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## STORIA PRESENTE

### THE HARD WAY HOME ITALIAN TROOPS IN YUGOSLAVIA AFTER THE 8 SEPTEMBER 1943 ARMISTICE

The following article concentrates on the fate of Italian troops stationed in Yugoslavia in the period from the 1943 armistice between the Allies and Italy to the end of World War II. It will examine the role played by Italian troops fighting alongside the partisan units in Yugoslavia after the armistice, and aims at closing some gaps in the historiography of the Second World War specific to this issue. Among the Italian military units fighting for the liberation of Yugoslavia, the Garibaldi division is the most successful example, although, as we will see, the collaboration between the Italian soldiers and the partisans were often complex, and shrouded in ambiguity. We will also concentrate on the fate of the thousands of Italians taken by Tito's army as prisoners of war who suffered a very harsh treatment. Among the Italians fighting with the partisans and the ones taken as prisoners of war by Tito's units, an antifascist propaganda activity was carried out with the aims at re-educating them and at creating a positive attitude towards the new communist Yugoslavia as well as towards Communism in general. The final part will deal with the military internees' repatriation after the end of the war.

#### 1. *Historiographical sources*

The signing of the Italian armistice on September 8, 1943, put an end to the alliance with Germany and gave Italy the chance to undertake a new path towards democracy alongside the Allied powers. However, the announcement of the surrender did not mean the end of the war, as many Italians thought, but the beginning of German occupation, facilitated by the flight of the king and of the military commanders and the collapse of the army, abandoned without any orders. The armistice was a crucial turning point, but also one of the most tragic events in Italian history. As the writer Piero Calamandrei noted in his diary referring to September 8, 1943: «I am surprised to hear how the shame of the

armistice is powerful even in humble people» (1). As a matter of fact, as Claudio Pavone has observed, «still today considering 8 September either as a mere tragedy or as the beginning of a process of liberation is a line that characterizes the interpretations of opposite sides» (2).

For a long time Italy's participation in World War II was seen as the tragic epilogue of the Fascist regime: a branch artificially grafted onto the «true» history of Italy. The resulting tendency was to minimize the fascist legacy in Italian society and celebrate the antifascist movement and wartime resistance. This imposed a selective historical vision that made it possible to jump directly from the antifascist opposition born in the 1920s to the history of the Italian Resistance, downplaying the importance of the various military engagements, the armistice, the evolution of the Repubblica Sociale – founded by Mussolini with Hitler's help on September 23, 1943 – and the governments that followed the fall of Mussolini (3). In particular, the armistice and the subsequent collapse of the Italian army have often been treated as the concluding moments of the fascist war, a historical epoch best not studied in detail. Thus, Italian historiography has continually simplified the events following September 8 by fitting them into a Fascist-antifascist dichotomy – a simplification that belied the complex history of the period and was clearly inadequate to a proper interpretation of what really happened.

For a time, the contribution of the Italian army to the resistance had been completely ignored, since it was impossible to ascribe antifascist sentiment to the military. In fact, the decision to take up arms against the Germans after the armistice was largely not determined by political ideology, but rather by a sense of duty, military honor and national pride.

Later governments of the postwar period emphasized opposition to Fascism and political resistance, forgetting military events, the choices made by soldiers after the armistice, and the tragic experiences of war prisoners and veterans from various fronts, which represented the defeat of the previous regime but also of the whole country. As a consequence, for a long period Italian historiography concentrated on the resistance of political antifascism. This attitude disregarded the Italian military's contribution to the Italian resistance since the armed forces were identified with the Fascist regime. According to part of Italian historiography, the army dissolved in two days, and even in situations where soldiers were

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(1) P. CALAMANDREI, *Diario 1939-1945*, ed. Giorgio Agosti, vol. 2, 1942-1945, Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 1997, p. 189.

(2) C. PAVONE, *Una guerra civile. Saggio storico sulla moralità nella resistenza*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 1991, p. 36, published in English as *A Civil War: A History of the Italian Resistance*, London, Verso, 2013.

(3) About this attitude see the well-known book G. CAROCCI, *Storia d'Italia dall'unità ad oggi*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1975.

involved in fighting, they «did not intend to go on, so in these events we cannot see any perspective of resistance»; that is, the resistance started with antifascists<sup>(4)</sup>. As a matter of fact, the first examples of resistance against the Germans after the September 8, in Italy and abroad, came from the military. Furthermore, in the few clear-cut cases where the Italian army opposed the Germans, such as the defense of Rome at Porta San Paolo or in Cephalonia, the interpretation was often ideological - these actions were ascribed to a spontaneous popular uprising among the soldiers. The innate antifascist spirit of the common soldiers, who refused to disarm, could then be contrasted with the passivity and temporizing of the officers and commanders.

Since Italy was a defeated country and since World War II has been considered for a long time a fascist war, the topic has been neglected by scholars who preferred to talk about political resistance, born in Italy and controlled by parties readmitted to public life in 1943. This lack of interest is evident if we consider the journal «Il Movimento di Liberazione», published by the National Institute of Italian Liberation, a leading journal of modern Italian history (in 1974, the name was changed to «Italia Contemporanea»). Significantly, the journal has ignored the military resistance of Italian troops against the Germans, not only in the Balkans but even in Italy itself: the number of publications on this topic can be counted on the fingers of one hand. The fate of Italian internees in Germany drew more attention, particularly from the mid-1980s onwards. Other journals, from «Storia Contemporanea» (which began publishing in 1970) to «Passato e Presente», also ignored the war of resistance fought by Italian troops abroad, although again there was some interest in the fate of Italian internees in Germany<sup>(5)</sup>.

The early 1990s, nevertheless, witnessed a resurgence of interest in the Italian participation in World War II and this interest has quickened with the seventieth anniversary of the war's conclusion<sup>(6)</sup>. In the nineties, the Ministry of Defense

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<sup>(4)</sup> As an example see G. BOCCA, *Storia dell'Italia partigiana*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1966, p. 21. The first chapter is titled *Il rifiuto dell'esercito* (The Refusal of the Army). Bocca cites some episodes of resistance such as Boves in Piemonte region, and Bosco Maltese in Abruzzo, neglecting the most famous Italian case of military resistance, the fight against the Germans on the Greek islands of Cephalonia and Corfu, or the contribution of Italian military personnel in the war of resistance in Yugoslavia.

<sup>(5)</sup> Both «Storia Contemporanea» and, more recently, «Nuova Storia Contemporanea» published several essays, as well as memoirs on this topic.

<sup>(6)</sup> Nonetheless, a comprehensive history of this topic was lacking until the publication of E. AGA ROSSI - M.T. GIUSTI, *Una guerra a parte. I militari italiani nei Balcani. 1940-1945*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2011. For better understanding the complex situation in which the Italian troops had to act, see J. PIRJEVEC, *Il giorno di San Vito. Jugoslavia 1918-1992. Storia di una tragedia*, Torino, Nuova Eri, 1993; for a comprehension of the idea of Yugoslavia, see E. IVETIC, *Jugoslavia sognata. Lo jugoslavismo delle origini*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2012.

and the veterans' associations sponsored a number of publications on the history of the period, as well as on particular episodes. However, the publications sponsored by military agencies were often of a celebratory nature, presenting a hagiographic version of events, neglecting to mention the troops who remained on the German side, and downplaying such delicate issues as resistance by troops stationed abroad and their relations with the local partisans. The clashes with the partisans and the losses suffered by the Italian troops are ignored, while their collaboration with the partisans is celebrated (7).

The resulting hole in the historical fabric has transformed the Italian troops into the «forgotten soldiers» of World War II history. Accordingly, it is now difficult to establish with any precision how many Italian soldiers participated in the war, how many were killed in action or went missing, how many fought with the Germans or against them as partisans after September 8, and how many were interned by the Germans on the Axis-occupied territories or transported to Germany proper. Anyway in recent years, new research on this topic has appeared, in order to better exploring the role of Italian units as occupiers in the Balkans and their fate after the armistice, among which the work edited by Caccamo e Monzali, *L'occupazione italiana della Jugoslavia. 1941-1943* (2008) (8), Gobetti, *L'occupazione allegra. Italiani in Jugoslavia 1941-1943* and Goddi, *Fronte Montenegro: occupazione italiana e giustizia militare. 1941-1943* (2016) which are an example of the numerous studies on the subject published in recent years (9), or the already quoted *Una guerra a parte. I militari italiani nei Balcani 1940-1945* (2011). If in Italian historiography the military's role after September 8 has sunk into oblivion, German historiography and archives have proven an invaluable

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(7) As regards the official publications, sponsored by the Ministry of Defence about the contribution of Italian military in the war of resistance in Yugoslavia, see: L. VIAZZI, *La resistenza dei militari italiani all'estero. Montenegro-Sangiaccato-Bocche di Cattaro*, Roma, Rivista militare, 1994; L. VIAZZI - L. TADDIA, *La resistenza dei militari italiani all'estero. La divisione Garibaldi in Montenegro, Sangiaccato, Bosnia, Erzegovina*, Roma, Rivista militare, 1994; A. BISTARELLI, *La resistenza dei militari italiani all'estero. Jugoslavia centro-settentrionale*, Roma, Rivista militare, 1996. Until then a hagiographic work about the collaboration among Italian soldiers and Yugoslav partisans was: A. BARTOLINI, *Per la Patria e la libertà! I soldati italiani nella Resistenza all'estero dopo l'8 settembre*, Milano, Mursia, 1986.

(8) In particular see M. T. GIUSTI, *La Jugoslavia tra guerriglia e repressione: la memoria storiografica e le nuove fonti*, in *L'occupazione italiana della Jugoslavia. 1941-1943*, edited by F. Caccamo - L. Monzali, Firenze, Le Lettere, 2008, pp. 379-418.

(9) E. GOBETTI, *L'occupazione allegra. Italiani in Jugoslavia 1941-1943*, Roma, Carocci, 2007; ID., *La Resistenza dimenticata. Partigiani italiani in Montenegro (1943-1945)*, Roma, Salerno, 2018; F. GODDI, *Fronte Montenegro: occupazione italiana e giustizia militare (1941-1943)*, Gorizia, Libreria Editrice goriziana, 2016. The last one examines the complex relations between the fascist imperialism and the small state of Montenegro until 1943.

source of information, particularly in reference to the number of Italian soldiers captured by the Germans (10).

As for Yugoslav historiography of the period, while the participation of Italian troops in anti-German actions is often mentioned, there is absolutely no discussion of the Italian soldiers executed by the partisans, often without any reason, after September 8, 1943 (11). On the contrary, Yugoslav historians concentrated on the debate about Italian behavior during the occupation. According to a part of Serb historiography, many Serbs and Jews saved themselves by escaping from the Independent State of Croatia and finding refuge in the Italian occupied territories (12). Other historians, instead, sympathizing with the partisan movement, describe Italian occupiers like persecutors, who only occasionally became saviors of the Serbs, and underline mass executions, deportations and forced conversion to Catholicism (13). Finally, the Anglo-Saxon historiography on the war in the Balkans during the post-armistice period typically ignores the Italian military contribution altogether, perhaps due to the old view that Italians were incompetent soldiers during World War II (14).

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(10) See G. SCHREIBER, *I militari italiani internati nei campi di concentramento del Terzo Reich 1943-45*, Roma, Ufficio Storico dello Stato maggiore dell'esercito, 1992, pp. 339; and G. HAMMERMANN, *Zwangsarbeit für den «Verbündeten». Die Arbeits- und Lebensbedingungen der italienischen Militärinternierten in Deutschland 1943-1945*, Tübingen, Niemeyer, 2002 translated into Italian as *Gli internati militari italiani in Germania. 1943-1945*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2004.

(11) About this topic see E. AGA ROSSI - M. T. GIUSTI, *Una guerra a parte*, quoted, pp. 211-217. There is a mention in *Italiani senza onore. I crimini in Jugoslavia e i processi negativi (1941-1951)* edited by C. DI SANTE, Verona, Ombre Corte, 2005, pp. 15, 43n. As concerns military historiography, see the paragraph in L. VIAZZI - L. TADDIA, *La resistenza dei militari italiani all'estero. La divisione Garibaldi in Montenegro, Sangiaccato, Bosnia, Erzegovina*, quoted, pp. 468-495. Numerous archival sources report the topic. As an example see *Fucilazioni di militari italiani appartenenti alla divisione «Garibaldi»*, in *Violenze ed illegalità di vario genere commesse da elementi e da organizzazioni partigiane jugoslave nei riguardi di militari e civili italiani*, Secret, Archivio dell'Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito (AUSSME), I 3, racc. 53/3, p. 7.

(12) On the persecution of Serbs see A. MILETIĆ, *Koncentracioni logor Jasenovac, 1941-1945. Dokumenta*, vol. III, Beograd, Narodna knjiga, 1986; B. PETRANOVIĆ, *Srbija u Drugom svetskom ratu 1939-1945*, Beograd, Vojnoizdavački i novinski centar, 1992, pp. 118-32; ID., *Istorija Jugoslavije 1918-1988*, Beograd, Nolit, 1988, pp. 43-51, 401-406; L. KARCHMAR, *Draža Mihailović and the Rise of the Četnik Movement. 1941-1942*, 2 voll., New York-London, Garland, 1987.

(13) As an example of this attitude see: B. PETRANOVIĆ, *Revolucija i kontrarevolucija u Jugoslaviji (1941-1945)*, 2 voll., Beograd, Rad, 1983. On the different attitudes in both Serb and Croatian historiography, see S. HODZIC, «*Italiani brava gente?*» *Storiografia recente dell'occupazione italiana in Croazia durante la seconda guerra mondiale*, in «*Ventesimo secolo*», VII, 2008, 16, pp. 31-55.

(14) This attitude pervades even the work of noted histories like G. WEINBERG, *A World at Arms. A Global History of World War II*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 614. For example, referring about the resistance on Rhodes after September 8, Richard Lamb writes that during the fighting 15 Italian military died and 18 were injured. R. LAMB, *War in Italy*, London,

## 2. *The situation of Italian troops after the 8 September 1943 Armistice*

Completely cut off from the developments on the Italian mainland, many Italian divisions stationed in Yugoslavia, Albania and Greece were caught by surprise, learning of the armistice from the radio (15). What followed varied according to local circumstances and the decisions taken by commanders on the spot. The choices faced by the troops were starker and the consequences more tragic than in Italy itself, both because the German actions were more brutal and because escaping the Wehrmacht was no guarantee of safety, given the hostility of the locals and the partisans, especially in Greece and Yugoslavia. Having been abandoned by the Italian Supreme Command, many local commanders chose to surrender to the Germans rather than risk resistance, after being reassured by the Germans that they would be repatriated. They refused to collaborate with Germany, declaring themselves loyal to the king of Italy. But, once the Italians disarmed, the Germans did not fulfill their promises and, instead of being repatriated, the Italian troops were either imprisoned in the Balkans or transported to Germany or other Axis-occupied territories.

Soon after the armistice, from a total of 2 million Italian soldiers, the Germans captured 1,007,000 men on all fronts, including 430,000 in Albania, Yugoslavia and the Greek islands. Of that million, 197,000 managed to escape; of the remaining 810,000, some 94,000 – for the most part members of «black shirt» units (16) – decided to keep fighting alongside the Germans. The number of collaborationists – that is, officers and soldiers who agreed to cooperate with Germany and the newborn Repubblica Sociale – grew among the Italian prisoners in German hands through spring 1944, owing to the harsh conditions in the prison camps. So, in total, the number of collaborationists reached 200,000, or 20% of the total number of soldiers captured by the Germans. This figure has been underestimated by historiography and public opinion (17). Italian person-

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John Murray Ltd., 1993, p. 148. Actually, according to the figures of the Italian Ministry of Defense, the dead and missing at Rhodes were 336, while 10 officers were shot after the surrender. Many of the 336 dead were killed the day after September 17, the date of the surrender. These figures have been provided to the author by Marshal Giuseppe Monaco and Colonel Giovanni Vergara Caffarelli from the Albo d'Oro Division of the Italian Ministry of Defense.

(15) On the Italian Armistice and its consequences, see E. AGAROSI, *A Nation collapses. The Italian Surrender of September 1943*, Cambridge University Press, Il Mulino, 2000; R. ZANGRANDI, *1943. 25 luglio - 8 settembre*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1964.

(16) The «black shirts» were fighting units of the *Milizia volontaria per la sicurezza nazionale* (Militia for National Security), loyal to Mussolini, and assigned to the various divisions of the Army.

(17) In 1964, in his studies about resistance, a famous Italian scholar wrote that the collaborationists could have been estimated around 1,03 %. See: R. BATTAGLIA, *Storia della resistenza italiana*, Torino, Einaudi, 1964, p. 103.

nel who surrendered their arms to the Germans but refused collaboration were interned by the Germans in various camps of the Balkan region or, mostly, transported to concentration camps in Germany and Poland.

Less known is the fate of the minority who took up arms against the Germans or tried to escape by joining local forces - mostly partisans - in Albania, Greece and Yugoslavia or simply by hiding among the local population. Likewise, the fate of the many Italian soldiers captured by local partisan forces has been completely forgotten, both in public discourse and in the growing number of studies about imprisonment during World War II (18). The choice of joining partisan forces was the most perilous as it was undertaken by a minority, abandoned in a hostile territory. Even if these units often were defeated and destroyed by overwhelming German troops, they represented the first example of Italian resistance. Other Italians decided to surrender under threat of German raids or possible betrayal by the local peasants and partisans. Nevertheless the relations with the partisans were not always easy, since during the occupation, especially in Yugoslavia, the outbreak of local resistance and the fight among the various ethnic and religious groups prompted many cases of savage repression by the Italian occupants. Italian military and civilian authorities, unable to cope with guerrilla resistance, responded to numerous acts of sabotage and ambush with harsh reprisals. Only in recent years war crimes committed by the Italian occupation forces in Yugoslavia have become the core of historiographical studies, shedding light on many episodes that had been almost totally ignored by historians (19). These studies have demolished the image of «the good Italian», avoiding to frame the repressive action in the context of the total war they were fighting.

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(18) Only in recent years some studies have shed light on this topic. See C. DI SANTE, *Nei campi di Tito. Soldati, deportati e prigionieri di guerra italiani in Jugoslavia. 1941-1952*, Verona, Ombre corte, 2007; E. AGA ROSSI - M. T. GIUSTI, *Una guerra a parte*, quoted, pp. 371-386.

(19) As regards the behavior of Italian forces of occupation in Yugoslavia see: F. GODDI, *Fronte Montenegro: occupazione italiana e giustizia militare (1941-1943)*, quoted; E. AGA ROSSI - M. T. GIUSTI, *Una guerra a parte*, quoted, pp. 45-87, 427-435; R. PUPO, *Trieste '45*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2010; D. CONTI, *L'occupazione italiana dei Balcani. Crimini di guerra e mito della brava gente 1940-1943*, Roma, Odradek, 2008; E. GOBETTI, *L'occupazione allegra. Italiani in Jugoslavia 1941-1943*, quoted; D. RODOGNO, *Fascism's European Empire. Italian Occupation during the Second World War*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 332-361, first published in Italian in 2003; see also H. J. BURGWIN, *Empire on the Adriatic: Mussolini's Conquest of Yugoslavia, 1941-1943*, New York, Enigma Books, 2005, pp. 49ff, and Id., *Le divergenze tra i «professionisti» della controguerriglia italiana in Slovenia e Dalmazia*, in *Crimini e memorie di guerra*, edited by L. Baldissara - P. Pezzino, Napoli, L'Ancora del Mediterraneo, 2004, pp. 247-259; *Italiani senza onore. I crimini in Jugoslavia e i processi negati. 1941-1951*, edited by C. Di Sante, quoted; E. COLLOTTI, *Sull'Italia come potenza d'occupazione*, in «Contemporanea», VIII, 2005, 2, pp. 313-317. See also the various essays on the topic in «Qualestoria», edited by B. Mantelli, 2002, 1.

In his studies Tone Ferenc has underlined the inability of military and civilian authorities to control the movements of liberation and their need to make use of increasingly repressive measures (20). The background of Italian war crimes is essential to understanding partisan behavior after September 1943, even towards Italian personnel who decided to join them in the war to liberate Yugoslavia from German occupation.

At the moment of signing the armistice, Italian troops stationed in Yugoslavia amounted to around 305,000 men, slightly less than half of the total amount of troops in the Balkans, who numbered 650,000 (21). Italian troops in Montenegro depended on Army Group East; those stationed in Slovenia, part of Croatia, Fiume and Dalmatia depended on the Second Army, which in July 1943 counted 219,303 men, led by General Mario Robotti. The command headquarters was Sussak (22). At the announcement of the armistice, after confusing negotiations with Germans, most Italian commanders decided to give up their arms, and Robotti left Sussak for Venice, leaving his soldiers in the hands of the Germans and the Yugoslav partisans. In Montenegro the situation was different, owing to the massive presence of partisan forces, which in spring 1943 counted 16,000 men against 71,000 Italians: this aspect influenced the choices of Italian divisions stationed in Montenegro and led to the birth of the Italian Garibaldi Partisan Division.

### 3. *The Garibaldi Partisan Division*

The most effective example of collaboration between Italian soldiers and partisan units is given by the Italian Garibaldi Partisan Division, born in Montenegro at the beginning of December 1943 from the fusion of two units – the Venezia Infantry Division and the Taurinense Alpine Division – which decided

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(20) T. FERENC, *La politica italiana nei Balcani*, in *L'Italia nella seconda guerra mondiale e nella resistenza*, edited by F. Ferratini Tosi et alii, Milano, Franco Angeli, 1988, pp. 65-92; ID., *Gli italiani in Slovenia 1941-1943*, in *L'Italia in guerra. 1940-43*, edited by B. Micheletti - P. P. Poggio, Brescia, Annali della Fondazione Luigi Micheletti, 1992, p. 5; ID., *La provincia «italiana» di Lubiana. Documenti 1941-42*, Udine, Istituto friulano per la storia del movimento di Liberazione, 1994; ID., *Si ammazza troppo poco: condannati a morte, ostaggi, passati per le armi nella provincia di Lubiana, 1941-1943: Documenti*, Ljubljana, Istituto per la storia moderna, 1999.

(21) See G. SCHREIBER, *I militari italiani*, 180, 182 f. For figures, which vary little depending on the sources, see L. MARTINI, *I protagonisti raccontano. Tra cronaca e storia. Diari, ricordi e testimonianze di combattenti italiani nella lotta popolare di liberazione della Jugoslavia*, Pola, Unione degli italiani dell'Istria e di Fiume, 1983, p. 12; M. TORSIELLO, *Le operazioni delle unità italiane nel settembre-ottobre 1943*, Roma, Ufficio storico Sme, 1975, p. 324; G. BAMBARA, *Non solo armistizio. Autunno 1943. Tragico sfacelo dell'Armata italiana in Jugoslavia e ai confini orientali*, Gussago, Vannini, 2003, pp. 18 f.

(22) The Second Army consisted of the V, XI and XVIII army corps.

to join Tito's army, the NOVJ (*Narodnooslobodilačka vojska i partizanski odredi Jugoslavije*). In Yugoslavia, other units were formed in the name of the fight of Italian soldiers and Yugoslav partisans against the Nazi-German troops occupying the territory after the Italian withdrawal. Among these, two battalions, the Gramsci and Matteotti, were constituted in Slovenia by partisan commanders with Italian Carabinieri volunteers, who refused to surrender to the Germans or collaborate with them in maintaining public order. The two battalions contributed to the liberation of Belgrade in October 1944, and later merged into the «Italia Brigade».

The Garibaldi Division was born from an order of the partisan command of II Corpus, led by Peko Dapčević. It was the only example of an Italian military body, that was formed abroad and succeeded in returning, albeit decimated, in March 1945 to Italy (23). Until now the history of the Garibaldi Division was based on celebratory reports of protagonists and veterans' associations, which preferred to underline the spirit of an alleged brotherhood existing between the Yugoslav and the Italian people in order to fight Nazi-Fascism. To date, the reconstruction of the events which followed the armistice in Montenegro and the birth of the Garibaldi Division have been characterized by an interpretation based on the rhetoric of collaboration between partisans and Italian forces.

As a matter of fact, all Italian soldiers stationed abroad, particularly in Yugoslavia, considering their proximity to Italian coasts, favored repatriation, but this was impossible to realize since the Italian government was unable to send ships. On the other hand, partisan commanders were interested above all in seizing Italian weapons. The massive presence of partisan forces in Montenegro led the majority of officers and soldiers in the Venezia and Taurinense Divisions to choose the partisans as allies. Another option was to join Chetnik forces, although the latter for the most part had decided to side with the Germans. So, Italian soldiers also had to face the presence of the Chetniks, involved in a harsh fight against the partisans. Furthermore, during the occupation, Italian commanders had armed and used Chetnik units to fight the partisans. This strategy had lasted until April 1943, allowing Italian occupiers on the one hand to save their own forces, and on the other to divide the local forces of resistance. The Chetniks' behavior prompted harsh accusations from the Comintern, which supported Tito's forces, of collaborationism with the occupiers.

From summer 1942 the Comintern launched a negative campaign against the Serb general Draža Mihailović with the aim at fragmenting Chetnik for-

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(23) See *Historical Journal of Venezia Division*, edited by E. Stuparelli, chief of Staff of Venezia, in «Camicia Rossa», 2002, 3, p. 15.

mations to weaken them and avoid their involvement in anti-partisan actions. The accusations of Chetnik collaborationism had their effect. From the beginning of August 1942, in its reports sent to the Western Allies and the Yugoslav government in exile, Moscow directly accused Mihailović of collaborating with the occupants, first indirectly through broadcasts on Yugoslav free Radio, then directly (24). At the same time Moscow insistently urged Tito to act prudently. The Allies also shifted their support from the Chetniks to Tito for various reasons. First, the Chetniks really collaborated both with the Italians and the Germans. Furthermore, the Comintern's campaign against Mihailović provided negative reports on the Chetnik leader's work but positive evaluations of the partisans. The same information was reported by the officers of the British Missions sent to Yugoslavia (25). These officers, who were attached to Tito and Mihailović's Headquarters, remarked upon the stronger fighting spirit of the partisans against the occupiers compared to the Chetniks, who were more interested in fighting local opponents for future control of the country. Churchill himself declared his wish to support the group which was causing «major damage to the Germans» (26).

In Montenegro, after some hesitation, Italian local commanders decided to join Tito's NOVJ and cooperate with the partisans in the war of resistance. The decision was not an easy one to take, since the partisans had until then been considered enemies. As a matter of fact, within the Taurinense Division there were alpine units that refused to accept any collaboration with Tito's forces (27).

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(24) *Otnoshenija Rossii (SSSR) s Jugoslaviej. Dokumenty i materialy*, edited by I. V. Bucharkin, Moskva, Terra, 1998, docc. 164-166, 171, 177; see also D. MARTIN, *The Web of Disinformation: Churchill's Yugoslav Blunder*, San Diego, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990, p. 25.

(25) The first Mission sent to Tito's Headquarters, named «Typical», arrived in May 1943. It was led by Captain Frederick W. Deakin, an officer of the British Special Operations Executive (SOE). See F. W. DEAKIN, *The Embattled Mountain*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1971. In September Churchill sent to Yugoslavia another Mission headed by Fitzroy Maclean with the purpose of supporting the partisans. See: F. MACLEAN, *Eastern Approaches*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1949.

(26) F. MACLEAN, *Eastern Approaches*, quoted, p. 500. This new attitude is shown in one directive of the British Government at the beginning of 1944, in which it was underlined that in the future Mihailović's forces should not be described as patriots, but as «terrorist bands», while the partisans should not be named «red bandits», but «fighters for freedom». See M. LEES, *The Rape of Serbia. The British Role in Tito's Grab for Power, 1943-1944*, San Diego, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990, p. 3.

(27) This was the case of battalion Intra whose officers and soldiers opposed the proposal of commander Vivalda to join Tito's partisans. The reason was that they hoped to reach the coast as soon as possible and go back to Italy. See the report of Major M. Sessik who led the battalion, to the Secret Service of Italian Army SIM-CSDIC, August 14, 1944, Roma, AUSSME, DS 2127/517, p. 4. The battalion left the command but few days later was captured by a partisan unit and its officers decided to join Tito's army.

Nevertheless, considering the massive partisan presence in the area controlled by the Taurinense Division, and considering also his anti-fascist attitude, the commander of the division, General Lorenzo Vivalda, urged his men to share his decision and follow him.

The Taurinense had until then suffered very high losses fighting against the Germans between 26 and 28 September. By the end of the month, the latter had captured over 7,000 Italians in battles or roundups (28). According to an order issued by General Lothar Rendulic, Italian officers were to be considered snipers and for this reason shot: 18 officers were killed without a trial (29). After resisting the German attacks through the middle of October, the survivors of the Taurinense Division reached the partisan command in Kolašin.

The Venezia Infantry Division, led by General Giovan Battista Oxilia, was stationed between Montenegro and Sandžak. The Division, consisting of 12,000 men, had a comparatively better fate, since it succeeded in avoiding German attacks and roundups. Anyway the story of the division is characterized by the uncertainty of its commander who, after having decided to resist the Germans, did not take any decision, in the uncertainty of allying with the partisans or with the Chetniks. Finally the decision was taken by a captain, Mario Riva: during an attack coming from the Yugoslav commander Peko Dapčević's troops, that menaced to destroy his unit, Riva asked for directions to the command, but general Oxilia did not answer. Captain Riva independently decided to join the partisans (30). Oxilia's behavior was typical and shared by many other commanders, who in the following hours after the armistice were not able to make decisions about the allies to choose, and in order to save the most part of their soldiers.

When it was created, the Garibaldi Division had about 20,000 men, mostly from the Venezia Division, divided into four brigades. From the start, the division lost many soldiers, owing to the harsh living conditions and to the lack of weapons and food. The partisans forced many Italians to give up their arms and join working battalions: 11 battalions were formed with Italians who decided to stop fighting. Their conditions soon became very difficult due to the lack of food, so many of them decided to do some work for local families in exchange for food. In order to cope with the lack of food, the II and III brigades were sent by the partisan command to Bosnia in February 1944. They were told that

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(28) See G. SCHREIBER, *I militari italiani*, quoted, pp. 261-262.

(29) KTB Pz. A.O.K. 2, p. 61, 18.9.1943, Bundesarchiv, Abt. Militärarchiv, Freiburg im Breisgau [BArch], RH 21 2/v. 590. See also the Report to the Ministry of War by Colonel Vittorio Musso, *Relazione sugli avvenimenti a cui ho preso parte in Montenegro dal giorno 8 sett. 1943 al 4 agosto 1944*, AUSSME, 2127/5/11, p. 12.

(30) E. AGA ROSSI - M.T. GIUSTI, *Una guerra a parte*, quoted, pp. 184 ff.

they would be repatriated. The result was that the II Brigade, which had left with 1,200 men, after reaching 2,000 meters of altitude, came back with only 221 of them; the III brigade was entirely wiped out, partly from the cold and a typhus epidemic, partly captured by Germans and Ustasha after fierce fighting <sup>(31)</sup>.

The several works on the Garibaldi Division published up until today are largely hagiographical in nature and do not provide even such basic data as the number of troops involved. In the instance of Italian troops joining forces with the local partisans, the relations between the Italians and the Yugoslavs were often complex and difficult, and shrouded in ambiguity. There were numerous instances of summary justice meted out to the Italians by the Yugoslav partisans: despite the nominal alliance to fight the Germans, the partisans pursued a conscious policy of eliminating Italian soldiers and officers implicated in war crimes during the occupation or tainted with a fascist past. Thus, a number of Italian officers were executed both immediately after the signing of the armistice and after the formation of the Garibaldi Division, even though in the latter case the Italians and Yugoslavs were fighting on the same side.

All the decisions about the Garibaldi – including the division's name – were made by the partisan command. For instance, in January 1944 military courts were established with the aim at punishing Italian and partisan soldiers. They were composed of one president – generally the vice-commander of the unit – as well as a political commissar and a member of the antifascist committee. Its founding document underlined that the court «has jurisdiction on the acts committed against the army and the war of liberation» and also «on the activities of fascist propaganda or sabotage of antifascist committees». There was neither a list of crimes, nor a list of penalties to be imposed but political crimes were considered the most serious <sup>(32)</sup>. The pivotal role of the political commissar gave these courts a deep political significance. As a consequence, if many Italian soldiers were convicted of minor offenses, such as theft of food, others, in some cases, were sentenced for their political past as fascists. Despite their collaboration with the partisans, many Italian officers and soldiers of the Garibaldi Division disappeared and were killed by partisans from 1943 to the beginning of 1945.

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<sup>(31)</sup> Among memoirs see E. LISERRE, *La divisione italiana partigiana «Garibaldi»*. Montenegro, Sangiaccato, Bosnia, Erzegovina. 1943-45, in «UCT», 2001, 304, p. 56; L. MANNUCCI, *Morte al fascismo. Libertà al Popolo! Breve storia della II Brigata della divisione «Garibaldi» in Jugoslavia*, Firenze, STE, 1945, p. 11.

<sup>(32)</sup> See *Dal Comando del II corpus d'assalto Epl della Jugoslavia*, No. 22, Confidential, January 10, 1944, signed by general commander Peko Dapčević and by the political commissar Batić, attached n. 45 to *Diario storico della Garibaldi*, January, b. 3, Report by General Carlo Ravnich. Ravnich was the third and last commander of Garibaldi Division.

One of the most paradigmatic cases was that of Colonel Stuparelli, of Slovenian origin: Stuparelli had been accused of anti-Slavism, since under the fascist regime he had changed his surname from Stupar to Stuparelli. His alleged fascist past and his statement of being Italian condemned him: in June 1944 he was arrested, interrogated, beaten by the political commissar, and tortured before being killed in August (33). Captain Lorenzo Caroti was killed like Stuparelli, although, paradoxically, he was among the first to speak out against the surrender to the Germans and in favor of an alliance with the partisans (34). Another officer, Major Bruno Monsani, as a result of accusations of Fascism by the political commissar, was arrested and disappeared (35).

Among the officers unjustly held by the partisans in 1944 and 1945 were Captain Gino Panicucci and General Carlo Isasca, both of the Venezia Division. The former was accused of betrayal since he had asked the partisan command to be repatriated for health reasons; he was hanged soon after the repatriation of the Garibaldi Division in March 1945 (36). Isasca was accused of handing over Italian weapons to the Germans and chairing the war tribunal before the armistice. The most serious charge was the sentencing to death of thirty partisans caught with weapons in hand. General Isasca became the scapegoat for reprisals ordered by the command of the Venezia Division following a partisan ambush of August 1943, in which ten Italians had been injured and five had died. The Venezia command ordered the burning of 32 homes and the arrest of civilians near the ambush site. Isasca was shot on an unspecified date between April and July 1945, after the repatriation of Garibaldi Division (37).

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(33) Stuparelli has been described by the Military Secret Service (SIM) as one of the main proponents of anti-German movement after the armistice. See *Report by col. Antonio Zitelli*, Podgorica, January 7, 1945, AUSSME, DS 2127/1/1, p. 79ff. Stuparelli was killed by a 14 year-old boy of the II Partisan Corps. See *Fucilazioni di militari italiani appartenenti alla divisione Garibaldi*, in *Violenze ed illegalità di vario genere commesse da elementi e da organizzazioni partigiane jugoslave nei riguardi di militari e civili italiani*, Top Secret, AUSSME, I 3, 53/3; «Divisione italiana partigiana Garibaldi», March 1948, 3, p. 1.

(34) *Ibidem*.

(35) *Ibidem*.

(36) Testimony by soldier Enrico Terradura Vagnarelli, who was trusted by the II Corps Command. Panicucci had asked him for help concerning his own repatriation. See L. VIAZZI - L. TADDIA, *La resistenza dei militari italiani all'estero*, quoted, pp. 490 ff.; see also *Divisione italiana partigiana 'Garibaldi*, 3. Information about the arrest of the two officers can be found also in *Note by Allied Forces Headquarters of March 9, 1945*, in *Yugoslavia: Treatment of Italian Army Personnel by Yugoslav National Army of Liberation*, National Archives London [NAL], WO 204/2432.

(37) See L. VIAZZI - L. TADDIA, *La resistenza dei militari italiani all'estero*, quoted, p. 493 and E. AGA ROSSI - M.T. GIUSTI, *Una guerra a parte*, quoted, p. 215.

About the situation of the Garibaldi, Oxilia, its first general commander, wrote:

We ended up in an ambiguous state. The alliance with Tito's partisans, which – according to the previous agreements between Italian commanders and the partisans – should have been equal for both sides, in a short time had placed us at the mercy of the Yugoslav II Corpus. The latter took all the decisions about our military units, placing us in a position of inferiority and subjection (38).

#### 4. *Mario Palermo's mission in Montenegro*

The fate of Italian officers and soldiers of the Garibaldi Division, imprisoned by the partisans with various charges, was one of the issues which deputy Mario Palermo – undersecretary at the Ministry of War and member of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) – was meant to address during his mission to Yugoslavia in October 1944. For his important role inside the PCI, Palermo was sent to Montenegro with the aim at solving the difficult situation of the Garibaldi Division, and organizing its repatriation. Besides the interests of the Italian Parliament, he also represented the Communist Party, which was deeply interested in extending the participation of the Garibaldi Division in the war against Nazi Germany alongside the partisan forces. Palermo had to face the harsh living conditions of the Garibaldi, who were lacking in food, medicine and even clothing. When he returned to Italy he reported on the difficult situation of Italian troops in Montenegro to the Ministry of War and also to Palmiro Togliatti, the secretary of the PCI (39).

After receiving Palermo's report about officers and soldiers of the Garibaldi Division being detained by the partisans, the Italian Ministry of War asked the Allies to intervene. In January 1945 the Italian ambassador in Moscow tried to obtain the release of Italian soldiers detained in Yugoslavia by «appealing to the

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(38) See *Relazione sull'attività svolta dall'8 settembre 1943 al 15 marzo 1944* by General G.B. Oxilia, commander of Venezia Division. AUSSME, DS 2127/2/1, p. 3. See also L. TADDIA, *Uno che non si arrese. Dal Kosovo alla Bosnia 1943-1945*, Bologna, Minerva, 2001, p. 73. As a matter of fact the agreement for the alliance between Italians and partisans, signed on October 10, 1943, talked about a «mutual respect».

(39) Archivio del Partito Comunista Italiano, Rome [APCI], Direzione Verbali 1944-1948, MF 272, verbale, 25 October 1944. Archivio «Mosca» (hereafter Archivio «M»), Roma, Fondazione Istituto Gramsci.

sentiment of humanity and justice» (40). Although the Soviets did not respond, the Anglo-Americans addressed the Yugoslavs with specific requests concerning the fate of Italian troops. Finally the Yugoslavs replied that they were willing to provide full details on the trials of detainees, but only after an official request by the Italian government to the Yugoslav Mission to Italy, in Bari (41). The Yugoslavs sought official recognition of the mission. However, the Italian government was not able to do so without the approval of the Allies; thus, the request was really just a way to buy time. Afterwards the Yugoslavs declared that they did not desire any official contact with the Italian Foreign Ministry (42).

Between February and July 1945 the Yugoslav attitude towards the repeated requests of the Anglo-Americans became more and more elusive, until the Allies had to declare: «This headquarters does not consider that it can appropriately take any further action in this matter» (43). Several documents in the National Archives in London show that the Anglo-Americans were aware of the dramatic situation of Italian officers held by the NOVJ, and the failure of their attempt to mediate their release shows how the British were losing their influence on Tito. Since the end of the war was near, and since Tito no longer needed arms and could rely on the Soviet Union, the Yugoslav leader felt free to change his attitude towards the British. On the occasion of a visit to Moscow, in spring 1944, Milovan Djilas met several times with Dimitrov to discuss the future of the Yugoslav Communist Party. The most important meeting was that with Stalin and Molotov, on May 19, 1944, during which diplomatic support for the National Committee was discussed. On that occasion Stalin agreed to grant an interest-free loan of 2 million dollars and 1 million rubles for what were defined as representation expenses (44). In April 1945 Churchill observed in a personal minute that Tito's attitude might induce the British to restrict weapons and food supplies to his partisans, and added: «there is no use in our running a race with Russia in bringing utmost help to Marshal Tito. Let him continue to count pri-

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(40) Telegram by Renato Prunas – General Secretary at the Ministry of Italian Affairs – January 22, 1945, in *Yugoslavia: Treatment of Italian Army Personnel by Yugoslav National Army of Liberation*, NAL, War Office (WO) 204/2432.

(41) Allied Force Headquarters to Headquarters, Allied Commission, *Trials to Italian Officers in Yugoslavia*, March 11, 1945, in *Treatment of Italian Officers by Yugoslavs*, NAL, WO 204/2432.

(42) Allied Force Headquarters to US Political Advisor, *Italian officers under arrest in Yugoslavia*, July 5, 1945, NAL, WO 204/2432.

(43) Allied Force Headquarters G-5 Section to Headquarters, Allied Commission, *Italian officers under arrest in Yugoslavia*, July 8, 1945, NAL, WO 204/2432.

(44) I. V. BUCHARKIN, *Otnosheniya Rossii (CCCP) s Jugoslaviej*, doc. 311, 247-249. The loan agreement was approved at a later date.

marily on the Soviet Union» (45). This demonstrates that Churchill had already lost his control over Tito, considering that in the meeting between the British prime minister and Stalin in October 1944, in Moscow, the position of Yugoslavia in the division of Europe was considered fifty-fifty, that is 50% under the control of the Soviet Union and 50% under the control of Anglo-Americans (46).

### 5. Propaganda activity among the troops of the Garibaldi Division

Among the soldiers of the Garibaldi Division as well as among the other units consisting of Italian personnel, such as the Gramsci and Matteotti battalions, political commissars conducted antifascist propaganda activity with several aims: re-educating the troops and officers confused by fascist ideology on the principles of communism; persuading them of the merits and values of Marxist-Leninist doctrine; and, creating a positive attitude towards Yugoslavia and its people. Nevertheless, the principal goal of the partisans was that of creating faithful allies among Italian soldiers, who after the war could support the Yugoslav claims on Istria and Trieste, and Italy's eastern border (47). For this purpose in autumn 1944, before Mario Palermo's arrival, some Italian Communist Party members had travelled from Italy to Montenegro to work with Yugoslav political commissars to transform the Garibaldi Division into a politicized military unit to be sent back to Italy to join the Italian army. Their task was to visit the camps and organize political activities in support of the local commissars. Inside the Garibaldi Division each brigade had a political commissar whose tasks, among other propaganda activities, involved organizing conferences and assemblies among Italian soldiers, controlling the conduct of Italian officers and reporting on anti-Yugoslav or anti-communist behavior to the II Corpus Command. The long-term objectives of the political education of Italian prisoners were inspired by Soviet communist propaganda as stated by the Comintern Secretariat resolution of February 5, 1943. These included «forming conscious and convinced antifascists and preparing new national military units as well as new cadres for the communist movement» (48).

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(45) Prime Minister Personal Minute, n. 376/5 to Sir Orme Sargent, April 20, 1945, NAL, Prime Minister (PREM) 3513/6, Top secret.

(46) Tito's rebellion against Stalin in 1948 is a topic that cannot be addressed here.

(47) On this topic, among the others, see M. CATTARUZZA, *L'Italia e il confine orientale*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2007, English edition: *Italy and its Eastern Border. 1866-2016*, London, Routledge, 2016; see also Pupo, *Trieste '45*, quoted.

(48) *Postanovlenie Sekretariata IKKI ot 5-ogo fevralja 1943*, Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Sotsio-politicheskoi Istorii (RGASPI), f. 495, op. 77, d. 27, l. 179.

On January 10, 1944, a decree by II Corpus Command instituted antifascist committees «in the interest of the Italian people and the future of Italy» and «in the interest of the whole progressive mankind». According to the decree, the committees had as a fundamental task «the fight against fascism and all the forms of reactionary theories», which had left «a deep impression in all classes of the Italian people» (49).

Other goals of the antifascist committees were to make Italian troops aware of the importance of the fight carried out by Yugoslavs against Nazi-Fascism; to offer a positive image of Yugoslavia as a good ally of the new democratic Italian State; to develop fraternal solidarity between the Italian and Yugoslav peoples; and, to fight implacably against the «remnants of Fascism inside the Army» (50). The last objective was also related to the activity of the military courts and revealed the complex relations between alleged fascists and those who had joined the partisan forces. The final part of the decree focused on two central issues: the condemnation of those who interfered with the work of the committees, and the obligation imposed on the Italian commanders to cooperate with them by denouncing their soldiers and officers. The decree – as with many others issued by the partisan Command – used the typical *langue de bois* of communism, and ended with the slogan «Death to Fascism! Freedom to the people!». Propaganda activities were organized also among the soldiers enrolled in the working battalions, drawing on national heroes like Giuseppe Garibaldi in the spirit of re-educating the troops.

The results of the antifascist political work were compromised by the difficult relationship between Italian soldiers and Tito's partisans: mistrust between former enemies, the summary executions of alleged criminals of war, and the disappearance of officers accused of crimes hindered any real collaboration based on a trusting relationship. Propaganda itself was perceived by the Italian personnel of Garibaldi Division as an imposition. Moreover, Italian troops had a different view of their role: they did not consider themselves «proletarians» drawn to Yugoslavia to fight a war of liberation, but soldiers enrolled in a regular unit of the Italian army abroad.

The task of political commissars to re-educate Italian military personnel – not just the officers, who were generally more politicized and closer to Fascism, but also the soldiers – was very difficult considering both the relationship described

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(49) See the Report by Lieutenant A. Host, former officer of Bergamo Division, Sinj P-M. 73 Sinj, Dalmatia, *Sul comportamento dei partigiani jugoslavi nei riguardi degli ufficiali e dei soldati italiani e viceversa*, Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ACS), Roma, PCM, 1951-1954 cat. 15.2, f. 10599; see also Attachment n. 1 to the Report by Captain A. Torchio, officer of the Secret Service (SIM), Bari, November 3, 1944, AUSSME, DS 2127/6/4, p. 9.

(50) See *ibidem*.

and the short time they had at their disposal. The failure of the political work carried out by the Yugoslavs among the men of the Garibaldi Division is shown in several memoirs and reports, such as the following: «Communist propaganda organized among our units has almost zero results; firstly because it is elementary and primitive, secondly because the growing hostility of our troops towards the partisans leads them to reject on principle the communist doctrine» (51).

### 6. Italian prisoners of war in partisan hands

From September 8, 1943 until 1947 Yugoslavia held between 62,500 and 67,000 Italian prisoners of war (52). Italy's new status as a co-belligerent of the Allies and Yugoslavia (Italy declared war on Germany on October 13, 1943) did not change the position of those Italian soldiers in the hands of Yugoslavs, who were considered prisoners of war. Since they had invaded and destroyed Yugoslav lands, they were held to exploit their manpower, as partial compensation for war damages. In spite of the fact that Yugoslavia had signed the 1929 Geneva Convention on prisoners of war, it claimed the right to hold Italians until the signing of the Peace Treaty, violating the principles that govern the release of prisoners (53).

The Italian prisoners of war included soldiers who had fallen into the hands of the partisans for different reasons: there were some who had gathered along the coasts or on the islands to reach Italy but had been taken by the partisans; there were civilian and military collaborators of the Germans caught as prisoners; others had managed to escape from local German prison camps and reach areas under partisan control; finally, there were Italians who had been captured during the occupation of Istria by Tito's units and accused of collaborationism. It is difficult to establish how many prisoners belonged to each category, as it is difficult to prove the exact number of Italian prisoners in Yugoslav hands. There are several reasons for this uncertainty: first of all, Yugoslavia never provided precise data or lists of prisoners, and the lack of official relations between the Yugoslav State and Italy until 1946 made it difficult to solve the question. As

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(51) Report by Capt. Torchio, 8. See also Report by Red Cross Lieutenant C. NOVELLO, *Avvenimenti dopo l'armistizio*, AUSSME, DS 2127/2/11, p. 4.

(52) The first figure is reported by the Office for Veterans returning from Captivity – an Office instituted inside the Ministry of War. Other figures reported by the Ministry of Postwar Assistance speak of about 67,000. See C. DI SANTE, *Nei campi di Tito*, pp. 85, 236 n. 15.

(53) About the agreements on the protection of civilians and prisoners of war prisoners, see A. MARCHEGGIANO, *Diritto umanitario e sua introduzione nella regolamentazione dell'esercito italiano. II: La protezione delle vittime della guerra*, Roma, Ufficio storico Sme, 1991, pp. 448 ff.

regards Italian sources, the figures reported by the Office for Veterans Returning from Captivity refer only to «the Balkans», thereby also including prisoners in Greece and Albania. Additionally, soldiers and civilians were detained in the same prison camps, making it more difficult to establish the exact number of military prisoners. Moreover, after 1945 some prisoners were repatriated, but other Italians, for the most part deportees from Venezia Giulia, arrived in the Yugoslav prison camps. The latter suffered the worst conditions: many were repatriated only in the 1950s, and others, accused of fighting against the Yugoslav annexation of Istria region, were thrown into *foibe* [pits] or vanished into thin air (54).

Italian soldiers were interned in sixty-five different prison camps, but they were also assigned to working battalions which operated in various parts of the country (55). The prison camps lacked even basic services: some were without water. Among the worst camps remembered by survivors were Tolmin, Borovnica and the hospital of Škofja Loka, in Slovenia. Some prison camps were also instituted on the islands of Lastovo and Vis. Living conditions in these camps were very difficult: most deaths occurred as a result of hunger, beatings and torture, as well as typhus and other diseases connected to malnutrition. However, not all directors of prison camps behaved harshly towards Italians. Both the camp of Borovnica and the hospital of Škofja Loka lacked any health care: in the former the percentage of mortality among Italian prisoners was very high between May and July and between October and December, owing to the lack of organization. In the first period the percentage of mortality among Italian prisoners reached 70%. Škofja Loka instead became a gathering place of dying people (56).

In such wasting conditions Italian prisoners were forced to do heavy work, such as cutting and transporting wood with loads up to forty kilos (57). Those who stopped under the weight of the wood were shot or punished. Executions of prisoners by the guards were customary both in the camps and during the marches from one camp to another: those who stopped were summarily executed. In some cases shootings were even used to start the march (58).

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(54) See E. AGA ROSSI - M.T. GIUSTI, *Una guerra a parte*, quoted, pp. 207, 372, 538 n. 198.

(55) See *Campi di concentramento e prigionieri di guerra*, case 39, mic. 0311, Archivio «M».

(56) See L. ROSSI KOBAN, *Prigioniero di Tito 1945-1946. Un bersagliere nei campi di concentramento jugoslavi*, Milano, Mursia, 2001, p. 58. See also *Condizioni degli internati italiani in Jugoslavia con particolare riferimento al campo di Borovnica (40B-D2802) ed all'ospedale di Skofja Loka (11-D-2531) ambedue denominati «della morte»*, October 5, 1945, Secret, AUSSME, I 3, 108/3, pp. 51 ff. The figures referred to in this report to the Army Staff show that the main causes of death among the internees were decay, gunshot injury, accident at work, herbal poisoning, and diphtheria.

(57) L. ROSSI KOBAN, *Prigioniero di Tito*, quoted, p. 47.

(58) Herein, p. 30.

Some Italian soldiers, who had defected before the armistice, became officers collaborating with the partisans; they very often tried to convince Italian prisoners to join partisan forces, such as the Gramsci Battalion (59). In some cases they behaved in a worse way than the partisans, probably to enjoy their approval (60).

The harsh attitude of the partisans was also due to a sort of «moral duty» arising from the assumption that Italians had occupied Yugoslav territories, carried out reprisals against the civilian population and killed many of their comrades. For this reason and because Italy had lost the war, the Italian government could do little to help Italian soldiers still trapped in Yugoslavia: only in December 1944 could Rome intervene by sending the British government documentation concerning Italian internees in Yugoslavia. This included a letter sent to the Army Staff by a lieutenant who, denouncing the harsh living conditions of Italian soldiers in Macedonia, asked the Minister of Foreign Affairs to solve the problem and to engage himself in their immediate repatriation. The officer declared that on November 14, 1944, following the liberation of Skopje, all the Italians in the city were forced to work on the reconstruction of infrastructure destroyed by the Germans during their withdrawal. The officer wrote that «the daily sight of Italian soldiers taken to prison without any plausible reason saddens even the local population. In the city of Skopje live about 2,000 Italian soldiers, partly former prisoners of war, not equipped with clothing and in a pitiful state of malnutrition due to captivity» (61).

Although the Allies knew about the difficult situation of Italian soldiers in Yugoslavia, they could do little to help them or improve their conditions: as a matter of fact in 1944 they considered it much more important not to irritate Tito, their ally, than to help Italians (62). So the latter became a labor force as an advance payment for war damages suffered by Yugoslavia.

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(59) Ufficio SIM/CSDIC (Military Secret Service), Stralcio interrogatorio dell'artigliere Sebastiano Zappulla effettuato presso il Centro "C", *Comportamento dei partigiani di Lissa nei riguardi degli italiani*, September 2, 1944, Secret, AUSSME, I 3, 108/1, p. 2.

(60) This is the case of Marshal G. Stanzione who had been appointed commander among Italian prisoners in the camp of Borovnica with the task of maintaining the discipline among them. In this role he proved to be sadistic and cruel to his own countrymen: he did not hesitate to use torture even for trivial reasons. See G. BARRAL, *Borovnica '45 al confine orientale d'Italia. Memorie di un ufficiale italiano*, Milano, Paoline, 2007, pp.189 ff.

(61) *Trattamento degli italiani in Macedonia*, December 12, 1944, NAL, WO 204/2858. The full text of the document can be found in M. T. GIUSTI, *Militari italiani prigionieri in Jugoslavia dopo l'armistizio dell'8 settembre 1943. Documenti*, «Ventunesimo secolo», VII, 2008, 16, pp. 57-82.

(62) As the documents drawn from the NAL show, the Allies were aware of the situation and knew about the shootings of officers of the Garibaldi Division, but they declared that they could not officially intervene since they lacked any proof. See *Italian army: return of troops from Yugoslavia and Dalmatian Islands*, 922.6/1, NAL, WO 204/1779 and Stato maggiore generale, Ufficio operazioni, *Militari italiani nell'isola di Lissa*, December 6, 1944, AUSSME, I 3, 108/1.

### 7. *Antifascist propaganda among Italian prisoners and its results*

Antifascist propaganda activities were organized also among prisoners of war. In the camps the so-called *politična ura* was planned; that is, a lesson time for political education carried out by a political commissar tasked with extolling the successes of the Red Army and of Tito's NOVJ and with spreading confidence in an imminent communist victory (63). Given the harsh living conditions in the camps, political propaganda must have seemed absurd and unacceptable to prisoners; but it clearly shows how important the ideological foundation was on which the justification for the treatment of prisoners was based. The activities carried out among Italians were lectures, readings of texts on Marxist-Leninist doctrine, and writing articles for prison newspapers. The publication of propaganda newspapers, distributed in the prison camps, was another useful activity to the objectives of communist propaganda.

Propaganda activity was enhanced just before the repatriation of Italian troops. In February 1945 a collection point for disbanded Italian soldiers and military personnel awaiting repatriation was set up in Dubrovnik. Its commander, captain Angelo Graziani of the Venezia, also intended the centre, known as «la base», to become the reference point for veterans of the prison camps (64). Graziani's duties included providing assistance to Italian prisoners, so he tried to get permission from the partisans to visit other prison camps and bring relief supplies to Italians. In addition, one of his main tasks was to ensure the respect of international laws on prisoners of war (65).

Another duty of the Dubrovnik collecting point was that of publishing one of the most popular newspapers for Italian prisoners of war, «Ritorno» (Return), directed by captain Graziani. The paper, emphasizing the issue of repatriation, was initially aimed at providing moral aid to the Italians, trying to foster among them a spirit of collaboration while informing them about internal Italian politics and military operations in Europe (66). Later on the newspaper became a means of Communist propaganda, in which Italian Communist Party members played a significant role. The issues underlined in the articles, written also by Italians, regarded

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(63) See BARRAL, *Borovnica '45 al confine orientale d'Italia*, quoted, p. 173.

(64) See S. GESTRO, *La divisione partigiana Garibaldi. Montenegro 1943-1945*, Milano, Mursia, 1981, p. 599.

(65) Ministero della Difesa nazionale – Federativa Democratica Jugoslavia – sezione per prigionieri di guerra, no. 8248, October 29, 1945, Belgrado, Arch. «M», MF 134-216, «Questione prigionieri in Jugoslavia», p. 4.

(66) See *Il vostro giornale*, in «Ritorno», August 4, 1945, 1 in Fondazione Istituto Gramsci, Archivio «M», MF 134.

the new political situation in Italy, exhausted after twenty years of Fascism and war, and the need to rebuild the nation on the basis of democratic and antifascist principles (67). Both «la base» and «Ritorno» became instruments of pro-Yugoslav propaganda carried out as well by the Italian Communist Party. As a matter of fact in August 1945 the under-secretary of War, the communist Pompeo Colajanni, sent two party members to Dubrovnik – Danilo Dolfi and Mario Socrate - in order to improve the political work among Italian troops gathered in the city for repatriation. In a report to the PCI, written after his return to Italy, Dolfi noted that among these soldiers «no political work had been carried out», and that for this purpose he had organized other party cells, each of five people, «deployed in all areas of the command, in the barracks, offices and warehouses» (68).

The huge gap between the objectives of the representatives of the Communist Party, who wanted above all to form active anti-fascists from the mass of disbanded soldiers in Yugoslavia, and the real situation of the soldiers, whose sole purpose was that of repatriating as soon as possible, is evident. As underlined by Maria Michetti, a delegate of UDI (Union of Italian Women) to the first Congress of anti-fascist women in Yugoslavia in July 1945, «Italian soldiers do not have a real political consciousness [...] They wish to repatriate, but believe that in Italy there is a lot of confusion. The attitude towards the Yugoslavs is rather hostile» (69). We must also consider that propaganda was carried out by Yugoslav commissars who did not know the real political and social situation in Italy; their speeches often offended prisoners' pride and religious beliefs.

Propaganda itself could not really modify most prisoners' attitudes toward Fascism or Communism: the successes came in relation to individuals who were already antifascists, a few former committed fascists and among those who saw in collaboration with Yugoslavia 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 antifascist rhetoric, sincerely hoped to change Italy on the basis of democratic principles and to contribute in rebuilding the country. Nevertheless, the terrible living conditions in Yugoslav camps for Italians taken as prisoners made re-education work among them an impossible task, and made the activity of all those who had undertaken the work as political instructors more difficult.

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(67) As an example, see «Ritorno», February 16, 1946, 2, Fondazione Istituto Gramsci, Archivio «M», MF 134.

(68) Dolfi and Socrate discussed the results of their mission in a long report *Lavoro sui prigionieri italiani in Jugoslavia*, in Fondazione Istituto Gramsci, Archivio «M», MF 134, b. 35, n. 9.

(69) See *Delegazione dell'Udi al I Congresso del Fronte antifascista delle donne in Jugoslavia, Relazione sui dati forniti dal ten. Salvetti sulla situazione dei militari in Jugoslavia*, July 15, 1945, Fondazione Istituto Gramsci, Archivio «M», MF 134, «Questione prigionieri», p. 2.

## 8. Repatriation

At the end of 1945 47,700 Italian soldiers had repatriated from Yugoslavia, included those who had fought with the NOVJ. 30,000 Italian prisoners of war and civilians remained in Yugoslav territory. In the following years they were exploited by the Yugoslav government for its own political purposes. In fact, as had been suggested in a note from the High Commissioner for Prisoners of War to Prime Minister Ferruccio Parri, in July 1945, «it is clear that these internees are used by Yugoslav Authorities with the obvious intent to claim as much as possible from Italy» (70). The claims in question referred to Trieste and Venezia Giulia, and to the presence in Italian refugee camps of about 30,000 anti-Tito fighters, including Ustasha, Chetniks and other political fugitives, whose extradition was desired by the Yugoslav government (71). It was obvious that the release of Italian prisoners and civilians was contingent on the delivery of those Yugoslav citizens. Thus, Yugoslavia followed the example of the Soviet Union, which in the same years used Italian war prisoners – detained in the Soviet camps – as tools in order to obtain the forced repatriation of Soviet refugees in Italy (72).

The issue of repatriation also involved the PCI, whose members feared that the question of Italian internees in Yugoslavia could weaken the party's image and that, if Italian soldiers were not helped back to Italy, they would certainly become the instrument of «reactionary» political groups. In a report to the PCI in summer 1945, Danilo Dolfi wrote that about 30,000 Italian soldiers, still held by the Yugoslavs, were treated very badly. He therefore recommended dealing with the question immediately so that the internees did not turn into 30,000 reactionaries, and he proposed sending a comrade able «to do good propaganda work among the soldiers» (73). A Party delegation was sent, led by Italo Nicoletto, who at the beginning had great difficulties meeting with Italian prisoners: as a matter of fact the Yugoslavs even declared that they did not detain any Italian

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(70) See *Italian army: return of troops from Yugoslavia and Dalmatian Islands*, 922.6/1, NAL, WO 204/1779. The High Commissioner for Prisoners of War had been set up by Pietro Badoglio in April 1944, with the task of conducting a census of all the Italian military throughout the world and prisoners of Allied Powers. Pietro Gazzera was appointed as Commissioner.

(71) See Yugoslav anti-Tito activity in Italy, November 19, 1945, NAL, WO 204/12751. A document dated 4.12.1945, sent to the War Office in London, listed Yugoslav personalities who opposed Tito and lived in Rome. See *Information on Yugoslav Royalist and anti Tito activities in Rome*, Secret, Oct.-Dec. 1945, *ibidem*.

(72) On this topic see M. T. GIUSTI, *I prigionieri italiani in Russia*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2014 (2), pp. 282-ff.

(73) D. DOLFI, *Trattamento prigionieri italiani da parte slava. Relazione del compagno Dolfi in merito ai nostri prigionieri*, August 29, 1945, Fondazione Istituto Gramsci, Archivio «M», MF 134, b. 35, no. 3, p. 4 f.

internees. The Italian delegates explained that they had not come to investigate the treatment of prisoners, but that they wanted to help establish good relations between the Italian and Yugoslav peoples (74). Once they returned to Italy, the delegates did publish some newspaper «articles in favor of Yugoslavia, with the purpose of reassuring the interested families on the good treatment used by Yugoslavs towards Italian prisoners» (75). However, this did not yield positive results. Other delegations were sent to Yugoslavia to address the question, but it seemed clear that the issue of Italian military personnel and civilians trapped in Yugoslavia was not easy to solve since they had become tools of foreign policy: Tito used them in exchange for Italian territories. Besides the territorial claims, the problem of repatriation was strictly connected to the recognition of the new Republic of Yugoslavia, but since it was a defeated country Italy could not decide anything without the Allies' approval. Anyway, in February 1946 Tito agreed to repatriate 3,400 internees after the arrival in Belgrade of a delegation of Italian partisans and veterans (76).

In domestic policy the issue of Italian soldiers held in Yugoslavia became a matter of growing concern, particularly on the eve of the administrative elections of 1946, with mutual accusations between the PCI and Alcide De Gasperi's Christian Democrats. According to the PCI, De Gasperi's government was doing little to achieve repatriation, thus feeding the anticommunist campaign; the Christian Democrats answered that an official Italian delegation was unable to depart because the Yugoslav diplomatic mission in Rome had not granted visas (77).

In early November Togliatti himself met with Tito to discuss, among other questions, the problem of Italians held in Yugoslavia. After making some requests, such as a mission of «true Communists» – that is partisans and antifascists – to be sent to Belgrade, Tito decided to repatriate Italians (78). The official PCI newspaper, «l'Unità», launched a media campaign that emphasized the role of the

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(74) I. NICOLETTO, *Relazione sull'attività della federazione di Brescia per fare ritornare i prigionieri italiani in Jugoslavia*, Organizzazione rimpatrio prigionieri italiani, Brescia, 5.12.1945, Fondazione Istituto Gramsci, Archivio «M», MF 134/216.

(75) The articles were published in the following newspapers: «Avanti!» (the Socialist Newspaper), «Verità», the weekly magazine of Brescia Communist Party Federation, and «Giornale di Brescia», the daily newspaper of the CLN (Committee for National Liberation) of Brescia.

(76) See C. DI SANTE, *Nei campi di Tito*, quoted, p. 101.

(77) Herein, p. 108.

(78) The main topic of the meeting between Tito and Togliatti was Trieste. On that occasion Togliatti suggested an exchange: Trieste to Italy and the transfer of Venezia Giulia, included the city of Gorizia, to Yugoslavia. See E. AGA ROSSI - V. ZASLAVSKY, *Togliatti e Stalin. Il Pci e la politica estera staliniana negli archivi di Mosca*, 2nd ed., Bologna, Il Mulino, 2007 (2), pp. 152-ff., available in English as *Stalin and Togliatti, Italy and the Origins of the Cold War*, Stanford (CA), Stanford University Press, 2010.

Communist Party and its secretary in the upcoming repatriations: «Thanks to the initiative of comrade Togliatti Italian mothers and wives, who are still waiting for their loved ones, will see them back in a few days» (79). The arrival of veterans in Italian ports was particularly emphasized by the Communist press: in November «l'Unità» announced the «joyous return» to the port of Ancona of 7,500 veterans, singing the communist song «Bandiera rossa» (Red flag) while on the ship «Italian and Yugoslav flags fluttered in the wind» (80). Throughout 1946 another 14,400 Italians came home. By the end of 1947 only 2,000 Italians remained in Yugoslavia, held in prison for various offenses. They would be repatriated during the following years, but still in 1957, 36 Italians were detained in Yugoslavia for political reasons (81). In total 78,100 Italians, including combatants of Italian partisan units and prisoners of war, were repatriated from Yugoslavia.

The repatriation of the Garibaldi Division was completely different: when it finally returned to Italy on March 8, 1945, after 18 months fighting alongside the partisans, it counted only 3,800 men. Around 3,500 sick and injured combatants had repatriated before March 8, and 4,000 were repatriated from German captivity. The Garibaldi counted 3,556 dead and 5,000 missing; that is, 8,500 losses out 20,000 men - a significant number (82).

The division played an important role in the liberation of Yugoslavia; but, as shown, the relations with the partisan command were not always easy or clear. If on one hand Italians sought to contribute to the defeat of the Germans, on the other hand the partisans were interested primarily in seizing Italian weapons and in carrying out revenge against them as former occupiers. After the Garibaldi came back to Italy, both its contribution to the Yugoslav war of Resistance and the alleged Italo-partisan «spirit of brotherhood» were emphasized. At an official level, the Italo-partisan collaboration gained recognition from the newborn Republic of Yugoslavia, but this recognition could not hide the ambiguities of the past (83).

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(79) *I nostri ex prigionieri in Jugoslavia. Tra cinque giorni arriva il primo scaglione*, in «l'Unità», November 24, 1946, 277, p. 1.

(80) See «l'Unità», November 28, 1946, 280, p. 1; see «l'Unità», November 29, 1946, 281, p. 1.

(81) See C. DI SANTE, *Nei campi di Tito*, quoted, pp. 108, 139.

(82) The figures are drawn from a publication by Anvrg (National Association of Veterans enrolled in the Garibaldi division), Lando Mannucci, *Una storia eroica, drammatica ed esemplare dimenticata*, in «Camicia Rossa», 2003, 2-3. For a comparison of the data which, slightly diverge, see S. GESTRO, *La divisione partigiana Garibaldi*, quoted, pp. 596-597.

(83) On the twentieth anniversary of NOVJ, Tito conferred to the I, II and III brigades of the Garibaldi Division the Order of Merit and the Order of Brotherhood and Unity. See S. GESTRO, *La divisione partigiana Garibaldi*, quoted, p. 595.

## 9. *Conclusions*

The history of Italian occupation of Yugoslavia and the fate of Italian military after the 8 September 1943 Armistice – as demonstrated by the numerous works published in recent years – is still a topic of big interest, which needs however further investigation. The paper intended to bring the readers' attention to a topic not deeply examined. After the Armistice, Italian occupiers suddenly changed their status becoming hunted soldiers, trapped in Yugoslavia, forced to surrender their weapons to the Germans, former allies, or to the partisans, former enemies. They were required to choose a way in a very complex situation, the most perilous, where the local forces of resistance were fighting each other to gain the future control of the country. A part of Italian soldiers decided to join the partisans and fighting for the liberation of Yugoslavia, but this choice was not easy, since a past of war and reprisals could not be easily canceled. So in Yugoslavia for Italian military the situation was a tragic and paradoxical one: on the one hand some Italian units were fighting alongside the partisans in a mood of an alleged «brotherly collaboration» to free Yugoslavia from the Nazi Germans and return home with honor; on the other hand some Italian officers were imprisoned, sentenced after summary trials and executed.

Another paradoxical situation was that of thousands of Italian soldiers captured by the partisans after September 8, 1943, and detained in prison camps where many of them were subject to abuse and torture in revenge for the Italian occupation. For the most part Italian prisoners in Yugoslavs' hands were treated as a bargaining chip in order to obtain some advantages, like the recognition of the new Yugoslav State and the delivery to Belgrade of hundreds of Italian, alleged war criminals – they were more than 400, for the most part officers. In this case the new Republic of Yugoslavia behaved like the Soviet Union, which on its part used Italian prisoners of war and civilians, detained in Soviet territory, to negotiate the delivery to Moscow of Russian and Soviet citizens who had left USSR and had fled to Italy during and before the war.

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*The paper deals with the fate of Italian troops stationed in Yugoslavia in the period from the 8 September 1943 Armistice between Italy and the Allies to the end of World War II. Based on Italian and foreign historiography, memoirs and documents drawn from Italian and foreign archives, the paper aims at examining the role played by Italian troops fighting alongside the partisan units in Yugoslavia after the armistice, and at closing some gaps in the historiography of World War II, specific to this issue. It will also concentrate on the fate of the thousands of Italians taken by Tito's army as prisoners of war who suffered a very harsh treatment. Among the latter and the Italians fighting alongside the partisans, an antifascist propaganda activity was carried out with the aim of re-educating them into antifascists. The final part will deal with the servicemen's repatriation and will show how the Italian prisoners of war were used by Tito as a bargaining chip in order to obtain some advantages, such as the recognition by the Italian government of the new Yugoslav State.*

**KEYWORDS**

*World War II*

*Italian troops*

*Yugoslavia 1943-1945*

