the children of our children.”\(^10\)

According to Savorgnan, the post-war period would require an intense demographic campaign, concentrated on eugenically selected groups; that is, those who survived the war:

The category of individual most richly endowed with physical robustness, with courage and energy, will be that of the soldiers who survive the war, even if wounded and mutilated, provided that they are not decaying with tuberculosis and syphilis. Promoting marriage and childbirth among these classes of citizens [...], giving them financial aid, enabling them to found a family and give life to a new generation in which their characteristics appear, will be [...] the sole way to bridge the void left by the war: with people vigorous of body and energetic in character, keeping the best aspects of the race intact.\(^11\)

If the war was characterized by its overshadowing dysgenic effect, then the post-war period needed the imposition of a eugenic policy aimed at favoring national rebirth, not only in terms of number but also of race:

The future rests with those nations that resolve the problem of population, not with the animal brutality of undisciplined sexual instinct that procreates blindly, but with eugenic criteria, which can be suggested by intelligence, rational thought and science.\(^12\)

Savorgnan was certainly not alone in his denunciation of the dysgenic impact of the conflict. In May 1916, in the pages of Nuova Antologia [New...

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\(^9\) Savorgnan, La guerra e la popolazione, 93.

\(^10\) Savorgnan, La guerra e la popolazione, 93.

\(^11\) Savorgnan, La guerra e la popolazione, 141.

\(^12\) Savorgnan, La guerra e la popolazione, 141.
anthology], Giuseppe Sergi, commenting on the French demographic decline and summarizing several points from Georges Vacher de Lapouge, offered a bio-sociological interpretation. The “decadence of nations” was not only caused by voluntary birth control, but above all by the war, and not only due to the destruction of the younger generation, but particularly to the tension suffered by society:

Biological disturbances do not derive only from the destruction of young lives—those most adapted to fertility—but also from those unfavorable conditions in which the nation is suddenly placed. From these come mental and sentimental disequilibrium, psychical and nervous traumas, anxieties, and pain of every sort, intensified by the grave economic conditions that derive from the state of war: all this strikes again in the general organic economy of the population.¹³

The increase in mortality was not the war’s only dysgenic effect. Since the nervous system was “the regulator of life and human vitality,” its disequilibrium was “a cause of partial or total dysgenia and therefore of relative sterility.” Not only the combatants, but also the civilian population far from the front manifested nervous traumas, which “could not help but influence the general state of vitality and genetic development.” Such conditions would then be aggravated “by poverty, the difficulties of achieving normal nutrition, the inferior quality of the foodstuffs, and by the terrible uncertainty of tomorrow.”¹⁴

The article closed with a call for eugenic intervention by the state:

It is therefore incumbent on the state, on the managers, on all those who have power, mind and heart, to support the population in the grave and difficult trials in which we find ourselves. The normal activities of the nation and of daily life must be altered as little as possible; sufficient food must be stored for every class in the city and the country; comfort must be given, not verbal, but an effective assistance of a varied and manifold nature […] and not only to maintain the high spirits of the nation and the power of resistance to the harsh con-


¹⁴ Sergi, “L’eugenica e la guerra,” 137.
ditions of the war, but also to maintain healthy and vigorous bodies for the present and the future.\textsuperscript{15}

At the height of the conflict, Sergi proposed a program of eugenic defense against the war, for all those currently aged from birth to twenty years of age. It would be necessary to care above all for the population that was still healthy, “to preserve its integrity as those who will in the future constitute the active population of the nation, which may descend into decadence if the post-war generation is weak and sickly.”\textsuperscript{16} The first problem to solve was that of nourishment:

The problem of nutrition must therefore be resolved rationally, might I say scientifically, especially for the lower classes both in the city and the country, in order that the new generations that comprise the first twenty years of life do not experience a decline due to insufficient nourishment. The adults could easily bear a reduction, but not the population in a period of growth, unless we want to see, after the war or in the successive years, a population that is not vigorous and has little resistance to the dangers of various pathogenic ailments, especially tuberculosis, and the diminution of eugenic potential, which would have a serious final effect.\textsuperscript{17}

In addition, eugenics would have to satisfy the “vital needs” of “air, light and movement.” “Thus, no difficulty should be found in this, save perhaps that of possessing a large zone of ground free from trees and not far from the city, which all the youth, including the children, could access at their ease.”\textsuperscript{18} As for education, Sergi proposed, first of all, a new type of “technical school”:

Technical work is more educational than the teaching of education with words; it develops the sense of order and discipline, fosters natural logic and invention, while it prepares the future of the man who is formed throughout schooling to be ready for life. The work is also hygienic when it is distributed according to age and gender and on the basis of the physical conditions of the learners. It distracts from vices, easy to develop in the younger years,

\textsuperscript{15} Sergi, “L’eugenica e la guerra,” 139.
\textsuperscript{17} Sergi, “La guerra e la preservazione della nostra stirpe,” 12.
\textsuperscript{18} Sergi, “La guerra e la preservazione della nostra stirpe,” 13.
which increase the possibility of physical decadence. In these aspects, technical schools have a double aim; one is eugenic because the adolescents develop in an ordered way in body and mind, and the other is to prepare them for those industries which will emancipate us from servitude to foreigners, useful for them and for the nation.¹⁹

The second proposal focused on educational reform, reducing the duration of studies to allow young people to follow the paths indicated by biological development:

We would impose a scholastic reform on every grade, principally to shorten the length of the various scholastic periods. In this way, the youth are free sooner to take those directions that are more appealing to their nature and tendencies. It is still urgent that all the grades are pruned of what is not necessary to teaching, and in this way the time that is occupied by school is shortened and students left free for more hours.²⁰

For Sergi, post-war eugenics assumed the shape of a discipline, a cousin to nipiology and pediatrics. Likewise, Serafino Patellani, student of gynecologist Luigi Maria Bossi and first professor of eugenics in an Italian university,²¹ believed that the explosion of the First World War signaled nightfall for the optimistic eugenics of the age of positivism:

Marriages will be celebrated in houses closed because of recent mourning, and real intimacy will be carried out preceded, accompanied and followed by stories of atrocious human violence, with visions of blood, with the constant echo of the screams of wounded brothers, of the groans of the dying; with the recollection, almost like glory, of a moment of collective madness. And the women, already prepared by anxiety, by the agony of waiting, and notices and false news received, despite their desire to procreate and for love in their homes

²¹ Patellani translated into Italian Mendel’s Versuche über Pflanzen-Hybriden (1865), rediscovered in 1900, simultaneously, but independently, by Correns, De Vries and von Tschermak. See Serafino Patellani, “Gregorio Mendel e l’opera sua,” Il Morgagni, 56 (1914), 148–54, 161–76, 201–33. Professor of a free course in “social eugenics” at the University of Genoa from 1912, in 1924 he was awarded the first professorship instituted in eugenics in Milan. Patellani’s eugenics can be summarized as the defense of the “naturalness” of the human reproductive instinct, which implies, in practice, the refusal of birth control; premarital chastity; condemnation of bachelorhood; state intervention to support the birthrate; protection of motherhood and infancy. See Serafino Patellani, Prolegomeni di eugenetica sociale (Milan: Cogliati, 1925).
being deadened, will be overpowered by a sentiment of maternal humanity. This sentiment, intensified and expanded by the collective poverty, in the joy of seeing the fiancé or husband feared lost, will lead them, though tired and ill, to submit once more for the pleasure of man, reviving life in others.  

In the face of the war, the possibility of eugenics was compromised not only by the physical damage to bodies, but by the profound moral and spiritual pollution that menaced the “ethics of procreation.” According to Patellani, the life of the barracks, far from being a means of natural selection of the best, had always been a source of dysgenics and immorality:

In fact a man enters into the army because he is in the fullness of his sexual potential: young, strong, robust, honest and healthy. This situation may become dangerous later on [...]. The idle life of the barracks, the friendship of eventually corrupt companions, life in the large and small cities, the assembly of many men, the distance from relatives, the abandonment of habitual occupations, the ease of sexual rapport with women in the brothels, or worse, on the streets, or with occasional prostitutes, create special conditions that intensify the damage of urbanism, heightening vices and the diffusion of sexual illnesses due to the ease of sexual contact that is offered to him. The advantages of physical education and military exercises are in this way destroyed by dysgenic causes, against which, experience tells us, all the efforts of mankind are not sufficient.

Following the war therefore, dysgenics would manifest above all in the form of moral degeneration, which would then be translated into biological ruin. In dark and melodramatic terms, Patellani went so far as to announce, in 1915, the “death of eugenics”:

The death of eugenics, which, when it was just born offered portents of a bright path, with glimpses of grand benefits for humankind, is not the smallest damage done to science by war. The death of eugenics is the march of infamy that distinguishes our civilization, so atrociously offended in the early years of the 20th century [...]. There will come a day, unfortunately still far off, in

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22 Serafino Patellani, “Eugenetica e guerra,” La ginecologia moderna 8, no. 5–8 (May–August 1915): 225 (Lessons on social eugenics held in the Obstetric-Gynaecological Clinic in Genoa, 6 and 13 March 1915).
which our descendents pronounce a judgment on the events of today and on
the arrest of the progress of eugenics, which should have represented a new
social religion. On that day, perhaps they will remember that in the period of
war, amidst the violence and slaughter, there arose in Italy a free voice of pro-
test and faith.24

Together with the sociologists and gynecologists, it was above all the psy-
chiatrists who read an irreversible racial degeneration into the symptoms
of war-related trauma.

This was the case for socialist Ferdinando Cazzamalli, a psychiatrist in
a mental hospital in Como who published an article in 1916, in Quaderni
di psichiatria [Psychiatric notebooks], which included several preliminary
remarks on the concept of degeneration. In particular, “degenerates do not
develop, but are born; however, one becomes a carrier of degeneration
[... ] when morbid causes modify the body and become fixed in the germ
plasm.”25 Degeneration did not come from outside, therefore, but rather
in the guise of illness: the environment, “sum factor of all biological phe-
nomena,” produced the degeneration of the species through the illness of
the individual. To environmental influence, the main source of “morbid
causes,” could be added the nervous system, as a means of transmission
of degeneracy from within the human body. Degeneration could prin-
cipally be defined, therefore, as an “abnormal state of the nervous system”:
“organic or functional damage existing in the progenitors, having reperc-
cussions in the form of absence of, or congenital defects in, offspring.”26

War had always—continued Cazzamalli—modified the environment,
which became a “forge of traumatized, fatigued, or malnourished” peo-
ple. In particular, the conflict underway did not exercise a direct “psycho-
pathogenic effect,” but instead equaled an “adjuvant factor.”27 There was,
therefore, no “psychosis of war.” Instead there existed a “predisposition”
to psychosis:

25 Ferdinando Cazzamalli, “Problemi eugenetici del domani. Guerra e degenerazione etnica,” Quaderni di psi-
chiatria 3, no. 7–8 (July–August 1916): 166–67. See also Ferdinando Cazzamalli, “La guerra e le malattie ner-
a supplement to the journal L’igiene e la vita.
26 Cazzamalli, “Problemi eugenetici del domani,” 166.
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War, by creating neuropsychoses in healthy subjects, even if purely transitory, sows the seeds of more or less latent types of psychopathogens, worsening morbid states that had been overcome, or buried. This will considerably aggravate the static condition of that supreme regulator of human life that is the nervous system [...], with dynamic repercussions for future offspring, certainly badly counterbalanced by the maternal influence, inasmuch as this is affected by the emotional and hyperasthenic (depressive) disorders of these anxious times upon the female organism.28

Cazzamalli detailed his synthesis of principal “wartime neuropsychoses,” which could all be traced to forms and manifestations of epilepsy: “shellshock,” “battle hypnosis,” “neurasthenia,” “hysteria,” and “epilepsy.” In general, recalling the definitions developed by Arturo Morselli, son of Enrico and head of neurological and psychiatric consultancy services for the First Army,29 Cazzamalli defined the psychoses of war as a “pathogenic condition,” summed up by the term “asthenia,” created by an “organic fatigue” or intense emotion. Healthy people were as likely to suffer from this as were those who were “predisposed.” Those “neuropsychoses” which particularly affected those individuals potentially exposed (family pedigrees of alcoholism, psychopathic tendencies and epilepsy), must therefore be added to the list of “wartime psychoses.”30

In such a pathogenic framework eugenics represented an urgent political and social issue. War had always been of a “degenerative” nature, but the conflict underway represented a biological menace for European civilization:

The youngest and most vigorous, who promised the irrepealable generative continuity of the stock, are mown down, cut off. And the survivors? The majority, weakened by physical ailments and by serious emotional depression of the nervous system, will undoubtedly see the lessening of that hereditary biological patrimony that will be transmitted to their offspring.31

28 Cazzamalli, “Problemi eugenetici del domani,” 168.
31 Cazzamalli, “Problemi eugenetici del domani,” 173.
The war had transformed “potential” and “latent” sick people into “actual” sick people, turning sane people “neurotic” and “psychopathic.” The number of “carriers of degeneration” would increase, as illnesses of the nervous system were transmitted from generation to generation. Epilepsy, through the psychological traumas of the war, would broaden its reach. The survivors of the war, that is, “male procreators” of the future, would be “psychologically traumatized,” “neuro-psychasthenics,” “hysterical epileptics,” “epileptics” and “carriers of epilepsy.” Women, reduced to conditions of “minor physical resistance (depression) and psychological resistance (emotional trauma),” would find, for marriage, only a “damaged male youth,” and the resultant offspring would be “scarce, with elevated mortality, definitely neurotic or at least strongly predisposed to psychological disorders.” What was to be done, therefore, in the face of the apocalypse that was the First World War? “The pharmaceutical armory of eugenics ranged from castration of those individuals ascertained as degenerate, […] to perpetual segregation; from marriage limitations (Galton) to interdiction”; but Cazzamalli, in agreement with Enrico Morselli, refused “violent means,” and in the end preferred the development of social medicine and the encouragement of an “education of the masses as regards the effects of sexual union.”

The theme of “ethnic degeneration” was also taken up in the pages of the catholic journal *Vita e Pensiero* [Life and thought], in an important essay by the psychologist (and future founder of the Catholic University in Milan) Agostino Gemelli. In the article, titled *Eugenica e Guerra* [Eugenics and war], Gemelli adhered substantially to Sergi’s hypothesis, but did not deem the war the “exclusive” or “predominant” cause of the decreasing birthrate; negative factors could also be identified in “race-crossing,” “illnesses of the female sexual organs” and “criminal neo-Malthusianism.” Instead, the war would impact more on future generations, who would inherit psychological traumas from their fathers, worn down by serving on the front, and from their mothers, shaken by poverty, work and violence:

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32 Cazzamalli, “Problemi eugenetici del domani,” 175–76.
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War reveals, so to speak, psychologically ill people; people predisposed to mental or nervous system illnesses, either hereditarily, or from previous illness, who, due to an emotional effect, experience episodes of nervous and mental illness that were previously concealed. At the end of the war, equilibrium will be re-established, and these ill people, apparently healed, will return to their social life and to their family, and have children, to whom they will transmit this disposition toward illness, or the illness itself.36

The sons of war, therefore, could not help but be “neurotic and psychopathic,” destined to “carry traces of the terrible event in which their fathers took part, for all their lives, in their nervous systems and psychological structure.” According to Gemelli, the war not only “diminished birthrate, but deteriorated the race.”37 In the face of this racial degeneration, negative eugenic remedies could be useful, to “impede or limit marriage between those who could not help but transmit illness or evil dispositions to their children.”38 Instead, the precautions of positive eugenics aimed at raising the birthrate would not be so effective:

Working fatally against the facts of biological order, we find facts of social order and of economic order, determining among their good and evil effects also this effect of decreasing the birthrate. To raise the birth rate, we must neutralize these factors, that is, we must mutate the current social order.39

Gemelli’s eugenic project envisioned a fight against neo-Malthusianism, conducted by rehabilitating the Catholic family model, founded on its “natural bases,” that is, on “moral Christian laws.” Restoring the “natural function” to the family—expressed by “love between the parents,” by “mutual respect” and a vision of life not as a pleasure, but as a “test for higher purposes”—would mean, in Gemelli’s view, the development of “the most effective and fertile eugenic activities.”40

36 Gemelli, “Eugenica e guerra,” 140.
37 Gemelli, “Eugenica e guerra,” 141.
38 Gemelli, “Eugenica e guerra,” 142.
39 Gemelli, “Eugenica e guerra,” 144.
40 Gemelli, “Eugenica e guerra,” 145.
2. War as Gymnasium

In his effort to develop a scientific paradigm that could justify war as a product of the demographic expansion of young nations and as an instrument of modernization of the social organism, nationalist Corrado Gini expounded a series of arguments between 1915 and 1921, aimed at putting the dysgenics of the conflict into perspective.\(^4\)

To begin with, military conscription: is it positive or negative from a eugenic point of view? The people subjected to military service—Gini claimed—married later than peers fit for the army who did not serve. However, they married more frequently, almost as if military service constituted a preference in matrimonial selection. From twenty-five until forty years of age, those who completed military service had fewer living children than their peers, in keeping with the shorter duration of their marriage. But above forty years of age, the number of children clearly increased. Although they married later, those fit for the army had more prolific marriages, as if that same preference found in matrimonial selection allowed them to “marry women who were younger or, independent of age, healthier and more robust, and therefore more fertile.”\(^4\)

In addition, the greater prolificacy of the military put into perspective, in Gini’s eyes, the problem of venereal diseases, which according to many eugenicists was widely diffused among the military lines: in fact, “these would undoubtedly manifest themselves in an unusual frequency of sterile marriages and a high infant death rate, and therefore a lower number of living children, whereas the facts clearly verify the opposite.”\(^4\)

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Another critical point concerned the purported weak constitution of war babies. Data gathered on still births and infant death rates, particularly “for reasons of weakness or congenital vice” relative to the war years in combatant nations, did not actually show any traces of such a weakness. In fact, statistics of newborns showed in the first years after the war even higher birth weights than before the war. The dysgenic factor, represented by the absence of the best “reproducers” busy at the front, was substantially compensated for by opposite elements, such as selection by social class or number of children:

In any case, the higher social classes, and families with smaller numbers of children, present, on average, superior physical characteristics, yet give a contribution to the military which is not proportional to their numerical importance.44

In addition, the economic disadvantage and the brevity of conjugal contact in times of war favored reproduction by “the people endowed with the most intensive reproductive faculties, able to create better products,”45 while the long intervals between births contributed to vitality in their offspring.

The third question addressed the death rate. While deaths in combat and due to war injuries had an inevitable dysgenic effect, the excess of deaths due to illness among the military and among the civilians seemed to exercise, according to Gini, a favorable influence on the constitutions of future generations. It was impossible to predict which of these elements would be predominant. Certainly, modern war represented, in Gini’s view, a higher dysgenic factor than traditional war:

Compared to the wars of the past, modern war is more likely to have a dysgenic effect, insofar as deaths in combat or due to injuries are concerned, which now, as has been said, have overtaken death by illness among the military. Moreover, the greater economic prosperity and the better preparation for war have meant that the civilians feel the privations and disadvantages less strongly, and are therefore more subject to a less severe surplus of mortality. On the other

hand however, the larger recruitment of combatants necessarily carries with it a rigorous selection of the military, which must naturally correspond to a less unfavorable influence of mortality, in combat or due to injuries, and of the difference of mortality due to illness between the soldiers and the remaining population.\textsuperscript{46}

As for the impact of the war on the intellectual endowments of the nation, research specifically carried out by Gini on primary school teachers, based on a report by the Deposit and Loan Bank (Cassa Depositi e Prestiti) demonstrated that those who died in war did not present a “social value” superior to that of the survivors. Despite being limited to a single profession, the research aimed to put the conflict’s dysgenic effect into perspective:

Other longer investigations will be necessary to judge with precision the selective influence of mortality directly caused by the war; but the investigations carried out in the interim serve only to bear out the suspicion, which had already been considered \textit{a priori}, that the higher death rate during war time does not have the profound dysgenic effects that are generally attributed to it.\textsuperscript{47}

The growing rate of deaths and of births immediately following the end of the conflict resulted in favorable selection effects. Death eliminated the weakest, whereas newborn children of the selected military classes were enhanced by the long rest forced on the “reproductive organs of the mother,”\textsuperscript{48} and demonstrated a superior constitution. According to Gini, growing birth weights and the frequency of multiple births represented, as much as anything, proof of a favorable eugenic event.\textsuperscript{49}

\textsuperscript{46} Gini, “La guerra dal punto di vista dell’eugenica,” 49.
\textsuperscript{47} Gini, “La guerra dal punto di vista dell’eugenica,” 62.
\textsuperscript{48} Gini, “La guerra dal punto di vista dell’eugenica,” 63.
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3. War as Laboratory

In 1905 the Russo-Japanese war provided a new perception of the psychological impact of modern conflicts, announcing a previously unforeseen role for several sectors of military medicine and psychiatry. In Italy, the issue of the relationships between war and mental illness fed an intense discussion at the 14th Congress of the Italian Phreniatric Society in May 1911, and a psychiatric service was established during the colonial war in Libya. The specter of deviance, particularly in regard to deserters, soldiers suffering “homesickness,” or hypersensitive or traumatized people, was nevertheless amplified by the proportion and duration of the First World War.

For the neuropsychiatric body, the war was above all an immense laboratory, a field of clinical experimentation, where it was possible to observe large-scale “trauma, emotion, commotion, privation, mutilation and devia-
tion of every kind, known and unknown, already codified and new.”50 In addition to scientific knowledge, the front enhanced both the organizational and ideological powers of psychiatrists. In August 1915, the Military Supreme Command, on the recommendation of the Military Health Committee (Ispettorato Medico Generale), decreed the institution of a special neurological and psychiatric service in each of the four armies’ military health systems. The four specialists appointed for the occasion (Arturo Morselli, Vincenzo Bianchi, Angelo Alberti and Giacomo Pighini) organized departments of neuropsychiatry in the first and second lines, with mental illness ward annexes behind the front.51 In the national exhibition of


works of assistance for the war effort, held in Rome during June–July 1918, psychiatry was well represented, with reconstructions of medical wards, photographs and “products of the sick.”

Together with these organizational efforts, the so-called “military neuropsychiatry” (neuropsichiatria castrense) looked to eugenics to face the problem of biological selection of the soldiers, aimed at rationalizing and intensifying wartime efforts. In their attempts to guarantee the maximum efficiency of the available biological resources—through the diagnoses of different psychological “anomalies,” the identification of “simulations” and the segregation of elements dangerous to military discipline—the physicians soon faced the dilemma of “abnormality”: what to do with the defective elements? Keep them well away from the war effort, or utilize them until the end?

Psychiatrists such as Edmondo Trombeta, director of the Giornale di medicina militare [Journal of military medicine], and Giacomo Pighini, consulting neuropsychiatrist of the Grappa and Altipiani army, were convinced of the necessity of eliminating the defectives from the army lines, to eventually relegate them to a “special company for deportation to the colonies.” However a majority of the physicians at the front favored an approach of extreme Tayloristic re-utilization of “abnormals.” For example, Enrico Morselli agreed with the use of the mentally ill and “waste material” as workers:

It could be that the mildly insane, who are obedient and physically strong, could be used advantageously in military service, even in the active units, if they were surrounded by numerous psychologically healthy people, from whom they would receive some useful influence that would help them to work together, for discipline, perhaps even for courage.

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53 For more informations on this issue, see Mantovani, Rigenerare la società, 159–65, and also Andrea Scartabellati, Intelllettuali nel conflitto. Alienisti e patologie attraverso la Grande Guerra (1909–1921) (Bagnaria Arsa: Edizioni Goliardiche, 2003): 100–21.
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Every type of illness corresponded with a form of economic use:

There is much work to be done in the war for which participation without thought is enough: the work of digging and excavating the trenches, transporting munitions, various restocking and repairs, etc. In which case, given that calm and obedient insane people remain among the troops in active service, we do not have to hastily renounce the utilization of their brute strength.56

While the automatist comportment of the “pure imbeciles” might be useful, some epileptics might be destined for “custody by the military depots for harmless objects” (Depositi militari di oggetti innocui) or for “porterage work.”57 Along the same lines, Cesare Agostini, director of the Perugia military neurological section and neuropsychiatric consultant for the Carnica army, suggested the establishment of centers within war zones specially charged with distinguishing the genuine cases of epilepsy from possible, and frequent, simulations. Serious epileptics would then be sent home “to be secluded in a curative institute or in a criminal mental hospital,” while those “affected by rare episodes” could be put to work in special division of troops, “naturally unarmed” and “used precisely behind the front line solely for the work of digging, opening roads, building boardwalks through the trenches, arranging aviation camps and perhaps cultivating the terrain in the zone of operations.”58 Such a solution would prevent, in Agostini’s view, the absurd “salvage of social waste” and that form of “counter-selection” that consisted in sacrificing the “physically strongest part of the nation” to the front and repatriating the “physically defective and morally degraded,” ready to “multiply the candidates for insanity and criminality.”59

However, it was medical captain Placido Consiglio who carried the logic of eugenic selection of soldiers to its extremes. Specialist for the War Zone Central Health Commission (Commissione Sanitaria Centrale della Zona di Guerra) and director of the military psychiatric diagnosis center in Reggio Emilia, instituted in 1917 as a concentration camp for neuropsychotics identified by the Army Consultancy Board (Consulenze d’Armata),

56 La Direzione, “Il lavoro degli anormali psichici e la Guerra,” 80–81.
57 La Direzione, “Il lavoro degli anormali psichici e la Guerra,” 80–81.
Consiglio regarded the conflict as a laboratory of applied eugenics. He saw the military as a highly selected and medical social microsystem:

The battle against every form of degeneration and abnormality, fought with direct and indirect methods together, can be better realized in the special community, more restricted, more intimate in structure and more homogenized, that is the army [...]. I have always believed that this particular environment must be considered as an instructive form of social experimentalism.\(^{60}\)

Consiglio’s utopia quickly assumed the shape of a eugenically militarized society:

If every human group could impede the penetration of deviates and psychological degenerates from outside or from internal generation, and eliminate those already born or penetrated, distancing them in such a way as to impede the actual or potential damage to others that comes from their pernicious fermenting actions [...]; well then, the grave problem would without doubt be resolved, and the constitution of that group greatly bettered, in an always progressive mode.\(^{61}\)

Eugenics, extrapolated from the military microcosm to the social macrocosm, had to be understood as a “function of the State” and managed in first place by physicians:

It lies with military physicians to undertake the great physical and mental healing process of the military community and the great decrease that we wish to see in the various forms of sickness that inflict humankind. And the same thing must occur in society: in schools, through the work of pedagogical physicians, in social life through the medical sociologists in parallel with active, extended prophylaxis against intoxication and epidemic infections, and moreover, positive moral education, above all in the working classes.\(^{62}\)

With his strong case-history of hundreds of military psychiatric analyses and studies from the Libyan war,\(^{63}\) Consiglio did not hesitate to contest


\(^{61}\) Consiglio, “Problemi di eugenica,” 459.

\(^{62}\) Consiglio, “Problemi di eugenica,” 460.

the more popular Lombrosian arguments: neither genius nor warrior hero-
ism could spring, according to the military physician, from degenera-
tion. “Abnormals” would always be of “no social value, often damaging,
always dangerous, and wasters of bio-psychical energy.”64 Moreover, at the
request of the War Ministry, Consiglio conducted research on a sample
of 772 military prisoners, concluding that resistance to re-education and
discipline came principally from families that were carriers of hereditary
defects. The Zar family was a notable example—a singular Italian version
of the celebrated American eugenic family-case, the Jukes65—in which
Consiglio counted 44 individuals “in whom neuropsychological degen-
eration was identifiable, assuming a variety of forms, from psychoses to
criminality, epilepsy and madness for four generations and in five fami-
lies.”66

This rigid hereditary determinism was clearly the theoretical base for a
radical eugenic solution. If anthropological defects were fatally transmitted
to generation after generation, then policies centered on education or envi-
ronmental betterment would be worthless. The sole remedy was selection
and isolation:

Delinquents do not choose to be so, but are constituted in that way in their most
intimate cerebral matter: if criminal actions are prevalently determined by con-
stitutional anomalies of the psychophysical make-up, then the human group
in which these occur have no work more effective and positive—albeit com-
plex and difficult—than to prevent this evil, combating the impure origins of
the parental toxicity, of hereditary morbidity, and of degeneration of offspring.
This can be done by isolating and curing criminals such as the insane and neu-
rotic, and so, without any false sentimentalism, supporting human eugenics by
impeding reproduction on the part of the many sufferers of tuberculosis, syphi-

64 Consiglio, “Problemi di eugenica,” 465.
65 The celebrated study of the Juke family (seven generations of criminals, prostitutes and various degenerates
produced by a single couple in the state of New York) was published in 1877 by Richard L. Dugdale, a mem-
ber of the executive committee of the Prison Association of New York. In 1916, Arthur Estabrook, a field re-
searcher and collaborator of Davenport at the Carnegie Institution, updated and reanalyzed the Juke family
data: see Kevles, In the Name of Eugenics, 71; Paul, Controlling Human Heredity, 43–49.
66 Consiglio, “Problemi di eugenica,” 452.
War as Laboratory

lis, alcoholism, epilepsy, and degeneration that pollute the font of human life, in such a way that we arrive at a progressive selection of the race.⁶⁷

“For now,” Consiglio emphasized, the “traditional human instincts” impeded the practice of sterilization in the “Latin world,” but in the meantime, much could be achieved with the “isolation of anomalies from society, for cure, and for re-education of an indeterminate length of time”:

Various widespread methods in Italy and Libya of obligatory insurance against illness, of reformatories in agricultural colonies and similar, could help us to obtain the goal of distancing the dangerous elements from society, and therefore also from reproduction, with enormous moral and social advantages.⁶⁸

At the beginning of the 1920s, in the pages of Difesa sociale [Social defense], Consiglio systematized his almost ten years of eugenic reflections, distinguishing between the wartime emergency and the period of peace. The war imposed an “accurate selection” of “degenerates”: the major part should be utilized in the “numerous auxiliary services, armed or not, in war zones or domestic territory, according to profession, and to the attitudes and year people were drafted.” The “serious degenerates” (in Consiglio’s terms, the constitutionally immoral, alcoholics with epileptic tendencies, perverts and those with incorrigible vices, habitual offenders, or those regularly imprisoned), “for special security measures and the defense of the race,” would be “segregated and used in work colonies in national territorial zones or overseas, giving them tools, seeds and plots of land.” “The most seriously insane and true psychopaths” had to be imprisoned in institutions for rehabilitation, asylums or special colonies; the “degenerate minors” could be, in the end, utilized “in special squads behind the front lines, working within or outside of the war zones, without arms and under strict discipline, to their great re-educative benefit.”⁶⁹

Once the war was finished, the prophylaxis at work in the military environment would indicate the “best path” for defending society from “abnor-

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mals and degenerates,” based on two fundamental precepts: their “elimination from the civil environment and the reproductive function,” and their “symbiotic utilization in diverse work.” The two eugenic strategies—elimination/segregation and economic re-utilization—were, however, rooted in only one concept: the “complete knowledge regarding degenerates and abnormals.” This could be realized, according to Consiglio, through a vast biographical-clinical survey of degenerates. The project that had matured in nineteenth-century positivist criminal anthropology was destined to have a notably favorable reception among the Italian eugenicists.

4. Eugenics and the “Sons of the Enemy”

Between 1915 and 1917, the violence of the First World War fuelled the diffusion of a specific eugenic “case” throughout the Italian medical context. The “serious problem of eugenics and justice” was provoked by the news, released by the French parliamentary commission and reported in Italian daily news and journals, of “ethnic rapes” being currently committed by German soldiers in occupied Belgium and France.

A discussion on similar acts in Italy was opened in medical circles by well-known gynecologist Luigi Maria Bossi (1859–1919), director of the monthly review *La ginecologia moderna* [Modern gynecology], which deliberately assumed the new subtitle *Review of obstetrics, gynecology, and psychological, eugenical and gynecological sociology* in 1914. Bossi explicitly confronted the question in March 1915, in a discourse addressed to the Genoa Royal Medical Academy (*Reale Accademia Medica*). Sexual violence, with an aim of “Germanizing” occupied France and Belgium, presented a problem, in the case of eventual pregnancy, that was as much ethical

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72 The first Italian university professor of gynaecology (1887), socialist, with interventionist and Mussolinian sympathies, Bossi was a proponent of a pervasive vision of gynaecology, based on a sociobiological interpretation of uterine pathology, which he considered a “supreme social pathological phenomenon.” See Mantovani, *Rigenerare la società*, 101–03.
as it was eugenic. From the first point of view, the birth would further aggravate the suffering of the women:

Frankly, we must ask ourselves if we have the right to impose further torture, both physical and psychological, on women already heavily tried by human infamy, in homage to a principal of conservation that today is violated everywhere, solely for the egoism of the increasingly widespread, and, what is worse, spread with impunity, curse of illegal abortion.\(^{73}\)

On the eugenic front, concerns were perhaps even more urgent. The psychological traumas experienced by the mothers; the state of alcoholism or of “morbid, insane, bestial excitement” of the fathers; and the “continuing physical traumas” of the pregnancy would result in children who were “developmentally deficient, destined to be a burden on public charity, or future insane or delinquents.” Beyond the danger for families and society, the “children of barbarity” could politically damage the nation in the future, “because it is impossible to eliminate the possibility that the enemy paternal seed, impregnated in a moment of hate, might not be carried by the child in a sad reflection of the same hate.”\(^{74}\)

In the face of such a dramatic situation, Bossi, who had in earlier years led the battle against abortion and neo-Malthusianism,\(^{75}\) proposed a medical justification for the French and Belgian women who had been victims of sexual violence:

Now I would not hesitate to confirm, as impudent as such a confirmation may seem, that for exactly those reasons highlighted above, the pregnancies of the Belgian and French women resulting from the barbaric violence of the Germans must be terminated [...].\(^{76}\)

The initiative not only aimed to eliminate “degenerates,” but also to protect the mothers, who, giving birth in conditions of strong psychological trauma, could be risking their lives.

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74 Bossi, “In difesa delle donne belghe e francesi,” 95.


76 Bossi, “In difesa delle donne belghe e francesi,” 96.
Bossi returned to this argument several months later, identifying in “ethnic rape” nothing less than the ultimate consequence of the German medical culture, which he deemed a promoter of neo-Malthusianism, gynecological errors and scientific usurpation: “We, in our field, feel we must conscientiously demonstrate that the German culture is, in certain parts, either a dangerous scientific error, a theft of others’ genius, or a hypocritical attempt to exploit humanity.”77

The eugenic appeal of the Genoan gynecologist provoked a limited, but not irrelevant debate: the pages of Policlinico [General hospital] (9 May 1915), Pensiero sanitario [Sanitary thinking] (10 April 1915), and Avanti! [Forward!] (23 November 1915) carried strongly polemical articles, while in Corriere mercantile [Trade journal] (21 May 1915) the contrary positions of Enrico Morselli and jurist Pietro Cogliolo stood out. But it was Enrico Ferri’s review La Scuola Positiva [Positivist school] that confronted the question in the most articulate way, analyzing the legal issues in a series of articles published between April and June 1915. In the first, Salvatore Messina contested Bossi’s ideas. He argued that Italian laws punished abortion for reasons that were independent from the circumstances of conception; the absolution that in the past had been given to violated women guilty of abortion did not imply negation of guilt, but was dictated by pity for a moral expiation that overrode the guilt and the respective judicial evaluation. In conclusion:

Nothing can legitimize the political opportuneness and juridical convenience of temporarily suspending the effectiveness of the normal penal code against abortion and infanticide: that is, to turn a diffused state of deep social compassion for the guilty women into extenuating circumstances for a crime, when there is no need for their wretchedness to unravel the thread of the law in order for them to be treated with justice.78

Different beliefs, however, were found in the second article, which justified the right to abortion in the name of a “state of necessity,” defined in the penal code:

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77 Luigi Maria Bossi, “I pericoli e le vittime della cultura tedesca nel campo ginecologico,” La ginecologia moderna 8, no. 5–8 (May–August 1915): 148.
78 Salvatore Messina, “Le donne violentate in guerra e il diritto all’aborto,” La Scuola Positiva 6, no. 4 (April 1915): 294.
Perhaps it is a question of two rights that find themselves in conflict here. The woman who has not contributed voluntarily to this conflict finds her rights concerning her own person in imminent danger; if she cannot otherwise avoid it, she must be able to resolve this by sacrificing, without being legally responsible, the rights that clash with hers. How can we doubt that there is a clash between the rights of the unborn child and the State as regards the physiological development of an embryonic life, and the right of the woman to prevent this seed, forcefully implanted in her, which, should it develop, would see the contrast between the two rights grow ever greater?\textsuperscript{79}

The article concluded by reaffirming this last position, citing some tendencies of the Catholic church to favor abortion in the case of rape.\textsuperscript{80}

On 25 August 1916, in Benito Mussolini’s interventionist newspaper \textit{Popolo d’Italia} [Italian people], Bossi’s referendum was published, addressed to “women, physicians, sociologists, jurists and literati,” publicly denouncing the German violence and declaring the right to abortion for the women violated. Several responses submitted by readers appeared in what could be considered the final act in Bossi’s eugenic debate: the publication in 1917 of an entire issue of \textit{Ginecologia moderna} dedicated to “the defense of women and of the race.” Here, Bossi equated the right to abortion for violated women with the political fight against neo-Malthusianism and criminal abortion:

The defense, therefore, of women and the race, in relation with neo-Malthusianism, criminal abortion and the right to abortion of women systematically violated by the Germans, constitutes a large, complex problem that must be resolved through three indivisible relationships: social, juridical and medical. And it is above all pertinent to gynecologists, because they are responsible, as is obvious, for the basal concept of conservation of the species, that is, the present life and health of the mother; and subordinately, the life and health of the product of conception. The social and juridical sides must naturally be subordinate to the gynecological side.\textsuperscript{81}

\begin{flushleft}\textsuperscript{79} Silvio Longhi, “Le donne violentate in guerra e lo ‘stato di necessità’” \textit{La Scuola Positiva} 6, no. 6 (June 1915): 485.\textsuperscript{80} Bernardino Alimena, “Concludendo sulla violenza carnale e il ‘diritto all’aborto’,” \textit{La Scuola Positiva} 6, no. 8 (August 1915): 673–75.\textsuperscript{81} Luigi Maria Bossi, “Per la difesa della donna e della razza,” \textit{La ginecologia moderna} 10 (1917): 128.\end{flushleft}
In the face of sexual violence, a “moral war against the perfidiousness of the German culture,” in the name of the “defense of women and the race,” had to parallel the war raging at the front.  

After a brief spark of interest, the debate surrounding the “sons of the enemy” was quickly extinguished in France, suffocated by the growing populationist concerns. In Italy, just a few neo-Malthusian activists kept on supporting Bossi’s position in the defense of eugenic quality as opposed to dysgenic quantity. In fact, in 1920, the pamphlets, which Secondo Giorni and Felice Marta—isolated champions of “practical” and “medical neo-Malthusianism”—had published in 1916 and 1915, were republished. The new edition included Giorno’s polemic against French pro-natalism and its attempt “to take advantage of the barbaric enemy seed and in this way to procure a greater number of soldiers for the future,” and Marta’s concerns regarding race-crossing between the French women and the Senegalese troops:

But who does not feel that it is grotesque; who can not see the damage and the insult of those wild stallions, next to whom those poor French males must figure as parade horses? […] Now, if Europe, to remake her race, needs Senegalese crossings and those with syphilitic inheritance, then it seems to us that it is better to choose the lesser of two evils. It is better, after all, to die of listlessness than gangrene.

After the war however, such neo-Malthusian issues as these seemed far from the Italian political and scientific context, which was increasingly eager to listen to the “regenerating” promises of natalism and fascism.

82 Bossi, “Per la difesa della donna e della razza,” 130.
84 Felice Marta, Neomalthusianesimo medico. Quando e come non bisogna aver figli (1915; repr., Milan: Società Anonima Editoriale, 1920), VIII.