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IB Internal Assessment in History

TO WHAT EXTENT WAS MUSSOLINI’S BATTLE FOR BIRTHS BENEFICIAL TO THE HEALTH OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN?

Examination Session: May 2018

Word Count: 2194

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**Part A: Identification and Evaluation of Sources**

This study investigates the question: to what extent was Mussolini’s Battle for Births beneficial to the health of women and children. The first source selected is *Fascism Doctrine and Institutions* by Howard Fertig. It is composed of articles and decrees established under Mussolini in 1925 in Italy. I used the section of laws created for the National Organization for Maternity and Child Welfare (ONMI). It is relevant because it provides direct information about Mussolini’s policies regarding women and children. The second source selected is *Mothers of a Nation* by Patrizia Albanese. It studies the role of women under Fascist regimes in twentieth-century Europe. It is relevant because it analyzes Mussolini's ONMI.

The first source is a collection of legal articles originating from Mussolini’s regime, written by government officials in 1925. Therefore, its purpose is to establish laws for Italy under Mussolini’s rule. A value of the origin to an investigation on Mussolini’s policies concerning women and children is that as the source was produced by officials, it is likely factual and reliable in the provided policies regarding women's health. As a legal document intent on establishing laws, a value of the purpose is that it delivers direct insight toward Mussolini's legal attempts to increase the birthrate, depicting the regime's desire to be perceived as helping women.

However, some limitations exist. A limitation of the origin is that as the document was produced by government officials, it was likely censored, providing only information deemed acceptable by Mussolini, and therefore it was propagandistic. Additionally, a limitation of the purpose is that as the document was made to be publicized it may have been manipulated to give off a certain appearance of helping women and may not express underlying motivations, such as increasing births.

The origin of the second source is historian Patrizia Albanese and the University of Toronto, published in 2006. The purpose is to inform the public about the effect of policies on women in twentieth-century Europe. A value of the origin to an investigation on Mussolini’s policies concerning women and children is that the book was published in 2006 it offers the benefit of hindsight regarding the effects of the ONMI. Since the source is an academic book with the purpose to educate readers, a value of the purpose is that the material is informative and verified by an editorial board.

However, limitations do exist. A limitation of the origin is that as Albanese was educated in Canada, she may lack understanding of Italian perspective on the subject. Further, a limitation of the purpose is that the text aims to educate readers on women and nationalism in Europe during the twentieth century as a whole; therefore, information regarding perspectives solely on Mussolini may be lost to broader topics as the text attempts to cover many divergent subjects.

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**Part B: Investigation**

Mussolini’s regime brought great change to Italy as a whole, affecting many demographics. Women and children, especially, were of interest to Mussolini as he aimed to secure a population large enough to sustain Italy’s army, a feat believed only to be possible if he increased the birthrate.[[1]](#endnote-1) As a result, Mussolini’s Battle for Births was established and numerous organizations, programs, and laws were enacted in an effort to promote natality.[[2]](#endnote-2) While Mussolini depicted his Battle for Births as beneficial to the wellbeing of women and children, his preoccupation with increased birthrates was actually harmful as a whole to women and children’s health.

While Mussolini established organizations intended to improve women’s health, the organizations were ineffective, cultivating insignificant results due to ideological emphasis on image rather than truth, in which statistics were often manipulated to depict the regime favorably. Institutions established to benefit women harmed Italy economically until eventually the cost to maintain such services grew unsustainable, thus reducing effectiveness.[[3]](#endnote-3) Without financial sufficiency, the organizations could not fulfill their function to the desired degree. The ONMI became so unmanageable that in 1933 all its committees had to be eradicated, and replaced with commissioners.[[4]](#endnote-4) Further, it is postulated that much of Mussolini’s information regarding the establishment of organizations for women was more propaganda than practice, conveyed by a lack of discrepancy between the geography of provided services and an overall lack of comparable statistic regarding the organization’s results.[[5]](#endnote-5) Lack of specifics regarding where services were offered indicates that programs were more prevalent in Northern Italy than in Southern Italy, where the demand was higher, thus weakening the notion that Mussolini’s policies helped women across the nation and improved their health. Mussolini localized elaborate organizations to areas popular with tourists to construct the illusion that such care was widespread and wholly effective.[[6]](#endnote-6) Further, as statistics regarding the era before Mussolini are nearly nonexistent it is difficult to assess the true effectiveness of Mussolini’s organizations, especially when considering that the majority of statistics produced by the Fascist government were used as propaganda. Statistics provided by Mussolini’s government manipulated data; for example, Mussolini was credited with health organization in Milan, when nearly all of such institutions were created in the sixty years prior to Fascism.[[7]](#endnote-7) Additionally, while the number of “insured women workers rose from 643,870 in 1922 to 822,385 in 1925, “of approximately 1,100,000 women, the birthrate remained relatively static; therefore as the intended result was not achieved, it can be concluded that such insurance was ineffective.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Some may argue that Mussolini’s Battle for Births improved women’s health by providing medical care through governmental organizations, such as the ONMI, advertised with the aim of providing greater access to doctors,[[9]](#endnote-9) uniting clinics for pregnant women and infants,[[10]](#endnote-10) and defending vulnerable mothers.[[11]](#endnote-11) Offering women with such services suggests a health improvement; however, aforementioned insufficient resources as a result of financial inadequacy would diminish such results. Additionally, some may claim Mussolini’s desire to increase the population led to encouragement of female participation in athletics, through school and state organizations, thus improving the health of women.[[12]](#endnote-12) However, any benefits of athletic participation were hindered by inaccessibility, as women were limited to participation in select sports, to decrease the possibility of women becoming ‘too masculine.’[[13]](#endnote-13) Permitted sports were generally only for upper class women as specific amenities and equipment were necessary, thus emphasizing class divides and hurting women of lower socioeconomic status as they could not produce the money or time to participate in many athletic endeavors, therefore preventing the majority of women from improved health through athletics.[[14]](#endnote-14)

While it is claimed that the Battle for Births improved children’s health, the overarching goal of increasing the population to strengthen the army made attempts to improve children’s health generally ineffective and produced adverse effects for children and mothers during birth. For example, while education regarding infant care increased under Mussolini’s regime, sexual education decreased tremendously and was essentially banned for girls.[[15]](#endnote-15) Banning of sexual education was harmful to women, increasing the likelihood of unwanted pregnancy, transfers of STDs, and bodily endangerment; therefore, prohibition of such education harmed women’s health in Fascist Italy. Despite the education provided by the ONMI, statistics suggest that infant and childbirth mortality rates were unimproved and Mussolini’s claims suggesting otherwise were merely propaganda.[[16]](#endnote-16) For example, Mussolini claimed that the mortality of women in childbirth fell from 3,111 in 1925 to 2,900 in 1930; yet neglected to acknowledge that deaths related to childbirth were 2982 in 1921 and 2810 in 1922, and subsequently rose to 3632 in 1924.[[17]](#endnote-17) Similarly, Mussolini claimed that still-births decreased under his rule, yet statistical analysis reveals that the decline merely followed a pattern that had been established before Mussolini acquired power. Further, such improvement actually slowed under Mussolini.[[18]](#endnote-18) Reanalysis of statistics producing divergent results weakens the claim that Mussolini’s organizations were beneficial, as they suggest Mussolini’s policies had little to no effect on childbirth, therefore implying that the ONMI did not improve women and children’s health to the extent previously claimed, if at all. Additionally, the ONMI declared itself vital in medical advancements and standards for children’s care.[[19]](#endnote-19) Yet, claims are unsubstantiated, disproven even, in the case of still-births.[[20]](#endnote-20) Mussolini’s Battle for Birth included providing assistance to struggling children.[[21]](#endnote-21) However, contrary to the wellbeing of diseased children, youth with abnormalities were recorded by “medical-pedagogic selection” and monitored through “biotypologic charts,” which later hindered their employability, thus producing negative long term effects influencing ability to maintain health.[[22]](#endnote-22) Further, it cannot be neglected that the very children these institutions were aimed to protect, were only being protected so they could be sent into war.

Further, Mussolini’s emphasis on population growth led to the creation of laws that were harmful to the health and safety of women and children. Mussolini’s primary goal of increasing the birthrate outweighed any true regard for women’s health, depicted in laws that lessened the punishment for violence against women who were caught cheating. In the Penal Code of Alfredo Rocco, under Article 587 “a man who murdered his adulterous daughter, sister or wife could be sentenced to three to seven years in prison, instead of the 30 years that was the standard punishment for other murders.”[[23]](#endnote-23) Rocco’s Penal Code exemplifies Mussolini’s poor treatment of women and disregard for their actual health, exposing his welfare systems solely as devices to increase the population rather than care for female health, thus health was actually neglected, in favor of pursuing Mussolini’s intended goal. Additionally, Mussolini’s Battle for Births damaged women’s reproductive rights, as he outlawed contraception and abortion. Article 553 of Rocco’s Penal Code “made it a punishable offence to ‘incite people to commit acts which prevent procreation,” leading to dangerous conditions for women.[[24]](#endnote-24) Outlawing abortion did not stop the practice, but rather forced women to use illegal means when they found it necessary, typically occurring in unsanitary conditions with undertrained medical staff thus resulting in increased death and disease.[[25]](#endnote-25) Yet, some may argue that Mussolini’s Battle for Births established laws that improved the health of women and children. For example, Article 6 and 10 of the Law on the Work of Women and Children relegates specific “periods of rest for women lying-in and nursing mothers.”[[26]](#endnote-26) Additionally, the law of working mothers enacted in 1934 attempted to ease the hardships of motherhood by providing jobs, maternity bonuses, and nurseries in workplaces.[[27]](#endnote-27) Other laws were also created solely with the purpose of improving the child’s health, such as prohibition of alcohol and tobacco for the Italian youth, as declared in Articles 23 and 24 of the National Organization for Maternity and Child Welfare respectively.[[28]](#endnote-28)

To conclude, while Mussolini established organizations intended to improve women’s health, the organizations were ineffective and statistics suggesting otherwise were merely a product of Fascist propaganda. Programs for increased awareness of child care came at the cost of prohibited sexual education in female youth, and lack of medical privacy. Similarly, the overarching goal of stimulating population goals overrode attempts to truly preserve women’s health as depicted in Rocco’s Penal Codes. Further, it cannot be ignored that children were only protected so that they could engage in war. Thus, to conclude, Mussolini’s Battle of the Births, was too principled on increasing birthrates, to actually benefit the health of women and children.

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**Part C: Reflection**

The investigation allowed me to consider the methods historians use to conduct research, providing me with insight toward the difficulties historians may encounter, as I faced similar complications. Historians are reliant on records from the past and thus, they are limited in available sources; forced to construct recollections from the material that remains. This poses an explicit obstacle in research of authoritarian regimes in which much of the preserved information and documents have been manipulated. As a result, sources must be carefully evaluated and the circumstance of their creations must be considered.

I encountered a blatant form of factual distortion in the primary stages of my research, making me acutely aware of difficulties historians face in interpreting events and sources. Earlier works I consulted include Albanese’s[[29]](#endnote-29) and Fertig’s works,[[30]](#endnote-30)both of which outlined the apparently ‘positive’ intentions of Mussolini’s policies, to improve women and children’s health. Fertig’s account especially created an image of revolutionary, compassionate doctrine, as it provided documents published by the regime itself. As a result, my initial impression was that Mussolini did improve the health of women and children. Had I not consulted additional sources, I would not have developed a more conclusive, realistic recount of Fascist Italy. The importance of consulting additional sources was made palpable after reading Gaetano Salvemini’s book[[31]](#endnote-31),in which Salvemini refutes claims by Mussolini, by analyzing statistics that the regime produced. He reveals statistical manipulation when data is compared to information from a greater breadth of years. The exposure of such manipulation altered my view of Mussolini’s regime and provided greater evidence that his policies were actually harmful to the health of women and children.

Further, I was forced to consider the diverging values of statistics and recollections. While statistics are more emotionally objective than recollections; numbers, too, can be manipulated in both their methodology and presentation, as observed above. However, recollections have their faults as well, as sentiments are likely to exaggerate or alter memory and historic implications.

To conclude, I learned that while historians cannot know undoubtedly the full truth of historical events, much can be gained from analyzing multiple sources, especially concomitant statistical data and recollections.

Word Count: 358

1. **Notes**

   1 . William Ebenstein, *Fascist Italy* (New York: Russel and Russel 1973), 127. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. . Howard Fertig, *Fascism Doctrine and Institutions* (New York: Howard Fertig, Inc., 1968), 251-264. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. . Patrizia Albanese, *Mothers of the Nation: Women, Families, and Nationalism in Twentieth-Century Europe,* ed. Michael Howlett, David Laycock, Stephen McBride, Simon Fraser University (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 50. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. . Gaetano Salvemini, *Under the Axe of Fascism* (New York: The Viking Press, 1936), 316. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. . Ibid., 318-19 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. . Ibid., 320. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. . Ibid., 315. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. . Ibid., 316. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. . Albanese, *Mothers of the Nation,* 50. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. . Ebenstein, *Fascist Italy*, 130. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. . Fertig, *Fascism Doctrine and Institutions*, 254. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. . Gigliola Gori, *Italian Fascism and the Female Body: Sport, Submissive Women, and Strong Mothers*, ed. J.A. Mangan (New York: Routledge, 2004), 62. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. . Ibid., 76. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. . Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. . Jennifer Linda Monti, “The Contrasting Image of Italian Women Under Fascism in the 1930’s” (Syracruse University Honors Program Capstone Projects, 2011) Paper 74, 39. http://surface.syr.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1706&context=honors\_capstone [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. . Salvemini, *Under the Axe of Fascism*, 318-20. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. . Ibid., 319-320. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. . Ibid., 320. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. . Albanese, *Mothers of the Nation*, 50. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. . Salvemini, *Under the Axe of Fascism*, 318-20. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. . Fertig, *Fascism: Doctrine and Institutions,* 254. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. . Elizabeth Dixon Whitaker, “Measuring Mamma’s Milk: Fascism and the Medicalization of Maternity in Italy” (University of Michigan Press, 2000), 130. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. . Gori, *Italian Fascism and the Female Body*, 60. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. . Doug Thompson, *State control in Fascist Italy: Culture and conformity, 1925-43* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1991), 68. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. . Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. . Fertig, *Fascism: Doctrine and Institutions*, 263-64. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. . Lesley Caldwell, *Women and Italy: Essays on Gender, Culture, and History*, ed. Zygmunt G Baranski and Shirley W. Vinall (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991), 55. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. . Fertig*, Fascism: Doctrine and Institutions,* 263-64.

    29. Albanese, *Mothers of the Nation.*

    30. Fertig, *Fascism: Doctrine and Institutions.*

    31. Salvemini, *Under the Axe of Fascism.*

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29. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)