

Italian Militaries in the USSR during the Second World War. Objectives of the Campaign and Negotiations in the Post-War Period

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Italy's participation in the war against the USSR was dictated by at least three reasons: the common ideology which Mussolini and Hitler shared; Mussolini's aspiration to revise the European order in the Mediterranean area, to the detriment of France and Great Britain; the goal of supplying Italy with the Russian raw material. The article examines the behavior of the Italian troops towards the Soviet war prisoners and the local population during the occupation from July 1941 to winter 1942–1943, which also depended on these reasons. Since 1944 some countries occupied by Italian forces, such as the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, had started asking the Italian government for the extradition of Italian alleged war criminals to be judged by local courts. In 1944, on the grounds of the reports produced by state and local commissions, the list of alleged war criminals in response to the USSR's requests was limited to ten militaries who had been repatriated after the defeat. Initially the USSR was intransigent, but afterwards began changing its tune, and finally Moscow proved less adamant in its accusations. This new attitude was connected to negotiations on handing over of Soviet citizens who stayed in Italy after the end of the war. This was most likely a contributing factor in persuading the Soviets to relax their demands on the matter of alleged Italian war criminals. The strategy was successful and, according to the Yalta conference, many Russian and Soviet citizens, who had left the Soviet Union, against their own will were handed over to the Soviet authorities facing a very uncertain fate.

Keywords: Great Patriotic War, Italian occupation, fascist regime, war criminals.

Итальянские военные в СССР во время Второй мировой войны. Цели кампании и послевоенные переговоры

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Участие фашистской Италии в войне против СССР было продиктовано как минимум тремя причинами: общей идеологией, которую разделяли Муссолини и Гитлер (та же

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самая, которая побудила Муссолини присоединиться к Германии во Второй мировой войне); желанием Муссолини переосмыслить европейский порядок, особенно в Средиземноморье, в ущерб Франции и Великобритании; стремлением обеспечить Италию российским сырьем, особенно нефтью, которой Италии не хватало. Поведение итальянских военнослужащих в отношении советских военнопленных и местного населения в период оккупации с июля 1941 г. по зиму 1942/1943 г. зависело и от этих причин. Начиная с 1944 г. до окончания войны некоторые страны, пострадавшие от действий итальянских войск, такие как Советский Союз и Югославия, стали обращаться к итальянскому правительству с требованием экстрадиции итальянских предполагаемых военных преступников для рассмотрения в местных судах. Как показали отчеты государственных и местных комиссий, в 1944 г. запросы СССР ограничивались десятью предполагаемыми преступниками, репатрированными в Италию после поражения армий «оси» зимой 1942/1943 г. Первоначально СССР придерживался непримиримой позиции по данной проблеме, но скоро Москва начала менять свое отношение, отказавшись от бескомпромиссности в своих обвинениях. Эти изменения были связаны с переговорами о выдаче советских граждан, оставшихся в Италии после окончания войны, немедленной репатриации которых и потребовал СССР. По всей видимости, именно этот аргумент повлиял на смягчение требований Советского Союза, касавшихся предполагаемых итальянских военных преступников. Данная стратегия оказалась успешной, и, согласно Ялтинской конференции (февраль 1945 г.), многие российские и советские граждане, против своей воли покинувшие Советский Союз (некоторые — до войны), были переданы советским властям что, впрочем, сулило им весьма неопределенную судьбу.

Ключевые слова: фашизм, итальянская армия, операция «Барбаросса», военные преступники.

The parallel war: the Italian strategy

In spite of the “axis” stipulated with Germany in October — November 1936, when Hitler attacked Poland in September 1939, Mussolini opted for neutrality. According to one theory, which enjoyed widespread currency in the past and engendered numerous lively debates, Mussolini did everything he could to avoid the war¹. The theory is only partly credible, for Mussolini took a rather dim view of the weakness Italy was forced to display by not taking active part in the conflict². Indeed, it was inconceivable for a regime that had long preached expansionism — and saw war as one of its fundamental features — to keep out of the conflict³. Rather, the reasons that compelled Mussolini temporarily to remain neutral in 1939 were his indecisiveness as to which side to take, and the country’s lack of military preparation⁴.

Before signing the Pact of Steel with Nazi Germany, Mussolini followed a “pendulum policy”, as Grandi dubbed it at the time: to be sure, Mussolini initially swung back and forth between democratic France and Great Britain, on the one hand, and Germany, on the other. His decision to ally himself with Hitler ultimately depended on the nature of

¹ Taylor A. J. P. *The Origins of the Second World War*. London, 1963. P. 103.

² On this issue cf.; Cassels A. *Switching Partners: Italy in A. J. P. Taylor’s Origins of the Second World War // The Origins of the Second World War Reconsidered: The A. J. P. Taylor Debate after Twenty-five Years* / ed. by G. Martel. London, 1986. P. 87.

³ Regarding Mussolini’s decision to send troops East, may I suggest my own book: *Giusti M. T. La campagna di Russia. 1941–1943*. Bologna, 2016.

⁴ See: *De Felice R. Intervista sul fascismo*. Rome, Bari, 1975. P. 79.

fascist ideology, and on his interest in revising the European order, particularly with regard to the Mediterranean. The Duce's "social Darwinian" view of international politics also contributed to his decision to turn his back on the Stresa Front. Regarding old powers as declining, Mussolini sided with "virile" Germany. Fascism revered strength, and fascist politics, as Mussolini understood it, dictated siding with the strongest power⁵.

The Italian government had observed the Germans' steps toward war with a mixture of admiration and apprehension. Determined to expand Italy's role on the international stage — by seizing control over the Mediterranean and, to the greatest extent possible, south-eastern Europe, northern Africa and the Middle East — Mussolini was favorably impressed by Germany's threat to the positions taken by Great Britain and France, the two powers that were clearly blocking its path⁶.

Therefore, following Germany's successes on the French front, Mussolini decided to hasten Italy's intervention in the war. Several elements pushed him in that direction. Back at home, Mussolini needed to strengthen his image in the eyes of the Italian public, an operation that intersected with the desire to obtain the territorial gains that had not been achieved in 1918. Meanwhile, with regard to foreign politics, there were multiple reasons prompting Mussolini to take action, including, first, general concern for Europe's future order, and, more specifically, his aspiration to keep Germans away from the Mediterranean, announcing the "parallel war". Secondarily, convinced as many others were, that Germany would win, Mussolini wanted to position himself alongside Hitler as the first among his allies. Thirdly, he believed Italy had to give a convincing contribution to the war so as to lend credibility to his proposal that raw materials essentially be shared. In June 1941, there were many reasons that led Mussolini to attack Russia alongside the German forces: Mussolini considered himself to be the first Hitler's ally, consequently, he could not avoid the intervention in the ideological war against the Soviets. Furthermore, Russia's long-standing aspirations toward the straits was another factor that led Mussolini to send his troops east⁷: Italian participation in the war would contribute to preventing the USSR from accessing the Mediterranean (by way of the Black Sea), and from robbing Italy of control over its eastern reaches. Not to mention that Soviet penetration in the Balkans, which had increased in the wake of the Ribbentrop — Molotov Pact, jeopardized Italy's "vital space"⁸. In addition, in a meeting on 9 June 1941 with the German experts, Admiral Arturo Riccardi clarified this point⁹. Mussolini aimed to ensure Italy's access to the sizeable oil reserves of Maykop (the capital of the Republic of Adygea, north-east of the Black Sea), whereby solving its energy problem. Mussolini was also obsessed by the idea that Germany might arrive at a separate peace with Great Britain. This even led him to hope that Hitler might be solemnly defeated in the Soviet Union, and to foster the "eternal illusion" that the war might last long enough to give Italy time to regain its strength. The

⁵ Cf.: *Cassels A.* Switching Partners. P. 82.

⁶ On this issue see: *Weinberg G. L.* A World at Arms: a global History of World War 2. Cambridge, 1994, P. 26ff. — On the matter of Mussolini's plans for a "new order" in the Mediterranean, see: *Rodogno D.* Fascism's European Empire: Italian Occupation during the Second World War. Cambridge, 2006.

⁷ In this case, however, his aspirations butted heads with the Reich's. Indeed, Germany too had aimed for the Black Sea straits, the subject of negotiations between Stalin and Hitler between 1939 and the end of 1940, about which Mussolini had been kept in the dark. See: *Volkov V.* Uzlovyve problemy noveishchei istorii stran Tsentralnoi i Jugo-Vostochnoi Evropy. Moscow, 2000.

⁸ On this matter, see: *Toscano M.* L'Italia e gli accordi tedesco-sovietici del 1939. Florence, 1955.

⁹ Akten zur deutschen auswärtigen Politik, HaPol. Ivb 6548/42, Series E, III, 1941–1945. Band I–VIII. No. 97. 15 July 1942, unsigned and undated memorandum. P. 172.

other option was that the war might be swift, and that the resulting compromise peace might restore balance in Europe.

At the same time, the “anti-Bolshevik crusade” was derived from a distorted understanding of *Realpolitik* and revolved around the Duce’s determination to show Berlin that Italy was Germany’s indispensable ally in the war he truly cared about, the one to end British colonial power in Africa and in the Middle East. Irrespective of Hitler’s decision, Mussolini was always going to stand beside him, both for reasons of ideological affinity and because of the intentions to achieve his own goals thanks to the Wehrmacht: this is the crucial point of the Italian-German alliance. Finally, the difficulties encountered during the Soviet-Finnish Winter War and the weakness with which the Soviets reacted to the attack in 1941 led both leaders to underestimate their enemy.

The CSIR and the Soviet prisoners of war

According to official German sources, 5,754,000 Soviet soldiers were captured starting in June 1941. At least 3,220,000 of them — more than half — died thereafter¹⁰. Part of the survivors were put to work in the German industry. The high mortality rate depended not only on the USSR’s decision not to sign the international conventions on the safeguarding of prisoners, but also on the fact that the prisoners, now unarmed military men, were an easy target to their enemies, commodities to be exploited as labor in the best of cases, or to be eliminated.

As regards the Italian Commands, according to General Giovanni Messe, commander of the Italian Expeditionary Corps in Russia (CSIR)¹¹, Italian corps did not have their own camps for prisoners, at least until they were reorganized into an army, so they handed Russian prisoners over to the Germans. Still, just because they had not been the ones to execute the Russian prisoners, Italians could not expect the Soviet government to view them as blameless.

In the report General Messe sent to the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 13 February 1945, he explained that Soviet prisoners captured in the first year of the CSIR’s campaign (July 1941 — July 1942) were held for thirty-six to forty-eight hours in the bigger units’ intelligence sections for questioning. After that time, they were sent, “in accordance with previously established agreements between the Italian and German governments, to the concentration camps placed under the surveillance of the German units. In these camps there was no involvement on the part of Italian commands or units”¹². After all, according to Messe, these were “the only available camps in the occupied territories <...>

¹⁰ *Streit C.* Sowjetische Kriegsgefangenen in deutscher Hand: ein Forschungsüberblick // Die Tragödie der Gefangenschaft in Deutschland und in der Sowjetunion. 1941–1956 / K.-D. Müller, K. Nikischkin, G. Wagenlehner (eds). Cologne, 1998. P.281–290. — The information provided by the Soviet General Staff confirms about 5.8 million prisoners captured by the Germans. Cf.: *Pleshakov C.* Stalin’s Folly: The Tragic First Ten Days of World War II on the Eastern Front. Boston, 2005. P.9.

¹¹ The CSIR was made up of 62,000 men, organized in the Turin and Pasubio infantry divisions, and in the Celere Division, which in its turn was formed by a Bersaglieri regiment, two cavalry regiments, and four Blackshirt battalions. The CSIR was equipped with 5,500 motor vehicles; armored vehicles were organized into four groups, comprising 60 3.5-ton L-tanks in all, absolutely inadequate in the face of Soviet T-34s and Kv-1s.

¹² Russian prisoners of war, General Staff, Operations Office, reference No. 10241/Op., to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to the Presidency of the Council, to the Ministry of War, to the High Commissariat for Prisoners of War // Archivio Storico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri: Historical Archives of (Italian)

in conformity with the rules laid out in our *Instructions concerning enemy prisoners of war*, which called for camps to be set up exclusively in the presence of armies”¹³.

Only well into winter did the German command authorize the Italian one to keep a few hundred prisoners in its custody. These were occasionally used in road work and to remove snow from tracks in the rear, alongside Italian sappers. A special, well-organized camp was set up for these prisoners — who, like our own soldiers, regularly received food and cigarettes — in which the Russian servicemen found a good accommodation.

No violence [was used] on the prisoners, many of whom were put to work without surveillance¹⁴.

In fact, Messe clarified in his report that “the treatment of the Russian prisoners, from the time of their capture to the time of their delivery to the German concentration camps, [had] always been characterized by a high sense of humanity”. The general attributed this not only to the preventive action carried out by Italian officers and commanders, but also to “the very nature of Italian soldiers, incapable of committing atrocities”¹⁵.

Supporting General Messe’s account, in October 1942, Russian prisoners in the camp of Karinskaya, on the Don front, sent a note of gratitude to the Italian army, and to Lieutenant Colonel Ugo Bianchi of the CSIR in particular, “for the fair and humane treatment” they’d received¹⁶.

Conversely, some Russian sources, as we will see, contradict Messe’s claims and the long-established idea that Italians’ behavior was always beyond reproach.

In fact, in his report to Molotov on the Italian war criminals still detained in the USSR, Colonel Sergei Kruglov relayed the information gathered by the Ukraine’s interior minister concerning how Italians — CSIR service members specifically — had treated Soviet prisoners.

The witnesses Ragozin, Mal’ceva, and Berezin, as well as five other people, claim that in September 1942 they routinely saw the hanging corpses of Soviet prisoners of war upon passing next to the camp as they were being transported from their village to work in the Rossosh station (of the south-eastern railroad).

During their deposition, the witnesses Selegenenko, and Mal’ceva, and four other people, reported that, in the camp used for Soviet prisoners of war Italians had created conditions for a large number of said prisoners to die each day. In front of the prisoners, their comrades were executed for disobedience or on suspicion of colluding with the partisans or Soviet activists¹⁷.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs (ASMAE). Series Affari politici, 1931–1945. B. 49. Fasc. 1. S. fasc. 3, 1; see also: *Messe G. La guerra al fronte russo. Il corpo di spedizione italiano in Russia (CSIR)*. Milan, 2005. P. 92.

¹³ *Messe G. La guerra al fronte russo*. P. 303f.

¹⁴ General Staff, Operations Office, reference No. 10241/Op., to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to the Presidency of the Council, to the Ministry of War, to the High Commissariat for Prisoners of War, re: Russian prisoners of war // ASMAE. Series Affari politici [Political affairs series]. 1931–1945. B. 49. Fasc. 1. S. fasc. 3. P. 1–2.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* P. 2.

¹⁶ Note of gratitude by the Russian prisoners interned in the camp of Karinskaya, on the Don front, October 1942 // Archivio dell’Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore dell’esercito Archive of the Historical Office of the Army General Staff (AUSSME), Fondo Messe, B. 7, photographic documentation.

¹⁷ Excerpt from the UMVD report on the Voronezh region dated 22 February 1949. Copy No. 1. Attached to Doklad Kruglova Molotovu ob italijskikh voennykh prestupnikakh, Secret. Tovarishchu Molotovu, 2 March 1949, Osobaia papka Molotova // Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Istorii (GARF). F. 9401. Op. 2. D. 240, L. 74. Cf.: *Giusti M. T. Stalin’s Italian Prisoners of War*. Budapest; New York; London, 2021. P. 30. — And the Italian edition: *Giusti M. T. I prigionieri italiani in Russia*. Bologna, 2014. Doc. XXI.

Reprisals and crimes against prisoners were thus recorded among CSIR soldiers and officers as well, though these instances appear to have been sporadic and carried out by isolated individuals, which in turn indicates that they were neither a habit nor a widespread behavior.

Rather, in his *Inquiry into the missing soldiers in Russia*, Messe called attention to the Germans' inhuman treatment of Russian prisoners. This led him to keep the latter in the Italian units' custody as long as possible and to report to the German commands fewer prisoners than had actually been taken¹⁸.

There were even instances of Italian officers initially refusing to hand prisoners over to their German allies until forced to comply to the rules in place. The following excerpt is from one alpine serviceman's diary:

The commander was supposed to hand [the Soviet prisoners] over to the Germans but held a dozen back to help us with the heaviest work. They were given the same food as us, a few cigarettes, and occasionally a small flask of cognac — but the day we showed them toothpaste, which had a strong taste back then, they ate it, licking the tube clean. They were good-natured young men, and none of them ever tried to escape¹⁹.

In his own diary, a *carabiniere* reported that he'd refused to deliver ten Soviet prisoners to the Germans, claiming they were under his direct responsibility.

The two Germans got angry, threatened us with their weapons, and told us they demanded the prisoners in the Führer's name. Encouraged by the prisoners themselves (who whispered in my ear, "Don't be frightened. Send the Germans away"), I answered: "In the Duce's name, these workers will not be moved from this location." Grumbling, the Germans walked away, and said: "Putrid, shitty Italians!" No one reacted. I hadn't understood their words; a prisoner had, but he said: "Never mind, the Germans aren't good". These prisoners seem to like us a lot. Every morning I share some national ground tobacco with them. They are really good at what they do, and they work hard²⁰.

A *bersagliere* recounts:

The town we'd settled in had a school where twenty Russian prisoners, captured by the Germans and placed in our custody, were detained. We'd been ordered to stand watch all around the building, but as cold as it was, we couldn't stay outdoors for more than fifteen minutes, and so — disobeying orders — we slipped into the school as well, for shelter.

I'd never smoked, but I did have cigarettes with me. The Russians were avid smokers, and would constantly ask for something to smoke, tobacco or cigarettes, and so we would end up giving them ours. This always happened at night though, for, if our superiors had seen us, we would have gotten ourselves into trouble (giving prisoners cigarettes was forbidden). This went on for some time, and a friendship of sorts developed between us and the Russians, who even ate the same food as us²¹.

¹⁸ Messe G. *La guerra al fronte russo*. P. 92.

¹⁹ Zazzerò L. *La mia odissea*. Typewritten diary. P. 38 // Fondazione Archivio diaristico nazionale, coll. MG/99. P. 8. Pieve S. Stefano (AR). — Zazzerò was an alpine serviceman in the Monte Cervino Skiers Battalion.

²⁰ Di Filippo R. *Daghela lu la carne grassa*. Typewritten diary. P. 13 // Fondazione Archivio diaristico nazionale, coll. MG/90. P. 5. Pieve S. Stefano (AR). — He was a *carabiniere*.

²¹ Doni B. *Sulle rive del Don*. Typewritten Diary. P. 19 // Fondazione Archivio diaristico nazionale, MG/07. — He was in the 6th Bersaglieri Regiment from Bologna, 5th Company, fanfare unit.

As for the treatment of the Soviet prisoners on the part of the Germans, the same *bersagliere* wrote this in his diary:

One evening, a fire broke out in one of the houses around our camp. The Germans forced the Russian prisoners held in the school to put out the fire, but some of them, taking advantage of all the commotion, tried to make a run for it through the fields. The German soldiers immediately pursued them and seized most of them.

There was no escape for them: they were hanged from the school gate, near our kitchen, and left hanging there until 11 a.m. the next day, as a warning to the other prisoners²².

As for the numbers, all that is known is that, as of 1 March 1942, the CSIR had taken 14,267 Russian prisoners, 10,927 of whom, a little over 75 percent, it had placed in German custody. The vast majority of the remaining 3,340 prisoners — precisely 3,031 — were handed over to the Wehrmacht in April²³. The CSIR sent to Italy only the highest-ranking officers, giving up on transferring a significant number of prisoners, whom it otherwise might have used as labor.

The ARMIR's treatment of Soviet prisoners of war

When the CSIR was incorporated into the ARMIR (Italian army in Russia) as the XXXV Army Corps on 9 July 1942²⁴, led by General Italo Gariboldi, the German commands assigned the Italian ones greater leeway and “broader occupation competencies. The Royal Army on the Russian front officially assumed independent responsibilities for civilian administration, prisoners of war, and control over the rear in the territories of deployment”²⁵. This, however, took place amid an emblematic set of circumstances, in which the Italian commands were clearly subordinated to the German ones, as informers working for the political police confirmed in their accounts. The instructions the German liaison command sent the ARMIR on 16 July 1942 were essentially based on Hitlerian parameters. Despite allowing for the allies' independence in penal matters, they called for very harsh punishments, even the death penalty, when crimes such as raids, thefts, robberies and rapes were carried out by allied soldiers, while giving German fighters free rein.

The ARMIR's command set up two prisoner-of-war camps, one in Stalino and one in Dnepropetrovsk with 835 prisoners. In time, the number of camps soared to ten, housing a total of 5,000 prisoners who mostly came from the German camps — and were in “frightful conditions” when they arrived, according to Messe²⁶. The sick, whom the Germans disregarded completely, received care in the Italian camps and were admitted into a convalescence unit in Rykovo (Yenakiievo)²⁷.

With the arrival of the ARMIR, which settled in the territories of the upper and mid Don, the camps set up by the Germans kept running under their care. Thus, management

²² *Doni B.* *Sulle rive del Don.* Typewritten Diary. P.7.

²³ *Schlemmer T.* *Invasori, non vittime. La campagna italiana di Russia. 1941–1943.* Rome; Bari, 2005. P.96.

²⁴ The ARMIR (the Italian Army in Russia) set off for the USSR 290,000 units strong — in the summer of 1942.

²⁵ *Scotoni G.* *Il nemico fidato. La guerra di sterminio in URSS e l'occupazione alpina sull'alto Don.* Trento, 2013. P.184.

²⁶ *Prigionieri di guerra russi.* P.3.

²⁷ *Ibid.* — Messe recalls that the man in charge of the camp in Rykovo was looked down on by the local German command because he had prisoners take baths.

remained in the Gestapo's hands in the Rossosh and Kantemirovka camps, for example, whereas Italians were charged with surveillance²⁸. In Rossosh, the camp was located in the territory of the *Put' Lenina* (Lenin's Way) kolkhoz. Prisoners of war, but also very many civilian refugees, were detained in livestock barns, in a vast area surrounded by barbed wire. Regarding this camp, the *Extraordinary State Commission's Report on Atrocities by Fascist Troops in the Territory of the Soviet Union*, sent to Molotov, reads as follows:

In the Rossosh countryside, in the estate of the Put Lenina kolkhoz, German and Italian occupation authorities set up a concentration camp for Soviet prisoners of war. The camp's regime distinguished itself for its exceptional brutality. The fascists thrashed the prisoners, starved them to death, forced them to remove explosives from minefields; each day executions by firing squad occurred. First of all, they killed the commanders of the Red Army. In groups, prisoners were led to the silo pits, not far from the camp, forced to get naked, and one at a time, made to lie down in the pit with their faces to the ground, at which point they were killed with a bullet in the back of their head.

The camp invariably featured gallows from which prisoners hanged.

After the liberation of Rossosh, 1,500 corpses — belonging to prisoners of war, defenseless civilians, women, and children, all of them shot dead — were found in five common graves in the territory of the Put Lenina kolkhoz²⁹.

According to this report, the man responsible for these atrocities, along with other Italian and German officers, was Colonel Raffaele Marconi, who was in charge of the area under Italian command in Rossosh³⁰. The commander of the Alpine Army Corps, General Gabriele Nasci, had appointed Marconi to oversee the area assigned to the army corps. While he may not have been directly involved in those crimes, he was still responsible for them as a result of his post³¹.

Further, the document does not refer to the generic term “fascists”, routinely used by the Soviets to refer to the Germans and to their allies alike (a circumstance that often complicates the matter of identifying the men responsible for a given crime). Rather, it unequivocally speaks of Italians and Germans, acknowledging an overlap in roles between those who ran the camps and those who carried out surveillance tasks there, as in the case of the Italians.

When Soviet prisoners weren't brutally killed, they were a great asset. As both Russian and Italian sources attest, they were used in disparate tasks in the rear, although, according to the commissariat's orders, prisoners were to be employed only in the upkeep of

²⁸ Cf.: Scotoni G., Filonenko S.I. *Retrosceca della disfatta italiana in Russia nei documenti inediti dell'8ª armata*. Vol. I. Trento, 2008. P. 185. — The camp of Kantemirovka had been set up in July 1942 in the Krasnyj Partizan kolkhoz. As many as 70,000 prisoners were interned there. The camp of Rossosh, opened by the Germans on 7 July 1942, came to hold 10,000–14,000 Soviet prisoners and refugee families (Ibid. P. 184–185).

²⁹ *Spravka Chrezvychainoi Gosudarstvennoi Komissii. O zlodejaniyakh fashistskikh voysk na territorii Sovetskogo Soyuz, podpisannaia sekretarem Bogoyavlennskim*. Undated. P. 21–33, 30–31. Osobaya papka Molotova // GARF. F. 9401. Op. 2. D. 240. — Cf. the Italian 2nd edition of this book: *Giusti M. T. I prigionieri italiani in Russia*. Doc. XIX.

³⁰ *Giusti M. T. I prigionieri italiani in Russia*. Doc. XIX. P. 364. — Other documents corroborate this account. On this topic cf.: *Abroskin S., Neino V., Sergeenko M. Zemlia, zalitaia krov'iu*. Voronezh, 1944. P. 35. — On the killing of large numbers of Soviet prisoners, even by way of starvation, see also: *Snyder T. Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*. New York, 2010.

³¹ Regarding the extremely harsh directives Marconi issued, see: *Istruzioni del comandante del distretto di Rossosh*. Ten. col. Marconi. 19.10.1942 // Scotoni G. *Il nemico fidato*. P. 349–351.

roads, and in the cutting of wood for the production of railroad ties. Regarding the use of Soviet prisoners in combat areas, different attitudes existed within the Italian commands: while the II Army Corps's command forbade their presence in areas near the front, let alone on the front line itself, the Pasubio Division's command favored their employment in the construction of fortifications — thus, precisely on the front line. The occupants did not hesitate to put civilians, including women displaced from their villages, to work on the front line too.

The *Extraordinary State Commission's Report* reads: "Following orders by the commander of the city of Yenakiiievo, Italian Army Captain Luigi Grappelli, 615 peaceful inhabitants were shot dead [there], while 2,683 people were deported into slavery"³².

The report also states: "In the region of Stalino, Italian and German military troops killed and tortured 174,416 defenseless local residents, and 149,367 Red Army officer and soldier prisoners; 252,239 people were taken prisoner and led into slavery"³³.

The documentation testifies to the involvement of Italian military men in the violence and atrocities committed against prisoners and civilians.

In the central prisoner-of-war camp in Stalino, located in the Lenin club, the occupants tortured 25,000 people, whose corpses were found buried in the camp. Tens of thousands of prisoners of war were tortured in the city of Stalino, in the camp located in factory No. 144. In the area of Khartsyzk in the Stalino region, occupants set up seven prisoner-of-war camps. More than 10,000 prisoners of war died as a result of starvation and cruel torture. Where the former prisoner-of-war camp once stood in the city of Artyomovsk, 3,000 corpses of the tortured Red Army soldiers and officers were found³⁴.

Violence toward Soviet prisoners often stemmed from the state of tension the occupants themselves were in, or was the result of the outcome of a battle, or rumors heard about tortures inflicted on Italian prisoners³⁵. Sometimes the violence was retaliatory, as in the following instance described in one alpine serviceman's diary:

Lieutenant Prada subsequently told me that once in Nikolaewka he'd had a hard time finding a place for the wounded and frostbitten men.

He'd decided to find shelter for them in an izba occupied by some wounded Russians. But as they were making their way in, one of the wounded Russians hurled a grenade against them. Our men's response was prompt: Second Lieutenant Tallucci of the Tirano Battalion fired a few shots of his Parabellum pistol and killed the Russian prisoners, thus punishing them for their cowardly behavior³⁶.

For a similar reason, twenty-two Russian prisoners were killed for re-opening fire on the Italians after surrendering³⁷. While it cannot be ruled out that unarmed Soviet servicemen were sometimes killed by Italian soldiers, in many cases these killings came

³² Spravka Chrezvychainoi Gosudarstvennoi Komissii. P.22. — Captain Grappelli was in charge of the engineering command of the Turin Division until 1941, when he was appointed to the civil affairs office of the same command.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid. P.22–23.

³⁵ Cf.: Diario di un autiere dell'Armir. Entry from 1 September 1942 // AUSSME. L-3. F.58/46.

³⁶ Diario personale di un militare degli alpini che è andato in Russia con l'Armir. Entry from 27 January 1943 // AUSSME. L-3. F.58/45.

³⁷ Radio message from the 3rd Bersaglieri Regiment dated 27 December 1941. 3rd Celere Division // AUSSME. D. S. II. F.648.

in response to attacks or provocations. On the contrary, according to Schlemmer, these were not isolated instances, given that General Zanghieri, commander of the II Army Corps, had to remind his men that the order to take no prisoners was only to be followed on “exceptional, very specific and limited occasions”³⁸. On the other hand, the clear and imperative order to kill only under specific circumstances proves that, at least on paper, Soviet prisoners were normally protected by the Italian commands. While Schlemmer implies that Italians too killed prisoners during the retreat, he admits he has no proof or firsthand accounts on which to base his argument and claims the Germans certainly did commit those actions³⁹.

Prisoners of war and the “belligerent complicity”

The attitude toward prisoners of war fell within the scope of “belligerent complicity” as Snyder has called it. The disregard for human life displayed by both regimes involved in the epoch-making war strengthened the principle of total elimination. Similarly to civilians, defenseless prisoners were more exposed and more likely to fall victim to this complicity which brought about annihilation.

The Political Administration for Prisoners of War used the matter of how Soviet prisoners in German hands were being treated to good effect in its own propaganda work. A statement issued by German prisoners lambasting the German authorities’ savagery toward Soviet prisoners was published in *Pravda* on 5 February 1942. Signed by sixty-three antifascist Germans of the Oranki camp, this protest was sent to the International Committee of the Red Cross. Another protest, signed by 115 German prisoners of the same camp, followed on 4 June, this time addressing the atrocities and violence the German authorities had inflicted on the Russian population in the occupied areas: “We, 115 soldiers, raise a voice of protest against the atrocities to which Soviet prisoners of war and the peaceful population of occupied regions are being subjected. We ask the International Committee of the Red Cross to make our protest known to the world”⁴⁰. It was a way, albeit an oblique one, for the Soviet authorities to communicate with the International Committee of the Red Cross.

By the end of the war, more than five million Soviet citizens, including prisoners of war and civilians deported to the Reich as workers, had been relocated to Germany and other European countries. When hostilities were over, the Soviet government set in motion a pressing political and diplomatic machine for the forced repatriation of all Soviet citizens, without exceptions⁴¹. According to Soviet army sources, during and after the war 2,775,700 Soviet prisoners were repatriated from Germany⁴², over 126,000 of whom were officers and generals. From a legal point of view, many of them were regarded as crimi-

³⁸ Order from the command of the II Army Corps, reference No. 2949/02. D.S. Cosseria Division, September — October 1942, attachment No. 186 // AUSSME. D.S. II/885.

³⁹ Cf.: Schlemmer T. *Invasori*, non vittime. P. 106.

⁴⁰ *Pravda*. 4 June 1942.

⁴¹ Cf.: Bacon E. *The Gulag at War: Stalin’s Forced Labour System in the Light of Archives*. New York, 1994. P. 92. — These, as Soviet officials in charge of the repatriation would tell their British colleagues, were detained in the corrective camps. Cf.: Geller M., Nekrich A. *Utopia in Power: the History of the Soviet Union from 1917 to the Present*. London, 1984. P. 451.

⁴² Bacon E. *The Gulag at War*. P. 93. — At the end of the war, many refused to be repatriated, the so-called *nevozvrashchentsy*.

nals in the USSR. Indeed, on 16 August 1941, Stalin issued decree No. 270, enacting that soldiers fallen into enemy hands should be considered traitors of the fatherland⁴³. On their way back, all former Soviet prisoners of war were gathered in assessment and sorting camps — about a hundred of them located in East Germany — and then transferred to the Soviet Union from there. About half of them ended up in the forced labor camps of the Gulag; 660,000 of these, former prisoner-of-war soldiers and noncommissioned officers of the right age to be conscripted into national service, were grouped together into Soviet labor battalions for the Defense Ministry and put to work in “dangerous productions”⁴⁴. Older soldiers and sergeants — who had not been involved in the Wehrmacht’s armed groups — were allowed to return home. With very few exceptions, a tragic fate befell officers. After months of detention in sorting camps and a “scrupulous” assessment, a part of them was executed by firing squad. Others ended up in the camps of the Gulag, or in Siberia’s “special villages”⁴⁵. Out of all the repatriated Soviet prisoners, almost one million survived captivity and the sorting camps, ultimately rejoining the army⁴⁶.

Soviet military men who had been captured by the Germans and joined the troops of General Andrey Vlasov, the so-called *vlasovtsy*, certainly fared no better. Some of their battalions, deployed by the German commands in the struggle against Yugoslav partisans, were finally seized by Tito’s men⁴⁷. With an order dated 11 September 1943, Dimitrov declared his agreement with Tito and authorized their execution by firing squad¹³⁵.

The USSR’s requests

Between 1943, when the war was still in progress, and 1952, the USSR started legal proceedings against alleged war criminals. During that span of time, 81,780 people were tried for war crimes, including 25,209 foreign servicemen charged with crimes against prisoners. Overall, about 40,000 foreign servicemen — mostly German and Austrian nationals — were tried for crimes committed against either members of the military or civilians. Collaborationists, Soviet servicemen and civilians who had given their support to the Axis troops, made up the greater part of convicts⁴⁸.

As for Italy, the USSR’s requests were limited. On the grounds of the reports produced by state and local commissions, in 1944 the Soviet Union — similarly to Yugoslavia —

⁴³ Bacon E. *The Gulag at War*. P.92.

⁴⁴ Cf.: Ibatullin T. G. *Voina i plen*. St. Petersburg, 1999. P. 18. — The decree of August 18 by the State Committee for Defense is reported: “... all prisoners and civilian deportees the right age to be conscripted into national service are placed in ‘labor battalions’ and sent to the corrective labor camps of the Siberian and northernmost regions as punishment”.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Bacon E. *The Gulag at War*. P.93.

⁴⁷ In July 1942, the Germans captured Soviet general A. A. Vlasov, commander of the 2nd Assault Army, who declared himself willing to collaborate with them. In 1943, he established the Russian Liberation Army (ROA), primarily made up of Soviet prisoners and used for operations alongside the Germans. Together with eleven high officers from his army, Vlasov surrendered to the Allies, but neither the Americans nor the British had any interest in granting him asylum, a decision that would have compromised relations with the Soviet Union. Taken back to Moscow, the *vlasovtsy* underwent a summary trial for high treason. Vlasov and his men were hanged on 2 August 1946.

⁴⁸ Cf.: Kopalín L. P. *Rassledovanie prestuplenii, sovershennykh v otnoshenii sovetskikh voennoplenennykh*, quoted in: Scotoni G. *Il nemico fidato*. P. 286; Astashkin D. Ju., Epifanov A. E. *Kholodnaia osen’ piat’desiat piatogo // Istorik*. 2020. No. 9 (69). P. 64.

started asking the Italian government for the extradition of ten alleged criminals, who had been repatriated after the defeat in the winter of 1942/1943. The list Mikhail Kostylev supplied the high commissar for sanctions against fascism, Count Carlo Sforza, included twelve men. One of them, however, was the lieutenant of the *Carabinieri* Dante Iovino, a Soviet prisoner, and another was Major Romolo Romagnoli, who had died on the battlefield in Russia⁴⁹.

According to the “Report by the Extraordinary State Commission on the atrocities committed by fascist troops in the territory of the Soviet Union”, and to the accusations by the local commission in Yenakiievo (Rykovo), General Lerici, in his capacity as commander of the Turin Division, had been responsible for the destruction of industrial plants in the area under his jurisdiction. In Yenakiievo, Captain Grappelli — head of the Civil Affairs Office of the Turin Division command — had also perpetrated several crimes: he had 615 locals shot and deported into slavery 2,683 people. Under his command, industrial plants, factories, hospitals, treatment centers, dispensaries and schools were destroyed⁵⁰. Together with the commander of the *Carabinieri* of the Cosseria Division, Captain Mariano Piazza, Grappelli distinguished himself for cruelty “in the extermination of the Soviet population”. Indeed, “following their orders, Italian soldiers [had] committed horrifying atrocities”⁵¹. Medical Lieutenant Bernardo Giannetti was likewise accused of having collaborated in the destruction of civil and industrial facilities in Yenakiievo⁵². The Italian inquiry committee — set up by Premier Alcide De Gasperi — pointed out that the units that had first entered the city and supposedly committed the crimes, had not been the ones the defendants belonged to. Rather, according to the committee, the plants were “destroyed by the Russians, with scientific meticulousness, during their retreat”⁵³. The committee also emphasized that Commander Lerici, far from destroying “what was already there”, made every effort to fix “what was damaged”. Not only had the incriminated officers not committed the crimes they were charged with, but also had actively strived to meet the locals’ needs, “particularly as regarded their health and welfare”⁵⁴.

According to the Boguchar commission, in December 1942, Captain Piazza shot twenty-three Soviet citizens, whereas Romagnoli ordered the search of a civilian E. S. Bekhalova’s house. On 13 December, the latter was arrested along with her fifteen-

⁴⁹ Romagnoli, commander of the 3rd Mortar Battalion of the Ravenna Division and local commander in Filonovo, died on 16 December 1942, near elevation-landmark 217, to the east of Krasno Orekhovo. The defendants for whom Soviet military authorities sought extradition were the following officers: General Roberto Lerici, commander of the Turin Division; Brigadier General Paolo Tarnassi; Lieutenant Colonel Raffaele Marconi; one Piliz Franzi, possibly Lieutenant Colonel Andrea Pinzi; Major Luigi Giovanni Bissotti; Captain of Engineers Luigi Grappelli; Captain of the *Carabinieri* Mariano Piazza; Medical Lieutenant Bernardo Giannetti; and Lieutenant Renato Basile. — Cf.: Elenco nominativo dei criminali di guerra italiani secondo i russi, Promemoria russo e Accuse mosse dalla Commissione della città di Enakievo // Archivio dell’Istituto Campano per la Storia della Resistenza (AICSR). Fondo Palermo. B. 54. Fasc. 256.

⁵⁰ Osobaia papka Molotova. Secret. GARF. F. 9401. Op. 2. D. 240. L. 22.

⁵¹ Ibid. L. 32. — “Led by their commanders Messe, Gariboldi, Attilio Banda, Iovino Dante, Grappelli, Della Robbia, Battisti, Ricagno, Tarnassi, Bonsembiante, Lerici, Pinzi and others”, the report further stated, “Italian troops established a brutal regime against civilians, forced to turn over agricultural produce, coerced into working and forbidden from leaving” (Ibid. L. 28).

⁵² Accuse mosse dalla Commissione della città di Enakievo. P. 2.

⁵³ Ibid. P. 10.

⁵⁴ Ibid. P. 11.

year-old daughter. Both were tortured, and their house was set on fire⁵⁵. In August 1942, the local commander in Boguchar, Major Luigi G. Biasotti of the 38th Infantry Regiment of the Ravenna Division, reportedly arrested and tortured one citizen, and sent others off to the concentration camps⁵⁶.

Heavy charges were leveled against Colonel Marconi, who served under Colonel Attilio Binda. Marconi was the chief of the area of Italian command in Rossosh and, on 15 January, allegedly had thirty-one Soviet citizens shot in the prison yard. The Italian inquiry committee responded to these charges claiming that on that day twenty or so Russian tanks had attacked the city leading to a terrible battle between the Italian-Germans and the Russians. Many civilians perished as a result as well. The Italian forces retreated, leaving Colonel Binda's troops on the ground. Two days later, these troops also retreated, whereas the colonel himself died on the battlefield. According to the committee, the civilians found dead in the prison yard had likely been killed by the Ukrainian guards who watched over them. Further to the officer's defense, the committee claimed no news of so violent a crime had been reported to the corps command. Also, it called attention to the fact that some Soviet prisoners, temporarily under Italian custody, were sent away from Rossosh. Thus, it could not see why the men detained in the prison would have been shot by the Italians. The committee concluded that the men found dead had either been killed on site by their Ukrainian guards, or had been dragged there at a later time, and were actually Russian civilians killed in the military operations. The arguments used in Colonel Marconi's defense seem a little weak. Regardless of whether responsibility fell on one officer or the other, Soviet authorities raised cases of suspected war crimes, which the Italians played down.

The Italian government's reaction

As a result of the pressing requests made by the interested countries and the United Nations, the government in power at that time, led by De Gasperi, made every attempt to spare the Italians charged with war crimes from being tried in the countries in which they had supposedly committed those crimes. To this end, a twofold defensive strategy was prepared: first, it was decided to prepare counter-documentation with evidence of the Italian officers' innocence; second, the government claimed the right to judge the supposed crimes in Italy.

In February 1946, Manlio Brosio, then at the helm of the Ministry of War, advised De Gasperi — who also served as *interim* minister of Foreign Affairs — to institute a committee of inquiry comprising a “certain number of high generals and former ministers of War”. The latter would have the aim of “carrying out every possible examination” in order to establish “whether the events took place; whether they were legitimate or in violation of criminal laws; the circumstances in which they occurred; and their relation to the conduct of war”⁵⁷.

⁵⁵ Proceeding of the commission of the Boguchar region dated 11 November 1943 (Accuse mosse dalla Commissione della città di Enakievo. III, 17. P. 17). The same accusations against Piazza are found in the Bogoyavlensky Report.

⁵⁶ The commission also provided the names of Biasotti's victims (cf.: Accuse mosse dalle Commissioni di inchiesta della regione di Boguchar e Pisarevo. Promemoria // AICSR. B. 54. Fasc. 256. P. 17).

⁵⁷ Commissione d'inchiesta per i crimini di guerra italiani in Jugoslavia, Carte varie Seg. Pol. No. 440, De Gasperi's letter to Admiral Stone. 9 April 1946 // AICSR. Fondo Palermo. B. 53. Fasc. 239; M. Brosio to the president of the Council of Ministers and to the minister of Foreign Affairs, Criminali di guerra italiani

If this was too difficult, another solution, Brosio believed, would be to call for “mixed courts, which would have to include among their judges a representative of the defendant’s nation, to the exclusion of the offended party’s representative”⁵⁸. The trial would have to take place in Italy and be open to the public and the press. If this proved impossible as well, then every effort should be made at least to “ensure that the court include no representatives of the opposing nations”, and that the hearing “not take place in the country of the allegedly wronged party”⁵⁹. Clearly, Brosio wished to institute proceedings in such a way as to afford the defendants the greatest degree of protection.

De Gasperi approved of the suggestion and took necessary steps to set up the committee. On 9 April, he wrote Admiral Ellery W. Stone, chief of the Allied Commission, and justified Italy’s will to judge the alleged crimes independently with “arguments of a legal nature”. These originated from the Moscow Declarations, as did a different treatment accorded to Italy as opposed to Germany. De Gasperi informed Stone that the Minister of War was eager to establish the responsibilities possibly falling on “the Italian commanders or privates for their conduct in foreign territories occupied by the Italian armed forces”, and to “punish anyone guilty of so-called war crimes”. To this end, he was “carrying out a strict investigation”, on the outcome of which the Allied Commission would be informed⁶⁰. The inquiry committee was established in May 1946 with the stated purpose of proving Italy’s will to carry out the necessary investigations on the men guilty of crimes, but also with a view to avoiding the defendants’ extradition⁶¹.

The handing over of alleged Italian war criminals to the USSR depended, among other things, on the requests that the Italian public, in its turn, was making to be handed over alleged German war criminals. With regard to this point, in January 1946, Ambassador Quaroni wrote De Gasperi from Moscow voicing his concerns about the appropriateness of Italy’s active participation in the punishment of German war criminals:

I understand very well the Italian public’s desire to see those Germans most responsible for war crimes committed in Italy brought to justice: I also understand that, for obvious reasons of prestige and for the sake of our legal and moral standing generally, the Italian government wishes to be granted the right to take active part in the punishment of German criminals. Unfortunately, though, we are in a position where other countries are asking us — or might ask us — to hand over [our own] men guilty of real or alleged atrocities. Indeed, the terms of our armistice could not be any clearer on this⁶².

Based on what he read in the Italian press, the ambassador inferred that the Anglo-Americans did not take an exceedingly broad view of what constituted a war crime

secondo alcuni Stati esteri. 3–4, 6 February 1946 // Ibid. P. 8. For De Gasperi’s correspondence with Brosio on this issue, see: *Focardi F. I mancati processi di criminali di guerra italiani // Giudicare e punire / L. Baldissera, P. Pezzino (eds). Naples, 2005. P. 194f.*

⁵⁸ Criminali di guerra italiani secondo alcuni Stati esteri. P. 4.

⁵⁹ Ibid. P. 5.

⁶⁰ Commissione d’inchiesta per i crimini di guerra italiani in Jugoslavia. Cit.

⁶¹ The committee — led first by Alessandro Casati and then by Luigi Gasparotto — comprised a former Minister of War (Senator Casati), three former undersecretaries of state, including the communist Mario Palermo; two high magistrates; an international law professor; three high-ranking military officers and a secretary.

⁶² *Telespresso* No. 12/6. From the Italian embassy in Moscow to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 7 January 1946. Rome. URL: www.criminidiguerra.it (accessed: 02.04.2021).

when it came to Italy. Yet the same could not be said of other injured parties, including the Soviets.

The USSR, on the other hand, has presented us with a list of war criminals, which we haven't followed up in any way so far. Yugoslavia, Albania, Greece and Ethiopia are moving heaven and earth against our atrocities, and calling for us to hand over our criminals: all four display an undeniable tendency to give a rather extensive interpretation of the concept of war criminal.

<...> Even presuming they could do without, on the day a German criminal is first handed over to us, a chorus of complaints will arise from all those countries that lay claim to the extradition of Italian criminals⁶³.

After initially being intransigent with regard to a small number of alleged Italian criminals it demanded be brought to justice, the USSR started changing its tune. Finally, Moscow proved more conciliatory in its accusations in a letter Kruglov sent Molotov in 1949. Indeed, it was primarily the Soviet Union's changed attitude that thwarted Yugoslavia's own attempts to obtain the extradition of defendants from Italy. Negotiations on the handing over of Soviet citizens who had stayed in Italy after and even before the end of the war — whose immediate repatriation the USSR requested — was successful. This was most likely a contributing factor in persuading the Soviets to ease up their demands on the matter of alleged Italian war criminals. As an additional result, however, Yugoslavia lost the support of an important ally⁶⁴.

This strategy was connected to the decisions taken by W. Churchill, Y. Stalin and F. D. Roosevelt at the Yalta conference (February 1945), with the concession to the demands of the USSR to have back, also against their own will, all the Russian and Soviet citizens who had left the USSR. These citizens were handed over to the Soviet authorities meeting a very uncertain fate⁶⁵.

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⁶³ Telespresso No. 12/6.

⁶⁴ In 1948, once the preliminary investigations were over, the Italian inquiry committee referred twenty-six of the forty-five most prominent defendants to the military tribunal of Rome. The legal process came to a halt, however, when appointing the presiding and panel judges proved difficult. The small number of tried defendants would never serve any real sentence or suffer any kind of punishment. On Yugoslavia, see: AUSSME. F.H-8. Racc. 21; cf. also: *Aga Rossi E., Giusti M. T. Una guerra a parte. I militari italiani nei Balcani. 1940–1945*. Bologna, 2011. P. 427ff.

⁶⁵ On this issue, see: *Huxley-Blythe P. The East Came West*. Caldwell, Idaho, 1964. *Tolstoy N.*: 1) Victims of Yalta. The Secret Betrayal of the Allies. 1944–1947. London, 2013; 2) The Secret Betrayal. New York, 1978; *Bethell N. The Last Secret: Forcible Repatriation to Russia 1944–7*. London, 1974. — As for Russian historiography, cf.: *Zemskov V. N.*: 1) Repatriatsiia sovetskikh grazhdan i ikh dalneishaia sud'ba. 1944–1956 gg. // *Sotsiologicheskie issledovaniia*. 1995. No. 5. P. 3–13; 2) *Vozvrashchenie sovetskikh peremeshchennykh lits v SSSR. 1944–1952 gg.* Moscow; St. Petersburg, 2016.

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