

## 9.5. Rural Resilience to Disaster. Part II: Warfare

### Panel organizer

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#### **9.5.3. Venetian rural communities during the "Italian Wars": Institutional evolution and tightness of the rural economic system**

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Let me start my talk with an archival quote, in order to contextualize the issues and the geographical area of interest.

“Il ditto loco di Schio [nel Territorio di Vicenza] al presente ha fuoghi 900 circa, aborgado, et unido con bellissimo casamenti, et molti palazzi, con chiese n° otto adotate di molti preti [...] che è fatto numerosissimo concorso de Cittadini, et de habitanti in ditto loco, delli quali in diverse scientie molti ne sono divenuti famosissimi, et Eccellentissimi.

Altri nelle arme valorosi capitani, et altri che è numero infinito ottimi marchanti per esser ditto loco merchantile, dil qual di seda solamente se ne traze ducati desdottomila a l’anno, et de panni se ne fa numero infinito. Tacemo le altre sorte di merchantia, et trafeghi [...]”<sup>1</sup>

Here’s the translation:

“Schio [in the venetian province of Vicenza] has, at the present, about 900 “hearts” [a demographic unit of measurement, which is something around a family of 4-5 people], It’s walled, and It’s provided of beautiful houses, and many palaces, with eight churches supplied with many priests [...] and many citizens flock there, and also locals, which are very famous and eminent in various sciences.

Some people are valorous Captains, and someone else – whose number is infinite – great traders, because this place is mercantile; only with the silk we gain 18000 ducats per year, and also the number of clothes produced is infinite. We omit the other types of merchandises, and trades [...]”

This is what the inhabitants of Schio wrote in a petition sent to Venice in 1534, few years after the end of the War of the Cognac League (1526-1527) and the peace of Cambrai (1529). Even taking into account the misrepresentation linked with the aim of the petition – Schio was trying to achieve the status of “city” - in this statement the community appears to be in a prosperous demographic situation and with an invidiable economic dynamism: the inhabitants are approximately 4000, the manufacturing production is booming, as the commercial activities. Furthermore the Scledensi (the inhabitants of Schio) omitted another important characteristic: the leading role played by the community in the development of the local rural representative authority. The purpose of this institutional innovation was to balance the urban predominance and in the mid of the century these representative authorities – recognised by the State - were named “Corpi Territoriali”.

The rural communities, after the Peace of Cambrai, played a new role in the organization of the Venetian State: they became the new referents, in addition to the cities, in the restoration of the

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<sup>1</sup> Archivio Storico Comune di Schio, Fondo Maraschin, P. Maraschin, *Moderne ed antiche memorie di Schio*, parte III , c. 41.

taxation system and of the military apparatus – with the creation of the rural militia (the so-called *cernide*), the building of new fortresses, etc. This process had significant consequences regarding the distribution of tax burdens between the cities and the countryside, especially through the review of the *Estimi* (something between a “tax return” and the cadastral survey), in the context of the progressive growth of the urban property in the countryside.

The question that underlies this paper is: How can we explain this resilience from the economic (and not least human) commitment required by two decades of war? The case of Schio is certainly uncommon, but not unique, since the process of formation of the *Corpi Territoriali* is shared by the whole Venetian Mainland Dominion. This new role played by rural communities does not only represent a change in the Venetian military and economic needs, but it’s also the evidence of the economic importance reached by the countryside; and this importance is hard to explain considering the state of desolation exposed by the same rural inhabitants – and to some extent evidenced by archival sources – in the years after the Italian Wars.

The analysis of the books of expenditure of Schio may help us to understand the way this village of the Vicenza’s countryside dealt with the war, providing partial answers to the question previously reported. In this paper I’ll first try to underline the role played by military expenses in the overall budget of the community expenses. Due to time constraints I can not dwell on the definition of “military expenses”, broadly: I will then refer with this term to everything that can be reconnected to the military apparatus and the on going war. The insignificance of those expenses itself would be already an explanation of this resilience ability. Because of documentary availability I’ve considered the books of expenditure covering the years since 1505 to 1510 (the period of the War of the Cambrai League) and since the 1525 to 1528 (the years between the fourth and the fifth War of Italy).

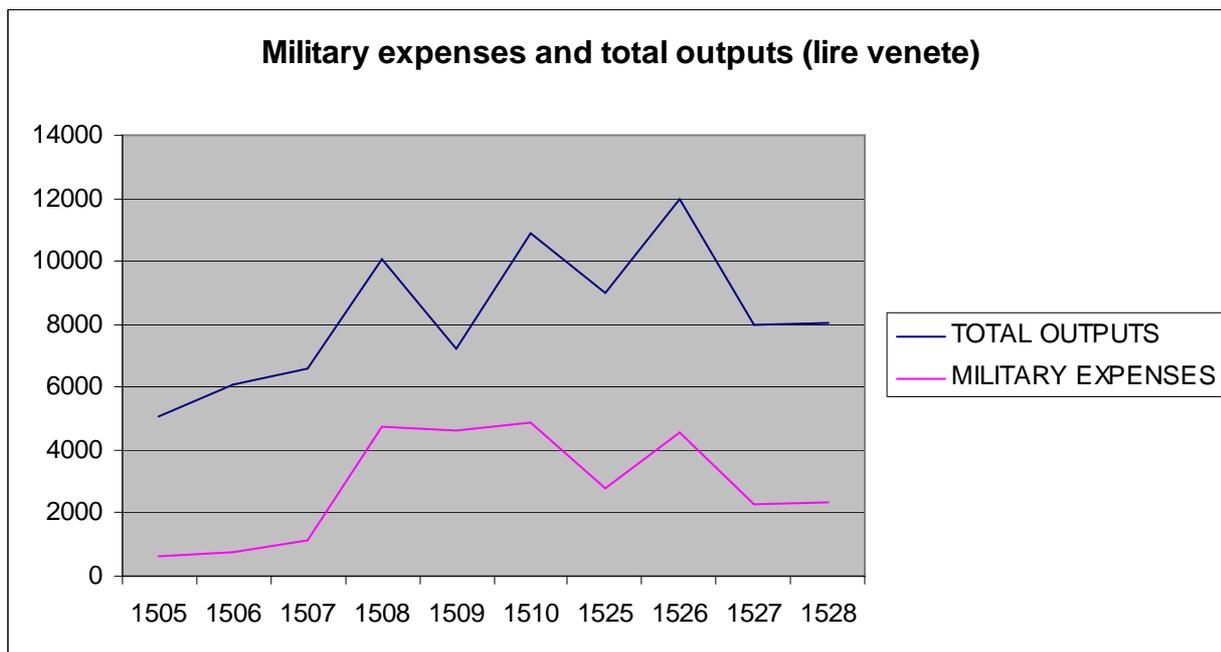
As you can see in the graph, between the 1505 and the 1507, military expenses are quite low, accounting for only the 12-14% of the overall budget of the community, while from 1508, with the approaching of the waged war, the picture changes radically.

	MILITARY EXPENSES	PERCENTAGE OF MILITARY EXPENSES in the overall budget
1505	610 lire	12,10%
1506	770 lire	12,60%
1507	1113 lire	16,80%
1508	4740 lire	47,20%
1509	4630 lire	64%
1510	4866 lire	44,60%
1525	2809 lire	31,30%
1526	4580 lire	38,20%
1527	2294 lire	28,80%
1528	2318 lire	28,80%

In 1508 more than 4.500 *lire venete* were paid for military expenses, the 47% of total expenditure, while in the following year (the year of the defeat of Agnadello, when Venice lost the whole Mainland Dominion) the percentage of this expense is even bigger, reaching 64%. It returned to 45% in 1510, diminishing gradually over the years. Despite this, however, even in the 1620th the expenditure related to the needs of war remained around 30% of the total budget. It’s undeniable therefore that the role played by military expenses was decisive in defining the general trend of the expenses, as the graphic demonstrates. Of course, only in 1509 the percentage of the military expenditure reached 64% of the total, more because of a drastic reduction of juridical and administrative costs than because of an effective increasing of military spending, which remained

instead constant (between 4.000 and 5.000 *lire*) during the period 1508-1510. We can see a slight decrease only in the following years, reaching just over 2000 *lire* between 1527 and 1528, without reaching, however, the low levels of the three years previously considered, from 1505 to 1507, when war expenses were between 400 and 1.000 *lire*.

The human costs had not been taken into consideration, as the shortage of work-force due to the war, the abandonment of crops, etc.; all of these costs, however, contributed to aggravate the situation of the rural economy. It's interesting to note that the public expenditure – as the graph shows - was strongly influenced by the war, and despite this, the communities were able to deal with it without the collapse of the economic system which happened at the beginning of the following century.



The importance of the military expenses is attested, and this lead us to reconsider the original question: how can we explain the resilience of the community, a resilience that allow the community to present itself as a new interlocutor in front of State authority? The answers that emerged from the analysis of the books of expenditure are essentially two: the first is linked to the characterization of the expense, and the other related to the way in which the community faced it.

My analysis starts from the assumption that the loss of wealth of a Community is as stronger as the cash outlay is directioned outside the community itself: in other words, if the amounts spent remained within the local economic circuit, it would not be correct, in my opinion, to use the expression “loss of wealth”, but it's better to use the word “redistribution”.

	TOTAL MILITARY EXPENSES (lire venete)	EXPENSES "INSIDE" THE COMMUNITY (lire venete)	PERCENTAGE of the expenses "inside" the community
1505	610	0	0%
1506	770	56	7%
1507	1113	246	22%
1508	4740	4391	81%
1509	4630	4325	94%
1510	4866	4866	100%
1525	2809	1820	65%
1526	4580	3929	86%
1527	2294	2040	89%
1528	2318	2133	92%

It's immediately evident in the graphic that in the years of strongest military engagement, this "loss of wealth" doesn't happened much. Even in 1510, all the money spent remained inside the community. This means that while the war may cause an increase in expenses and a confluence of the money spent in a given field – the military one, which is also little profitable for the community -, in spite of this there was not an excessive drainage of money. The money indeed has been redistribute within the community itself.

How this redistribution happened remains to understand: for reason of time I could not quantify the exact distribution (name to name) of the amounts spent, but scrolling the documentation what emerges is that if on the one hand almost the whole inhabitants "benefited" of these payments (by the payment of sappers, wagons, gunmen, etc.), they didn't do it equally.

Only the families which sat in the Councils could rent their houses for the lodging of soldiers or participating in contracts for the renovation of the castle located near Schio, in Pievebelvicino, thus obtaining real gains. It's not a coincidence, therefore, that at the end of the war these families are the ones that demonstrate the economic viability at the basis of the formation of the *Corpi Territoriali*.

So, the localization of the expenditure is an element that can preserve the wealth of a Community. These considerations are not enough alone, however, to explain the reactions of the community in front of the emergency of war; on the one hand It's true that it's important to understand the direction of the expenses, but on the other hand It's obvious that another key element for the tightness of local economy is the way in which these costs are coping. The analysis of the incomes is then crucial.

Studying the XVIIth century – my PhD is focused on this period – It's evident that rural communities didn't know where to find the money to cover the costs of taxation, requests of workers, wagons, men for the army and for the galleys, even in a period of much lower military engagement compared with the years of Cambrai. Being brief, the common properties yielded a little and individual wealth could hardly hold an excessive direct taxation.

At the beginning of the XVIth century, the situation looks very different: between 1505 and 1510 in Schio the revenues related to the renting of lands, forests and pastures, added to penalties and reimbursements from the smaller towns of the Vicariato – the administrative district headed by Schio – could cover almost 50% of the total expenditure. This means that even if direct taxation would represent a primary source of revenue – ensuring also the flexibility needed to face the fluctuating costs – its weight remained quite low.

PERCENTAGE OF REVENUES FROM RENTINGS, PENALTIES AND REIMBURSEMENTS in total outputs

1505	1506	1507	1508	1509	1510	1525	1526	1527	1528
56%	60%	59%	36%	29%	55%	55%	50%	56%	56%



The graphical elaboration of the trend of the direct taxation in the total budget of revenues shows also that in the following years (1525-1528), increasing expenses – which never return to the low levels reached before the War of Cambrai – did not match a parallel increase in revenues from rents, due to the “physical” limit imposed by the availability of goods that could be leased. The community needed to supply for the missing money using increasingly the direct taxation, and this caused obvious repercussions in the long term on the private wealth.

We can therefore assume that over time, after a situation of apparent tightness of local economy, the increase of direct taxation led to a progressive erosion of private wealth, forcing the communities in the second half of the XVIth century to sell common proprieties; this process at the beginning of the following century brought to the collapse of rural finances.

The war and the management of war costs therefore played a key role in triggering and guiding this process.

The new fiscal and military needs of the Republic met in the years following the Wars of Italy with the ability of communities to present themselves as politically and economically efficient interlocutors. On the one hand because of the resilience of the communities themselves, due in the most part to the maintenance *in loco* of the amounts spent; on the other hand, this presenting as interlocutors presupposed the existence of a social class – a sort of “rural bourgeoisie” – which in the years of the war had been able to consolidate its economic position. The war therefore could also had played a role as a catalyst of the wealth to those families which for the economic and political role played locally had been able not only to preserve their wealth, but also – as much as possible – take advantage of investment opportunities offered by the war.

The impact of military expenses, then, did not show their destabilizing potential for the local economy - as will be the case in the XVIIth century - because of the possibility for communities to

use the common properties to face them, resorting to direct taxation, increasingly, only at the end of the war. We must add to these considerations the different context in which they are located, the war of Cambrai and the crisis of the local finances during the XVIIIth century; while the Italian Wars fall on a growing economic system, especially with regard to the rural manufacture but not limited to it, at the beginning of the next century northern Italy had lost its leading position at the international level, affecting the ability of communities to cope with situations of great economic pressure. Despite this more general European economic context, it is undeniable that the resilience of the community was largely due to internal factors, as the management of expenditure and of the revenues. The assumptions made above are only starting points for analysis of a field of research which could be extremely intricate and which is hardly presentable in all its aspects in the minutes available here. I've tried in this paper to consider the relationship between war and local economy, without a specific analysis of the social and political dynamics within the community. However, there's no doubt that the management of common properties, the growth of a wealth inequality and so on, are all elements at the basis of the framework outlined in this paper, but these topics would require another speech.