

Prisoners of War, Prisoners of Peace

**Captivity, Homecoming and
Memory in World War II**

**Edited by
Bob Moore & Barbara Hately-Broad**

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Anti-fascist Propaganda among Italian Prisoners of War in the USSR, 1941–6

Maria Teresa Giusti

Anti-fascist propaganda directed at Italian POWs in the USSR forms part of a wider research project being undertaken on the general conditions of Italian POWs in Soviet camps during World War II.¹ This covers their treatment immediately after capture and during their transfer to the camps, but also includes a survey of Soviet leadership attitudes towards POWs. Many of these attitudes can be identified from the anti-fascist propaganda organized in the Soviet camps. The focus here is on the political education and propaganda directed at Italian POWs in the Soviet camps and its short-term and long-term effects. Particular emphasis is given to analysing Soviet techniques of political education and indoctrination of Italian prisoners. In addition, it is essential to examine the role of the Italian Communist Party leadership in exile, and especially its leader, Palmiro Togliatti, in the problems connected with the treatment of Italian POWs in Soviet camps and to their role in facilitating or hindering the return of prisoners of war to Italy.

The question of prisoners of war during World War II has remained a very important issue for both Italian foreign and internal policy since 1945–6, when the repatriation of only 10,032 Italian POWs from the Soviet Union gave rise to animated quarrels and controversies in public and also among Italian political parties in the post-war period. On 25 August 1945, the Soviets suddenly announced the repatriation of their Italian POWs, and in November 1946 the Soviet government declared that the process of repatriation was completed. By that time 10,032 soldiers and officers had returned to Italy from Soviet camps. The Soviet government, trying to hide the high mortality in the prison camps, never explained what happened to the overwhelming majority of the Italian POWs, who numbered around 70,000 men.² The enormous discrepancy between the number of prisoners returned and the number of ARMIR (the Italian Army in Russia) troops captured by Soviet forces turned the problem of POWs into an acute issue for post-war Italian politics. Tens of thousands of families whose sons were sent to the Russian front and never returned suspected that their loved ones had been kept in Soviet

camps, and therefore tried to put pressure on the Italian government to raise the problem with Soviet authorities.

Although a major political issue in the post-war period, the question of Italian POWs in the Soviet Union has been woefully neglected by Italian historiography: Italian scholars have essentially ignored the sufferings of Italian officers and soldiers in Soviet prison camps, as well as the attempted de-fascistization of Italy's armed forces organized by the Red Army between 1942 and the repatriation of 1946. The reasons for this neglect are primarily connected to political questions. For many years officially sanctioned historiography did not dwell on the defeat of the fascist army and this inevitably meant that the hard conditions of life in Soviet camps and their consequences for thousands of Italian POWs were also ignored.

A second reason for the lack of attention given to Italian POWs in Russia has been the unavailability of any documentation from Soviet archives. This only changed in the 1990s but now that newly released material has become available to scholars, it has helped to answer some of the important questions on the history of the Italians in Soviet hands. This research is based on documents drawn from three Russian archives in Moscow: the Russian State Archive of Socio-political History (hereafter named RGASPI), the Russian State Archive (GARF) and the Russian State Military Archive (RGVA). The Russian documentation, especially the material found in RGASPI, consists of letters sent to members of Komintern or written by them, Komintern resolutions, reports written by the political commissars, lesson plans for anti-fascist schools and courses. Other material consists of official reports about the living condition in the Soviet camps, the number of POWs and the percentage of their mortality. A case history concerning an Italian prisoner of war found among the Russian documents provides a useful insight into the prisoners' state of health in the camps.³ With regards to Italian archives, the relevant documentation has been found in the archive of the General Staff of the Italian Army, where important documents about the repatriation are preserved, and in the archive of the Foundation Institute Gramsci in Rome. In addition, the memoirs and recorded testimonies of surviving former Italian POWs provided a wealth of important information.

During the war, the Italian government never discovered how many of their soldiers and officers had been captured by the Red Army since, as it is well known, Stalin refused to sign the Geneva Convention. However, even after 1943, it was impossible to get any information through diplomatic sources about the real number of Italians captured in Russia during the conflict. In the post-war period, the coalition of political parties that ruled Italy until the 1948 general elections, chose not to pursue the Soviet Union on the question of how few soldiers had been repatriated from Russia. As a former Axis country defeated during the war, and because its coalition included the representatives of the Communist Party until May 1947, the government could neither exercise sufficient pressure on the victorious Soviet

Union nor make direct requests to Moscow about the real number of missing soldiers and POWs kept in the Soviet camps. Essentially, it accepted the official version that attributed the high mortality to the Battle of the River Don and to the subsequent Axis retreat.

The international situation also was not conducive to raising the issue of the fate of the Italian prisoners. At a time when the Italian government was concentrating all its efforts on securing a more favourable peace treaty, it could ill afford to alienate the Soviets by raising the prisoner of war problem. At the same time, according to some documentation drawn from American archives, it does seem that the Italian government did try to involve the United States, as a victorious power, in an attempt to get information about Italian POWs from the Soviets.⁴ Domestically, Italian governments did not do much to provide official explanations about the real results of the Russian campaign; but many newspapers did highlight the problem of POWs in the Soviet Union, and blamed the leadership of the Italian Communist Party that had been exiled in the USSR during the war for not doing more to press for information about and, repatriation of, POWs. As a result, during the first post-war years, the issue of Italian POWs was kept alive mainly by such grass-roots organizations as the 'Alliance of Families of Soldiers Missing in Russia' and the 'National Union of Former POWs in Russia' (UNIRR)⁵ that tried to gather information on the whereabouts of missing military personnel and to mobilize public opinion and pressure the government to continue investigating their fate.

Italy started its Russian campaign by organizing an expeditionary army corps, the CSIR, in 1941; a year later in July 1942 the ARMIR, consisting of 230,000 men, left Italy for the Russian front. The ARMIR was not properly equipped for warfare on the Eastern Front and, perhaps more importantly, the Italian soldiers were not sufficiently motivated to fight against Russians. Many of the soldiers were sent to the Eastern Front after having fought in the Greek and Albanian campaigns but, according to some evidence, the soldiers' departures from Italian stations were marked by clashes and brawls, and many of them returned late to their units after periods of leave.⁶ Conversely, loyalty to the country and the oath taken to the king were very strong among the officers, and this helped to justify the new campaign in Russia.

The ARMIR took part in a major battle at the River Don, fought between mid-November 1942 and January 1943, in which it suffered major losses amounting to about 95,000 men. Thanks to Russian documentation, it has now become clear that the number of Italian captives was very high and that the majority of them died in Soviet camps rather than on the battlefield. Changes in the political situation in the early 1990s led to an agreement in 1992 between Italy and Russia that committed the Russian government to providing all the lists of deceased Italian POWs in Soviet lagers. The Italian Ministry of Defence now has in its possession 2,600

pages of documents containing the names of 64,500 Italian officers and soldiers, of whom 38,000 died in Soviet camps. Also included in these numbers were the names of 21,800 repatriated soldiers, including Italians who had been taken prisoner by the Germans after 8 September 1943 for refusing to continue fighting with Germany. When their camps were overrun by the Red Army, (from 1944 onwards) large numbers of Italians were transferred to Soviet territory, where they received the same treatment as other Italian POWs. After the initial interrogations of those repatriated, it became clear that only 10,032 had actually been soldiers with the ARMIR.⁷

A high percentage of POWs, perhaps as many as 22,000 individuals, died in Soviet hands as a consequence of exhaustion, disease and hunger during the so-called '*davaj*'⁸ marches and during their transfer on goods trains.⁹ Even the majority of the POWs who succeeded in reaching the camps did not survive. The Russian documents sent from Moscow show that the mortality among Italian POWs in Soviet camps was particularly high, if compared with the percentage of mortality of other POWs as reported in the official documents.¹⁰ A document from NKVD (*Narodnyj Komissariat Vnutrennych Del*, the People Commissariat for Internal Affairs), referring to the period until 1956 (the year of repatriation of German POWs) shows that the mortality among Italian captives was the highest: from their capture until 1956 it reached 56.5 per cent while in the same period the percentage of mortality among German POWs was 14 per cent, Hungarians 10.6 per cent, and Rumanians 29 per cent.¹¹ This may seem strange as it is well known that many Germans were shot right after being captured, and that the living conditions for German POWs in the camps were much harder in comparison with those of other nationalities.

The explanation for the high mortality among Italians can be attributed to the following reasons. Most Italian POWs were captured at the end of 1942 and beginning of 1943, the period when the Red Army took most prisoners on Soviet territory. This represented the moment when the Soviets' resources were stretched to the limit and they found it hard to keep so many prisoners. As a result, general living conditions in the camps were harder then than at any other time. Moreover, the official data was based on the totals of prisoners after their arrival at the camps: thus the German prisoners and also many Italian officers who were shot soon after capture were obviously never registered. As a result of this, the percentage of Italians repatriated from the Soviet Union was only 14 per cent, while over 90 per cent of Italian prisoners were repatriated from imprisonment in the Allies' camps.¹²

Examination of the lists sent by the Russian government shows that 85 per cent of deaths among Italian prisoners took place in the first months of 1943; their mortality accounted for 90 per cent of deaths in all the camps in March 1943.¹³ Prisoners' living conditions were so hard that most Italian captives died because

they could not adapt to their situation and to the Russian climate. Furthermore, the Italian soldiers' clothing and equipment was not suitable to deal with the rigours of a Russian winter. Even the soldiers of the Alpine Corps, who had been trained to withstand fighting in low temperatures, did not survive as a result of the harsh conditions, poor equipment and hunger. Most deaths occurred as a result of hunger, typhus and other diseases connected to malnutrition. The initial disorganization with which the Soviets received so many POWs was also due to the general situation in Russia and to the fact that the Soviet Army, still involved in a great battle, had to sustain a great degree of mobilization to drive back the enemy.

Among the Soviet organizations entrusted with POWs was the Ministry's Main Administration for Prisoners of War and Internees (GUPVI), a structure created inside the NKVD. These institutions were concerned with the prisoners' treatment. The Political Department for POWs of the Red Army and the Political Directorate for Prisoners of War, created by the Executive Committee of Komintern (IKKI), dealt with the propaganda. Inside the Komintern, a party member for each nationality organized the political work among the prisoners, supervised by Georgi Dimitrov and Palmiro Togliatti, respectively First Secretary and Secretary of the Komintern, and Dmitrii Zacharovič Manuil'skii, a leading member of the communist organization. The Italian branch of the Political Directorate for Prisoners of War was staffed by members of the Italian Communist Party in exile who worked as political instructors, supervised by Togliatti and other leading communists, including Vincenzo Bianco, Edoardo D'Onofrio and Paolo Robotti, Togliatti's brother-in-law.

The Soviet organization for dealing with POWs involved a great many agencies and this inevitably meant that different approaches were often developed to solve the many problems that arose in dealing with prisoners. Individual agencies often adopted different attitudes to the prisoners, and consequently they sometimes pursued mutually incompatible strategies towards their charges.¹⁴ The exiled Communist leadership were very well informed of the prisoners' treatment after capture, since Italian Communist Party members often visited the camps as political instructors. Moreover, Vincenzo Bianco, the representative of the Italian Communist Party inside the Komintern who was responsible for anti-fascist propaganda among Italian prisoners, wrote the well-known letter to Togliatti on 31 January 1943 asking the communist leader to protest to the Soviets that 'as many [elite] soldiers and officers of the Alpine Corps had died as [ordinary] members of Italian infantry divisions'.¹⁵ Togliatti replied to Bianco by writing a long letter that reveals the difficult political situation of the exiled Communist leadership, as well as the Italian Communist leader's complete submission to Stalin's decisions and the total devotion to the rules of the international communist movement. Togliatti accused Bianco of 'abstract humanism' and with placing national interests above class interests.¹⁶ Togliatti considered the death of so many soldiers of an invasion

army as the 'the most effective among the antidotes' against Mussolini and Fascism in general: it was the best way to show the Italian people what errors had been committed by the regime. Anyway, he argued, all the prisoners who remained alive could be useful to the communist cause, if they were re-educated in democratic principles before their repatriation.¹⁷ On 20 March 1943, Bianco sent another letter to Togliatti related to this topic, in which he returned to the question of the fate of so many Italian soldiers, claiming that the death of so many Italian prisoners had done great damage to the political work. He wrote:

I perfectly realise that, fighting against the Soviet Union, they [Italian soldiers] committed a serious political crime against Soviet people . . . But you know better than me what it means to forget about them, about the workers of the fascist block, and, besides, I know very well that this isn't your real opinion.¹⁸

In spite of the inflexible hierarchical communist system, on 24 March 1943, Bianco sent a letter directly to General Petrov, who was responsible for the administration of camps for POWs (GUPVI). Referring to his visit to Camp 58 (Tiomnikov), Bianco openly accused the organization responsible for the treatment of POWs (the NKVD) of neglecting them and overseeing the deaths of hundreds every day. Bianco claimed that the bad organization was due to the different attitudes held by the NKVD on the one hand, and the Political Section of the Red Army (PURKKA) on the other. According to Bianco, GUPVI considered POWs as 'conscious enemies of the socialist country', who, for this reason, could also die. Conversely, PURKKA considered them a great resource: there were hundreds of men from whom a great deal of information could be acquired. Moreover, its priority was to expedite the re-education of these men in democratic principles so that they would become 'the best propagandists' for the 'socialist country'. According to Bianco, such terrible conditions in the camps 'made re-education work among POWs impossible' and 'made the activity of all those comrades who had undertaken the work as political instructors more difficult'. In sum, Bianco went over Togliatti's head to appeal directly to GUPVI and used political reasons and the aims of the International Communist Movement in order to plead for better living conditions for Italian captives.

Turning to the propaganda campaigns themselves, many of those prisoners who succeeded in surviving the hard living conditions accepted political indoctrination and attended the anti-fascist schools since, in general, it was well known that living conditions at the schools were better than in ordinary camps.¹⁹ Other captives were attracted by genuine political interests or just by curiosity towards a new political creed that represented an alternative to Fascism. Moreover, the evidence²⁰ shows that there were also many ex-fascist officers, particularly nationalists, who in captivity rejected their former ideological allegiances. This can be explained as a reaction to the military defeat in Russia, which represented the failure of the Italian

Army, but also to Mussolini's choice in undertaking a war and bringing about the collapse of the country. However, there was also a great number of prisoners who refused to accept the reasoning of communist propaganda. All the promises of constructing a better world in Italy, based on the socialist principles, seemed to be in total contradiction to what they had seen in Russian territory and to treatment meted out to most of their fellow soldiers who had died during captivity.

The political propaganda carried out among Italian POWs aimed at re-educating officers and soldiers obfuscated by fascist ideology, and persuading captives of the merits and values of Marxist-Leninist doctrine. The principal aim of the PURRKA was to create 'an anti-fascist mass movement'²¹ which could achieve both short and long-term objectives. In examining the political education and propaganda among Italian POWs it is possible to distinguish two major periods with their own goals and methods: the first that lasted until the Armistice between Italy and the Allies (8 September 1943), and the second one that began after the Armistice. In the first period the propaganda activities organized among Italian POWs were aimed at reaching military objectives: the desertion of fighting troops using prisoners' appeals sent to the Italian Army through leaflet; the collapse of Mussolini's regime; the end of the alliance between Germany and Italy.²² The contents of such leaflets suggested to the prisoners, during conversations or meetings with them, related to the necessity of putting an end to the Fascist regime and to the war for the good of Italy. It was also underlined that all responsibility for the military disaster of the ARMIR in Russia should be assigned exclusively to Mussolini and not to the Italian people. This last item was strongly emphasized in order to free the fighting forces, the Italian people and the POWs from any guilt, and also to draw the POWs closer to communist political reasoning. Another important item in this campaign was to stress the absurdity of the alliance between Italy and her 'old' German enemy.²³

After 8 September 1943, the political objectives were concerned exclusively with political matters. The long-term objectives of the political education and propaganda among prisoners were stated by the Komintern Secretariat resolution of 5 February 1943 and they aimed at 'forming conscious and convinced anti-fascists and preparing new national military units as well as new cadres for the communist movement'.²⁴ Another goal of propaganda was that of offering a positive image of the Soviet system as the best political order possible. This was formulated by Vincenzo Bianco in a letter sent to the Italian political instructors on 27 April 1943.

Apart from showing the false and reactionary attitude of Fascism, you should explain 'what [the] Soviet Union is', for instance, since the democratic-bourgeois revolution up to World War II. . . . To explain what [the] Soviet Union is, you can show as an example the fact that the working class can and should fight for building a regime that could not only destroy the reasons of the war, but permit all the workers to lead the State and

build their own existence, like in the Soviet Union, without either capitalists or black shirts.²⁵

Nikolaj Tereščenko, the Soviet political commissar responsible for propaganda among the Italian prisoners of war, describes a conversation between Palmiro Togliatti and Manuil'skij, during which the former had declared that the Communist Party considered political re-education of the POWs, its duty and a national task. 'As soon as we were informed of a great many Italian prisoners of war arriving in the camps, the party leadership and I decided to send the best communist instructors to carry out the political work among them'.²⁶ The purpose of the Communist leadership was to create armed military groups among former POWs as well as to educate 'agitators' who would work for the Communist Party after their repatriation. The anti-fascist education was organized therefore on two levels: the level of mass political education, directed at POWs in general and carried out in all the camps among the prisoners gathered according to nationality; and the second level, reserved only for deeply motivated prisoners, who would be sent to specially organized anti-fascist schools.

Interrogations of POWs by the political instructors were considered to be the first step in the re-education work. They were seen as a reliable source of information about the prisoner's state of mind and political attitudes. This information was also utilized to single out both presumed war criminals and the POWs who had possessed positive attitudes towards the Communist Party even before being mobilized into the Italian army, and who were, therefore, ready to join the anti-fascist movement.²⁷ The information distilled from the interrogations shows that a large part of Italian prisoners did not have anti-fascist attitudes: many of them expressed approval of Mussolini's domestic policies, especially the measures against unemployment, and limited their criticisms to Fascist foreign policy, especially Mussolini's decision to join the war. Regarding the attitude of Italian soldiers towards politics, the interrogations and discussions with political instructors revealed that most of the prisoners did not care about political questions and did not know anything about Italian politics before Fascism.²⁸ Many of the Italian officers, on the other hand, proved to be convinced supporters of the Fascist regime and the overwhelming majority of them expressed a continuing loyalty to the monarchy.

For this reason, the officers' acceptance of anti-fascist ideology was rather rare. Therefore both Bianco and D'Onofrio suggested that the political instructors should not use any radical arguments against Fascism, but approach the question in a moderate and gradual way, as the officers were the principal targets of the propaganda. They had to be re-educated to accept new political ideas for two main reasons. First, so that they could be instrumental in disseminating communist ideology among their soldiers; and second because of their future role as 'opinion

leaders' in post-war Italian society. As an example of mass political work, in a report of June 1942, referring to the work carried out at Camp 99, Bianco described the contents of his lecture on 'The economic situation in Italy':

What did Italian people gain from all the wars started by Fascism?

What does the military and political alliance with Hitlerian Germany give to Italians?

What does Soviet power consist of and who rules the Soviet Union?

What did the Soviet power give to the working people?

How was fascism in Italy born and what was its first political programme?

Against whom does Fascism fight inside the country and abroad?

Who is Mussolini?

On Italian-Soviet relations (to underline further on the lies of fascist ideology).

I also gave the following lectures:

'Why Italy and Germany attacked the Soviet Union' (the only State in the world in which there are neither plutocrats nor black shirts, neither capitalists nor landowners).

'The war against the Soviet Union is an unfair, criminal and capitalist one.'

'Stalin is the guide of all the overwhelmed people.'

'The kolchoz system.'²⁹

Besides the lectures, the mass political work was complemented by other activities such as the reading of texts about the Marxist-Leninist doctrine and the writing of articles for the POW journal³⁰ or for the news-sheets displayed on camp walls. Many camps had a library, whose material was supplied by the Political Directorate.

Significant political education and propaganda was carried out in two anti-fascist schools: at Camp 165 (Taliza) and Camp 27/B (Krasnogorsk), initially located in Oranki. The former began its work in August 1943 with basic courses limited to 'easy and essential knowledge about the history of the Soviet Union and about Italian history and Fascism'.³¹ The Krasnogorsk school was designed as a kind of high school aimed at recruiting 'qualified propagandist prisoners',³² so that they could become educators and could 'spread the anti-fascist truth among the mass of POWs'. Its courses dealt with Marxist political economy, historical materialism, the history of political parties and the principles of atheism. According to a document drawn from the Russian State Military Archive, 'in total, 359 Italian POWs had attended Krasnogorsk school . . . while 548 had attended anti-fascist courses organized in the Taliza school'.³³ In a letter sent to Stalin on 7 March 1944, Beria affirmed that '2,700 Italian POWs had become anti-fascist'.³⁴

A critical analysis of the reports written by the Soviet political commissars who visited the schools, and those submitted by the Italian political instructors, can provide a more realistic evaluation of the Soviet and Italian Communist Party's efforts to re-educate the prisoners. Particularly helpful in this regard are the reports written by the anti-fascist groups organized in the camps and consisting of

anti-fascist prisoners of different political tendencies. One of the most important documents is 'The chronicle of anti-fascist movement among Italian officers in prison-camp number 160', preserved among secret documents of the Italian Communist Party sent to the Soviet Union for security reasons in the 1950s. The chronicle represents a sort of evaluation of the effects of the mass political re-education carried out among Italian officers gathered in Camp 160 (Suzdal') after May 1943, carried out by the 'activist officers', just before the officers' repatriation.³⁵ According to the document, Italian officers' attitudes towards anti-fascism were characterized by a sort of 'political indifference', so that the results of mass political education and propaganda had to be considered unsatisfactory as far as the efforts and the expectations were concerned. In the words of the anti-fascist officers:

Three groups of officers with different attitudes towards Marxist-Leninist propaganda can be singled out in the camp: a group of officers interested in the problems of democracy and in the eradication of fascist mentality and ideology in Italy; another small but dynamic group, formed by antidemocratic and antinational elements; and finally the third group, consisting of a significant number of indifferent officers, who are mere spectators of the clash between the other two groups.³⁶

As is shown in the chronicle, the aim of recruiting the officers to the anti-fascist cause, or even convincing the doubters was never achieved.

The Soviet political commissars were far more positive about the political work carried out in the anti-fascist schools, especially the results achieved at Taliza with ordinary workers and peasants who had been conscripted as soldiers. The effects of the anti-fascist work carried out in the school of Krasnogorsk were considered more contradictory. According to reports, most Italian prisoners still remained fascist and many students, particularly the officers, had openly declared that they did not agree with the Marxist doctrine. They were adamant that they had agreed to attend the school to learn about anti-fascism rather than about Marxist materialism. The expulsion of prisoners who raised objections and compromised discipline in the classes produced a salutary change in the political and moral atmosphere of the class and, as a result, the remaining students began demonstrating a new and positive attitude towards Marxism-Leninism. According to the report,

By the end of the courses, all the students had strengthened their anti-fascist attitudes. There is no doubt that after their repatriation many of them would join the communist movement. Most of them have fully embraced the fighting spirit of Marxism and are firmly determined to take up arms and fight for it.³⁷

As a matter of fact, many Italian officers asked political instructors if they could join the Communist Party right there in Russia. The political activity among Italian

POWs continued until their very last days in the Soviet Union, even when those from Suzdal' were transferred to Odessa.³⁸

Repatriation of Italian POWs was announced on 25 August 1945 by the Soviet government without any consultation with the Italian communist leadership. Togliatti, who had returned to Italy in March 1944, was fully aware of a negative public reaction to the repatriation of only 10,032 prisoners. He also took into account the fact that the repatriated soldiers would have inevitably revealed the extremely hard living conditions endured by the Italians in the Soviet prison camps and the deaths of many prisoners. For this reason, in discussion with the Soviet ambassador Kostylev on the same day, Togliatti tried to suggest a different way of organizing the repatriation of the remaining soldiers and officers.³⁹ As he had feared, the accounts of the first groups of former prisoners about their imprisonment produced strongly negative consequences for the image of the Soviet Union and the Italian Communist Party. As a result, the Soviet Union decided to delay the repatriation of Italian officers until April 1946. After a long trip, the officers reached Italy on 7 July, almost a month after the institutional referendum and the elections for the Constituent Assembly had been held on 2 June 1946. As soon as the Italian POWs left the zone under Soviet control on the way back to Italy in July 1946, clashes and brawls broke out among Italian officers when some of them assaulted fellow-officers, accusing them of collaborating with their Soviet captors. For the same reason, after repatriation, former POWs formally accused eighteen officers of betrayal and of spying on their fellow-officers during captivity. These charges led to military trials, in which the accused officers were in the end exculpated and declared 'anti-fascist soldiers abroad'.⁴⁰

After the war, the return of such a relatively small number of prisoners, combined with the Soviet refusal to provide sufficient information on the fate of others, provoked strong suspicions that many thousands were still being kept in the Soviet camps. After 1947, the problem of the prisoners gave rise to acrimonious disputes between the government and the Italian Communist Party, and had some influence on the outcome of the April 1948 general elections, which resulted in a defeat of the Popular Front coalition organized by the Communist Party. On the eve of the April 1948 elections the UNIRR had published a booklet in which five officers, former POWs held in the Soviet camps, accused one of the exiled Italian Communist Party leaders in the USSR, Edoardo D'Onofrio, of 'psychological torture during the exhausting interrogations of POWs he conducted in the Soviet prison-camps'. Considering it a good device for propaganda, Edoardo D'Onofrio, then a Communist deputy in the Italian Parliament, accused the authors of the booklet of slander. While preparing for the court hearings, D'Onofrio invited at least forty-one former POWs to give evidence in his favour by sending a number of letters addressed to Communist Party local and provincial organizations, in which the forty-one former prisoners had been working, inviting them to testify in

his defence. During the trial held in 1949 the former prisoners did testify that, 'Eduardo D'Onofrio did his best to help us, both physically and morally . . . ; thanks to the political work carried out by D'Onofrio, we were able to understand that our new task as Italian citizens consisted in restoring democratic order in our country.'⁴¹ The authors of the publication, however, managed to provide a number of testimonies to the contrary, and referred to a number of Italian POWs still languishing in Soviet camps. As a result, they were acquitted of the charge of slander.

On 13 August 1948 *L'Unità*, the Communist Party newspaper, published a booklet signed by Paolo Robotti who accused General Messe, commander-in-chief of the CSIR and later of the General Staff of the Italian Army, of being responsible for the defeat in Russia.⁴² Robotti also asked the Ministry of Defence to start an inquiry into the deaths of such large numbers of Italian soldiers in the Russian campaign. Giovanni Messe answered in defence of the General Staff, asserting that all the responsibilities for the deaths of so many captured Italian soldiers had to be attributed to the Soviet government.⁴³ As we can see, both the attitude of the Communist Party and the general Staff of the Army lacked impartiality and objectivity. On the one hand, the Communist Party refused to acknowledge any Soviet responsibility for the deaths of many thousands of the Italian prisoners in captivity. On the other hand, the official version of the General Staff failed to inform the public about the real causes of the defeat in Russia and its consequences for the fate of members of the ARMIR.

In conclusion, as we can see, in the post-war period the question of POWs was exploited both by the Communist Party and by its opponents for their own political purposes. After 1948, only families of the missing members of the ARMIR and the associations of former POWs continued pressing the Italian government for further information about the fate of missing soldiers and officers of ARMIR. On the long-term effects of propaganda, some evidence is available from testimonies and documents left by former Soviet instructors and Italian communists in exile who worked as political instructors. One of the organizers of the Krasnogorsk anti-fascist school, Nikolaj Tereščenko, was delighted that many of his former students, after repatriation in Italy, 'occupied prominent positions inside various state, social and educational organizations of Italy'.⁴⁴ In the reports, which he regularly sent to Soviet political functionaries after his repatriation, Paolo Robotti always described the effects of the education and propaganda among Italian POWs as positive. Thus, in a letter, sent to Dmitrij Ščevljagin⁴⁵ on 7 May 1947, Robotti wrote about the activities carried out by his former anti-fascist school students.

In all the places I visited, I encountered our former students: they are to be found in prominent positions. Many of them have become members of organizing committees of big Party cells, sections and federations (like, for instance, Gonelli). One of our students is an outstanding leader of the insurance brokers association who organized and guided the national strike of this category. Another student of yours has become

secretary of a Communist Party section which numbers 1,200 members. Before coming to Russia he was a sacristan in his village! . . . In conclusion, our work has proved to be useful and it will continue to be useful in the future.⁴⁶

Many former POWs who had attended anti-fascist courses and schools did join the Communist Party after their repatriation. Substantial numbers became effective members of Party federations and of the Syndicate. A former Italian POW war from Abruzzo, my own region, became elected to the national Parliament as a deputy for the Italian Communist Party. Among the former prisoners there have also been examples of convinced Fascists who, after attending the school, changed their views and decided to work for the Communist Party such as a former officer of the Fascist Militia from Bologna who started working as a teacher in a Communist Party school after his return to Italy. Thus it is possible to claim that, as regards Italian POWs, the re-education programme carried out by the Political Department of the Red Army and by the Komintern did have some successes, but not on a large scale. Propaganda itself could not really modify most prisoners' attitudes toward Fascism or toward Communism: the successes came in relation to individuals who were already anti-fascists, a few former committed Fascists and among those who saw in collaboration with the USSR and the Communist Party the chance of a political career or of finding a job in Italy. In addition, there were also many prisoners who, after accepting the anti-fascist rhetoric, sincerely hoped to change Italy on the basis of democratic principles and to contribute in rebuilding the country exhausted after a twenty year regime of Fascism and war.

7 Anti-fascist Propaganda among Italian Prisoners of War in the USSR, 1941–6

1. This chapter is taken from my Doctorate on Italian POWs in the Soviet camps during World War II (University of Bologna, 2003). Supervisor: Prof. Elena Aga-Rossi.
2. The total losses of the ARMIR after the second battle of the Don amounted to 95,000, thus around 25,000 had been killed and the rest taken prisoner.
3. *Istorija bolezni N. 553* [Case History number 553], 'Archivio P. Resta', Archive of the General Staff of the Italian Army (AUSSME). The case history concerns the Italian soldier, Pietro Davide, of the 'Forlì' Infantry division stationed in the Balkans. He was taken prisoner by the Germans after the 8 September 1943 and then transferred to the USSR when the Red Army occupied the Balkans.
4. Memorandum of Conversation between Dr. Bounous, First Secretary at the Italian Embassy, and Mr Hilton, Representative of USA State Department, 24 October 1950. NARA Confidential US State Department Central Files, Italy Internal Affairs (1950–1954), 0551–0555. Restricted.
5. The UNIRR still now publishes a journal devoted to the question of repatriating soldiers and officers from Russia.
6. See the interrogations of the prisoner of war, soldier Antonio Astediano, sent to Georgi Dimitrov on 6 December 1942. RGASPI [Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History], f.495, op.77, d.18, l. 26.
7. Comminazione del ministro per l'Assistenza post-bellica all'Ufficio autonomo reduci e rimpatriati, 15 November 1945, AUSSME, DS 2271/C.
8. The word '*Davaj!*' (Forward!) was shouted by the guards as the prisoners set off in columns.
9. C. Vicentini, 'I prigionieri italiani in Urss negli archivi russi' in A. Bendotti and E. Valtulina (eds), *Internati, prigionieri, reduci. La deportazione militare italiana durante la seconda guerra mondiale* (Bergamo: Rassegna dell'Istituto bergamasco per la storia della Resistenza e dell'età contemporanea, 1999), p. 157.
10. According to Andrei Krupennikov, director of the Memorial Museum of anti-fascist German prisoners of war, if it is true that at Tambov – one of the worst Soviet camps – the mortality rate among Germans was 10 per cent higher than that of Italians (9,000 Italians died at Tambov), the documentation shows that for the whole period of captivity the percentage of mortality among Italians was the highest one. Interview taken at Krasnogorsk – Moscow – on 4 November 2000. See also the communication of L.P. Beria to V.M. Molotov on 7 March 1944, GARF, *Osobaja papka Stalina*, f.9401, op.2, d.69, l. 142; and *Elenco dei lager dove sono deceduti prigionieri italiani* [List of camps

- where Italian POWs died], according to Russian data, in Ministero della Difesa, *Csir – Armir. Campi di prigionia e fosse comuni* (Roma, 1996), pp. 3–5.
11. Information about the number of POWs of the German Army and its allies until 22 April 1945, RGVA [Russian State Military Archive], f.1p, op.32b, d.2, l. 8–9.
 12. 'Italian prisoners of war in the II World War', according to the Report of the UNO Commission for POWs, 1958, AUSSME.
 13. *Mortalità mensile dei prigionieri di guerra italiani nei lager sovietici*, in Ministero della Difesa, *Csir – Armir. Campi di prigionia e fosse comuni*, p. 25.
 14. See *Pismo V. Bianco G.P. Petrovu GUPVI NKVD* [Bianco's letter to G.P. Petrov, responsible for the GUPVI of NKVD], Moskva, 24 March 1943, Secret, RGASPI, f.495, op.74, d.256, l. 24.
 15. RGASPI, f.527, op.1, d.1, l. 14. Bianco's letter to Togliatti was published in Italy for the first time in the magazine *Panorama*, on 19 February 1992. When Bianco wrote the letter, many Italian POWs had not yet been transferred to the camps.
 16. RGASPI, f.527, op.1, d.1, l. 18–25.
 17. RGASPI, f.527, op.1, d.1, l. 18–25.
 18. RGASPI, f.527, op.1, d.1, l. 26–26 bis.
 19. The decree n. 0488 had fixed a ration of 700 gr. of bread a day for the prisoners of war 'who attended anti-fascist courses'. GARF, f.9401, op.1a, d.133, l. 150. Anyway, in many cases, owing to the generally bad conditions in the camps as well as in the country, the POWs had to be satisfied with the ordinary rations.
 20. G. Ossola, 'Notes', Archivio "M", MF 312, doc. 312, Fondazione Istituto Gramsci, Roma. Giuseppe Ossola, member in exile of the PCI, worked as a political instructor in the Suzdal' camp, number 160. Ossola's 'Notes' is a sort of diary in which he recorded the behaviour and the political attitude towards political propaganda of the Italian officers gathered at Suzdal'.
 21. *Postanovlenie Sekretariata IKKI ot 5-ogo fevralja 1943* [Resolution of the Secretariat of the Executive Committee of Komintern on 5 February 1943], RGASPI, f.495, op.77, d.26, l. 24.
 22. Such objectives were indicated in the programme drawn up for Italian POWs by Edoardo D'Onofrio – exiled member of the Italian Communist Party – and Nikolaj Tereščenko – a Soviet political commissar – according to the Komintern guidelines. See: *Plan meroprijatij brigady tt. Tereščenko i Edo*, July 1943, RGASPI, f.495, op.77, d.21a, l. 153–155, l. 154.
 23. RGASPI, f.495, op.77, d.21a, l. 153–155, l. 154.
 24. *Postanovlenie Sekretariata IKKI ot 5-ogo fevralja 1943*, RGASPI, f.495,

- op.77, d.27, l. 179.
25. *Pismo Bianco italjanskim komunistam instruktoram lagerej*, RGASPI, f.495, op.77, d.27, l. 50.
 26. N. Tereščenko, *L'uomo che 'torturò' i prigionieri di guerra italiani* [The Man who 'Tortured' Italian POWs] (Milano: Vangelista, 1994), p. 109.
 27. The importance of the interrogations for information from POWs is emphasized by V. Bianco in a letter sent to the Italian political instructor Fiammenghi, on 30 December 1942. RGASPI, f.495, op.77, d.27, l. 122. Moreover, see the minutes of the Committee for the political work among POWs, on 6 March 1942 where it was underlined that 'the political instructors should pay much attention to the individual work among POWs', p. 17.
 28. See: soldier Umberto Picini's interrogation of 4 December 1942, RGASPI, f.495, op.77, d.18, l. 27. Secret.
 29. *Doklad Bianco o politrabote sredi italjanskich voennoplennyh v lagere 99*, 18 June 1942, RGASPI, f.495, op.77, d.16, l. 7.
 30. The first issue of *L'Alba* (The Dawn) for Italian prisoners of war was published on 10 February 1943 in Moscow, and carried the subtitle 'For a free and independent Italy'. First it contained only articles written by exiled members of the Communist Party; but later, since the paper did not attract much interest among the prisoners, the editorial staff decided to include prisoners' articles. This kind of collaboration started with issue 7, of 8 May 1943.
 31. N. Tereščenko, *L'uomo che 'torturò' i prigionieri di guerra italiani*, p. 133.
 32. N. Tereščenko, *L'uomo che 'torturò' i prigionieri di guerra italiani*, p. 134. According to his interview with the former prisoner of war, Giulio Brancadoro, the study of history of political parties and atheism was also particularly exhaustive at Krasnogorsk. Interview taken at L'Aquila on the 27 November 1999.
 33. RGVA, f.88, op.4, d.2, l. 85 s. N. Tereščenko states that about 500–550 Italian students attended Krasnogorsk anti-fascist school in the period between 1943 and 1945. See: N. Tereščenko, *L'uomo che 'torturò' i prigionieri di guerra italiani*, p. 142.
 34. *Osobaja papka Stalina*, GARF [State Archives of the Russian Federation], f.9401, op.2, d.69, l. 142.
 35. *The chronicle of anti-fascist movement among Italian officers in prison-camp number 160*, Archivio 'M', Fondazione Istituto Gramsci, Roma. The 'activist officers' were the anti-fascist officer POWs, members of the 'Active' of the anti-fascist group that organized propaganda activities and wrote articles for the wall-newspaper, *l'Alba*.
 36. *The chronicle of anti-fascist movement among Italian officers in prison-camp number 160*, p. 3 ss.
 37. *Dokladnaja zapiska. Ob oznovnyh političeskich itogach obučenija 4-ogo*

- nabora slušatelej antifašistskoj politškolj prilagere N. 27/B NKVD Sssr*, 22nd May 1944, RGASPI, f.495, op.77, d.40, p. 2 s.
38. See Robotti's diary, in Fondo Robotti, Archivio Fondazione Istituto Gramsci, Roma.
 39. E. Aga-Rossi and V. Zaslavsky, *Togliatti e Stalin* (Bologna, Il Mulino, 1988), p. 170.
 40. Only one, the soldier Antonio Mottola, was convicted for insubordination during the captivity period. See the Judgement of the Court martial in Milan against Antonio Mottola, 8 May 1951, 'Archivio P. Resta', AUSSME.
 41. *Contro le calunnie le falsità* [Against slanders and lies], Fondo D'Onofrio, b. 3639, 22, Fondazione Istituto Gramsci, Roma.
 42. P. Robotti, *Perché non si è fatta luce sulla campagna di Russia. Dove sono i soldati dell'Armir?*, suppl. to 'L'Unità', 13 August 1948.
 43. G. Messe, *A survey about Italians missing in Russia*, in, *Russia. 1941–43* (Milano, Rizzoli, 1964), p. 12.
 44. N. Tereščenko, *L'uomo che 'torturò' i prigionieri di guerra italiani*, p. 178.
 45. D. Ščevljagin worked as a political instructor among Italian POWs in the anti-fascist school of Taliza.
 46. RGASPI, f.17, op.128, d.373, l. 43. See also P. Robotti's *Notes*, in Fondo Robotti, Archivio Fondazione Istituto Gramsci, Roma.

8 The Nucleus of a New German Ideology? The Re-education of German POWs in the United States during World War II

1. A copy of the statement, signed by a German prisoner of war, can be found at the Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv (Federal Military Archives), Freiburg, B 205/v.1537. See also: Jochen Leykauff, 'Erinnerungen an Georgia' (Hörstein, Ger. 1993), 81. Unpublished manuscript, Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, MSg 200/886.
2. In German: *Amerikanisches Verwaltungs und Demokratie Programm*.
3. 'Am Anfang stand nämlich ein Statement, das wir Knall auf Fall zu unterschreiben hatten und aus psychologischen Gründen und [das] gewohnheitshalber auch unterschrieben wurde.' Leykauff, 'Erinnerungen an Georgia', p. 81.
4. 'Guter Wille, das Bedürfnis, nach allem, was man vorfinden würde, einen Neuanfang zu machen, sicherlich auch eine Nutzen-Analyse, wie auch die Neigung zur Anpassung – das waren wohl wesentliche Komponenten, die die Bereitschaft der PW's weckten, am Umschulungs-Programm der Amerikaner teilzunehmen.' Leykauff, 'Erinnerungen an Georgia', p. 79.
5. Office of The Provost Marshal General (hereafter: PMGO), 'World War II: A Brief History. Part III: Prisoners of War' (1946). The Prisoner of War Division