



ITALIAN AND ITALIAN AMERICAN STUDIES

The Italian War on the Eastern Front, 1941–1943 Operations, Myths and Memories

Bastian Matteo Scianna



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For my dear father Salvatore Scianna (1956–2019). Ci mancherai!

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ABBREVIATIONS AND GLOSSARY

A NOTE ON SPELLING

English names have been used for locations in Russia or Africa. Soviet Union and Russia will be used interchangeably, even though there was no ‘Russia’ in this period. Various armies will be capitalized (First Army, but also Romanian Army), Army Corps will be used with Roman numerals (e.g. XXXV Corps). Italian infantry divisions will be referred to by their honorifics for the sake of legibility: e.g. *Ravenna* for the 3rd *Ravenna* Infantry Division; battalions will also be referenced with Roman numbers (for example IV/72, i.e. the fourth battalion of the 72th Infantry Regiment). Since it is often important to know if an author is a military figure, their rank (at the time of writing) has been included in brackets (e.g. [Gen.] *author’s name*).

GLOSSARY

Alpino (pl. *Alpini*)—Italian Alpine troops (mountain infantry with regional recruitment)

Anti-tank gun (AT gun)

Anti-aircraft gun (AA gun)

Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ACS)—Italian Central State Archives (Rome)

Archivio dell’Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore del Esercito (AUSSME)—The Archives of the Italian Army General Staff’s Historical Office (Rome)

- Ardito* (pl. *Arditi*)—Assault shock troops in the First World War
- Armata Italiana in Russia* (ARMIR)—Italian Army in Russia, or Eighth Army
- Bersagliere* (pl. *Bersaglieri*)—Light Infantry
- Bundesarchiv Militärarchiv* (BA-MA)—German Military Archives
- Busta* (*b.*)—Folder
- Cartella* (*c.*)—File
- Camicia Nera* (pl. *Camicie Nere*, CC.NN.)—Blackshirt(s)
- Carabinieri* (pl. *Carabinieri*, CC.RR.)—Italian military police
- Carristi*—Armoured troops
- Chief of Staff—Chief
- Corpo di Spedizione Italiano in Russia* (CSIR)—Italian Expeditionary Corps in Russia
- Diario Storico del Comando Supremo* (DS CS)—The *Comando Supremo's* War Diary
- Deutsches Verbindungskommando* (DVK)—German Liaison Command
- Documenti Diplomatici Italiani* (DDI)—Italian Diplomatic Documents
- Frame (microfilm)—f.
- Frames (microfilm)—fs.
- Folio (stamped archival material)—fol.
- Folios (stamped archival material)—fos.
- Folgore*—Italian paratroopers
- Infanterie-Division* (ID)—Infantry Division (German)
- Intendenza*—Rear command
- IWM—Imperial War Museum (Collections)
- Kriegstagebuch* (KTB)—War Diary
- Luftwaffe*—German Air Force
- Medaglia d'Oro al Valor Militare* (MOVM)—Gold Medal for Military Valour
- Milizia Volontaria per la Sicurezza Nazionale* (MVSN)—National Security Volunteer Militia
- No date—n.d.
- Panzer-Division* (PD)—Armoured Division (German)
- Oberkommando des Heeres* (OKH)—Germany Army High Command
- Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* (OKW)—German Armed Forces High Command
- Ostheer*—German Army in the East
- Regio Esercito*—Royal Italian Army

Repubblica Sociale Italiana (RSI)—Italian Social Republic. The new Fascist rump state under Mussolini in German-occupied northern Italy 1943–1945 (also informally known as the Republic of Salò)

General Officer Commanding (GOC)

Servizio Informazioni Militare (SIM)—Italian Military Intelligence

Stato Maggiore Generale (Comando Supremo)—Italian Armed Forces High Command and General Staff

Stato Maggiore Regia Aeronautica (Superaereo)—Italian Air Force High Command and General Staff

Stato Maggiore Regio Esercito (SME or Superesercito)—Italian Army High Command and General Staff

Stato Maggiore Regia Marina (Supermarina)—Italian Navy High Command and General Staff

Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore del Esercito (USSME)—Italian Army Historical Office

TNA—The British National Archives, Kew

Wehrmacht—German Armed Forces

Italian ranks with English and German equivalent

<i>Italian rank</i>	<i>Blackshirts</i>	<i>English</i>	<i>German</i>
Maresciallo d'Italia	Caporale d'Onore	Field Marshal	Generalfeldmarschall
Generale d'Armata	/	General	Generaloberst
Generale designato d'Armata	/	/	/
Generale di Corpo d'Armata	Comandante generale	Lieutenant-General	General
Generale di Divisione	Luogotenente generale	Major General	Generalleutnant
Generale di Brigata	Console generale	Brigadier	Generalmajor
Colonello comandante	/	/	/
Colonello	Console	Colonel	Oberst
Tenente Colonello Maggiore	Primo Seniore	Lieutenant-Colonel	Oberstleutnant
Primo Capitano	Seniore	Major	Major
Capitano	/	/	/
Primo Tenente	Centurione	Captain	Hauptmann
Tenente	Capo manipolo	Lieutenant	Oberleutnant
	Sotto capo manipolo	2nd Lieutenant	Leutnant

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

‘Cowards’, ‘clowns’, ‘useless soldiers’, and ‘treacherous allies’—the Second World War has bequeathed many stereotypes and enduring myths about the Italians. Mussolini’s regime had a central role as Nazi Germany’s closest diplomatic ally, and its fortunes during the war also influenced the Axis’s overall position. Yet, as the noted historian MacGregor Knox observed: “despite a fifty years’ undergrowth of memoirs and popular accounts, Fascist Italy at war remains poorly understood.”¹ This holds particularly true for one key piece in the puzzle: the Italian Army (*Regio Esercito*). Most myths are linked to the armed forces and the campaigns that it fought. But while the operations in North Africa have attracted notable attention, another vital theatre for the Italian Army, the Eastern Front, has thus far been almost completely neglected. This happened notwithstanding the fact that over one-third of Italian combat losses between 1940 and 1943 were suffered on Russian soil and five times more soldiers (229,000) fought on the Don in 1942–1943 than at the battle of El Alamein—the coinciding turning point in the North African desert. Collective memory in Italy has focused on the winter retreat (*la ritirata dal Don*) and largely portrayed the Italian soldiers as victims. This has meant that the previous operations have been seen as prelude to the inevitable catastrophe of a supposedly inept

¹MacGregor Knox, *Hitler’s Italian Allies: Royal Armed Forces, Fascist Regime, and the War of 1940–43* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 195.

military machine. In principle, three topoi emerged from the campaign in Russia, each with diverging interpretations that often depended on political views. First was the question of military performance, second, the Italian soldiers as victims (of their poor materiel and bad leadership, their government, their German ally and the Soviets) and third, whether the Italians had been *brava gente* (decent people) or ruthless Fascist occupiers. The Italian involvement in the war against the Soviet Union is, then, an important element of understanding the country's general role during the Second World War and the contested memories after 1945.

While cultural histories on collective memory analyse a constructed reality and public narratives, they often show little interest in the actual operations or in the armed forces as organisation. And yet events are never commemorated without myths and different layers of memories. Thus, reality—in a hermeneutic sense of *what really happened*—and the myths fashioned about an event often (or rather always) diverge, and notably influence the narrative and memory. The new school of military history as a study of mentality, cultural and everyday history has widened the hitherto narrow field, but has left operational aspects neglected. At the same time, operational military histories often did not investigate the memory of battles and campaigns or remained restricted to a single nation. A truly modern military history has to include several methodological strands, taking political, operational and cultural aspects into proper account without excluding the actual fighting.² This first step, analysing the military and its operations, is fundamental to drawing wider assessments of Italy's role in the Second World War. Yet, particularly the operational history of the Italian Army has been under-researched.

The myths about Italian military incompetence are closely linked to the difficulties of assessing military effectiveness. In the Second World War, one benchmark was arguably the ability to wage combined arms manoeuvre warfare (with infantry, artillery, armour and aircraft) on the divisional

²Sönke Neitzel, "Militärsgeschichte ohne Krieg? Eine Standortbestimmung der deutschen Militärgeschichtsschreibung über das Zeitalter der Weltkriege," in *Geschichte der Politik. Alte und Neue Wege. Beiheft 44 der HZ*, eds. Hans-Christof Kraus and Thomas Nicklas (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2007), 287–308; Stig Förster, *The Battlefield: Towards a Modern History of War* (London: GHI, 2008); John A. Lynn, "The Embattled Future of Academic Military History," *The Journal of Military History* 61, no. 4 (1997): 777–89.

and corps levels. This included the capability to command, control, supply and maintain these forces in the field. Military effectiveness has further to be subdivided into the political, strategic, operational and tactical levels, and has been defined as “process by which armed forces convert resources into fighting power. A fully effective military is one that derives maximum combat power from the resources physically and politically available. Effectiveness thus incorporates some notion of efficiency.”³ In his seminal work, Martin van Creveld had additionally highlighted the importance of combat motivation and morale for an army’s ‘fighting power’.⁴ On the other hand, the contributions from political science to this field have been vast—and are unfortunately often neglected by historians. Stephen Biddle has argued that modern material and sound finances alone are not sufficient for an army to be effective. His ‘modern system’ theory of force employment emphasised doctrine, tactical education for combined arms cooperation and the importance of force exposure reduction over sheer numbers and technology.⁵ Other scholars have hinted at the importance of national cultures in explaining the military as an organisation and in understanding combat outcomes.⁶

Added to this, military effectiveness has to be considered as a relative benchmark: that is, one to be seen in comparison to other armies and taking proper account of situational and structural factors, such as weather or materiel (lest we forget the enemy). The metrics for measuring effectiveness are both difficult to establish and hotly disputed.⁷ Defeat is certainly an indicator, but no one would claim that German defeat in two world wars means that her army was ineffective. Cohen and Gooch have pointed to the complexity of military failure, and shifted the analytical

³For detail on this, see Allan R. Millet, Williamson Murray, and Kenneth H. Watman, “The Effectiveness of Military Organizations,” in *Military Effectiveness. Vol. 1. The First World War*, eds. Allan R. Millet and Williamson Murray (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1–30, quoted on 2.

⁴Martin van Creveld, *Kampfkraft. Militärische Organisation und Leistung 1939–1945* (Freiburg: Rombach, 1989), 4.

⁵Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 2–5.

⁶Stephen P. Rosen, “Military Effectiveness: Why Society Matters,” *International Security* 9, no. 4 (1995): 5–31.

⁷The capture-kill ratio or the awarding of medals have been proposed as measures, but this has also been countered; see Roman Töppel, “Das Ritterkreuz des Eisernen Kreuzes und der Kampfwert militärischer Verbände,” *Zeitschrift für Heereskunde* 12 (2012): 180–90.

focus from seeing individual commanders as sole culprits to organisational flaws.⁸ They also criticised often-unsubstantiated theories about collective incompetence, institutional failure and uncritical military minds caught in their rigid doctrinal thinking.⁹ They thus argued against understanding institutions as a static concept and preferred to analyse armed forces as organisations, i.e. how they work in practice.¹⁰

Any serious examination of a given army must analyse its planning for war, organisational culture, battlefield performance and learning processes. Indeed, poor civilian-military relations, restrictions on training, hyper-centralisation, duplication in command chains and lack of international contacts will hamper hypothetical capabilities and may take decades to be overcome.¹¹ Therefore, military adaptability was and remains a key virtue for armies: even if cynics argue that the military always prepares for the last war, we also know that predictions are always difficult. Unpredictability and peacetime dividends add to the problem of military readiness,¹² which increases the need to instil armed forces with capability for critical self-assessment in peacetime and to stimulate a culture of change and adaptation with realistic training to prepare for the fog of war.¹³ According to John Nagl, “military organisations often demonstrate remarkable resistance to doctrinal change as a result of their organisational cultures. Organisational learning, when it does occur, tends to happen only in the wake of a particularly unpleasant or unproductive event.”¹⁴ Outside threats and defeat on the battlefield clearly are such unpleasant events,¹⁵ which still require a framework for effective

⁸Eliot A. Cohen and John Gooch, *Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War* (New York: Free Press, 1990), 3.

⁹Ibid., 10–16.

¹⁰Ibid., 15.

¹¹Wade P. Hinkle et al., *Why Nations Differ in Military Skill* (Alexandria: Institute for Defence Analyses, 1999), ES–2f.

¹²Richard K. Betts, *Military Readiness: Concepts, Choices, Consequences* (Washington: Brookings, 1995).

¹³Barry Watts and Williamson Murray, “Military Innovation in Peacetime,” in *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period*, eds. Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 369–415.

¹⁴John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (London: Praeger, 2002), 8.

¹⁵Williamson Murray, *Military Adaptation in War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 6.

reorganisation. Yet, other outside influences, e.g. within alliances, can have positive effects by channelling innovation to less developed armed forces. Thus, an army's combat performance depends as much on pre-war training as on time, context, enemy, materiel, strategic goals and policies and the nature of operations.

The second wider theme of this study is memory, which includes aspects of how myths¹⁶ and narratives are formed and contested. The main issues will be the interrelation between discourses and how some narratives prevailed and influenced memories, and the deviation of an organisational memory (e.g. the military's) from public discourses and the dominant collective memory. In the following, memory will be understood as contested and dynamic process of remembering and interpreting the past in order to provide identity. Memory will be seen as an active 'recollection' and search for meaning, e.g. in public political discourses to evoke images and narratives of the past for the present—or else to mute certain aspects.¹⁷

In order to explain why even military defeats are glorified, one needs to understand the political significance of myths about redemption and resurgence. Political myths have always held a central place for nation-building purposes, including in the Italian case.¹⁸ Likewise, war has always played an important role for founding myths and memories of nations.¹⁹ All these battle myths revolve around several recurring topoi: the few against the many (David versus Goliath), volunteerism, youth, elitism, hostile terrain, heroic sacrifice, refusal to surrender in hopeless situations and the association of a stronghold with a sacred home soil. These myths are often based on false official statements that set the tone for the 'glorious defeat' narrative and can be altered to suit a desired

¹⁶Or legends. The word 'myth' will not be used in a religious or strict mythical sense. In Italian, the *mito* is more akin to a mix between myth, legend, and tale in the English language.

¹⁷Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2004); Aleida Assmann and Linda Shortt, eds. *Memory and Political Change* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Jan-Werner Müller, "Introduction," in *Memory and Power in Post-War Europe*, ed. Jan-Werner Müller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1–35.

¹⁸Silvana Patriarca, *Italianità. La costruzione del carattere nazionale* (Bari: Laterza, 2010); Ernesto Galli della Loggia, *L'identità italiana* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1998).

¹⁹Gerd Krumeich, "Schlachtenmythen in der Geschichte," in *Schlachtenmythen: Ereignis – Erzählung – Erinnerung*, eds. Gerd Krumeich and Susanne Brandt (Cologne: Böhlau, 2003), 1–18.

memory—e.g. that of a ‘last stand’ against all odds.²⁰ Myths about defeat have often been willingly falsified by politics: military disaster could thereby be transformed into a political argument, for example to damn a corrupt social system and an undesired war, or the military could point to a lack of popular support and blame defeat on a ‘stab in the back’. In Italy, the lost battles of Custoza (1866), Adwa (1896) and Caporetto (1917) were deeply engrained in national identity—and a recent study of defeats in Italian history put the retreat in Russia 1942–1943 at the end of this ‘tradition’.²¹ Therefore, military myths were often linked to narratives of rebirth and renewal, e.g. the Italian *Resistenza*.²² Yet, while these myths are usually described as “homogenizing” and forming at least an “illusion of community”²³ through good communication, they are as much exclusive as they are inclusive; the battlefield victory of one group means defeat for another. Civil wars—such as that which ravaged Italy between 1943 and 1945—pose particular problems. In fact, defeat and recovery creates a particular kind of collective memory. Wolfgang Schivelbusch has created a “heroic defeat” paradigm to analyse how different nations coped with lost wars.²⁴ Indeed, victory is by no means a precondition for a battle becoming a mythical *lieu de mémoire* or positively connotated reference point for armed forces (think of the Spartans’ stand at the Thermopylae, or the Alamo). Where civilian societies see disgrace and futile bloodletting, the military might see heroic conduct upholding its values of obedience and sacrifice. Yet, even excellent volumes on the impact of defeats have habitually focused on society but omitted the memory of the main participating organisation: the military.²⁵

²⁰Bryan Perrett, *Last Stand! Famous Battles Against the Odds* (London: Cassell, 1991), 7–10.

²¹On the importance of these events, see Marco Patricelli, *L’Italia delle sconfitte: Da Custoza alla ritirata di Russia* (Bari: Laterza, 2016).

²²George Schöpflin, “The Functions of Myth and a Taxonomy of Myths,” in *Myths and Nationhood*, eds. Geoffrey Hosking and George Schöpflin (New York: Routledge, 1997), 19–35, here 32–33.

²³Schöpflin, “Functions,” 23.

²⁴Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Culture of Defeat: On National Trauma, Mourning, and Recovery* (London: Granta, 2003), 1–35.

²⁵An exception, which did not include Italy, was Peter Dennis and Jeffrey Grey, eds., *Victory or Defeat: Armies in the Aftermath of Conflict* (Newport: Big Sky, 2010).

On the other hand, even such ‘recollections’ of the past can remain confined to a specific social group. Just as nations are formed around founding myths and ‘invented traditions’ that repetitively use symbols and rituals to instil norms and values by implying continuity with the past,²⁶ so, too, are organisations. Yet the many theories on discourses and memories have focused on society at large rather than the armed forces.²⁷ As an independent institution, the armed forces have a distinct memory, which interacts with and is influenced by society’s memories, but it is not identical to it or static. Every organisation has a set of values and refers back to positively connotated events in its own past. The military, too, creates such positive points of reference for its identity: from individual battles and role models to ‘timeless’ military values, such as obedience, honour, sacrifice and duty.²⁸ Official and semi-official military publications, as well as memoirs by former generals have always been important references for the ‘military sphere.’²⁹ It would be rather surprising and, indeed, run counter to the logic of organisational self-protection, if the military did not try to write a *fable convenue* for itself. Another difference is that the military’s (organisational) memory may diverge considerably from the war experience and memory of individual soldiers. A soldier may have been disturbed by terrible experiences and subsequently attempt to narrate the ‘good memories’ and suppress less rosy ones, thus constructing different realities and narratives.³⁰

²⁶Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions,” in *The Invention of Tradition*, eds. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 1–14.

²⁷For example, Norman Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change* (Cambridge: Polity, 1993); John R. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1995).

²⁸Williamson Murray and Richard Hart Sinnreich, eds., *The Past as Prologue: The Importance of History to the Military Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). Research has stressed the dynamic interrelation between identity, stereotypes, group norms, values, attitudes, and actual behaviour; see Volker Franke, *Preparing for Peace: Military Identity, Value Orientations, and Professional Military Education* (Westport: Praeger, 1999), 26ff.

²⁹I will use the term ‘military sphere’ to include veterans, families, those close to the military and active soldiers.

³⁰Aleida Assmann, “Re-framing Memory: Between Individual and Collective Forms of Constructing the Past,” in *Performing the Past*, eds. Jay Winter, Karin Tilmans, and Frank Van Vree (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), 35–50.

Besides looking at operational performance and deconstructing certain myths and memories, another point is worth noting. While myths are mainly positively connotated for a nation's memory, their negative counter-part is the stereotype. There are many domestic and foreign stereotypes about Italians.³¹ One dominant theme is the view of Italians as unmilitary people.³² But as much as this stereotype has influenced Italian society's view of her armed forces after 1945, by no means does it stop at the country's borders. The Eastern Front—and especially Stalingrad—became an important part of Germany's postwar memory.³³ As with other theatres, the German generals' narrative and the Italian victim-cliché have overshadowed serious analysis of Italy's participation. Why has this been the case?

A DISTORTED OUTSIDE VIEW DEFINED BY PROPAGANDA AND STEREOTYPES

Our view on the Italian Army is distorted by Anglophone and German discourses and scholarship, memoir literature (whether domestic or foreign), anecdotal evidence and propaganda. The Abyssinian War (1935–1936) effectively started the *guerra fascista* and was a disaster for French and British foreign policy. During the dispute, cartoonists started to depict the Italians and Mussolini in a clownish and unsoldierly way—especially in *The Beano*.³⁴ This propaganda offensive was continued during the Spanish Civil War.³⁵ During the Second World War, propaganda movies, such as *Desert Victory* (1943), *Tunisian Victory* (1944) or *Five Graves to Cairo* (1943) set the tone for many postwar narratives.³⁶

³¹Loredana Sciolla, *Italiani: Stereotipi di casa nostra* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1997).

³²Christie Davies, "Itali Sunt Imbelles," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 5, no. 2 (1982): 266–69; Virgilio Ilari, "Il valore militare degli italiani" (Conference paper presented at the Istituto di Studi Militari Marittimi, 2002).

³³Christina Morina, *Legacies of Stalingrad: Remembering the Eastern Front in Germany Since 1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

³⁴Philip Willan, "Benito and the Beano," *The Guardian*, 28 Nov. 2002.

³⁵Sweet has described depictions of the Italian involvement in Spain as still based on Republican propaganda, John J. T. Sweet, *Iron Arm: The Mechanization of Mussolini's Army, 1920–1940* (Westport: Greenwood, 1980), xvii.

³⁶See e.g. the depiction of Italian soldiers in *The Best of Enemies* (1961). Still, the movie was the fourth most popular in 1961, attracting 1,076,211 viewers, Pietro Cavallo, *Viva l'Italia. Storia, Cinema e identità nazionale (1932–1962)* (Naples: Liguori, 2009), 406.

Similarly, while British posters portrayed the Japanese as animal-like beasts and the Germans as cruel Huns, “only the Italians were painted in sympathetic colours. Comic, unmilitary and rarely threatening, Italians were simply a variation on the pre-war ‘funny foreigner’ stereotype. [...] Even adventure fiction refused to take the Italian armed forces seriously.”³⁷ The same held true for American propaganda. Not only Italian soldiers, but also civilians were depicted as hapless victims of Fascism and “infantile, emotional and largely apolitical people whose character was marked by cowardice and unpredictable violence.”³⁸ After the war many Italians gratefully endorsed this narrative of victimhood. Additionally, the events of 8 September 1943 and the following two years had a strong impact on both discourse and memory in Italy and abroad. The change of alliances, the collapse of the Italian state and the armed forces, and the subsequent civil war posed many embarrassing questions and influenced judgements on the period before 1943, which was mainly seen through the lens of this year.³⁹ In Germany, Joseph Goebbels unleashed a massive propaganda campaign against the Badoglio government in the south,⁴⁰ and Italy was depicted—much like in 1914–1915—as an untrustworthy turncoat.⁴¹ Mussolini’s rump state in northern Italy also

³⁷Michael Paris, *Warrior Nation: Images of War in British Popular Culture, 1850–2000* (London: Reaktion, 2000), 217.

³⁸Andrew Buchanan, “‘Good Morning, Pupil!’ American Representations of Italianness and the Occupation of Italy, 1943–1945,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 43, no. 2 (2008): 217–40. See also Filippo Focardi, *Il cattivo tedesco e il bravo italiano: la rimozione delle colpe della seconda guerra mondiale* (Bari: Laterza, 2013), 3ff.; Ilaria Favretto and Oliviero Bergamini, “‘Temperamentally Unwarlike’: The Image of Italy in the Allies’ War Propaganda,” in *War and the Media Reportage and Propaganda 1900–2003*, eds. Mark Connelly and David Welch (London: Tauris, 2005), 112–26.

³⁹Elena Agarossi, *A Nation Collapses: The Italian Surrender of September 1943* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Claudio Dellavalle, ed., *8 settembre 1943. Storia e memoria* (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 1989); Ernesto Galli della Loggia, *La morte della Patria* (Bari: Laterza, 2003); Mario Isnenghi, *La tragedia necessaria: Da Caporetto all’otto settembre* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1999).

⁴⁰Aristotle A. Kallis, *Nazi Propaganda and the Second World War* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 159ff.

⁴¹Italy had remained neutral at the outbreak of the First World War, which left a bitter memory in Germany, see Gian Enrico Rusconi, *Deutschland-Italien/Italien-Deutschland. Geschichte einer schwierigen Beziehung von Bismarck zu Berlusconi* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2006), 100ff., 170ff., 190ff.; more broadly on German stereotypes, Klaus Bergdolt, *Kriminell, korrupt, katholisch? Italiener im deutschen Vorurteil* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2018). In fact, this narrative of treason has left a mark on the image of the

used propaganda to discredit the military elites who remained loyal to the King and now fought against Fascism. However, the new allies were also problematic. While the Italian Army in the south strove to be perceived as an equal *co-belligerent*, the British in particular treated them with scorn. As the Chief of the General Staff, General Paolo Berardi, later remarked in his memoirs: “also formally, we were delegated by the English to the humiliating level of an army from their colonies.”⁴² Yet, the impact of 8 September on the Italian Army’s domestic and international prestige has rarely been studied.⁴³ The Army’s postwar narrative about the ‘war of liberation’ became one of purification and redemption through combat: it sought to secure its role in the country’s memory, which strongly centered on the *Resistenza*.⁴⁴ This campaign, however, hardly attracted attention outside military circles—let alone outside Italy:

Italians and the Army in particular. When the former assistant military attaché in Rome, Friedrich-Karl von Plehwe, argued in 1967 that the deployment of German forces across the Brenner had been the real treason, his message was warmly received, and the book was eagerly translated (in 1970); the Italian general staff printed a special edition in 1978, which became required reading for all army officers, [Lt. Col.] Friedrich-Karl von Plehwe, *Blick durch viele Fenster. Erinnerungen 1919–1978* (Berlin: Frieling, 1998), 287. The book in question is [Lt. Col.] Friedrich-Karl von Plehwe, *Schicksalsstunden in Rom* (Berlin: Propyläen, 1967; Italian ed. *Il patto d'acciaio* by Longanesi). Plehwe became a noted diplomat after the war.

⁴²[Gen.] Paolo Berardi, *Memorie di un capo di stato maggiore dell'Esercito (1943–1945)* (Bologna: ODCU, 1954), 127. This cooperation and the Italian performance have been subject to very little serious study; for now, see Mario De Prosopo, “Reconstructing the Army of a Collapsed Nation: The Kingdom of the South of Italy (September 1943–March 1944),” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 18, no. 1 (2013): 1–16; Richard Carrier, “The Regio Esercito in Co-Belligerency, October 1943–April 1945,” in *Italy and the Second World War: Alternative Perspectives*, eds. Emanuele Sica and Richard Carrier (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 95–125.

⁴³More detailed in Filippo Stefani, “L’8 settembre e le forze armate italiane,” in *L’Italia in guerra. Il quarto anno – 1943*, eds. Romain H. Rainero and Antonello Biagini (Gaeta: Stabilimento Grafico Militare, 1994), 155–60.

⁴⁴This remains a history to be written. For now, see [Gen.] Oreste Bovio, *L’Ufficio Storico dell’Esercito* (Rome: USSME, 1987), 93ff.; Carlo Vallauri, *Soldati. Le forze armate italiane dall’armistizio alla Liberazione* (Turin: UTET, 2003); Nicola Labanca, ed., *I Gruppi di combattimento. Studi, fonti, memorie (1944–1945)* (Rome: Carocci, 2005).

the *Resistenza* myth was too strong, and internationally the memory of Anzio and Cassino were too dominant.⁴⁵

After the Second World War, the Allied cooperation with German military elites had a decisive impact on our perception of the military operations. In the period up till 1961, around 300 former Wehrmacht officers authored over 2500 reports.⁴⁶ Their aim was to write the war from a German perspective. As Field Marshal Georg von Küchler expressed in a circular to all collaborating German officers: “We describe *German* deeds from a German viewpoint and thereby build a memorial to our soldiers.”⁴⁷ They blamed Hitler for operational errors and attempted to establish a narrative of a purely professional, apolitical and chivalrous ‘clean Wehrmacht.’⁴⁸ While some scholars have laid bare these myths, the depictions of the Italians in these reports have endured: militarily useless partners, culprits for defeat, or at best a troublesome addendum. The same narratives were found in the influential memoirs of German senior commanders that further demoted the allies (including the Romanians and Hungarians).⁴⁹ Not only did the public readership buy into their narrative, but for decades scholars heavily relied on these memoirs.⁵⁰ Thus, the British and American desire to extol the beaten enemy (and gloss over their own shortcomings); the Wehrmacht generals’ yearning for recognition and self-exculpation, Basil H. Liddell Hart’s

⁴⁵Furthermore, the Italian campaign always ranked second to the Normandy operations for the British and Americans, and thus received less attention.

⁴⁶James A. Wood, “Captive Historians, Captive Audience: The German Military History Program, 1945–1961,” *The Journal of Military History* 69, no. 1 (2005): 123–47; Esther-Julia Howell, *Von den Besiegten lernen? Die kriegsgeschichtliche Kooperation der U.S. Armee und der ehemaligen Wehrmachtseleite, 1945–1961* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016).

⁴⁷Quoted in Bernd Wegner, “Erschriebene Siege. Franz Halder, die ‘Historical Division’ und die Rekonstruktion des Zweiten Weltkrieges im Geiste des deutschen Generalstabes,” in *Politischer Wandel, organisierte Gewalt und nationale Sicherheit*, eds. Ernst Willi Hansen, Gerhard Schreiber, and Bernd Wegner (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1995), 287–302, here 294.

⁴⁸Wegner, “Erschriebene Siege,” 291–92.

⁴⁹Rolf Düsterberg, *Soldat und Kriegserlebnis. Deutsche militärische Erinnerungsliteratur (1945–1961) zum Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2000), 11. See also Grant T. Harward, “First Among Un-Equals: Challenging German Stereotypes of the Romanian Army During the Second World War,” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 24, no. 3 (2011): 439–80.

⁵⁰Wegner, “Erschriebene Siege,” 299. Captured German war records also heavily influenced scholarship—providing mainly the German point of view on operations.

cooperation with them,⁵¹ the tales about Rommel,⁵² the British myths about their own allegedly highly successful war⁵³, and Churchill's influential *The History of the Second World War*⁵⁴; were all poisonous to the Italian reputation.⁵⁵

Hence, it is fair to say that our views on the 'Italian side of the hill' are still to considerable degree distorted by German generals' writing and their sympathetic British and American audiences. At the same time, the Italians remained very vigilant about how their armed forces were judged abroad and positive evaluations were readily cited.⁵⁶ In a sense, if one joins these dots, one could relate Antonio Gramsci's concept of 'cultural hegemony' to the interpretation of the Italian war effort. This hegemony was created both by a certain authority over discourses at home and abroad, and language: the dominant English narratives were also communicated through movies and novels, and everyday culture left its

⁵¹Alaric Searle, "A Very Special Relationship: Basil Liddell Hart, *Wehrmacht* Generals and the Debate on West German Rearmament, 1945–1953," *War in History* 5, no. 3 (1998): 327–57.

⁵²Patrick Major, "'Our Friend Rommel': The *Wehrmacht* as 'Worthy Enemy' in Postwar British Popular Culture," *German History* 26, no. 4 (2008), 530–45. For Italian views on Rommel, see Bastian Matteo Scianna, "Rommel Almighty? Italian Assessments of the 'Desert Fox' During and After the Second World War," *The Journal of Military History* 82, no. 1 (2018): 125–46.

⁵³Brian Bond, *Britain's Two World Wars Against Germany: Myth, Memory and the Distortions of Hindsight* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 8ff.

⁵⁴On Churchill's instrumentalisation of his memoirs, see David Reynolds, *In Command of History: Churchill Fighting and Writing the Second World War* (New York: Random House, 2005). While he panned the Italian war record, his depiction of a bogeyman Mussolini who misled the Italian people suited the overall narrative; thus the Italian reactions to his works were passive to friendly, see Emanuela Scarpellini, "Winston Churchill e la memoria della seconda guerra mondiale in Italia," in *La seconda guerra mondiale e la sua memoria*, eds. Piero Craveri and Gaetano Quagliariello (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2006), 223–33.

⁵⁵Another result was the rather negative depiction of the Italians in British service histories that served as background for many scholars, James J. Sadkovich, "Italian Service Histories and Fascist Italy's War Effort," in *The Writing of Official Military History*, ed. Robin Higham (Westport: Greenwood, 1999), 91–125, here 106ff.

⁵⁶Pietro Pallotta, *L'esercito italiano nella seconda guerra mondiale attraverso i giudizi dei comandanti avversari e alleati* (Rome: Tip. Madonna delle Grazie, 1955); Giuseppe Mayda and Nicola Tranfaglia, eds., *Come ci hanno visti* (Rome: Della Volpe, 1965), and also the review article, Piero Pieri, "Jugements sur l'armée italienne et responsabilités," *Revue d'histoire de la Deuxième Guerre Mondiale* 26, no. 7 (1957): 112–14.

mark on Italian public perceptions of the war, in some ways also through “imported memories.”⁵⁷ Accordingly, it should not be surprising that historical events were profoundly contested and used in political quarrels after the Second World War.

AIMS OF THIS STUDY

One important factor in the longevity of such myths is the poor state of scholarship. While the general level of studies on the Italian Army still lags decades behind those on the Wehrmacht, the research on its actions on the Eastern Front is still in its infancy, as mainly the North African theatre and the Balkans have been more closely scrutinised. Thus, choosing the Eastern Front as a case study has several benefits for an analysis of the *Regio Esercito*. Additionally, this study will not only demystify wartime myths and postwar memories, but also analyse how they were formed. The debates about a ‘correct interpretation’ of the campaign after 1945 has never been studied. Delving into memory studies can help us much better contextualise the legacies of 1940–1943 and also shed light on Italy’s domestic tensions during the Cold War, which derived in large part from the Fascist period and troubled wartime memories after 1943. This study cannot offer an all-encompassing analysis of the armed forces’ role in Fascist society, Mussolini’s foreign policy and strategic aims, or a detailed breakdown of military operations on all fronts. The following will focus exclusively on the Italian Army. While the navy (*Regia Marina*) and airforce (*Regia Aeronautica*) would deserve analyses of their own, this would far exceed the scope of this study.⁵⁸ Several key questions therefore run through the following chapters: What was the *Regio Esercito*’s performance on the Eastern Front like? How was it

⁵⁷ Daniele Pipitone, “Imported Memories: The Italian Audience and the Reception of American Movies About the Second World War,” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 21, no. 4 (2016): 627–48. See also Ronald Smelser and Edward J. Davies II, *The Myth of the Eastern Front: The Nazi-Soviet War in American Popular Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁵⁸ English readers may refer to Jack Greene and Alessandro Massignani, *The Naval War in the Mediterranean 1940–1943* (London: Chatham, 1998); for the airforce Brian R. Sullivan, “The Downfall of the Regia Aeronautica, 1933–1943,” in *Why Air Forces Fail: The Anatomy of Defeat*, eds. Robin Higham and Stephen J. Harris (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 135–76. See also Giorgio Rochat, *Le guerre italiane, 1935–1943. Dall’impero d’Etiopia alla disfatta* (Turin: Einaudi, 2008), 206–35, 335ff.

viewed by their German allies at the time? Which myths were forged (by whom) about the operations at the time and subsequently? How were these myths, memories and narratives about the Eastern Front created, perpetuated and debated after the war?

The study will proceed as follows: first, it will describe the primary sources used and the difficulties accessing the Italian archives. Then, it will review the literature on different aspects of the Italian Army, the Eastern Front, and memory. The third chapter will outline the developments of the *Regio Esercito* before the Second World War, looking at its materiel, doctrines and soldiers. The fourth chapter offers a comparative view on other campaigns' prior to June 1941—their operations and memories—in order to contextualise the Eastern Front case study. The following chapters will provide a detailed analysis of the Italian operations on the Eastern Front between August 1941 and March 1943. This will be the first primary-source based account of the campaign, which is vital for the following step: examining the myths on the Italian performance and the narratives of victimhood. These myths and narratives will be subject to scrutiny based on hitherto-neglected documents and German judgements, guided by the following questions: Were the Italian inept at learning the hard lessons of fighting the Red Army? Were the Italian divisions on the Don useless allies? How about their officers? In short, were the Italians really 'chickens led by donkeys' as conventional wisdom so often suggests? This will include a treatment of recently raised issues concerning war crimes: Had Italian soldiers murdered and plundered their way through the Soviet plains like their Axis comrades? Was there an Italian *Vernichtungskrieg* (war of extermination)?

The tenth chapter will analyse the memoir literature and the Army's narratives. Hereafter, the last chapter will examine contested memories by looking at postwar debates surrounding the Italian operations on the Eastern Front. The onset of the Cold War and the tense domestic situation established an intrinsic connection between historical interpretations and current affairs. Individuals, the press and even courts became vital elements in this contested space about victims and perpetrators: Palmiro Togliatti (1893–1964) readily jumped into the ring for his Communist Party (*Partito Comunista d'Italia*, PCI) against Marshal Giovanni Messe (1883–1968), who remained a vital role model and spokesperson for the Army even after his retirement in 1947. The earlier chapters on operations will thus serve as groundwork for understanding these debates and challenges in the onset of the Cold War. By analysing the disputes

surrounding the Italian peace settlement, the unexpected return of prisoners from Soviet captivity in 1945, the constitutional referendum on 2 June 1946, and the parliamentary elections on 18 April 1948, this part will show how interconnected and hotly debated the myths and memories of the *campagna di Russia* remained in postwar Italy.

This study will demonstrate that while the narrative of the ‘tragic retreat from the Don’ may have suited society at large—and indeed, groups who tried to discredit the senior leadership—the nuances that mattered so much to the military are often overlooked. Retreat and defeat could not form an acceptable narrative for the Italian Army, yet nothing was set in stone, and the different narratives were even more debated than, for instance, those on the North African campaign, due to the political situation of the Cold War. As this book will show, the defenders of the Army’s effectiveness and chivalrous behaviour were in many cases closer to the truth than the accusers.

A NOTE ON SOURCES

Any analysis has to start with the obstacle-strewn access to the Italian Army’s archives (*Archivio dell’Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore dell’Esercito*, AUSSME).⁵⁹ In addition to restrictive policies, many unit diaries for the vital periods before and during decisive encounters on the Eastern Front in 1942–1943 were lost.⁶⁰ The Central State Archives (*Archivio Centrale dello Stato*, ACS) in Rome keep many documents related to military operations. The private papers of Filippo Diamanti,

⁵⁹Silvia Trani and Pier Paolo Battistelli, “The Italian Military Records of the Second World War,” *War in History* 17, no. 3 (2010): 333–51.

⁶⁰Trani and Battistelli, “Italian Military Records,” 344; Robin Higham, ed., *Official Military Historical Offices and Sources*, Vol. 1 (Westport: Greenwood, 2000), 197; US National Archives and Records Service, *Guide to Records of the Italian Armed Forces*, 3 Vols. (Washington: The National Archives, 1967). The USSME has published some files in their official depictions, and some of the documents captured by the Red Army (that are now held near Moscow) were printed in Giorgio Scotoni and Sergej I. Filonenko, eds., *Retrosceca della disfatta italiana in Russia nei documenti inediti dell’8^a Armata*, 2 Vols. (Trento: Panorama, 2008). Antonello Biagini and Fernando Frattolillo edited the *Diario Storico del Comando Supremo* (hereafter DS CS) with an appendix of documents. It contains daily routine matters, but also minutes of high-level meetings and telephone calls with Mussolini, as well as incoming messages, orders to the war ministry etc. The authors also published the verbatim transcripts of the Chief of Staff’s meetings, see *ibid.*, *Verballi delle riunioni tenute dal capo di S.M. generale*, 4 Vols. (Rome: USSME, 1982–1985).