

Of unicorns and good people

I have always been fascinated by those stereotypes Italians ascribe to themselves. A charming summery dates back to 1935 when, reacting to UN condemning Italian invasion of Ethiopia, Mussolini pronounced a speech that reaffirmed the colonisation right of a population made of poets, artists, heroes, saints, thinkers, scientists, navigators, transmigrants. Not bad, I would say... To this quote, later significantly engraved on the *Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana*¹, we could add a few other characteristics that Italians understand as peculiar to their cultural – some would say genetical – humus. Italians are sophisticated, fine lovers of spiritual and earthly pleasures but, first and foremost, they are impregnated of the humanistic breathe, which, through genes and land-endemic inspiration, from ancient Rome passing through Renaissance, reached the contemporary Italian soil. One would misjudge thinking that Italians don't see defects in their national soul, in fact they do: they acknowledge being tricksters, always looking for workarounds to reach their profit, individualist to the verge of institutionalized anarchy, yet perpetually waiting for the paternal State support and aid. However, ultimately Italians are *brava gente*. They are good people, intrinsically sociable, open to others and unable to do harm.

Being *brava gente* provides a functional reading filter not only to look at present and past, it also serves at projecting its symbolical spectrum onto the future. It gives Italians a credit to act upon the world, that allows for a straight judgement, clean from any stale political correctness. A clear example of this approach is visible for instance in the debate about rescuing migrants boats in Mediterranean Sea: Italy is in no condition to offer migrants a better life and providing no rescue will help them give up on a fantasy that would be detrimental for their future, which should be in fact far from Italy. Likewise, the second world war peace treaty wasn't even signed and already many voices were raised to support the thesis that 1938 racial laws were imposed by Germany on the substantial nonexistence antisemitic roots within Italian population.

Now, the very first act Adam performed upon the brand new world, was to name it. This naming act produced the reality he – and the humankind after him – would live in and dominate over. Naming phenomena allows for their acknowledgement, hence for their existence. Does that mean naming a unicorn will make it exist? Not quite. At least not in flesh and blood – or whatever matter unicorns are made of. But they will begin existing as a symbol, as a projection, as an aspiration or a rejection. In other words, as an echo of a phenomenon of a sort that is otherwise concretely observable. A less profane example could be additionally given by the ninety-nine Yupik words know to describe snow², in which comparison the non-arctic languages nomenclatures are manifestly superficial. This example does not account for supporting the one or the other perception as more accurate, it serves to underline how description is a tool of perception and how the latter is influenced and determined by environmental factors. Sometimes these environmental factors lead back not to strictly material surroundings but to social dynamics.

The symbolical spectrum carried by the definition *Italiani, brava gente*, along with its origins and its practical purposes has been investigated with increasing interest in the last ten/twenty years. This new sensitivity towards what until then seemed to be an anthropological category of a sort, follows a belated and unprecedented attention concerning the many forgotten pages of Italian contemporary history. It is only with the turn of the millennium that new research paths have been opened overseas, making Italian studies profit from the advancements of postcolonial approaches while complementing the attempts made by non-academic historians, whose work is currently constituting the basis for a younger, prolific generation of scholars. Central in these new approaches is the fragmentation of a consolidated collective memory of colonialism on the one side and the dialectic between fascism and resistance on the other³. The emergence of forgotten memories seems as much needed as irrepressible: rewriting history is urgent matter. And while the insertion of new threads is distorting the overall design of the pre-existing historical weft, the question about how it was possible to forget for so long, becomes a crucial one. To this question an analysis of the phrase *Italiani, brava*

1 Italian for Palace of Italian civilization. Built in 1940, the Palace is part of the EUR (*Esposizione Universale di Roma*), one of the most ambitious urban projects initiated by Mussolini, a new city district within Rome that would host the 1942 universal exposition and display the magnitude of the fascist agenda.

2 “Quante parole hanno gli eschimesi per dire neve?”, *Il post*, 1st February 2015
[https://www.ilpost.it/2015/02/01/quante-parole-hanno-gli-eschimesi-neve/#:~:text=In%20groenlandese%20sono%20due%3A%20qanik,apusiniq%20\(cumulo%20di%20neve](https://www.ilpost.it/2015/02/01/quante-parole-hanno-gli-eschimesi-neve/#:~:text=In%20groenlandese%20sono%20due%3A%20qanik,apusiniq%20(cumulo%20di%20neve) Last accessed 14th March 2021

3 It is interesting to note that the first comprehensive researches about Italian colonialism have been conducted in the Sixties by a former journalist, Angelo Del Boca; similarly, the first excavations of unorthodox perspectives on fascism and resistance have been conducted by a former teacher, Mimmo Franzinelli.

gente can maybe bring some light.

According to Angelo Del Boca⁴, the first appearance of a related concept is to date back to the first colonial agenda. It was two decades after Italian difficult unification in 1861, when Italy was made and Italians had yet to be made⁵: relying upon little means, Italy introduced itself in the final African partition trimmings as a bearer of civilisation. Italian settlers would be of a completely different cloth compared to the other Europeans: generous and tolerant, their mission was not based on imperial aspirations but on an idea of progress to be achieved in the collaboration between settlers and natives. Over the course of a few years this concept would be already translated into a fixed phrase inside and outside the colonies: *bono italiano* would become the locution to address Italian settlers in Eritrea, while in Italy the writer Emilio Salgari would fix it as early as in 1905 with a novel about a Somali slave saved from pirates by Italian sailors⁶. The establishment of a first outline of a supposed Italian type paradigmatic description, brings with it an already substantial synthesis of what would be later on expanded and sedimented within Italian self-perception; a perception that will be cultivated through its consistent presence in the public discourse at all levels, from government dossiers to academic research, from cinema to the overall media communication. Italians are fundamentally kind, peaceful people, naturally inclined to warm and informal sociability. And these traits have kept them far from historical brutality episodes.

However, before its final mass absorption that leads to the current days, the phrase had first to go through the ultimate legitimation: the handling of fascist memory.

Aldo says 26x1⁷

On the 25th of July 1943, the radio announced Mussolini's resignation as a Prime Minister and the nomination of Marshall Badoglio, a former general who led the occupation and ruled over Libya and Ethiopia as viceroy⁸. In the previous months the war had resulted a full failure across the board: the Don and El Alamein defeats showed to what extent Italian army was disorganised, badly equipped and dependent on German support; meanwhile most of the recently subjected colonies had been occupied by Allies, who, furthermore, had landed in Sicily on the 10th and were swiftly taking over the island; the population was afflicted by food rations and while the first aerial bombings were conducted on Italian cities, the home front began crumbling. It became fatally evident that Italy, or the so-called soft underbelly of the Axes⁹, was on the verge of the collapse: monarchy, military staff, antifascist parties, as well as fascists, had begun thinking and acting upon the necessity of forging an exit strategy that would save the national fate. It appeared necessary to make a clear and definitive separation between the latter and Mussolini's one as a last resort to plead Italian case before the Allies and avoid the most severe consequences of an unconditional surrender. To be at stake here was, on the one side, the safeguard and prosecution of dynasty and military honour, both strictly tied with corporate interests: these forces would lead in the direction of a fascism without Mussolini, and consequently without Hitlerian Germany¹⁰. On the other side, the antifascist parties, which local roots had been almost completely cut by twenty-year institutional persecution and ban, had managed to turn the exile of their many members into an opportunity to use Allies' infrastructures for their cause, and intended now to seize the favourable conjuncture to finally pull the

4 Del Boca, 2005, p. 47-49

5 The phrase "Italy is made, now Italians are to be made" is commonly attributed to Massimo d'Azeglio, intellectual and politician in the first years of Italian unification.

6 Emilio Salgari, (1905) *Lo schiavo della Somalia*
[https://it.m.wikisource.org/wiki/I_racconti_della_Bibliotechina_Aurea_Illustrata/Lo_schiavo_della_Somalia_\(storia_vera\)](https://it.m.wikisource.org/wiki/I_racconti_della_Bibliotechina_Aurea_Illustrata/Lo_schiavo_della_Somalia_(storia_vera)) Last accessed 14th March 2021

7 The title refers to the code agreed between Allies and resistance to begin the open fight in the main Italian Northern cities, on the 26th (of April) at 1AM.

8 Marshall Badoglio was a crucial figure in Mussolini's expansionist plans, as together with General Graziani he subjugated Libya and Ethiopia, introducing the massive usage of concentration camps in the first case, chemical warfares in the second one. However, because of the disastrous campaign in Greece in 1941, he left his post and became a harsh opposer of Mussolini. In this perspective and because he was younger, the king, Victor Emmanuel III, chose Badoglio over Marshall Caviglia, renown for his honesty and antifascism. Italian official admission regarding chemical warfare in Ethiopia came as late as in 1996 (Focardi, 2013); symbolically, Lion of the Desert, Libyan movie from 1981 about Italian occupation, has been censured until 2009, when in occasion of Gaddafi visit in Rome, Sky broadcasted it.

9 The phrasing is attributed to W. Churchill during his speech in the House of Commons, 11 November 1942: "We make this wide encircling movement in the Mediterranean, having for its primary object the recovery of the command of that vital sea, but also having for its object the exposure of the underbelly of the Axis, especially Italy, to heavy attack." <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780191843730.001.0001/q-oro-ed5-00002969> Last accessed 14th March 2021

10 The destitution of Mussolini was coordinated and made politically possible by the action of Dino Grandi. Fascist since before the 1922 march on Rome, Grandi represented a more institutional, less popular, idea of fascism than Mussolini. As such he could see the urgency of detaching from the Duce's fate and operate for his overcoming.

carpet underneath fascists¹¹.

On that day, after being impeached by his own Council, Mussolini had an institutional conversation with the king, Victor Emmanuel III, who would confirm his destitution and order his arrests¹². Executed by fascist gerarchi, Mussolini's deposition was meant to ascribe the ruinous military disaster to Mussolini's strategical mistakes, therewith attempting to establish a belated separation between Duce and fascism, that would grant institutional continuity and safeguard related interests. With Mussolini aside, the king and Badoglio started secretly arranging the terms for an armistice with the Allies, while officially still being confederate with Germans. To support Italian army and protect the country from about 45.000 German soldiers¹³, who reached Italy initially with the purpose of contrasting the Allies invasion in South-Italy, afterwards with the suspect of the imminent volte-face, the Allies prepared the so-called Operation Giant II. On the day of the armistice announcement, the Badoglio Cabinet would have granted US military forces access to key-locations in Rome – such as airports – and received military aid by a parachute division. However, the day before, when the details had to be set with US generals, the head of Italian Government were either unreachable or otherwise busy. The coordination with the US army failed and so did that of the Italian one. When the Allies announced the armistice, on the 8th of September 1943, the king, the Prime Minister and a few other court members had fled to Brindisi, leaving Rome in German hands and the army in the absolute absence of any sort of direction. The causes of this mishandling have been ascribed to a substantial incapacity of the political and military leadership to handle the process, and to their pretentious belief to be able to surrender to the Allies without fighting the Germans. For this reason, no instruction whatsoever had been put out among the troops. Not in Italy, not on the fronts, nor on the occupied territories. 800.000 Italian soldiers have been captured and 600.000 of them who had refused to serve the new-born puppet-state RSI but had not managed to run away from the otherwise prepared German soldiers, have been deported to German concentration camps. Along with and consequent to the annihilation of the Italian army, the mismanagement of the armistice resulted in the full exposure of the civil population to former confederate retaliation. While the Allies, counting on the support of a minimal number of Italian soldiers, mostly employed in the logistics, were slowly gaining territory across South-Italy, Mussolini was working from Germany on the foundation of a new republic that would benefit from German protection. The *Repubblica Sociale Italiana*¹⁴ was founded on September 23rd and extended from the Alps to the so-called Gustav line, barring Allies way to Rome, and implicitly to Germany. The civil war that raged across Italy for almost two years was the result of nothing else other than the short-sightedness and incompetence of Italian political and military establishment, so faced with such an indefensible debacle, with the nation split in two and in fact occupied by two foreign armies, it became absolutely urgent to reason the radical shift. And to do so, not only towards the Allies, who would decide about the national future at the end of the war, but also, and mostly, towards the population itself, which support would be crucial on the whole territory, especially on that controlled by the RSI. In other words, it became crucial to elaborate a narration that would support the frantic actions of Italian establishment.

In fact, it had been made clear by the Allies that the peace treaty conditions would be deeply influenced by the behaviour of Italian population after the armistice. There would have been a chance to be in the position of extend requests to the winners, if they could have counted on a genuine popular support. Therefore it was fundamental to mobilize the civilians. To do so, the Badoglio Cabinet II, a new government of national unity set up after the armistice flight and, this time, massively represented by antifascist forces, made use of a mixture between the antifascist and Risorgimento (Italian unification) repertoire. The main purposes of the propaganda could be summed up into two primary conceptual areas: tell apart Italy from Germany, tell apart Italy from fascism.

The ideological toolkit was based on some key-points that can be grouped into the following categories.

There was no betrayal from the Italian side, in fact the former ally had betrayed first. Germans were accused of having involved Italy in their military action for their own profit, in order to have access to Italian supplies and assets. This became clearly manifest when German troops were crossing Italy on their way to Libya taking away all sorts of good from the population. But also and even more spiteful was German behaviour on the battlefield. On both North-African and Russian fronts, Germans had no regret leaving Italians behind, fighting alone not only the enemy but also the extreme weather. In El Alamein, Italians, first used to open a way through the mined fields, were finally sacrificed to

11 The collapse of the home front was favoured and supported by the action of the many radios broadcasted on the national territory from UK, USA, USSR, promoted by antifascist in exile. Besides Radio Londra, the most famous one, Radio Mosca and Radio Milano-Libertá saw the contribution of Palmiro Togliatti, secretary of the Italian Communist Party (PCI).

12 The conversation was in all aspects a trap, in fact the king disposed his palace to be surrounded by the army during the talk in order to ensure Mussolini could not escape. After the arrests Mussolini was moved from one location to the other for security reasons, until his final reclusion on the Gran Sasso mountain, from which he was liberated by German paratroopers and brought to Munich.

13 Rapporto della Commissione storica italo-tedesca insediata dai Ministri degli Affari Esteri della Repubblica Italiana e della Repubblica Federale di Germania il 28 marzo 2009, 2012
<https://italien.diplo.de/blob/1600290/91b68fe8ac6b370ee612debfee141419/rapporto-hiko-data.pdf> Last accessed 14th March 2021

14 Italian Social Republic, from now onwards RSI.

allow Germans, with their trucks full of campsite material, to retreat. On the Don front, Germans prevented Italians to get shelter on the cold Russian front, robbing them of vehicles and hitting those who would cross their way.

There is a structural difference between Italian and German soldier. To begin with, Italians had no passion for that war, in fact the decision of joining a conflict side by side with a historic enemy, was the result of Mussolini's attempt to impress Hitler, more than the expression of popular will. This distinction appeared very clearly on the many occasions when the two armies were fighting on the same battleground, for instance when Italian army intervened to protect and save Jews in Croatia and Thessaloniki; but it was even more clear after the armistice of the 8th of September 1943, when instead of joining the RSI forces, the impressive number of 600.000 Italian soldiers chose the deportation to German concentration camps. These events were the outcome of a deep political maturation process that was intervening in the Italian national soul, a process that was widely reflected in the general behaviour of the population and that would have blossomed on the Liberation day, the 25th of April 1945.

Italian and Germans are different on a rather anthropological basis. The distinction between Italian and Germans can be traced back to the Latin time. While Italians flourished through Renaissance and Risorgimento, Germans appear not to have overcome the time of Barbarian Invasions: the *furor teutonicus*, bearer of death and destruction, is still observable in terms of moving spirit of the *belva nazista*, the nazi beast. But the German nature is also represented by a specularly different type, the blond, algid, military elite, that would stand straight against the horrific crimes committed. Italians, on the contrary, can become murders as a result of wrath, but are intrinsically unable to perpetrate calculated brutality¹⁵: if they had committed crimes, then it was because they were fascists, and also in that case, the main incentive was to prove themselves emulating German deeds. A clear illustration of that is the implementation of racial laws in 1938, with which Mussolini tried to earn prestige with Hitler. These laws were fundamentally far from the popular sentiment, that in fact is conversely represented by the many instances when Italians hid and saved Jews from German hunting, undergoing themselves a life-threatening risk.

It's dark in the closet ¹⁶

Looking at themselves through their representation of Germans, Italians resulted to be the good-hearted victim that hadn't spare itself to do justice fighting with German brutality and Mussolini's god complex. Germans had become an alibi that would safeguard Italian moral tranquillity: in a diametrical opposition to the Mussolini *uomo nuovo*¹⁷, Italians would instead be the good samaritan. Illustrating itself through this bas-relief, made of axe-cut outlines, Italy succeeded in getting out of the Second World War military defeated but morally redeemed.

As said, the most pressing reason to introduce and inflate this mono-dimensional narration of the Second World War was connected to the necessity of securing Italy better surrendering conditions, which was done proving the intrinsic distance of Italian people from the fascist and nazi agenda, while boosting episodes of actual goodwill, distorting events and hiding the jarring notes.

So it was true that, because of an intentional delay in the Italian handling, almost a thousand Jews were able to avoid deportation to concentration camps. However the reason for that delay was Mussolini's test of strength on Hitler's demands¹⁸. If at the beginning of the war, the popular enthusiasm towards the conflict was limited, it grew when the Axis began collecting victories¹⁹. Talking about a sudden political conscience and an antifascist choice for soldiers who decided to rather be deported than joining the RSI forces seems to be quite a stretch, considering that soldiers' first loyalty was to the king and the nation. Furthermore it has to be considered that these soldiers, along with the whole population, had been raised within a twenty-year long totalitarian regime, where outsider voices had been silenced with

15 Gaetano Salvemini, Giorgio La Piana, *What to do with Italy?*, 1943, quoted in Focardi (2013) p. 109

16 The title refers to the so-called *Armadio della vergogna*, Armour of shame, a cabinet containing about seven hundred files about nazi-fascist war crimes committed between 1943 and 1945, that was found in an unused room inside a military building. The files, among which a classified dossier called "Atrocities in Italy" compiled by British secret services, had been temporarily archived in 1960 and since then 'forgotten' until their accidental finding in 1994. In 2003 the Parliament sets up a commission to investigate the causes of this decade-long concealing and identifies three possible trails. First: the slaughter of Italian soldiers conducted by Germans in the Balkans represented a counterpart of Italian crimes in the region: to hide Italian responsibilities, German ones had also been covered up. Second: in the middle of the Cold War, when Germany was becoming a revived ally within the Western Bloc and the enemy was the USSR, in the country with the strongest Communist Party within the European context, the relationship between the two countries had to be preserved. Third: the presence of former member of nazi-fascist establishment within western secret services was extensive and had to be preserved. The commission did not close its work with a unanimous conclusions: the majoritarian position stated that the involvement of secret services and politics was not provable. See Giustolisi *L'armadio della vergogna*, Franzinelli *Le stragi nascoste*, Focardi *Criminali di guerra*.

17 Italian for new man, in other words, the fascist man who would rule over the empire Mussolini was gifting Italy with.

18 Focardi, 2013, p. 113-118

19 Focardi, 2013, p. 89

exile, confinement, murder. Finally, the accusations by which German army would have betrayed the Italian one were solely instrumental to cover military and political incapacity that resulted in the slaughter on the Don and at El Alamein.²⁰ Last but not least, the convenient German caricature was supported by the resonance of the trials subsequent to the end of the war, where alid SS would state the unconditioned priority of the *Befehlsnotstand*²¹. Such trials barely took place in Italy.

All in all, the objectives pursued by the propaganda, even if not fully reached have been anyway pretty wide: even with relevant losses in terms of colonies and national borders, the political establishment had succeeded having a partial improvement of the surrender terms. The participation of Italian population to its own liberation was passionate, undeniable and paid with a consistent number of victims among civilians and partisans. This contribution was consequently compiled as a dossier meant to support Italian requests for a favourable peace treaty, along with a second one about Italian aid to Jews²². The matter of these dossiers became quickly of public domain and was echoed by publications of different sorts, including an intense production of memories by former *gerarchi*²³ such as Galeazzo Ciano and Dino Grandi, who were working on their political rehabilitation²⁴.

Meanwhile a few chapters of that same war were about to be fully deleted. It was as soon as in 1944 that Belgrade raised its claim for extraditing those Italian war criminals that brutally repressed Yugoslavian partisans and civilians under the motto “head for tooth”²⁵. In this case, a growing concern from US and British establishments regarding Yugoslavian ambitions, allowed for boycotting the requests, while the split between Tito and Stalin caused the loss of their most powerful advocate. A total of 45 Italians were claimed in vain by Yugoslavia, 74 by Greece, 142 by Albania, 30 by France, 10 by Ethiopia, 12 by the USSR. Claiming, when possible, to be able to judge its own citizens, otherwise simply ignoring the requests, and anyway postponing until further notice the legal proceedings, Italy, only one among the defeated countries, extradite none of its war criminals²⁶. And prosecuted none as well.

Similarly to what happened with the Yugoslavian case, the approach to political crimes committed on Italian ground was dictated, internally, by the intent of covering responsibilities and supported by UK and US with its silent endorsement. It was the dawn of the Cold War: Italy position on the Mediterranean was strategical in the Western Bloc but also endangered by a growing communist party that was loyal to the Russian guidelines; moreover the knowledge collected by some *gerarchi* was deemed useful for intelligence purposes²⁷.

When looking at the aftermath of fascism, we shall not forget that its rise dates back to 1922 when, consequent to the march of 50.000 *camicie nere*²⁸ on Rome, the king Victor Emmanuel III appointed Mussolini as Prime Minister. Since then the *Duce* ruled unchallenged till his deposition on July 25th 1943, twenty yers or the so-called *Ventennio*. During his regime, through a massive and pervasive propaganda, the reshaping of educational models and the purge of dissidents, Mussolini succeeded in laying the foundations of his fascist ideals. At the same time, being member of the PNF²⁹ became a passepartout that would secure the working position and anticipate a career: in twenty years the whole State structure had been forged upon Mussolini's will, removing disloyal officials and allowing access to key roles to Party members.

The successful outcome of Mussolini's strategy was shown in the immediate post-war period by the judiciary, which fascistisation began already in 1925 with the dismissal of opposers and it concluded in 1941, when the access was reserved to male citizens of Italian race members of the PNF. At the end of the war, when the need for justice exploded in a number of more or less autarchic episodes of sentencing, the courts were filled with judges and prosecutors who had been loyal to the fascist State and applying its laws for twenty years: after twenty-years regime the number of independent officials the State could count on was, so to speak, exiguous.

20 See Focardi, 2013, p. 101 and 105

21 German for “necessity to obey orders”, concept that was largely used by nazi criminals as defence strategy in the trials. For the contemporary German army, obeying to orders is understood as an excuse, not as a justification; that means the individual responsibility in handling orders is not annihilated.

22 *Relazione sull'opera svolta dal Ministero degli Affari Esteri per la tutela delle comunità ebraiche (1938-1943); Il contributo italiano alla guerra contro la Germania*, both compiled in 1946.

23 Fascist term for defining men who occupied a high position in the PNF's (National Fascist Party) hierarchy.

24 Two examples: Galeazzo Ciano, Mussolini's son-in-law and former Minister of Foreign Affairs (1936-1943), publishes his revised diaries in 1946; Dino Grandi, former Minister of Foreign Affairs (1929-1932), then Minister of Justice (1936-1943) publishes his memoirs already in 1945.

25 According to Del Boca, Italian army under General Mario Roatta (to whom the phrase is attributed) conducted an attempted genocide in Ljubljana (Del Boca, 2005, p. 243) with the deportation of around the 8% of the population (Focardi, 2013, p. 132).

26 Focardi, 2013, p. 149-150

27 Franzinelli reports the case of Nino Buttazzoni, former commander of the RSI X-Mas troop, accused of crimes against civilians, was saved by his collaboration with US secret service (Franzinelli, 2016, p. 39)

28 Italian for Blackshirts, lowest rank of the Voluntary militia for the national security, that was the armed section of the PNF depending only on Mussolini's orders.

29 The acronym PNF, that stays for National Fascist Party, was sarcastically used also for *Per Necessità Familiare*, for family necessity, to stigmatise those who would become members claiming their affiliation to be merely instrumental to the good of their family.

The then Minister of Justice, Palmiro Togliatti PCI, and the whole national unity government had to choose between two ways. They could pursue a radical reform of the judiciary, with massive dismissals and hirings; yet that would have come with major delays in granting the prosecution of crimes, therefore could have exposed the nation to potential resurgences of private justice. Or they could rely on a prominent loyalty to the State rather than to Fascism and attempt for a swift resolution of the civil conflict in the courtrooms, allowing even former RSI judges to operate in the new context. The second option was accounted for viable and the provisory structure already put in place in the so-called Southern Kingdom³⁰ after the armistice was expanded: a High Court for the trial of the most serious offences and extraordinary Corti d'assise spread over the national territory, both composed by professionals and civilians, were in charge of making justice. The number of trials held between May and August 1945 was 10.028³¹, with 259 death sentences, 91 of which actually executed³². Against the sentences it was only possible to appeal to the Court of Cassation, which, briefly detached in Milan, was operational, as per tradition, in Rome. Since the capital was liberated in June 1944 and had not lived the latest phases of nazi-fascist retaliation, the centralisation of the Court in Rome meant, as noted by Togliatti, distancing it from the popular soul³³. The result of the massive wave of appeals to the Court was a complete turnaround of the former rulings and the release of *gerarchi*, who otherwise would have served twenty or thirty years sentences. Meanwhile an increasing number of Partisans were being convicted for crimes committed during the Liberation war, facing firsthand the consequences of the failed judicial reform.

To contain the negative impact of this uncontrollable process, while hindering the king who had similar plans and securing the PCI political consent, Togliatti drafted the outline of an amnesty that would have accommodated the current judicial trends; however the amnesty draft would restrict the absolutions to minor crimes and, most of all, only when committed by subordinates. Furthermore, the amnesty, promulgated 1946, included a paragraph exclusively dedicated to those crimes committed after the Liberation, in the attempt of targeting those acts executed by Partisans in the wake of the antifascist insurrection³⁴.

The effects of the amnesty were clear already a couple of weeks after its promulgation. With the intent of favouring judiciary's autonomy, the text of the document was not written in a stringent formulation, leaving a few crucial passages to the interpretation of judges³⁵. While partisans were profiting only partially from the amnesty, because of a persistent reluctance to release them, a twist in the interpretation allowed for the extensive discharge of fascists convicted for minor offences, but also *gerarchi* who had designed the fascist regime and its terror structure. The reiterated experience of a biased justice that wouldn't tell apart partisans from fascists added up on the top of the wide frustration that was meanwhile dominating amongst partisans: forced to deliver the weapons, the divisions had been disbanded and dismissed with no compensation nor a chance to be incorporated in the armed forces. Such a striking defeat of the justice represented for many partisans the last intolerable insult: in August 1946 over four hundred armed partisans had gathered on the Alps, while in a number of Northern cities solidarity protests broke out. It was only thanks to the negotiation of respected partisan leaders and the PCI that the uprising was put down. However, while Italian society was about to finally embrace amnesia, their aspirations for a real justice had not been completely dismissed: taking up the mission, for which sometimes they would form dedicated groups, in the following years former partisans conducted a few episodes of executions. The resonance of this actions paved the way for a neo-fascist re-reading of the whole Resistance chapter³⁶.

30 On the 1248 judges and prosecutors active on the RSI territory that have been analysed to evaluate their possible incompatibility with the further administration of justice, only 24 have been negatively assessed and exempted (see Franzinelli, 2016, p. 16). A striking example for that is Carlo Alliney, who, although having taken active part in the writing of RSI racial laws, ended up becoming member of the Court of Cassation (see Franzinelli, 2016, p. 15). *Regno del Sud*, is a locution used to describe that part of Italy that, after the armistice and until the liberation of Rome, was not under the RSI but the king Victor Emmanuel III.

31 Franzinelli, 2016, p. 23

32 Stramaccioni, 2018, p.164

33 Togliatti in his speech at the Constituent assembly in 1947. Franzinelli, 2016, p. 33

34 This is how, in the forewords to the amnesty, Togliatti describes the summary justice episodes conducted by some partisans after the liberation. His purpose was to emphasise their contribution to the liberation encouraging a less strict approach from judges.

35 Franzinelli mentions two crucial passages. The article 3 refers to those relevant acts and collaborations, except they would be committed by the high hierarchy. Since the possibility of committing relevant acts is connatural to power positions, this contradictory formulation invalidates either the definition of relevant acts or the one of hierarchy. The same article limits the application of the amnesty in cases of particularly brutal tortures: here the introduction of the adverb "particularly" allows for the wildest dissertations around the topic of torture and eventually for a significant reduction of its spectrum. Franzinelli, 2016, p. 50-51

36 The so-called insurrectional violence is the definition used for those violent acts committed by partisans and civilians after the Liberation. For instance, if until the Liberation, killing a spy was considered an act of self-defence and for that purpose several bulletins with names and descriptions had been published (Franzinelli, 2012, p. 214; Cairoli, 2013, p. 95) after the 25th of April it became, understandably, a crime. The insurrectional violence was proportionally higher in those areas that had seen a stronger nazi-fascist repression and manifests itself since the beginning as people's justice. The mishandling of the amnesty and the overall failure of the State in granting justice to its long oppressed citizens was interpreted as a signal that the antifascist fight wasn't over yet. So action was taken

Zone grigie³⁷

As briefly mentioned, the impossibility of conducting a radical reform of the judiciary was imposed by the social contingencies after the Liberation that required immediate. The crimes committed by the nazi-fascist occupation were so many and so dreadful that only the rapid institution of people's courts supervised by the CLN³⁸ could contain the summary justice applied outraged population. The popular wrath poured out on all sorts and degrees of perpetrators and collaborationists, executing about 9000 people³⁹ before the State was able to restore the institutional course of justice, in some cases not later than two weeks after the Liberation, when the state of emergency was officially dismissed on the 5th of May. The revenge touched, obviously, executives and executors of the nazi-fascist establishment, many of which had, however, cleverly fled before the turn of the 25th of April; but it also raged on their civilian collaborators, or else anyone who was accounted to be colluded with it. Unsurprisingly within a civil war scenario, it was a wide range of categories, that had profited from different kinds of support provided to the oppressor, to be regarded as civilian collaborationists: spies, double-crosser, informants but also prostitutes and lovers, who have been accused of betraying their own people materially or ideologically.

The last two mentioned categories offer a very interesting angle to look at the phenomenon of civilian collaboration, the presence of women on the two sides of the civil war. And in between. Consequent to a stringent lack of men, women have been deployed on both sides among the executors, on both sides they have been employed for the logistics, on both sides they have been prevented to use firearms. While years of men absence from home, caused by the many Mussolini's war enterprises, had forced women to take up traditionally manly roles and responsibilities, hence forging new aspirations, both partisans and RSI fighters were not willing to share the battlefield with women. For these men, women in war equaled to the comfort and assistance given by Red Cross nurses. So, to accommodate women willingness to serve the fatherland, and incidentally move men from logistics to operations, the RSI introduced in 1944 the Female Auxiliary Service: the corp was organised as any other RSI one, besides its field of action was strictly separated by the men's one and functional to it. Likewise, the vulgate wants partisan women to be active as *staffette* because of the instrumental utilisation of those gender stereotypes that would make women perfectly disguised operatives; however, partisan women were fiercely obstructed in their attempt to take up a military role. In fact their presence was held as distracting for the men troop, having to share lairs and to conduct their life in tight proximity and consequent promiscuity; therefore women were employed for the back-line work, such as propaganda, connection among corps, supplies. Those few women who nevertheless managed to join men on the mountains had to defend themselves and their "moral correctness" from recurring accusations of being "bad women".

Between *staffette*, *ausiliarie* and the civilian population, operated a third category, the collaborationists. In the popular understanding, that was the one judging and punishing them between the Liberation and the restoration of the juridical order, the term included any woman who would have profited by contacts with nazi-fascists. Even though there have been several cases of love relationships, the choice to take the occupant side was indeed mostly dictated by monetary interest and by the chances of quickly gaining a powerful position in a precarious social order. So, next to frequently very young women, who would become lovers of nazi-fascist officers to wear silk stockings and have access to their reserved food supplies, next to those who would instrumentally denunciate partisans or Jews for immediate profit, there are also those women who had glimpsed the opportunity of pursuing social rise through an active involvement, an unprecedented chance for personal redemption from a life of submission. If women partisans and auxiliaries choice was

and fascists punished, often with death. The most famous case is the Volante rossa, active between 1945 and 1949, when all its thirty-two members have been arrested with following accusations: three murders, kidnapping, possession of firearms, damages to a factory and a newspaper building. These such episodes, although limited in terms of frequency and in terms of legal consequences, have been functional to the fascist self-victimising depiction, specular to the representation of a brutal, mostly communist, partisan. This early re-reading of the events spans its influence until the current days, when the Liberation is blatantly interpreted by some as the violent victory of one side over the other.

- 37 Italian for grey zones. In his book "The Drowned and the Saved", Primo Levi dedicates a chapter to an investigation around what he calls *La zona grigia*, the grey zone, the space between victims and persecutors. While a urge to simplify the world is intrinsic to human nature, the simplification itself isn't always justified, he says. And arguments that only a schematic rhetoric can affirm the grey zone to be empty: that space is dotted with wicked or pathetic figures, that is necessary to know if we aim at knowing the human species.
- 38 *Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale*, Italian for National Liberation Committee. The Committee was instituted on the 9th of September 1943, a day after the announcement of the armistice and the king flight from Rome, and was composed by the largest part of the antifascist movement, with the exception of Republican Party and anarchists. To prevent personal revenges to happen, the CLN instituted people's court for the administration of justice and used partisans as police force on the streets.
- 39 Del Boca reports 9519 as a number of victims of summary justice, using the counting made by the General direction for Public Security in 1946. While it is accepted that counting shifts according to the perspective adopted, it is however beyond doubt that it could not reach 300.000 as per former RSI affiliates allegations. See: Del Boca, 2005, p. 291; Franzinelli, 2012, p. 279.

already pushing ahead the boundaries set for women action, collaborationists broke the overall structure, claiming the autonomy and emancipation of their doing. They stated through their actions their capacity to consequently act upon a man-dominated world. And in the wake of the Liberation were brutally punished for that. It is a fact indeed that women underwent a double trial, moral and political, whereas the moral sentence was outweighing the political one. According to the dominant understanding, women were unable to commit cruelty; if facts would show otherwise, those women would subsequently develop either feral or demoniac traits. The representation of women collaborationists perfectly overlaps that of German women, who could either be horrible beasts, thirsty for blood and pain, or refined and over-sexualised beauties attempting to corrupt partisans. Traditional symbols of femininity would play a crucial role in identifying the one or the other category and their poignance would be so extraordinary that some of the most frequent forms of popular punishment revolved around their violent elimination. So women would be denuded, shaven in their head and often their pubis, lynched, in front and by the hand of a furious crowd. Sometimes raped and killed as a conclusion. On the other side, the institutional justice one, women would typically find an overtly absolving approach due to the attribution of a physiological irrationality, absence of autonomous judgement, generic hysteria. All that would make women incapable of actually committing crimes as an effect of free-will: they were either subject to some malicious influence or confused, anyway acting upon untameable passions other than rationality and, for instance, no woman has been accused of felony murder⁴⁰. Double trial, we said, where the moral one would outweigh the political one. What was punished on Italian streets in the immediate postwar was not the crime of making profits with human lives, and it was not about betraying the native community. What was collectively punished was the rebellion against a social rule for which women sexuality is national property⁴¹. The same for which in Italy, until 1996, rape was a crime against moral, not against the person. Similarly, when a handful of women made their return from the concentration camps, the main concern they were welcomed with, was if they had been “touched”. Similarly, the RSI was granting abortion to those women who had been raped by non-arian enemies.

Moving back to a more genderless perspective, in the first years of the fascist regime, denunciation was accounted to be a political duty in order to cleanse the nation from those opponents who would act against the national interest: object of denunciation were not only citizens who could be identified as antifascist but also, more broadly, the *mormoratori*, whoever would murmur against any aspect correlated to Mussolini or fascism. Back then, the reports were mostly “horizontal”, as they would take place within a social background shared between accuser and accused, and often at the boundary between ideology and personal interest: denouncing someone meant to quickly get rid of that person, that would often come handy for quick resolutions of a private disputes. Becoming the weapon of the weaker against the powerful, denunciation was also used to address the misbehaviour of institutional representatives, especially in the public sector, in the understanding of Mussolini as a benevolent but strict father of the nation, who would take action for its good. Furthermore, while reports were spontaneously flowing to the police headquarters, the regime had additionally identified places and professions, that would constitute crossways for information about its population: for instance, porters and tavern keepers had become remunerated informers at the police service, making sure no murmur would go lost. As reminded by Franzinelli⁴², around 50% of reported people suffered from serious repercussions and several years sentences in a civilian concentration camp were standard practice in cases of claimed murmurs. However, with the turn of 1938 and the promulgation of racial laws, denunciation starts taking a different shape in terms of prospected consequences. Received in the general apathy, the racial laws deprived those 51.000 Jews, targeted with a dedicated census, of their basic civil rights: education, employment, property were regulated in order to drastically reduce the public presence and influence of Jewish population in the public space. The counterpart for the so-called arians was oftentimes highly attractive, as job posts and low-priced estate were made suddenly available. What is more, when the bureaucratic machine wasn't functioning as expected, fostered by a pervasive antisemitic campaign, that would point at Jews as the sworn enemy of Italians, concerned citizens would help shaking that machine with their reports, so to ensure that the rightful course of the law would be granted. The last step down in the universe of civil betrayal was finally taken after the armistice of the 8th of September 1943. With the constitution of the RSI, the denunciation became a mass phenomenon that broke community and family bonds, in the name of ideological thrust and private interest. In fact, those traits emerged back in the previous years, became most evident from 1943 to 1945 on the territory of RSI, where nazi-fascist authorities agreed upon the deportation of Italian Jews to Germany and the confrontation with partisans was taking place.

40 Roberta Cairoli mentions the case of Ernesta Creanzi, auxiliary absolved from the accusation of having denounced partisans, who had been later on deported to Germany. The ruling from the Court of Cassation exonerated her because she was a woman and only twenty-five years old, so clearly a mythomaniac. Similarly, Amelia Bortolozzi, prostitute, had been passing informations that lead to the capture of a number of partisans was charged with a five years sentence against the twenty-four envisaged by the law, because of her precarious health conditions. Those conditions, allegedly caused by a life of excesses, manifested as absence of moral decency and illogical speech. Cairoli, 2013, p. 23 and p.43

41 The concept of shaving as a form of punishment for deviations from the idea of female sexuality as national property is suggested in Cairoli, 2013, p.24. The author also mentions that shaving can be interpreted as a rape of a sort, but charged with even more hatred because of the refrain from the sexual abuse (Warring, 1999).

42 Franzinelli, 2012, p. 19

In none of its triggers or manifestations was denunciation a univocal phenomenon. Delators were institutionalised gears of the totalitarian regime but also citizens who free-willingly chose to support that regime; they did it sometimes anonymously, most times not, hence taking credit for the report and cashing the relative reward, calculated according to the category of the service provided. In a period when the average income was 5.046 Italian Lira⁴³ and the food insufficiently rationed, the RSI would pay 5.000L for a Jewish man, between 3.000L and 2.000L for women and children, between 1.000L and 300L for partisans⁴⁴. Out of the 6.806 Italian Jews deported⁴⁵, 2210 have been victim of denunciation⁴⁶. In fact the largest majority of Italian Jewish population had left their residences to hide in smaller groups in the countryside, where only the support of someone informed could lead the fascists on their traces. In many case it was the same smugglers who, handsomely paid to facilitate the passing of the Alps with the hope to find refuge in Switzerland, would deliver them to fascists and cash twice, once from the Jews, once from the RSI. However, the reward wasn't necessarily only monetary, nor was it necessarily coming as an official reward. Reporting Jews to the police oftentimes meant to apply some sort of distorted sense of justice: outraged by the frequently high social and economical status of Jews, through the denunciation, the delator would contribute to the restoration of the rightful social order, normally also taking subsequent possession of their belongings. It is a shame to add here that there has been no proactive intention from Italian postwar institutions to make justice for the abuses committed against Jews, whose perpetrators have been protected, sometimes quite openly, other times more subtly. It was as late as in 1999 that a parliamentary commission on public and private acquisitions of Jewish properties published its results: it highlighted the substantial unwillingness of the State apparatuses to operate in the direction of restitution and the use of cover-ups and over-bureaucracy to obstruct the judicial track. One early, though striking hint on Italian approach to the matter is the good reception enjoyed by the book *OVRA Fascismo Antifascismo*. The book has been written in 1951 by the former head of RSI police, later in charge for the reorganisation of Italian postwar secret services, that handles the work of fascist secret police, the OVRA⁴⁷. Among the topics touched, there is also that of racial laws, that are briefly depicted as a "tragic joke" since, thanks to "the natural benevolent and humanitarian spirit that brings our people to rescue those who are believed to be object of persecution, Jews found everywhere support"⁴⁸.

While the Jews hunting was raging, the confrontation between fascists and antifascists was raised from a rather individual to a national level, becoming a collective matter of life and death. Politically, logistically and military led by historical antifascist forces, and strategically supported by the Allies, the popular foundation of the partisan movement was mostly constituted by RSI draft evaders, soldier of the royal army who, after the Armistice, found themselves on the wrong side of the Gustav line, and fresh young opposers. In both cases it was mostly people who could count on strong ties with the territory they would operate on, that would regularly ensure food and medicine supplies but also logistical support through the women *staffette*. Therefore, especially when the RSI structure starts crumbling and the Germans take over the military repression, the anti-partisan retaliation strikes not only partisans individually and collectively, but also entire communities that, unfoundedly or not, had been accused of intelligence with the partisans.

Despite the majoritarian Liberation rhetoric, partisans did not enjoy a full support from the population: besides ideological positions originated in a twenty-year regime, we shall not forget that, in the RSI, the nazi-fascist power was in all regards the ruling one, the official authority; while, on the other side, partisans represented a heterogeneous force, oftentimes bearer of death and destruction. It wasn't in vain that the retaliation was conducted by Germans on a civilian level, here repeating a strategy that had been used by Italians in Yugoslavia: in fact, the affected local communities would often hold partisans accountable for it, carrying out a consequent fracture in the social tissue that turned out functional for repression purposes, for instance with respect to facilitating the information flow towards police stations. The delator was not an isolated, mentally disturbed character. On the contrary, in a world shaken by a war fought house-to-house, it summarises a variety of different instances, a wide range of approaches and attempts that spanned from the coldest economic calculation to the ideological fanaticism, passing through the faith in a strong power that would protect the population from itself.

In other words, the delator is a symbolic figure of that distinctive historical complexity that denoted the years 1943-1945. A complexity that contradicted the dominant narrative, instrumentally constructed after the armistice. The delator is a liminal character, poised between two worlds which representation revolves around their mutual contraposition. Contact points are not given. And as such the delator falls in the populous grouping of those categories long excluded from the main narrative.

Delators, women fighters, deportees, internees, Germans deserters who joined the Resistance: these are all categories

43 Barberi, *Le disponibilità alimentari della popolazione italiana del 1910 al 1942*, 1946, in *Statistiche – La miseria che cresce*, <http://www.leftcom.org/it/articles/1946-12-01/statistiche-la-miseria-che-cresce> Last accessed 15th March 2021

44 Franzinelli, 2012, p. 167; 278. Cairoli, 2013, p.38

45 CDEC sources on governmental platform, http://www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/olocausto_italia.pdf Last accessed 15th of March 2021

46 Del Boca, 2005, p. 306

47 *Organizzazione per la Vigilanza e Repressione dell'Antifascismo*, Italian for Organisation for Vigilance and Repression of Antifascism

48 Leto, *Ovra Fascismo Antifascismo*, 1952, own translation. In Franzinelli, 2012, p. 156

who invalidated the manichean separation between Italic hero and evil. Therefore had long found no space in the historical reflection.

We saw for what practical purposes the stereotype of the good Italian has been forged; we saw how partial and distorted truths reinforced and alimented it; we saw how that self-representation has been functional to the Resistance movement and to its glorification; we saw how deep was the line created to separate nazi-fascists and antifascists and we saw how it was mostly based on the instrumental selection of narrated historical events. These events are currently emerging to the public consciousness, as a consequence of the widening of the historiographic focus. It seems, in fact, that our current days have taken up the challenge of uncovering historical distortions, and began an enthusiastic digging up adventure that is leaving us wandering around on an excavation ground, among piles of memories, heaps of history fragments.

Given that the act of remembering is indissoluble from the one of forgetting, how are we gonna deal with these broken memories? How are we gonna make our selection of this historical debris? In what perspective of which future?