# TOTALITARIAN SOCIETIES and Democratic Transition

## Essays in memory of Victor Zaslavsky

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# From Fascism to Communism

## The History of a Conversion

Maria Teresa Giusti

A Blackshirt's conversion to communism is the subject of these pages, which aim to follow the personal and political fate of Danilo Ferretti, a restless spirit of fascist Italy. Intensely antibourgeois and anticapitalist, Ferretti pursued politics as revolution, and wanted to build totalitarian popular democracy. His choice to turn his back on fascism and favor the opposite camp, communism, was determined by the time World War II broke out. This reversal was not as unusual as one might think. Many other young fascists found themselves at a crossroads after July 25, 1943, and particularly after the end of the war. Their decisions often diverged. Some remained faithful to fascism, and in 1946 became members of the neo-fascist party (the Italian Socialist Movement; MSI). Others joined the monarchic party, or the Christian Democracy (DC). Finally, many felt it was more consistent with their past to enroll in the political and union organizations of the left, including the Italian Communist Party (PCI), where they sometimes took on important positions.[1]

Danilo Ferretti's story holds special interest for the ways in which his political conversion occurred. He participated in the Spanish Civil War enlisting as a volunteer in the fascist army, and during the Second

[1] On the neo-fascist option, see G. Parlato, *Fascisti senza Mussolini. Le origini del neofascismo in Italia 1943–1948* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2006). On the fate of young fascists, see the long and detailed study by A. Carioti, *Gli orfani di Salò. Il Sessantotto nero dei giovani neofascisti nel dopoguerra. 1945–1951* (Milan: Mursia, 2008), and, by the same author, *I ragazzi della fiamma* (Milan: Mursia, 2011). As concerns the fate of fascist unionism, see, among others, P. Neglie, *Fratelli in camicia nera. Comunisti e fascisti dal corporativismo alla CGIL. 1928–1948* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1996).

World War fought in Yugoslavia and in Russia in the fascist militia. It was precisely in the Soviet Union, during his captivity, that he resolved to convert to communism.

## The Adherence to Fascism

Danilo Ferretti was born in the Italian town of Russi, in the Province of Ravenna, on January 14, 1913.[2] He became involved with the first fascist organizations in 1931, when, after graduating from the classical lyceum, he enrolled in medical school at the University of Bologna, and—"like everyone else," he writes—was forced to secure membership of a fascist university group (GUF).[3]

In subsequent years, his adherence to fascism strengthened, finally becoming the result of personal, firmly held convictions. According to his autobiography, what moved him at first was neither the education he received at home (his father was "very much opposed to fascism," and disapproved of his decision to join the Blackshirts during his pre-military service in 1933), nor ideological belief. As in the case of many of his friends, it was merely the circumstances that inspired him: "All the young people in my town were doing as I was," and, further, "I did not realize the import of this fact."[4]

The definite change in his attitude occurred in 1933. His family's financial straits, and the need for him to support himself through his studies, compelled him to teach Italian and Latin as a substitute teacher in the professional training schools of Russi and in the technical institute of Ravenna. On December 5, in his capacity as a teacher, he was invited to commemorate Giovan Battista Perasso, the Genoese hero known as Balilla. "I accepted," he writes, "perhaps also because

[2] As stated in his autobiography, his father and mother—a varnisher and a seamstress, respectively—"managed, at great sacrifice, to see him through a complete course of high school education"; *Autobiography of Danilo Ferretti* (henceforth *Autobiography*), 1. His widow, Maria Chiara Bosi Ferretti, kindly provided the author of this essay with the typewritten text from 1949.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

my ambition was aroused. That was my first true step in political life."[5] Later, his desire to take active part in politics prompted him to change his course of studies and enroll in law school. His financial troubles and his work as a substitute teacher had made it impossible for him to attend classes in medical school regularly; what's more, he trusted that a degree in law, rather than medicine, would facilitate his entry into one of the regime's institutions. Thus, he became politically active in the small town of Russi, and "almost unwittingly, the black shirt became not only an item of clothing, but also a frame of mind, which seemed well suited to the confused, socialist-leaning ideas I had always harbored."[6]

What won Ferretti over was fascism's revolutionary promise. Increasingly, Mussolini's regime seemed to him the only political force capable of deeply changing society, as had happened in Russia in 1917, and the only force that could produce true revolution based on social justice, a recurrent theme in his thoughts and writings. This stance was shared by many intellectuals of the time, including those of the so-called fascist left. While never formally adhering to the latter, Ferretti did share some of its core values and attitudes, absent from or little developed in other currents of fascism: "the fight against the bourgeoisie and capitalism, but also the aversion to liberalism, the subordination of economy to politics, the populism, culture as civil and social commitment."[7]

Throughout the 1930s, Ferretti was an uncompromising fascist. He held the firm belief that fascism could bring about great social change, and set off a process leading to corporative civilization, social equality, and the end of the corrupt bourgeois world. Like other young adults involved in the GUF and in the local federations of the National Fascist Party (PNF), who even contributed to youth magazines, particularly to those linked with *Il Bargello* and *L'Universale*, Ferretti

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid., 2.

[7] P. Buchignani, "Romano Bilenchi dal fascismo al comunismo," *Nuova storia contemporanea* 6 (2009): 62. On the fascist left, the most rebellious of the many fascist currents, see G. Parlato, *La sinistra fascista. Storia di un progetto mancato* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2008), which identifies that movement's characteristic features between the 1920s and the 1970s.

shared fascism's anti-bourgeois spirit and approved of the points of contact between Blackshirt Italy and the Soviet Union. Chicago was the "enemy," not Moscow. The latter had broken free of traditional forces, which were outdated and corrupt, thus setting an example for others to follow.[8]

In 1935, Danilo was called on to attend a course for infantry reserve officer cadets. Meanwhile, the war was being fought in Ethiopia, an operation that had his approval. He later explained that "the regime's propaganda against the great Anglo-Saxon plutocracies," which embodied the corrupt and imperialist bourgeois world, had particularly taken hold on him.[9]

Ferretti's participation in the regime's political life was bound to take place through authentic militancy, and by putting fascism's militaristic "warrior spirit" into practice. This occurred in Spain when, in 1938, he was awarded a GUF scholarship to study at the University of Santander. Here, he mixed with student circles, where "Franco's cause was a holy cause." He later shared his thoughts on this matter:

> Superficial and empty like so many young people in my condition, my head full of fascist propaganda, I believed I could equate the small number of monarchic, bigoted and greedy people that made up the bourgeoisie with the entire Spanish population. And that provided me with a moral justification to enlist in the units of the Italian army that fought against Spanish republicans. I said it provided me with a justification, not with a reason, for the real motive for my enlisting must be sought 1) in my need for a "warrior title" in order to secure a position in Italy, and 2) in my need to pay off the many debts my parents had contracted with banks and individuals, mostly to support me in my studies.[10]

In this passage from 1949, the author's tendency to reconsider his adherence to fascism in the light of his subsequent antifascist turn is apparent, as is his minimization of the ideal reasons that had first inspired him, much more prominently displayed in other sections of

[8] *Autobiography*, 62.

[9] Ibid., 2.

[10] Ibid.

his *Autobiography*. Still, on October 26, 1938, instead of returning to Italy, he joined the Italian troops that were fighting in Spain as a reserve lieutenant.[11] He would remain in Spain until April 1939, when he filed a request to return to Italy after arguing with his battalion commander, whose "plundering methods" he disapproved. By his own account, it was in Spain that he was first confronted with the regime's violent nature. Perhaps also to absolve himself, he would later point out that he never took part in "feats of arms of any kind" in that war.[12]

Back in Italy, Ferretti devoted himself completely to his studies, graduating in November 1939. He then found a job with the artisan federation in Rome, where he first came in contact with what he would term the "corrupt world of fascism":

> My monthly salary was 1,500 lire. It wasn't a lot, but the job entailed many chances for and the likelihood of improvement. I kept it until 15 June 1940. During this time, I saw that corruption had seeped through all the institutions of the fascist regime. It disgusted me. Therefore, I welcomed the new call to arms by the 28th infantry regiment on 15 June. I was assigned to the GIL battalions (which were to carry out the so-called youth march), with which I remained until 26 November 1940, when I was discharged.[13]

At this point, Danilo could have resumed work in Rome, and spent time with his family, resting before he was inevitably called back to arms. Yet in Rome he felt as if he were "drowning in a sea of venal, immoral, and apathetic bureaucrats," whereas in his own town he perceived himself as being surrounded by the "usual shirkers, sons of the draft-dodgers from the other war, and 'heroes' of the squads, profiteers and speculators." He wrote, "I immediately felt ill at ease. Leave … I must leave, and return after the war was over with the right to speak my mind and clear Italian life of all the corruption that had invaded it."[14]

Thus, Ferretti wanted to escape an environment he saw as corrupt. Furthermore, and above all else, the war had rekindled his affection for

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid., 3.

[13] Ibid. The acronym GIL stands for Italian Youth of the Lictor.

[14] Ibid.

fascism, which was also the case with many other young adults of the time. The conflict, viewed as a revolutionary war, seemed to provide the regime with a chance to redeem itself, while offering youth hope for real renewal. In mid-December 1940, Ferretti decided to enlist as a volunteer in the fascist militia, which he had not wanted to be involved in until then. Assigned to the 81st Blackshirt battalion of the Ravenna division, in the spring of 1941 he left for Slovenia, which by the end of the Yugoslav campaign was under Italian management. Italian occupation troops had great difficulty managing the territory they were assigned, and were involved in a violent civil war among resistance forces (communist partisans, the Ustashe, and Chetniks), which they were unable to contain, if not by means of equal violence.

Ferretti later recounted that he had been disgusted by the experience: he did not accept conducting the war from house to house, and asked to be assigned to a different unit and location.[15] Nevertheless, he remained a staunch fascist, and was intent on getting his "warrior title," which would allow him to secure a job and fully to participate in his country's social and political life, once back in Italy. He was assigned, at the helm of a small group of soldiers, to the 6th Blackshirt battalion of the Montebello division, one of the units most loyal to Mussolini, and a part of the ARMIR set to leave for the Russian front, which it reached on 11 September 1942.

The battalion arrived behind the front lines at the Don, where General Diamanti awaited it. Despite the commander's assurances that the war would be short-lived, the newcomers immediately realized that was not going to be the case. The following words are from Ferretti's journal: "How did the Russians' aggressiveness, the losses suffered by Italian units, the sense of tiredness felt by older CSIR soldiers, the 'void,' and everything else we were experiencing reconcile with the leisurely stroll they'd told us we were going to take on leaving Italy? ... Many of us started fearing [or rather, thinking] that the patent leather

[15] Ibid., 4; *Verbale del dibattimento di Danilo Ferretti al processo D'Onofrio del 31 maggio 1939* [Transcript of Danilo Ferretti's hearing at the D'Onofrio trial of 31 May 1939], given to his widow, Maria Chiara Bosi Ferretti, 1, and the interview with the latter by the author of the present essay, Bologna, May 20, 2010.

boots and brand new uniforms they'd forced us to buy to "parade in Moscow" would remain in their cases for a long time to come."[16]

Like many sincere fascists, he felt betrayed by the slapdash way in which Mussolini had sent many young men to their deaths on the Russian front, unequipped not only with modern weapons, but also with adequate clothing, and following vague logistics. For instance, they lacked antifreeze liquid, an absolute necessity in Russian weather, and so the oil used to operate trucks had to be heated before their engines could be turned on, which posed a serious fire hazard. Ferretti recounts an episode regarding these ordinary difficulties faced in the dead of winter:

> Our truck was trailing at the end of the line. It had just tottered down and up the slope of a deep hollow, when the engine stopped. It was a tragedy, under the circumstances, all the more so given that the truck was carrying dispatch riders, explorers, signalmen, and soldiers—their faces gaunt and pale—who had just arrived from Italy a few days before. The driver lifted the hood and started tweaking the engine. ...
>
> I was nervous, my soul heavy; deep down, I had a dirty conscience. I had lost all belief in the war we were fighting, and yet, in spite of myself, I was still so imbued with rhetoric that I did not want to pull out of a test that was clearly very difficult, and possibly fatal. More than half an hour passed. We could no longer hope to reach the column. What were we to do now? Continue on foot? And where to? Go back on foot? And where to?
>
> "Should I try to start the engine one more time?" the driver asked.
>
> "Try," I answered. He stood in front of the radiator, and using all his strength he proceeded to turn the crank, which was very hard. Combustion took place once, then twice, and finally the engine started.
>
> We resumed our journey, following what appeared to be a track in the icy snow. After a few hundred meters, we reached the end of the

[16] D. Ferretti, *The Long Road of a Prisoner of War in the USSR*, typewritten journal, kindly provided by Maria Chiara Bosi Ferretti, entry dated September 22, 1942. Ferretti published two collections of short stories on his life in Romagna and, to a lesser extent, on his experiences during the Russian campaign, which are the main subject of his diary: D. Ferretti, *Una Romagna così* (Ravenna: Longo Editore, 1975) and *I giorni e gli anni* (Ravenna: Il Girasole, 1979). Both volumes contain more than just chronicles and sketches of town life; they impress the reader's mind with a sense of anticipation and preparation for the war and the real points of reference in the author's life, the Battle of Golevka and the retreat, both of which preluded his political conversion.

> column, which had also stopped, because the trucks at the front had broken down.
>
> If people hadn't been dying—and even when they weren't really dying, the cold was agonizing—we might have appreciated the humorous side of war.[17]

Ferretti's unit was supposed to regain control over a stronghold near Golevka, in the region of Belgorod, secured by the Italians and subsequently taken over by the Russians. Even to the most committed fascists, such as himself, this feat seemed impossible, and, more importantly, useless. Ferretti criticized his commanders' behavior without reticence, and reported on a series of imprecise and confused orders, because of which, "in the course of a week, entire battalions were sacrificed" to no avail.[18] "Our soldiers were in wretched conditions—they hadn't been equipped to endure the Russian winter, and lacked proper weapons. All the fighters were demoralized and physically ill. In effect, there was not a single command, for the generals in charge of the troops had left."[19] It was the first wounded, amassed in the camp hospital of Golevka, and other people, who "seemed to have lost their minds," that revealed the truth of the war to Ferretti: "There should have been a doctor, or at least a post for the treatment of the injured and sick. There was nothing. Officers would emerge from their shelters and gather around those who had been hurt. They too appeared under a spell of insanity. They would gesture like madmen and shout: "A doctor! A doctor! Where's a doctor? You're all cowards!" Meanwhile, the injured blasphemed and packed their wounds as best they could with the medication packets."[20] Confronted with death, he was made to consider the absurdity of war:

> All of a sudden the air exploded, and the cataracts opened: antitank guns, mortars, and machine guns were fired, and men were covered in death. This is all I remember about that hell. Before me, maybe a hundred meters away, stands a young man from Cremona, Farina, former student of the school of fascist mysticism, presently machine gunner

[17] Ferretti, *I giorni e gli anni*, 172–73.

[18] Ibid., and *Verbale del dibattimento di Danilo Ferretti al processo D'Onofrio*, 1.

[19] *Verbale del dibattimento di Danilo Ferretti al processo D'Onofrio*, 1.

[20] Ferretti, *I giorni e gli anni*, 175.

> lieutenant. He's long-legged, and moves forward in short, quick leaps. He's in the line of fire. He seems to be dragging himself toward a man who's lying on the ground, his heavy weapon upside down, and to be shaking him. I see him stand up, and I can make out his reddish beard. He screams, I think. He's so tall... He falls with a crash, shot in the head. ... There are dead men standing, killed and stiffened by the cold.[21]

For Ferretti's unit, the battle of Golevka marked the beginning of the retreat, which involved all the units stationed along the Don. The defeat suffered in the winter of 1942–43 dealt a serious blow to the Axis armies, and determined a crisis in Ferretti's political identity.

> The terrible defeat suffered by the Italian forces, the incompetence and cowardice shown by high officers during the retreat, particularly those on the active list, and the useless sacrifice of thousands of young men left a deep impression on my heart. Though I didn't exactly identify the causes of all these disasters, I started thinking that the blame did not lie with a few men, but with the entire system.
>
> And so the whole house of cards I'd believed in for years and for which I'd even made sacrifices came crumbling down.
>
> However, at that point I was still simply disoriented.[22]

## Imprisonment and Antifascist Propaganda

On December 22, 1942, the Red Army captured Ferretti and his whole unit. Thus began the march toward the train station from which the prisoners would be sent off to the camps. "Our physical conditions at the time of our capture were pitiful. We had been fighting out in the cold for days, eating when we could."[23] On January 1, 1943, the prisoners started their journey aboard a train with livestock cars. Some of them, debilitated because of the battles and marches, died of dysentery during the trip. Ten days into the journey, the convoy reached camp 52, where prisoners who had contracted dysentery were detrained.

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[21] Ibid., 176.

[22] *Autobiography*, 5.

[23] *Verbale del dibattimento di Danilo Ferretti al processo D'Onofrio*, 1.

Everyone else, including Ferretti, continued on to the camp of Oranki (74), which they reached only on January 26.[24]

As with Ferretti's account of his adherence to fascism, the narrative he provides of the captivity is heavily affected by his subsequent espousing of communism, and by the ensuing tendency to validate the party's version of the facts. This bias is easy to detect when his accounts are contrasted with all that has come to light thanks to later historical reconstructions. For example, Ferretti refers that the food doled out to prisoners was enough for them to live on.[25] In fact, at first, the lack of food, due both to disorganization and to a form of negligence on the part of the Soviets, resulted in very high mortality among prisoners of war, particularly Italian ones. Charts documenting mortality among prisoners, which the Russian government only made available in the early 1990s, belie Ferretti's positive impressions.[26]

Soon after their arrival at the camp of Oranki, an Italian political instructor met the prisoners. He "offered words of encouragement and assured us that he would help us to the extent possible."[27] Antifascist propaganda among prisoners was immediately set in motion. The instructor started interrogating prisoners to acquire information on their political leanings. He gathered information on their families, on the work and properties of their parents, and on their cultural interests. These interrogations, repeated throughout the captivity, were used to paint a picture of each prisoner and fill out a sort of information form, the *anketa*, which would end up in each prisoner's personal file.[28]

In the course of the questionings, Ferretti did not hesitate to declare himself a fascist, and to claim, even though by then he was aware that

[24] In Oranki, Ferretti met lieutenant Enrico Reginato, a doctor in the camp hospital, and captain Joli, who served as a nurse (see *Verbale del dibattimento di Danilo Ferretti al processo D'Onofrio*, 3). Both would always oppose anti-fascist propaganda; the Russians accused them of crimes of war, and so they were repatriated only in 1952.

[25] See ibid., 4.

[26] On the matter of mortality, please refer to M.T. Giusti, *I prigionieri italiani in Russia,* 2nd ed. (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2014), 109–17; for the charts, see ibid., 126, 130–33.

[27] *Verbale del dibattimento di Danilo Ferretti al processo D'Onofrio*, 4.

[28] The *anketa* had twenty-five questions (later increased to forty) that as well as eliciting the prisoner's personal data, his rank, and his unit, aimed to trace his political identity (for an example, see Giusti, *I prigionieri italiani in Russia*, 340–41).

the opposite was true, that Italy should have won the war.[29] Toward the end of February, he came down with typhus. An odyssey started for him then, when in addition to typhus he became infected with tuberculosis, a disease that would plague him for the rest of his life.

Recovered from typhus but completely debilitated, Danilo was released from the camp hospital in May 1943. At the end of the month, a medical commission placed him in the lowest of the three categories prisoners were divided into based on their health. For this reason, Ferretti was excused from work, which all prisoners except officers were forced to carry out, and sent to the hospital in Skit, near Oranki. Here too political commissioners visited prisoners, in spite of the fact that the latter were sick or very weak, and even in extreme conditions continued to conduct political propaganda.[30]

In addition to the disillusionment with the war, addressed above, the Marxist-Leninist antifascist propaganda Ferretti was exposed to played a decisive role in his conversion to communism.

Responsibility for managing prisoners of war fell on a large number of administrative, military, and political offices, particularly of the NKVD, the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Within the latter, it was the Main Administration for Affairs of Prisoners of War and Internees (GUPVI) that managed prisoners. The NKVD was supported in its political propaganda activities by the Central Committee's Department for Agitation and Propaganda (Agitprop), as well as by communists in exile in the USSR. These people interrogated prisoners to find out their political inclinations, organized meetings, and held rallies in the camps on antifascism, communism, and the military successes of the Red Army.

Propaganda activities had both short-term and long-term goals. In the short term, they aimed to convince prisoners to sign pleas that would be circulated among fighting troops in order to convince them

[29] See *Verbale del dibattimento di Danilo Ferretti al processo D'Onofrio*, 5.

[30] According to a report by Vincenzo Bianco, several political instructors contracted typhus in the camps, and some even died as a result (see *Pismo Bianko italianskim kommunistam instruktoram lagerei* [Bianco's letter to Italian communists, instructors in the camps], Secret, Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History [RGASPI], f. 495, op. 77, d. 27, l. 50, in Giusti, *I prigionieri italiani in Russia*, 156, 169).

to desist from acts of war against the Soviet Union, and to surrender to the Red Army. But as the situation on the front started evolving in the USSR's favor, propaganda among prisoners of war was perfected into a more complex indoctrination. Thus, in the long term, the goal of propaganda, as stated by the Secretariat of the Executive Committee of the Comintern, was "to forge conscious and active antifascists, prepare new national military units, and also new cadres for their respective communist movements."[31] As well as fighting against fascism, propaganda aimed to offer a positive image of the Soviet Union, born from the revolution "to create a regime that may not only destroy the causes of war, but also allow workers themselves to lead the state and build their life ... without capitalists or Blackshirts."[32]

Indeed, propaganda's most ambitious objective was to shape the "new man" of socialism among prisoners, as well as in Soviet society. The reeducation of prisoners was not merely a matter of creating trustworthy collaborators. It was linked with the eschatological function of Marxism-Leninism, too. The Soviet leadership organized antifascist propaganda activities with the intention of reeducating masses "deviated" by fascist ideology. Fundamentally, these activities fell within the scope of communism's penchant for education. The whole of the Soviet Union was viewed as a huge classroom in which everyone needed to be taught lessons that would allow for capitalism to be rooted out, and for the spirit of socialism to be planted in its place. Through the system established by the political direction and the Comintern, subjects "in need of correction" were to experience a catharsis. This would affect not only their human and social sphere, but would also shape them on a transnatural plane.

Subjects were led to "suppress their old selves to be made new." The attempt to conduct this kind of program among prisoners of war, as well as among Soviet civilian deportees,[33] stemmed from the regime's

[31] *Postanovlenie Sekretariata IKKI ot 5-ogo fevraliia 1943* [Resolution of the Secretariat of the Executive Committee of the Comintern, 5 February 1943], Secret, RGASPI, f. 495, op. 77, d. 26, l. 24.

[32] *Bianco's letter to Italian communists, instructors in the camps*, 50.

[33] On the educational purposes of the gulag for Soviet civilians, refer to the rich literature and historiography on the subject. Particularly, see E. Bacon, *The Gulag at War:*

determination to educate men hailing from other countries to such a principle of rebirth, so that they might transfer their newfound convictions and experiences back to their homelands. To be sure, the circumstances provided the regime with the unique chance to expose a large number of foreign nationals to its belief system.

## The Conversion to Communism

This form of education had a particularly strong effect on Ferretti, and ultimately led him to a complete transition from fascism to communism. He recounts his conversion both in his *Autobiography* and in his journal, *The Long Road of a Prisoner of War in the USSR*, which to this day remains unpublished. The latter text is a confession of sorts, a tool of "redemption" Danilo used to reinterpret his whole past in the light of his conversion. It is not by chance that Danilo Ferretti chose the narrative form of the journal to tell the tale of his transition from militant fascism to communism. A diary was the best device the author could use to reveal his new personality, blotting out his past and making himself out to be a model communist. According to the narrative of the diary, there was a turning point in his life, which separated his youth, before the war in Russia, from the period that followed the war, his captivity, and, more importantly, his contact with antifascist propaganda.

Because it was not written at the same time as the events it described, the journal—an instrument for the elaboration of memory—allowed

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*Stalin's Forced Labor System in the Light of the Archives* (New York: New York University Press, 1994); O. Khlevniuk, *The History of the Gulag: From Collectivization to the Great Terror* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004). However, it must be clarified that, according to some historians, the Bolsheviks had given up on the idea of converting detainees, and that the educational spirit of communism within the Soviet empire stopped at the threshold of the camps (see A. Besançon, *A Century of Horrors: Communism, Nazism, and the Uniqueness of the Shoah* [Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2007]). On the limits of the gulag's educational set-up, see A. Kaminski, *Konzentrationslager 1896 bis heute: Geschichte, Funktion, Typologie* (Munich: Piper, 1990), and G.M. Ivanova, *Labor Camp Socialism: The Gulag in the Soviet Totalitarian System* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2000), 19.

the author to expunge from his recollection of the past any "troublesome" aspect at odds with his decision to espouse communism. Ferretti's diary, written after his experience in the camps, is an extraordinary source of information recording the effects propaganda had on him. His reworking of his past experiences reveals a new social individual, a "being" willing to deny itself, to change and accept everything from the new regime. In the pages of his diary, he manages to "release [his] poisonous thoughts and thereby regain the assured and unified voice of a devoted revolutionary."[34]

On leaving the hospital in Skit, Ferretti was returned to the camp of Oranki, where political activities were well under way. Among many such activities were the readings suggested by the instructors, the works of Lenin, Stalin, Marx, and Engels, translated in the languages spoken by the prisoners. "I had an unquenchable thirst. I pored over those books, reading and studying them without repose. Gradually, I seemed to gain greater insight into my past, to see more precisely the reasons for fascism, the causes of our tragedy. Bit by bit, I felt reason inexorably sever even the last of the sentimental ties that kept me anchored to the past."[35] News of the fall of the fascist regime pushed him to increase his involvement in political activities:

> During the first few months of my imprisonment, I was spending my time thus [deep in study]. Then, on 25 July [1943], came the Badoglio government and its "War goes on." I immediately understood that the time for action had come even for Italians who were far away from their homeland, and that even in concentration camps spirits had to be mobilized to fight against Germans and overcome fascism.

[34] H. Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 2. Hellbeck addresses how—in totalitarian regimes, and particularly in the Soviet one—diaries were the tools authors used to reconstruct their adaptation to the regime. In his essay, Hellbeck claims he was surprised at the realization that diaries and memoirs proliferated under Stalin: "given the omnipresence of state repression in totalitarian systems, only exceptional persons risk keeping secret diaries" (3). In fact, by describing the process whereby their authors adapted to the regime, diaries were means of self-legitimation.

[35] *Autobiography*, 4.

> It was then that, under the guidance of Italian and Russian instructors, I started openly carrying out political work, which has not ended with my repatriation.[36]

The "transformation" was not pain-free. "On the contrary, deep down my pain was great," he confessed in his *Autobiography*, "my mind and my heart were at odds."[37] In this process of change, he was guided and counseled by Ettore Fiammenghi, a communist exile who served as instructor for the Italians in Oranki. Fiammenghi was one of the exiles most criticized by the prisoners, because of his morally aggressive behavior toward them and because of his open condemnation of fascism, which not all prisoners were ready or willing to accept. Conversely, Ferretti appreciated his antifascist choice, which had forced him to emigrate, and which separated him from the many officers who reacted to the regime only after its collapse:

> In February, more than once I heard the "political commissioner" Fiammenghi speak about the Italian situation after Stalingrad and the African upheavals to Italian officers gathered in assembly. Hearing him call Mussolini "the rogue (or the fool) of Predappio" made me feel like a boxer who had to roll with the punches keeping a straight face. Yet even then I started noticing that those invectives (Fiammenghi called them "classifications"), while they displeased me, did not sound as jarring or as stilted to me as the more formally polished and restrained ones uttered by some high officers who declared themselves antifascist right after their capture. Fiammenghi's tirade came from a man who had always fought against fascism, preferring a state of conflict, poverty and exile to compromise and a peaceful life. If we hadn't heard his voice before, it wasn't because he'd kept quiet. On the other hand, these high officers had always been silent. The young, born and raised under fascist rule, had seen them beaming at ceremonies, parades, and regime parties. And now these men cast aspersions on Mussolini. How could you help equating them with the representatives of ruling elites, whose opposition to fascism appeared to be, above all else, a matter of competition?[38]

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[36] Ibid.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Ferretti, *The Long Road of a Prisoner of War in the USSR*, 86–87.

Ferretti found "the fundamental reason for detaching himself from fascism" in his conversations with the political instructors of the camps, as well as in his innate aspiration to "social justice." In his case, the conversion to communism was gradual, thought-out, and whole-hearted: "And it mattered that the victory of communism came for me not as an instance of love at first sight, but as the culmination of a gradual crumbling down, resulting from critical thought, of all the elements that constituted fascism."[39]

The construction of a society characterized by harmony between the classes as first planned by Mussolini—where trade and professional associations might share decisions on the social and economic policies of the country, taking the place of political representation—was among the elements of fascism that Ferretti perceived to be crumbling down. After the fascist experiment failed, Ferretti decided to seek alternative projects and contents elsewhere. Regarding the communist exiles, who "were the living opposition to fascism," he wrote the following words: "Fiammenghi, D'Onofrio, Gottardi, Robotti, Di Giovanni, Curato, Germanetto... An unknown Italy approached me with a language that perhaps hurt me, but that I felt was based on the truth, a language that differed from anything I'd heard until then, but seemed to me full of the greatest substance, humanity and Italian character. They were the first antifascist fighters I met."[40]

For Ferretti, communist ideology was a revelation that called into question the entire political past he had believed in until then. In communism he saw the opportunity to improve himself and Italian society. What's more, because almost all camps featured schools for the illiterate to complete their general political work, he regarded propaganda as a means of emancipation for the many prisoners who did not know how to read or write. Toward the end of October 1944, Ferretti asked for permission to attend the antifascist school for prisoners of war of Krasnogorsk, set up in camp 27, near Moscow. Here, among other things, he studied Marxist political economy, dialectical materialism, and historical materialism.[41]

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[39] Ibid., 85.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Ibid., 96. Between January 1942 and the spring of 1943, the political office of the Red Army and the Comintern instituted two anti-fascist schools for the political education

> The course syllabus included Italian history (from Napoleonic rule to the present, with special attention to the last three decades), political economy (with special attention to the time of imperialism), the basics of historical materialism, and the basics of economic geography.
>
> There were more or less seventy students, divided into three study groups, one of them made up of soldiers only, and the other two made up of both soldiers and officers. Generally, before reaching camp 27/2, soldiers attended a preparatory course in camp 165.
>
> The actual lessons were held in the morning with all three groups in attendance, and they usually lasted two hours, with a short break in between, during which students could rest or step outside to smoke a cigarette. Teachers made their presentation, and students took notes. At the end of the class, teachers answered any questions the students might have.
>
> In the afternoon, there were a study hall and a seminar—that is, a discussion among the students on the topics of the previous lessons, under the supervision of a teacher, who, at the end, drew the conclusions.
>
> In the evening, an optional study hall was offered.[42]

Regarding his experience at Krasnogorsk, Ferretti noted: "My status as a prisoner of war was unchanged, but at least I found myself in an environment that satisfied my great desire to fill the void fascism had created in my mind, and update my political and cultural knowledge with a view to returning to a renovated Italy, which appeared under way thanks to the liberation fight. Up until then, all I'd done was devour book after book, without following a defined course of studies."[43]

In his opinion, school was the means to the political and cultural training he needed to become a leading figure in a new, democratic Italy. Surely, the camp was not a place of recreation. In addition to studying, prisoners had to work to provide for all the needs of the

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of prisoners of war: one in camp 165, in Yuzha, near the city of Ivanovo (300 km from Moscow); the other in camp 27, in Krasnogorsk. The courses held in the first school were of a lower level, whereas those offered in camp 27 constituted something like a high school for the most deserving and motivated students (on this issue, please see N. Tereščenko, *L'uomo che "torturò" i prigionieri di guerra italiani* (Milan: Vangelista, 1994), 133, and Giusti, *I prigionieri italiani in Russia*, 170f.

[42] Ferretti, *The Long Road of a Prisoner of War in the USSR*, 98.

[43] Ibid., 96–97.

camp. For instance, they had to cut wood and carry it on their backs to where it would be used to heat up the classrooms and dorms, and to cook.[44] Nevertheless, compared to prisoners who refused communist propaganda, those who attended antifascist schools were treated with a certain degree of respect. At Krasnogorsk, Ferretti distinguished himself for his interest in the teachings of Marxism-Leninism. He was therefore chosen to be the instructors' assistant, and was made into an instructor himself, so he could impart lessons to his fellow countrymen.

At the end of the course, students had to take an oath, pledging to pursue the antifascist cause. The final part of the oath explains the responsibilities entailed by the promise: "With this oath, I am bound to all antifascists in ties of fraternal loyalty and devotion to the fight until complete victory of the holy cause. I vow to be ruthless with those who break this oath. If I break this oath, and become a traitor of the people, of my homeland and of my family, I will lose the right to live. My comrades in the common cause will be authorized to eliminate me as a traitor and an enemy of the people."[45]

Ferretti had to be admitted to the camp hospital again, and was not able to complete the course. As a result, he never took this oath. Yet he later said that, if he'd been given the chance, he would have.[46]

During his detention, he continued to carry out propaganda among sick soldiers even as he was hospitalized for tuberculosis. His journal documents his surprise at finding out how many Italian soldiers were illiterate, and how politically uneducated they were, even on fascism.

> When I first got here [at the hospital in Oranki] from the antifascist school—where my classmates were soldiers who, starting from nothing, had acquired a remarkable culture during their time in prison—I was baffled. I felt terribly uncomfortable. I would say, "I can't endure this!" Now I've gotten used to the situation. And, even if just slightly, someone has changed, particularly two illiterate soldiers, humble young men who listen to what you tell them.

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[44] Ibid., 98.

[45] Most secret, RGASPI, f. 495, op. 77, d. 20, l. 126. The oath is given in full in Giusti, *I prigionieri italiani in Russia*, 176.

[46] *Verbale del dibattimento di Danilo Ferretti al processo D'Onofrio*, 14.

> It's easy to guess their political ideas: a chaotic jumble. In Italy, they never knew what politics was. They were farmers. And apparently they had very little land.... They hold peculiar views as to the needs of workers; these do not include study, rest, the theater, the movies, etc. Such activities are for the gentry, not for workers. Instinctively they loathe fascists and fascism, but they don't exactly know what the two are about. They say: It was Mussolini who reduced us to our current state. Why didn't they kill him before 1935?[47]

In addition to working as an instructor, he collaborated with *L'Alba*, the magazine published by Italian prisoners of war in the Soviet Union, which bore the insignia "for a free and independent Italy," and featured articles on democracy, and on the mistakes of fascism and Nazism.[48]

From a certain point of view, Ferretti's case remains an anomaly. On a large scale, antifascist propaganda did not produce the intended effects among prisoners, which goes to show that propaganda was only one of the elements that determined the political evolution of each individual. There were those who were antifascist before attending the schools, and those who adhered to communism only on their return to Italy. There were also those who, in spite of being particularly active in captivity, "defected" once back in their country.[49] For some the school had been a means of attaining better conditions during imprisonment, whereas others adhered to communism under cover, working for the party while officially remaining in the anticommunist camp.[50]

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[47] Ferretti, *The Long Road of a Prisoner of War in the USSR*, 3–4.

[48] The first issue was printed on February 10, 1943, in Moscow, under the direction of Rita Montagnana, Togliatti's wife; after the first four issues, and until August 1944, Edoardo D'Onofrio, and later Luigi Amadesi and Paolo Robotti, edited the magazine. After May 1943, to increase the readership, it was decided to promote the collaboration of the prisoners themselves, who were invited to contribute drawings, articles, and jokes.

[49] In a letter to Dmitrii Shchevliagin, who had directed the courses for Italian prisoners in the school of Yuzha, dated May 7, 1947, Robotti assessed the results of propaganda and mentioned the names of two former prisoners who, after attending the anti-fascist school, did not become PCI militants once back in Italy (RGASPI, f. 17, op. 128, d. 373, l. 43).

[50] On this fascinating subject, and on the recruiting of spies, particularly German and Italian ones, in the camps, refer to M.T. Giusti, ed. and trans., "Direttiva del Commissariato del popolo per gli Affari Interni (NKVD) dell'URSS, n. 489 sul reclutamento di agenti tra i prigionieri di guerra" [Resolution of the People's Commissariat for Internal

Most prisoners, however, were completely impervious to communist suggestions. In general, propaganda had no effect on staunch fascists, in spite of the fact that Soviet authorities used every means possible specifically to convert them. Fascists, for the most part, continued to believe the regime had been good for Italy; they did not take a critical attitude of the kind seen in Ferretti's case, and they seldom abandoned the ideas they'd had before leaving for Russia. Propaganda only managed to inflame them.

His collaboration with the Soviets and with communist exiles caused a deep rift between Ferretti and the officers who did not share his antifascist choice. This rift would not be overcome after their return to Italy.

## The Return to Italy and the D'Onofrio Trial

Ferretti was repatriated. The long journey by train started on February 12, 1946, and was interrupted by a side trip to Odessa, where prisoners were detained for a few days, so they would regain their strength and return to their country in better shape. Ferretti reached Italy in April.

His wife, Maria, was surprised and overjoyed when she found out by chance that he had not "fallen heroically" in war, as she'd been told at first, but that he was ill in barracks in Milan. "He had tuberculosis. My brother and I left from Russi on a borrowed motorbike to go get him. We found him in a large dormitory, lying on straw on the floor. I had relatives in Milan: supporting him, we took him to their house. We left the motorbike and tried to find a seat on a train to Bologna, a difficult feat, as all trains were full. My brother scuffled with a passenger for a seat."[51]

Back home from imprisonment, Ferretti immediately joined the PCI. He did not receive a warm welcome in Russi: of the seventeen men who had left the town for Russia, he was the only one to make it back. "In a sense, it felt as if he was being blamed for surviving. Several local residents even pressed charges against him, claiming he

Affairs (NKVD) of the USSR, no. 489, on the Recruiting of Agents among Prisoners of War], *Ventunesimo secolo* 3 (2003): 109–16.

[51] Interview to Danilo Ferretti's widow, Maria Chiara Bosi Ferretti.

was responsible for the death of those who hadn't made it back. This happened because he'd become a communist."[52]

His fellow townspeople saw his conversion to communism as betrayal, and subjected him to outright ostracism. Bolognese veterans would not invite him to their gatherings and commemorations: they could not forgive him for surviving by collaborating with Soviet communists. In those years, and up to 1953, Ferretti was further forced to move in and out of hospitals to try to cure his tuberculosis. His only joy came from seeing his family members, and particularly from being able to hold his five-year old daughter Laura, born in 1941, and whom he'd never met.[53]

After a long period of medical treatment, he resumed his activities within the party, working as a teacher in the PCI educational institution bearing the name of Anselmo Marabini, in Bologna.[54] After all, many former prisoners of war who had submitted to propaganda activities while in the USSR enrolled in the federations of the Communist Party once back in Italy, often holding important positions.[55]

In 1949, three years after his return from Russia, Ferretti was presented with an important opportunity to prove his loyalty to the teachings and principles of communism: the D'Onofrio trial. In April 1948, at the height of the political campaign, the Union of National Veterans of Russia (UNIRR) published a booklet titled *Russia*, in which

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[52] Ibid.

[53] Laura would die at twenty-eight, leaving a daughter behind, Nina, who was raised by her grandparents Danilo and Maria.

[54] One of the school's teachers was another veteran imprisoned in Russia, Vincenzo Vitello, whom Ferretti had met among the Russian exiles (author's interview to Ezio Antonioni, former president of the Provincial Institute for the Study of the Italian Resistance in Bologna, and a friend of Ferretti's, Bologna, June 13, 2001, and May 20, 2010).

[55] In the cited letter to Shchevliagin, Robotti emphasized the successes of anti-fascist activities: "Everywhere I've been to throughout Italy I've found our former students. All are all at their places, in the front row." Robotti referred that many of them were on the directive boards of PCI sections and federations; others were active in the union. He concluded that "the work we carried out has proven truly useful, and it will even more so in years to come." See Robotti's letter to Shchevliagin. See also P. Robotti, *Scelto dalla vita* (Rome: Napoleone, 1980), 314.

several officers who had experienced imprisonment accused D'Onofrio, Robotti and other communist exiles in the USSR of mistreating prisoners of war by subjecting them to "exhausting interrogations" and threats.[56] D'Onofrio, with the PCI's support, charged the officers with libel. He believed the trial would take place on the eve of the election, and that it would provide a great chance for propaganda. In fact, the hearings were held between May and July 1949, in a political climate that had changed a lot since the year before. The trial was closely followed by the press, and ultimately boomeranged on D'Onofrio and the PCI.

Because the trial was not going well, D'Onofrio asked the Soviet ambassador in Rome, Mikhail A. Kostylev, to help him, particularly in discrediting one of the defense's main witnesses, Father Enelio Franzoni, chaplain of the Pasubio infantry division, and a prisoner in the Soviet Union.[57] Instead of having Italian communists present in the USSR during the war summoned to testify in his favor, as Kostylev advised him to do, D'Onofrio preferred to have Italian prisoners of war who had attended the antifascist schools and whom he trusted called to the stand. Ferretti, officially acknowledged as a person greatly disabled by the war, and who was gravely ill at the time of the hearing (he was led before the court on a stretcher and required frequent breaks during his deposition), was one of the forty-one witnesses called on to testify in D'Onofrio's favor. During the four-hour deposition, speaking with difficulty, Ferretti praised D'Onofrio's behavior toward prisoners. Ferretti stated that, in one of the communist exile's numerous visits to the camp of Oranki, he spoke of his political efforts and of his desire to "support the cause of the Italian people against fascism," and that

[56] See *Russia*, single issue, edited by UNIRR, 1948, and D'Onofrio's answer in *Contro le calunnie e le falsità* [Against Calumnies and False Imputations], Fondo D'Onofrio, envelope 3639, dossier 22, Fondazione Istituto Gramsci. On the D'Onofrio trial, see G. Sotgiu, *La tragedia dell'ARMIR nelle arringhe di Giuseppe Sotgiu e Mario Paone al processo D'Onofrio* (Milan: Mursia, 2006); E. Aga-Rossi and V. Zaslavsky, *Stalin and Togliatti: Italy and the Origins of the Cold War* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2011), 179–82; Giusti, *I prigionieri italiani in Russia*, 299f.

[57] Cf. Aga-Rossi and Zaslavsky, *Stalin and Togliatti*, 179–80.

"his words were met with approval by almost everyone present, because they were inspired by patriotic feelings."[58]

His behavior on this occasion is indicative of his inclination and will to believe the arguments set forth by propagandists, even when they were openly at odds with what he himself had experienced. In this regard, his statements on the health of the prisoners are particularly revealing. Between February and March 1943, a typhus epidemic raged in the camp where Ferretti was hospitalized, which resulted in high mortality among the prisoners. In the camp of Oranki, 661 Italian soldiers died, including 327 officers.[59] In the hospital of Skit, "which mostly housed soldiers sick with typhus, prisoners lay on a straw mattress in pairs, under a same blanket; there were no sheets or pillows; each evening the nurse would find that three or four had died (out of a hundred or so). There were no doctors, and hygiene was very poor."[60]

Camp personnel and civilians on the outside were likewise infected, and dead were counted among them as well. The fact that prisoners were continuously transferred from one camp to another and the lack of hygiene were decisive in causing the diseases to spread. During the trial, however, Ferretti ascribed the responsibility for the disease's entering the camp to the prisoners themselves, echoing the explanation provided by political commissioners and camp managers.[61] While this was true in a sense, the marches and long journeys by train, which prisoners managed to survive, as well as the abysmal hygiene standards that awaited soldiers once in the camps, were the real reasons for the diseases.

His testimony in favor of D'Onofrio bound him, even in public opinion, to the PCI and to the responsibilities its members had had

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[58] *Verbale del dibattimento di Danilo Ferretti al processo D'Onofrio*, 7–8. Ferretti added that D'Onofrio's "friendliness and humble attire" also impressed prisoners, ibid.

[59] See Ministry of Defense, Department of Military Honors, *Csir-Armir. Campi di prigionia e fosse comuni*, Rome, 1996, 14. On the cause of the particularly high mortality among Italians, see Giusti, *I prigionieri italiani in Russia*, 97, and 126.

[60] Giusti, *I prigionieri di italiani in Russia*, 104.

[61] Ferretti claimed typhus was brought by the Alpine officers who reached the camp of Oranki (see *Verbale del dibattimento di Danilo Ferretti al processo D'Onofrio*, 5).

in the Russian prison camps.[62] The deposition was even used against him in a trial Ferretti—like D'Onofrio before him—instituted against "slanderers" who accused him of being one of the people responsible for some of his fellow prisoners' failure to return.[63] The outcome of the two trials was the same. In both cases, the judges rejected the prosecution's arguments.

Ferretti's role in the D'Onofrio trial bears witness to his determination to follow communism and his being committed to its diffusion. In the last years of his life, spent in Bologna, he continued to devote himself to teaching, took part in the activities of the PCI section Ferruccio Magnani, and worked for the city's Public Education Department. Yet he never forgot his fellow prisoners and those who had disappeared in the Russian snow.[64] Even after 1956, during the easing of relations, he remained faithful to the PCI. He never returned to Russia, however. And after all, his health wouldn't have allowed him to. Before dying on October 11, 1982, he faced another difficult experience: after undergoing multiple surgeries, he was placed in an iron lung. Although his poor health was the result of the hardships he'd suffered during the war and the years he'd spent in captivity, he never faulted the camps. Even in his final conversations with his closest friends, he never failed to inquire about the annual celebrations to finance the party's official newspaper, *L'Unità*, and the other events organized by the Communist Party.[65]

## Conclusions

What were Danilo Ferretti's political choices ultimately influenced by? Above all else, his writings reveal that he was frustrated with fascism for promising change without acting on its promises.

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[62] In this regard, see Togliatti's behavior and his well-known reply to Bianco on the fate of the prisoners apprehended by the Red Army, in Giusti, *I prigionieri italiani in Russia*, 84–87.

[63] See E. Antonioni, "Un ricordo per Danilo Ferretti," *L'Unità*, October 1985.

[64] Ibid.

[65] Ibid.

In my life as a fascist, only once was I "revolutionary." It was the time I persuaded the local post office director (a distinguished fascist and member of the directorate) to double the wages of an employee who for twenty years had been barely getting by despite working ten hours a day. I did this, together with my orderly and another fellow townsman, by evoking fascist "principles" and threatening obscure penalties.

A product of the same social ferment was the theory whereby, once the war was over (and, of course, won), we would return to our homeland and make a clean sweep of profiteers, exploiters, and shirkers.

Looking at these two examples, I think the main reason for my detachment from fascism is apparent—my sincere aspiration to social justice.[66]

Following Ferretti's political course from the beginning to the end, it's impossible not to see that the peculiar brand of fascism he espoused early on bore the ideological preconditions of his definitive conversion to communism. Fascist institutions had not upheld the values of honesty and justice he, like many of his peers, so strongly believed in. Many young fascists admired the radicalism and violence of the revolution by which Bolsheviks managed to subvert traditional forces. Conversely, to their way of thinking, the latter survived fascism's victory in Italy. Gradually, many such young intellectuals, despite being sincerely fascist, started detaching themselves from the regime and from political activities, seeking refuge in literature.[67] Others, like Ferretti, initially saw "war action" as the only tool for real revolution and social change.[68]

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[66] Ferretti, *The Long Road of a Prisoner of War in the USSR*, 84.

[67] Romano Bilenchi was among the young intellectuals who completely devoted themselves to literature. As early as 1938–39, he started distancing himself from fascism and from magazines associated with the regime, with which he collaborated, finally turning to communism. "Others and I drew inspiration from Russia, who had managed to free itself of tsars, priests, and lords; we wrote that Moscow was an example to follow, not our enemy," Bilenchi wrote in R. Bilenchi, *Due ucraini e altri amici* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1990), 139. See also Buchignani, "Romano Bilenchi dal fascismo al comunismo," 73.

[68] Berto Ricci, who unlike Bilenchi took part in the activities of the magazine *Incontro*, founded in Florence in February 1940 and edited by Enrico Vallecchi, "flooded numerous fascist party leaders with requests to be sent to the front line, for he saw that conflict as the crowning achievement of all battles, of his every hope, and of his whole life" (Buchignani, "Romano Bilenchi dal fascismo al comunismo," 73).

Yet the failure of the war, attributed to fascism, and the disappointment toward the regime for its corruption, together with the heavy antifascist propaganda he was subjected to in the camps, produced the transition. In his account, Ferretti ascribes his departure from fascism also to the regime's violence, experienced in Spain and Yugoslavia. Significantly, he refused to see this same aspect in the communist experience.

This is one of the most interesting traits of his story, in that it attests to the force of ideology in rejecting the stimuli of experience. More than the conversion itself, what's surprising is that it occurred in the extreme conditions of captivity. While the Soviet political apparatus invested a great deal of money and energy in propaganda, the latter was hampered by the contrast between Marxist-Leninist theory and real life conditions in the USSR, which prisoners witnessed firsthand, as well as by the indelible memory of the many comrades in arms who died during the first months of imprisonment, which forever haunted those who survived. Yet, when Ferretti was forced to see for himself the state of misery and the material difficulties faced by Soviet society, he ascribed them to the war, not to the communist regime, of which he was only ready to see the positive qualities.