



ITALIAN AND ITALIAN AMERICAN STUDIES

Italian Partisans and British Forces in the Second World War Working with the Enemy

Nicola Cacciatore



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If our lives are but a bundle of chance encounters, this long list of names makes me consider mine a good one.

CONTENTS

1	Introduction	1
2	Where It All Began	13
	<i>Opposing Fascism</i>	14
	<i>War Returns</i>	26
	<i>Spies, Thugs and Patriots</i>	34
	<i>Discordant Allies</i>	42
	<i>The Englishman Who Fell from the Sky</i>	48
	<i>8 September: Resistance and Civil War</i>	58
3	Fieldwork	67
	<i>Setting Italy Ablaze</i>	68
	<i>Tightening the Belt: Airdrops</i>	85
	<i>Size and Aim</i>	93
	<i>Politics, or the Lack of Thereof</i>	103
	<i>British Liaison Missions: A Reassessment</i>	112
4	Propaganda	117
	<i>Too Much Optimism and a Rude Awakening</i>	118
	<i>Competition</i>	129
	<i>Italy: A Hostile Environment</i>	137
	<i>Between a Rock and a Hard Place: The British Propaganda Machine</i>	146

<i>Multiple Solutions to Multiple Problems</i>	149
<i>British Propaganda in Italy: An Evaluation</i>	154
5 The Long Liberation	163
<i>The First Steps</i>	164
<i>Rome and Beyond</i>	167
<i>The Long Winter of 1944–1945</i>	182
<i>The Last Months of War</i>	192
<i>Liberation</i>	206
<i>The Aftermath</i>	210
6 Conclusions: The British in Italy—A Matter of Image	219
Bibliography	233
Index	245

ABBREVIATIONS

AAI	Allied Armies in Italy
ACC	Allied Control Commission (also: AC)
AFHQ	Allied Forces Headquarter
AMG	Allied Military Government (also: AG)
BLO	British Liaison Officer
CG	Command Group
CI	Counter-Intelligence
CLN	Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale (National Liberation Committee)
CLNAI	Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale d'Alta Italia (National Liberation Committee for Northern Italy)
CU	Comando Unico (Unified Command)
CVL	Corpo Volontari della Libertà (Voluntaries of Freedom Corp)
FO	Foreign Office
MoI	Ministry of Information
No. 1 SF	Number 1 Special Forces
OSS	Office of Strategic Services
OWI	Office of War Information
PCI	Partito Comunista Italiano (Italian Communist Party)
PWB	Psychological Warfare Branch
PWE	Psychological Warfare Executive
SACMED	Supreme Allied Command for the Mediterranean (also: SAC)
SIM	Servizio Informazioni Militari (Military Information Service)
SOE	Special Operations Executive
WO	War Office



Introduction

This work was born to offer a comprehensive interpretation of the long-standing depiction in Italian historiography and public memory of the British as an invasive, domineering force in Italy between 1943 and 1945. As underlined by Claudia Nasini, up until the 1980s, the mainline interpretation in Italy was built on the idea that ‘[the] Anglo-Americans had always hindered the development of the Italian Resistance, scared of the possible growth of potentially dangerous political factions’.¹ The crux of the contrast was identified in the approach to the armed Resistance during the Italian campaign. The Italians, allegedly, were aiming at the creation of a ‘partisan army’ of some sort to conduct what they called the ‘guerra grossa’ (‘big war’) against the Germans, while the British were more interested in small bands of saboteurs who could strike at selected targets and quickly disappear.² As it was put by the No. 1 Special Force (No. 1 SF)³ operational report of May 1945:

¹ Claudia Nasini, *Una guerra di spie: Intelligence anglo-americana, Resistenza e badogliani nella Sesta Zona Operativa Ligure Partigiana (1943-1945)* (Trento: Tangram Edizioni Scientifiche, 2012), p. 11. Unless otherwise stated, all translations of original documents or Italian texts are my own.

² Pietro Secchia, Filippo Frassati, *La Resistenza e gli alleati* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1962), p. 34.

³ This was the name taken by the Special Operations Executive in Italy.

ITALIAN partisans have never been, even at their period of greatest strength - September 1943, June 1944, April 1945 - a secret army; [...] To form a secret army in Occupied Territory was not at any time the objective of the Allied Commanders [...]⁴

The liaison officers (BLOs) that the British sent behind the frontline to help the partisans have been the primary victim of this issue. For long, they have been depicted as the *longa manu* of the politicians in London, afraid that the Resistance could veer too much towards Communism and interested in fracturing and controlling the partisan bands. In this context, the number of supplies airdropped to the partisans has been for long the subject of a heated debate.⁵ Of course, things are more complicated than this. Indeed, the 'partisan army' never came to be.⁶ Partisan commanders understood that concentrating large forces in a single area would only make them an easy target for the Nazi-Fascists. While the idea of creating an army was never abandoned, the partisan war followed the principle of survival, with bands shrinking and growing as the situation required. On the other hand, the British decided to abandon the strategy of 'secret armies' to defeat the Axis only after the USA and the USSR were dragged into the war.⁷ This policy change was subject to considerable debate in London, and the old considerations still lingered in the strategy of the British secret services, even in Italy. As the British archive became available to scholars,⁸ more and more studies have revised the previous

⁴ Istituto piemontese per la storia della Resistenza e della società contemporanea 'Giorgio Agosti' (Hereinafter: Istoretto), B16a, Report on No. 1 Special Forces activity until April 1945, 3 June 1945.

⁵ Angelo Ventura, 'Prefazione', in Chiara Saonara, *Le missioni militari alleate e la resistenza nel Veneto. La rete di Pietro Ferraro dell'OSS* (Venice: Marsilio Editori, 1990), p. 8.

⁶ Santo Peli, *La Resistenza in Italia storia e critica* (Turin: Einaudi, 2004), p. 208.

⁷ Mark Wheeler, 'The SOE Phenomenon', *Journal of contemporary history*, 3 (1981), p. 518.

⁸ The documents preserved in the Foreign Office and War Office archives were opened to the public in 1972, and the SOE files became available in 1992. In particular, on the SOE archive, see Stuart, Duncan, "Of historical interest only" the origins and vicissitudes of the SOE archive', in ed. by Mark Seaman, *Special Operation Executive, A new instrument of war* (Routledge: London, 2006), pp. 217-229.

interpretation since the mid-1980s,⁹ showing that the Italo-British relationship was complex and multi-faceted. However, it seems that rather than replacing the former, the two interpretations now simply coexist,¹⁰ and the discussion has turned into a rather stale match of ping-pong.

The interpretation offered in this book tries to overcome this problem and offer a unified perspective on the relationship between the British and the Italians. If archival documents are unequivocally in support of the ‘revisionist’ studies, it becomes extremely interesting to examine why the oldest interpretation still survives. A simple answer would be to look at the political dimension of Italo-British relations. Indeed, if one were to confine itself to it, there would be few doubts about the fact that the British were deeply hostile to Italy. The centre of this hostility was the Foreign Office and Minister Anthony Eden.¹¹ However, even friendlier figures in the British establishment, like Prime Minister Winston Churchill, were clear on the fact that Italy had to ‘work her passage’ to re-enter the international community.¹² This attitude was double-faced. On the one hand, Italy had cowardly attacked the UK in its moment of maximum vulnerability after the fall of France to the Nazis. However, there were also imperialistic considerations: forcing the country into the British sphere of influence would allow for complete British control over the Mediterranean and, thus, safe passage for the goods of the empire. Not even the ‘revisionist’ studies put in doubt that this hostility existed in London and that it conditioned the British position towards Italy. Elena Aga Rossi, for example, describes the frequent political contrasts as a significant factor of

⁹ Marcello Flores, Mimmo Franzinelli, *Storia della Resistenza* (Bari: Laterza, 2019), pp. 267–268. Among them: Elena Aga Rossi, *L’Italia nella sconfitta: politica interna e situazione internazionale durante la seconda guerra mondiale* (Napoli: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1985); Massimo de Leonardis, *La Gran Bretagna e la Resistenza partigiana in Italia (1943-1945)* (Napoli: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1988); Tommaso Piffer, *Gli alleati e la Resistenza italiana* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2010); Mireno Berrettini, *La Resistenza italiana e lo Special Operations Executive britannico (1943.1945)* (Florence: Le Lettere, 2014). C. Nasini, *Una guerra di spie*.

¹⁰ Piffer, *Gli alleati*, p. 11.

¹¹ Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini l’alleato* (Turin: Einaudi, 1997), II, p. 207.

¹² Winston Spencer Churchill, *The Second World War*, vol. V, *Closing the ring* (London: The reprint society, 1954), pp. 117; 157.

inefficiency for the British. Fragmentation, according to her, is the key to interpreting the British presence in Italy, with various centres of power acting in separate and often contrasting ways.¹³ However, while this is undoubtedly correct, it still fails to explain why the positive interactions between Italians and British (of which the Liaison Missions are the prime but not sole example) have fallen to the wayside. The beginning of the Cold War and the stark political competition that it caused indeed played a role in this, as many read the actions of the British through the lens of anti-imperialism.¹⁴ However, once more, this position seems incomplete: the interpretation of the armed Resistance has changed many times in the 70 plus years of its history, often following the earthquake-like movements of the Italian politics.¹⁵ The view of the British, on the contrary, has not. To the point that, as mentioned, the opening of the archives has yet to bring a complete revision of older positions but rather the birth of two concurrent interpretations.

The first step in solving this conundrum is to extend the field of analysis: to break the cage of 1943 and 1945. Already in the mid-1970s, Guido Quazza advised his fellow scholars to incorporate elements of *longue durée* in their analysis.¹⁶ However, few were successful in doing so. Which is singular in the case of the Italian Resistance, as Italian anti-fascism can boast a long and complex struggle against Fascism that was not confined to the years of the Second World War. The idea that the armed Resistance had been the culmination of a process begun in 1922, with the Fascist takeover of the country, is widely accepted by scholars. However, very few books on the 1943–1945 period open with more than as a short preamble referencing these events.¹⁷ And outside of academia, the connection is

¹³ Aga Rossi, *L'Italia nella sconfitta*, p. 198.

¹⁴ And the Allies were an easy scapegoat for Italy's lacklustre modernisation. Piffer, *Gli alleati*, p. 10.

¹⁵ See Focardi, *La guerra*; and Mirco Carrattieri, 'La Resistenza tra memoria e storiografia', *Passato e presente*, 95 (2015), pp. 5–18. Perhaps the most prominent examples of revisionist studies on the Resistance are the works by De Felice, which started in the mid-1970s with: Renzo De Felice, *Intervista sul fascismo* (Bari: Laterza: 1975).

¹⁶ Guido Quazza, *Resistenza e storia d'Italia: problemi e ipotesi di ricerca* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1976), p. 19.

¹⁷ Among them, see Charles F. Delzell, *Mussolini's enemies The Italian Anti-Fascist Resistance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961); Tom Behan, *The Italian Resistance Fascists, Guerrillas and the Allies* (London: Pluto Press, 2009); M. Flores, *Storia della Resistenza*.

rarely, if ever, made.¹⁸ On the other hand, the period immediately after the war, with the difficult transition from war to peace and the Allied occupation of the country, has been often connected with the Resistance. This connection is presented almost always negatively as a betrayal (or at least a watering down) of the Resistance's ideals. Italy has the propensity to form a 'historiography of the unfinished', whereas all historical happenings are interpreted as missed opportunities. Since its unification, there have been attempts to fill the gap between the 'real' Italy and an idealised version of the country that its people (or its rulers) envisioned.¹⁹ The Risorgimento, the Industrial Revolution and the First World War were filtered through this lens, and the Resistance as well became, for many, another 'missed revolution'²⁰ in the history of the 'great incomplete' that is the Italian nation.²¹

This work, therefore, opens with an analysis of the situation before 1943, trying to keep its focus on the relationship between the Italians and the British as their contacts increase in frequency with time. Examining Italian anti-fascism before the war is crucial to understanding Italian Resistance and the relations between the Italians and the Allies. As Oliver Wiewiorka wrote, European Resistance is often the story of 'patriots who fought *for* their country and, mostly, *in* their country'.²² However, one element of the Italian case's uniqueness is that it began as the story of patriots who, for the most part, fought *outside* their country as they were forced into exile by the regime. Later, many of those who fought Mussolini in the 1920s and 1930s came back and became prominent leaders of the Resistance or played a central role in the reconstruction of Italian political life in the South, under the tutelage of the Allies. Therefore, it is pivotal to have a proper understanding of their struggles and how the previous years' events shaped their worldview. Italian anti-fascists, in fact, already had

¹⁸ Notably, it was made by Ferruccio Parri, old-time anti-fascist and vice-commander of the CLNAI, in the opening speech before the Constitutive Assembly on 25 September 1945, Ferruccio Parri, *Discorsi parlamentari* (Rome: Senato della Repubblica, 1990), p. 46.

¹⁹ Christopher Duggan, *La forza del destino Storia d'Italia dal 1796 a oggi* (Bari, Laterza, 2008), pp. X–XI.

²⁰ The concept gained traction especially in the 1960s and 1970s, as the idea of 'betrayed Resistance' was postulated. Notably, this was a debate mostly internal to left-wing parties and intellectuals. Philip Cooke, *L'eredità della Resistenza Storia, cultura, politiche dal dopoguerra a oggi* (Rome: Viella, 2015), pp. 212–213; 319.

²¹ Roberto Esposito, 'Unfinished Italy', *Italian Studies*, 76:2 (2021), pp. 128–134.

²² Olivier Wiewiorka, *Storia della Resistenza nell'Europa occidentale 1940–1945* (Turin: Einaudi, 2018), p. 7.

interacted with the nations that fought Italy before the war broke out. In many cases, these interactions were profoundly negative, marked by mutual diffidence and mistrust. This trend would continue in the first years of the war, as the British made clumsy attempts at ‘detaching’ Italy from the Axis, supporting Italians whose allegiance to anti-fascism was tenuous at best while clashing with more genuine and, therefore, more ideologically rigid, ones. In many ways, this was a prelude to the issues the British would face in Italy in the 1943–1945 period.

The analysis will then move to the interactions in the field between the BLOs and Italian partisans, providing examples from missions behind enemy lines. This will cover, of course, the problem of the airdrops, which have been for so long a point of fiery debate among historians. Thanks to the material already unearthed by other scholars, as well as some new documents found during the research, this chapter aims to reconstruct this relationship to clear the field from the debris of old prejudices against the British, examining the material conditions in which they operated and the way they juggled their meagre resources.

To complete the analysis will be necessary to explore the issue of representation and self-representation connected to the British image in Italy. The focus will be on British propaganda, its management (and its mismanagement) and the effects it had on the way the British were perceived in Italy. British propaganda had an enormous impact on Italy. *Radio Londra*, for example, is still a well-known name in Italian popular culture. Let us cite here, for example, Giuliano Ferrara’s short-lived TV programme which aired during 2011 and 2012 in a timeslot right after the 8 pm TG1 on RAI1, Italy’s main public TV station, aptly titled ‘Qui Radio Londra’.²³ However, as much as it had an impact on popular culture, British propaganda failed to dispel the idea that the British were untrustworthy. By putting British propaganda into its context and examining its interactions with American and Soviet propaganda, as well as Fascist counter-propaganda, we can better interpret this failure, apparently in such contrast with the popularity enjoyed by the BBC during the period and afterwards.

The final chapter will be devoted to the British’s approach towards partisan disarmament and dispersion, as well as the problem of Fascist epuration. Many points made after the war to expose the supposed British

²³ As it was Ferrara’s previous programme, which aired on Mediaset’s *Canale 5* from 1989 to 1994.

hypocrisy focused on these issues. However, similarly to BLOs and the airdrops, when examined within the practical situation in which the British found themselves, it appears clear how they were hindered in their efforts by the resources at their disposal (or lack thereof), not by political considerations.

From propaganda to partisan disarmament, from airdrops to the management of the liaison mission, the British made a series of fatal mistakes in handling their interaction with the partisans. Many of these mistakes were not tied to a clear-cut political strategy to impede or contain the Italian Resistance but rather to the lack of any form of strategy, political or not. The Anglo-Americans simply did not have a strategy for the Italian theatre. From the start, they adopted a wait-and-see approach²⁴ and considered the Italian front as a way to distract German forces in their overall strategy for Europe.²⁵ They were caught unprepared by Mussolini's dismissal in 1943,²⁶ and lacked any form of precise planning for operations after the initial landing in Sicily,²⁷ just like they lacked any precise planning for the post-Rome conquest. Considering this, it is clear that an overarching strategy to handle the Italian Resistance was also missing. The British were uniquely affected by this, both because of the interaction that Italian anti-fascists had with them in the previous years and because they were not able to project a coherent image of themselves and present their plans to the partisans. As a result, partisans were confused by the discrepancies between British propaganda and the actions effectively taken by the British forces. These caused dissatisfaction to grow among the partisans (and often among the liaison officers, too) and, in the long run, exposed the British to the accusation of mendacity. Even when handling the partisans' disarmament and dispersion, the Allies lacked preparation and coordination. Despite the lessons learned during their advance between 1943 and 1945, they greatly mishandled the disarmament during the spring of 1945, creating fertile ground for dissent and discontent among the Italians. It is indeed essential to notice how the main narrative about the relations between Italians and the British, with the British trying to

²⁴ Elena Aga Rossi, *Una nazione allo sbando: 8 settembre 1943* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2003), pp. 192–193.

²⁵ Nasini, *Una guerra di spie*, p. 14.

²⁶ Norman Kogan, *Italy and the Allies* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956), p. 31.

²⁷ Harold Macmillan, *The blast of war* (London: Macmillan, 1967), p. 365.

control and impede the growth of the partisan movement, can find much more tangible proof to sustain itself in the last few months of the war.²⁸

Another issue often overlooked is the extraordinary fragmentation not only of the British but of the Italians as well. It is to underline this point that the title of this work does not mention ‘Italy’, but rather ‘Italians’. Defining what the Italians were (or even are today) is complex, and to an extent, it has always been so. ‘We made Italy, and now we have to make the Italians’ ruled Massimo d’Azeglio after the Italian unification of 1861.²⁹ In the turbulent times of the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, this uncertainty was even greater. Italian anti-fascists, in fact, very quickly claimed that they were, indeed, the ‘real’ Italians, while the Fascists were illegally squatting in the country, occupying the state. On the other hand, the Fascist rhetoric was always clear in pointing at its enemies as the ‘anti-Italians’, the antithesis of good citizens.³⁰ This situation only got more complicated after the beginning of the war, especially after 1943. After the armistice of 8 September, in Italy, there were at least three entities with a claim to power: the Southern Kingdom, propped by the Allies, the Fascist *Repubblica Sociale Italiana* in the North (Italian Social Republic—RSI) and finally the Committees of National Liberation (CLN), with the one in Milan in particular (CLNAI) gaining a prominent role. The bands themselves were a source of legal power and often administered the land in a para-statal manner, declaring and enforcing laws.³¹ While the partisan band as a ‘microcosmos of direct democracy’ as theorized by Quazza³² remained an ideal to aspire, rather than a reality,³³ the partisan band as a source of sovereignty was very much real.³⁴ Moreover, besides these

²⁸ As pointed out by Claudia Nasini: ‘It was only at the end of 1944 that the [Allies’] choices, especially of the British, towards the Italian Resistance begun to be influenced, partially, by political considerations’. See Nasini, *Una guerra di spie*, p. 15.

²⁹ Duggan, *La forza del destino*, p. X–I.

³⁰ Nicola Cacciatore, “La vera Italia siamo noi.” Gli antifascisti e le loro riflessioni sul patriottismo e sulla storia nazionale’, *Rivista storica del socialismo*, 1 (2022), pp. 28–29.

³¹ The more apparent manifestations of this legal power were the so-called partisan republics during the summer of 1944. See Massimo Legnani, *Politica e amministrazione nelle repubbliche partigiane* (Milan: Istituto nazionale per la storia del movimento di liberazione, 1976), pp. 12–33.

³² Quazza, *Resistenza e storia*, pp. 241–252.

³³ Peli, *La Resistenza*, pp. 209–211.

³⁴ Giuseppe Filippetta, *L'estate che imparammo a sparare* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2018), pp. 78–79.

entities, there were several people who simply accepted their position as bystanders in the events, not taking either side and trying to scrape a living. Finally, the Resistance movement itself was an incredibly varied phenomenon, which escapes any sweeping generalization on its nature, motivation or even its strategy in facing the enemy. The early historiography on the Resistance underlined this phenomenon,³⁵ but in the following years, and for a long time, the armed Resistance was presented as the prominent, if not the only, way in which Resistance against the Nazi-Fascists was fought.³⁶ Subsequent studies have shed light on different aspects and forms of Resistance.³⁷ ‘Passive’ Resistance, which took the shape of strikes, destruction of foodstuff, aid to the bands and the escaped Allied PoWs,³⁸ desertion and draft evasion, was vital for the survival and success of the armed Resistance, as the population, to cite Mao, created the ‘water’ in which the guerrillas could swim like fish.³⁹ The Resistance of the *Internati Militari Italiani* (Italian Military Internees—IMI), the Italian soldiers deported to Germany after 1943, who choose captivity over allegiance to the Fascist RSI, as well has been rediscovered and re-examined after a long period of silence.⁴⁰ The composition of the armed Resistance itself has been the object of further enquiries, which underlined the participation of women in it, often in prominent roles.⁴¹ Its ‘Italianness’

³⁵ Nicola Labanca, ‘Resistenza/resistenze Un bilancio tra discorso pubblico e studi storici’, in ed. by Monica Fioravanzo, Carlo Fumian, 1943 *Strategie militari, collaborazionismi, Resistenze* (Rome: Viella, 2015), p. 28.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 40.

³⁷ On the historiography and public memory of the Resistance, see the capital study by Filippo Focardi: Focardi, *La Guerra*. And: Mario Isnenghi, *Le guerre degli italiani. Parole, immagini, ricordi 1848-1945* (Milan: Mondadori, 1989); Philip Cooke, *The Legacy of the Italian Resistance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); John Foot, *Italy's divided memory* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

³⁸ This topic attracted the interest of Anglophone scholars as well; see Roger Absalom, *A strange alliance: aspects of escape and survival in Italy, 1943-45* (Florence: L.S. Olschki, 1991).

³⁹ A concept taken from the millenary Chinese military tradition: Gastone Breccia, *L'arte della guerriglia* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2013), pp. 26–29.

⁴⁰ On this topic see Gabriele Hammermann, *Gli internati italiani in Germania, 1943-1945* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2004); Sabrina Frontera, *Il ritorno dei militari italiani internati in Germania dalla “damanation memoriae” al paradigma della Resistenza senz’armi* (Rome: Aracne, 2015).

⁴¹ Jane Slaughter, *Women and the Italian Resistance: 1943-1945* (Denver: Arden Press, 1997).

as well has been put into question, as studies have shown the large participation of minorities and escaped PoWs from other countries, from the Commonwealth to the Soviet Union,⁴² and even German deserters.⁴³ The Resistance, therefore, appears more and more as not a strictly ‘Italian’ movement (to borrow again the words of Wieviorka, a group of patriots fighting *for* their country *in* their country), but rather as an internationalist one, which housed a number of different groups banded together under the flag of anti-fascism. Internationalism truly is the pivotal connection between the Resistance of the 1920s and 1930s and the armed Resistance during the war. Italian anti-fascists before the war envisioned their movement more and more as a pan-European one, and it was not by chance if the calls for some form of European Union gained traction during the war in anti-fascist circles, regardless of their political colour,⁴⁴ and not only in Italy.⁴⁵

Therefore, while some level of generalisation is inevitable in historical analysis, this work aims at reinstate at least a bit of this complexity in the history of Italo-British relations trying to connect various elements and showing how the anti-fascist struggle before the Second World War

⁴²For a few examples, see: Mauro Galleni, *Ciao, russi: partigiani sovietici in Italia, 1943-1945* (Venice: Marsilio, 2001); Andrea Martocchia et al., *I partigiani jugoslavi nella resistenza italiana: storie e memorie di una vicenda ignorata* (Rome: Odratek, 2011); Vasely Maria Jiri, *La resistenza cecoslovacca in Italia: 1944/45* (Milan: Jaca Book, 1975); Gordon Lett, *Rossano a valley in flames: a story of the Italian Resistance* (Barnsley: Frontline Books, 2011).

⁴³Mirco Carrattieri, Iara Meloni, *Partigiani della Wehrmacht disertori tedeschi nella Resistenza italiana* (Piacenza: Le Piccole Pagine, 2021).

⁴⁴Charles F. Delzell, ‘The European Federalist Movement in Italy: First Phase, 1918-1948’, *The Journal of Modern History*, 32:2 (1960), pp. 241–250. The most prominent example is the *Manifesto* for a Free and United Europe, written by Altiero Spinelli and others on the island of Ventotene, where they were imprisoned by the Fascist regime. Edmondo Paolini, *Altiero Spinelli* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1996).

⁴⁵See Walter Lippens, ‘European Federation in the Political Thought of Resistance Movements during World War II’, *Central European History*, 1 (1968), pp. 5–19; Tadeusz Wyrwa, *L’idée Européenne Dans La Résistance à Travers La Press Clandestine En France et En Pologne 1939-1945* (Paris: Nouvelles éditions latines, 1987); Stephanie Wodianska, ‘Connecting Origin and Innocence. Myths of Resistance in European Memory Cultures after 1945’, in ed. by Lea Brenningmeyer, Martin Butler, Paul Mercheril, and Christoph Behrens, *Resistance: Subjects, Representations, Contexts* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2017), pp. 153–172.

influenced the 1943–1945 period, and how this period influenced the afterwar years as well. This analysis will, hopefully, contribute not only to the advancement of the field but also help the creation of a shared memory between Italy and the Anglophone countries on the subject.⁴⁶

⁴⁶Despite the desires of many authors, such memory is still missing. See *The history of the Italian resistance* edited and translated by P.D. Cummings (London: Odhams Press Limited, 1957), p. 10.



CHAPTER 2

Where It All Began

In the early morning of the 10 September 1943, two Italian corvettes of the Royal Navy reached the harbour of Brindisi. One of them, the *Baionetta*, was carrying a particularly delicate cargo: the Italian royal family and the government, led by Marshal Pietro Badoglio, who had fled the capital of Rome on the night of the 8 September 1943. However, the *Baionetta* had another, perhaps even more unusual, passenger. He was Richard ‘Dick’ Mallaby, a British agent of the Special Operations Executive (SOE), the secret service created by the UK in 1940 and to which Prime Minister Winston Churchill gave the task of ‘setting Europe ablaze’. How Mallaby ended up sharing the *Baionetta*’s deck with the King of Italy and its head of government is a story tied with the history of Italy in the Second World War. While the corvette was slowly approaching the docks, Italy’s fate had been sealed, and the previous years’ events had come to a devastating conclusion. However, to explain why Mallaby was where he was, we need to recount these events from the perspective of the two main actors involved, the Italians and the Allies. These two actors, in fact, had a long and complicated relationship even before the start of the war, which laid the way to further issues during it.

OPPOSING FASCISM

For Italians, things arguably started more than 20 years before, with the Fascist takeover of 1922. It would be impossible to recount here the events that brought Benito Mussolini to his position of power.¹ However, it is noteworthy to point out that he enjoyed the support of many strata of the Italian society, especially of the upper ones. After the First World War, Italy's economy struggled to recover, unemployment was rampant, political unrest was widespread, and there was a general resentment against the Versailles peace treaty, which many considered unfair towards Italy. Fascism was, in the eyes of many, the best way to restore order and bring Italy back to the forefront of the European stage. For the upper classes and the church, Fascism was an effective counter to the threat of Bolshevism, and it quickly gained the support of the reactionaries and the conservatives. Against those who opposed it, Mussolini and his goons unleashed a wave of violence and brutality. The black shirt *squadre* (hence the term *squadristismo*) soon gained grim fame.² Finally, at the end of October 1922, Mussolini launched his march on Rome, as the *squadristi* converged on the capital. The government asked the King to let the Army intervene, but Vittorio Emanuele III decided against it. A mix of Fascist sympathies and the fear that the army would side with Mussolini convinced him to let things play out.³ Therefore, the Fascists entered Rome unopposed, and Mussolini was nominated PM by the King.⁴ The Fascist takeover of Italy was a violent affair, only draped in the pretence of legitimacy.⁵ It had only been possible thanks to the support of the ruling classes of the country and the church.⁶ The conservatives and the liberals wrongly believed they could use Mussolini to quash the Socialists, Communists and even those Social-Catholic elements of the *Partito Popolare Italiano* (Italian Popular Party—PPI), whose leader, the Sicilian priest Don Luigi Sturzo, had shown sympathies for the plight of the farmers and the working class and

¹On the figure of Mussolini, see the classic volume by Richard Bosworth: Richard J.B. Bosworth, *Mussolini un dittatore italiano* (Milan: Mondadori, 2004).

²Emilio Gentile, *Il fascismo in tre capitoli* (Bari: Laterza, 2004), pp. 13–21.

³Bosworth, *Mussolini*, p. 187.

⁴Gentile, *Il fascismo*, pp. 27–29.

⁵For an account of the Fascist takeover in English, see Delzell, *Mussolini's enemies*, pp. 6–25.

⁶Bosworth, *Mussolini*, p. 187.

had set up cooperative or trade unions to help them.⁷ In the end, they were the ones who were phagocytised by Mussolini even if, even after the realisation that Fascism could not be tamed, they did not rebel. On the contrary, many simply reaped the benefits of their position inside the new-born regime.

Since 1925, the regime proclaimed a series of ‘exceptional decrees’ to squash its opposition. ‘Anti-nationalist’ parties and newspapers were suppressed, passports were cancelled, and emigration was made illegal. The death penalty was re-introduced after Italy had been among the first countries in Europe to abolish it in 1889. Moreover, a *Tribunale Speciale* (special tribunal), ‘for the defence of the state’, was set up. It began working almost immediately, its powers were vast and discretionary (as it was considered a military court), while the accused had minimal rights.⁸ The police and the *prefetti* were empowered to deal with anti-fascists, and they too could count on discretionary powers. Besides prison sentences and death, another measure adopted by the regime to deal with opposition was the *confino*, a form of deportation to remote parts of Italy or to small islands along the coast which often became open-air concentration camps for dissidents.⁹ The regime also created two new sections of the police, one to deal with the anti-fascists who had emigrated abroad, and one to deal with the anti-fascists still present in Italy. The latter, much more grimly famous, was the OVRA¹⁰ (established in 1927), whose headquarters were in Milan.¹¹

⁷ Delzell, *Mussolini's enemies*, p. 4. Giovanni Giolitti was among those who made this mistake. Gentile, *Il fascismo*, p. 23.

⁸ Giovanni Tessitore, *Fascismo e pena di morte Consenso e informazione* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2007), pp. 220–224.

⁹ Delzell, *Mussolini's enemies*, p. 39.

¹⁰ The meaning of the name still remains uncertain. It has been explained as *Opera Volontaria di Repressione Antifascista*, *Organizzazione di Vigilanza e Repressione dell'Antifascismo*, and *Organo di Vigilanza dei Reati Antistatali*. However, despite the passion of the Fascist regime for acronyms, it seems it was simply a pun made by Mussolini, by merging the words *piovra* (octopus) and *ochrana* (the czarist secret police). Mimmo Franzinelli, *I tentacoli dell'ovra agenti, collaboratori e vittime della polizia politica fascista* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1999), p. 103.

¹¹ To have an idea of the vast repressive apparatus of the regime, see the diagram in Marina Giannetto, ‘I Rosselli, GL e i Servizi di informazione politica’, in Marina Giannetto (ed.), *Un'altra Italia nell'Italia del fascismo: Carlo e Nello Rosselli nella documentazione dell'Archivio Centrale dello Stato: Roma, dal 20 giugno 2002* (Roma: Edimond, Direzione generale per gli archivi, 2002), pp. 26–27.

The Fascist takeover, however, did not mean the end of internal opposition. Many groups kept fighting underground, especially on the left. The Communist *Partito Comunista Italiano* (Italian Communist Party—PCI) was the organisation best poised to keep working underground, as it already had a conspiratorial network and a history of conflict with the police and the state.¹² However, the PCI was somewhat caught off-guard by the ‘exceptional decrees’ and a number of high-profile members of the party were arrested, including its leader, Antonio Gramsci,¹³ who wrongly believed in the protection granted by his status as a MP.¹⁴ Gramsci, one of Italy’s brightest minds and one of the most influential intellectuals in Communist history, was left to waste in prison for the rest of his life.¹⁵ The PCI managed to reorganise itself under the leadership of Palmiro Togliatti, who only escaped arrest in 1925 because he was on a mission to Moscow. The Party had a foreign centre located in Paris and an internal one in Milan.¹⁶ *L’Unità* (Unity), the PCI newspaper, continued publication clandestinely, together with other Communist publications such as *Avanguardia* (Vanguard), *Galletto Rosso* (Red Rooster) and *Stato Operaio* (Worker’s State).¹⁷ This work was closely watched by the Italian police and the OVRA, which proceeded to mass arrests in 1927 and 1928. However, the skeletal organisation of the PCI survived.¹⁸

While the Communists were, and remained for a long time, the most organised group fighting against the regime inside the borders of Italy, they were by no means the only one. The Anarchists too were trying to topple Fascism,¹⁹ and engaged in several terrorist attacks against Mussolini, and many high-ranking officers in Italy and abroad. However, their results were unfortunately scarce.²⁰ Moreover, other groups that engaged in active Resistance were the minorities. Of course, Fascism, as a totalitarian ideology, could not tolerate dissent or ‘deviancy’ from its notion of

¹² Luigi Salvatorelli, Giovanni Mira, *Storia d’Italia nel periodo fascista*, vol. II (Turin: Einaudi, 1957), p. 33.

¹³ Delzell, *Mussolini’s enemies*, p. 113.

¹⁴ Giorgio Galli, *Storia del Partito Comunista Italiano* (Milan: Edizioni il Formichiere, 1976), p. 131.

¹⁵ On Gramsci: Angelo d’Orsi, *Gramsci una nuova biografia* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2017).

¹⁶ Aldo Agosti, *Storia del PCI* (Bari: Laterza, 1999), pp. 26–27.

¹⁷ Salvatorelli, *Storia d’Italia*, II, p. 35.

¹⁸ Agosti, *Storia*, p. 27.

¹⁹ On Anarchism in Italy, see the recent volume: Antonio Senta, Claudio Venza, *Utopia e azione: per una storia dell’anarchismo in Italia (1848–1984)* (Milan: Eléuthera, 2015).

²⁰ Delzell, *Mussolini’s enemies*, pp. 106–109.