

Studies and research

The Italian military internees in the camps of the Third Reich

by Michela Cimbalo

From the armistice to the deportation

The deportation of over 600,000 Italian soldiers to the Third Reich camps was one of the prices that Italy had to pay as a consequence of the fascist war and the agreement with the Nazi regime, considering that Germany neither could nor intended condescending to Italy's withdrawal from the war and much less accepting the loss of control over the peninsula.

The ways in which the Badoglio government planned the armistice of 8 September further put the Italian army in difficulty, which found itself totally unprepared. ready to face this sudden change of alliances. Indeed, the directives intended for the army issued by the Italian government before the declaration of surrender

they did not even contain veiled references to the armistice, but merely warned to defend against any German attacks. Particularly destabilizing it had to be the directive contained in the "Promemoria 2" issued on 6 September, since there it was said: 'The commander is free to take his attitude towards the Germans which he will deem more in accordance with the situation » 1 , thus leaving it to the initiative of individuals

commanders the crucial decision to surrender to the Germans or fight. However some of these directives did not even reach their destination, and many did now late. The difficult condition of the Italian army caused by the lack of orders was further aggravated by the flight from Rome, during the night of the 8th September, of Badoglio together with the royal family and the high commanders of the army, who

it made it impossible to maintain contact with the various corps of the army at the very moment more crucial.

At 8.00 pm on 8 September the Germans immediately began to disarm of the Italian army, already foreseen since early August by the *Asche* plan , worrying doses above all to interrupt the lines of communication and to occupy the positions e the key roads. The disarmament was carried out in different ways according to the situation

«Qualestoria» n. 2 - December 2007

1 M. Torsiello, *The operations of the Italian units in September-October 1943* , Ministry of Defense, Staff of the Army, Historical Office, Rome 1975, p. 70.

ni: either directly by force, or, in cases where the German troops found themselves outnumbered, the Italians were initially promised that if they surrendered they would be immediately repatriated.

Faced with all this, the prevailing reactions of the Italian army were of disorientation. tament and disintegration: it was difficult to think of suddenly turning weapons

against the allies of a moment before, especially in the absence of specific orders. Indeed, even when the orders managed to arrive, they never talked about attacking the Germans, but to defend themselves from any attacks on their part. There were also those who heard

communicate absolutely paradoxical orders, like the Bergamo Division, that yes found in Yugoslavia, which was ordered to resist but "without spreading blood" ². Under these conditions the task of the German forces was greatly facilitated and the surrender was generally perceived by the Italian army as humiliating.

On the other hand, it would be wrong to want to generalize the behavior of the army: not wherever the prevalent reaction was disorientation, there were indeed several cases of armed reaction from the Italian side, cases of divisions that fought to the last for do not give in to the Germans. The greatest clashes took place outside Italy, since abroad an "all home" was impossible; in particular, they occurred in the area of Balkans and especially on the islands. On the other hand, relations with the Germans in the Balkans

they were already tense for some time, and in these areas there were the greatest massacres of soldiers

Italians by German hands, as in the case of the Acqui Division in Kefalonia, of which between 4000 and 5000 men were killed after the surrender ³.

Once disarmament was completed, the captured soldiers were sent to transit camps for prisoners of war, called *Dulag*, already existing in the various war zones or built specifically for Italians after 8 September. From this moment on, yes occurred mass escapes, facilitated above all in cases in which the Germans do not have they lacked enough men to guard the prisoners. In these first fields the Italians had to stay for a short time, to be then soon deported to territory of the Reich, where they would be locked up in prison camps for officers (*Oflag*) and in those for non-commissioned officers and enlisted men (*Stalag*).

Within a few days the long journey began for almost all the prisoners towards the camps of the German Reich, a journey that in all memories is described as a traumatic and humiliating experience, «the antechamber of the Lagers» ⁴. Indeed the journey

it could last several days, during which time the prisoners were crammed into the

² E. Aga Rossi, *A nation in disarray: the Italian armistice of September 1943*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1993, p. 164.

³ According to Torsiello, 4095 Italians were killed in Kefalonia, while for Schreiber it was 5170; cf. M.

Torsiello, *The operations of the Italian units*, cit., Pp. 587-590; G. Schreiber, *The Italian soldiers interned in the camps of concentration of the Third Reich 1943-1945: betrayed, despised, forgotten*, Army Staff, Historical Office, Rome 1992, p. 208.

⁴ G. Rochat, *Memorial and historiography on internment*, in N. Della Santa (edited by), *The Italian military interned by the Germans after 8 September 1943*, Proceedings of the conference on historical studies promoted in Florence on 14 and 15 November 1985

overcrowded freight train wagons where the maximum ceiling of 40 was often exceeded people, in poor hygienic conditions and in total insufficiency of food and water. The journey to the camps was particularly hard for the soldiers captured in the Balkans and Greece, which were often subjected to grueling walking marches before getting on trains or freight wagons, on which they faced a very long journey, which in some cases even lasted a few weeks.

Furthermore, a separation was made before departure or during the journey between soldiers and officers for which, for organizational reasons, they were loaded on different trains

since the two groups were destined for distinct Lagers, but also to break up further the already precarious hierarchical structures and weaken any will to resist. This purpose was clearly made clear by the commander of the Group of Armies E, General Löhner, who ordered to «mix as much as possible and separate from their

officers "the soldiers during the journey to captivity to avoid that it could" diverge it seems the resistance of entire units » 5 .

We do not yet know how many were the Italian soldiers who fell into the hands of Germans. In this regard, one of the most reliable and most recent research, that of Gerhard Schreiber, calculates the unarmed soldiers at 1,006,730 following the events of September 6 . However, not everyone would have experienced the events of the military internees; in fact,

First, according to Schreiber, about 810,000 had been declared prisoners of war, a figure from which it is inferred that not all those who were disarmed by the Germans were then taken prisoner. The difference between the two data is due both to the fact that above all in the

Northern Italy many of the unarmed soldiers managed to escape after capture, both at modalities with which the capitulation of Rome took place so, following agreements between

Italians and Germans, most of those who surrendered in Rome were not captured. To this must be added that in the south-east area there were thousands who lost the life in the sinking of the ships that had to carry them from the islands to the continent; but they had already been declared prisoners of war, and sometimes they remained for several months in the places of capture before being transferred; therefore

however, they fall within the total number of prisoners of war described above, even if obviously they never arrived in the concentration camps of Germany 7 .

Having said this, it must be pointed out that not all actual prisoners of war were immediately transferred to the territory of the Reich. In fact, contrary to the directives, many were held in the area of capture and forcibly employed as workers. An even harder fate had the thousands of soldiers who were sent

5 G. Schreiber, *The Italian military* , cit., P. 326.

6 Ibid, pp. 305-306. Schreiber arrives at this result by adding the following data: 415,682 unarmed in Italy in the north, 102,340 in central southern Italy, 58,722 in southern France and 429,986 in the Balkan area.

7 Schreiber estimates that at least 13,298 were killed at sea during these transfers. The data is obtained from official sources of the *Wehrmacht* and is however approximate since it cannot be excluded that they occurred further sinking we are not aware of. To these must be added no more than 100 people who died during air travel by the *Luftwaffe*. Ibid, pp. 324, 375.

The Italian military internees in the camps of the Third Reich 7

as workers in the army's zone of operations on the Eastern Front. Others instead they immediately declared themselves "loyal to the alliance" with Nazi Germany and they were employed as fighters alongside the Germans or as workers of various kinds following the *Wehrmacht*.

Although we still do not have exact data regarding the number of soldiers Italians that the Germans had available after 8 September, it is evident that captured Italian soldiers literally went to swell the conspicuous booty of war that Germany gained from the occupation of Italy, and their deportation it meant and was mainly managed as a labor supply for the German Reich.

Not surprisingly, on 7 November 1943 the Chief of Staff of the *Wehrmacht*, the General Jodl, thus underlined the advantages of the Italian capitulation: «Fortunately there is also a positive aspect in the betrayal of Italy. The massive influx of military personnel captured and of workers from Italy will result in a considerable relief in this field [the field of labor employment; NdA] » 8 .

The choice not to collaborate

The decision to deport the Italian soldiers captured after 8 September to the concentration camps

responded to the German desire to employ them as workers in the territory of the *Reich* e of the occupied countries, and thus at least partially compensate for the strong need for manpower

of the German industry. However, most of the Italian military showed none willingness to give voluntary support to the Nazi regime and its economy of war.

Immediately after the disarmament, the Italian soldiers were declared prisoners of war and it was

established that they were to be used for the war industry and for the construction of the wall

on the eastern front. After a few days it was further specified that among them

there were three distinct groups: those who declared themselves faithful to the covenant, which they would have fought with the Germans; those who did not want to cooperate, which they would be considered prisoners of war and sent to work; and finally those who had opposed resistance to disarmament, whose officers were to be shot while soldiers would be sent to the Eastern front as a punitive measure. As for the "faithful to the covenant," most of these joined the collaboration with Nazi-Fascism immediately after disarmament, mainly driven by ideological reasons, and some never reached the German concentration camps since they came employed in the occupied countries where they had been captured.

8 HA Jacobsen (ed.), *1939-1945. Der Zweit Weltkrieg*, in "Chronik und Dokumenten", Darmstadt 1959, p. 330, quoted in G. Hammermann, *Military internees in Germany, 1943-1945*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2004, p. 75.
8 Michela Cimbalo

Page 5

On the date of February 1, 1944, instead, prisoners were found in the Reich concentration camps

about 607,331 men, while in the area of operations on the eastern front there were about 8,481 prisoners, for a total of 615,812 Italian soldiers locked up in prison camps nia 9 . In reality, however, the Germans made a distinction between prisoners Italians, so the soldiers were immediately sent to forced labor, mainly in factories, while the officers were not forced to work at first.

The decision to exempt officers from work, which at least formally seemed respect the application of the Geneva Convention - in clear contradiction with the fact that the Germans did not recognize its validity for the Italian military - is symptomatic of the caste spirit that permeated the *Wehrmacht* and the Nazi state; indeed, it was maintained until the need for manpower became too urgent. you for the German economy. Furthermore, this choice significantly differentiated the conditions of officers' imprisonment from those of the soldiers, forced into grueling work rates.

On September 20, 1943, Hitler decided to change the *status* of the prisoners and they they were called IMI (Italian military internships). The transition from prisoners of war he military internees led to an aggravation of their living conditions, since the their new position excluded them from the right to assistance from the International Red Cross.

nal and allowed to use them also in the war industry, as the category of military internees were not protected by the Geneva Convention. Furthermore, the camp-change of *status* had negative psychological effects on prisoners who felt compelled completely abandoned to German arbitration.

The reasons that inspired this choice of the Nazi regime were prevalent-mind of a political nature, since the Italian military were not considered prisoners of war as subjects of an allied state, the Italian Social Republic. The

Salò's government, however, did not have the strength to ask for his repatriation, and the fact that more than half a million Italian soldiers found himself prisoner in the Nazi concentration camps was one clear contradiction of the alliance and certainly did not give prestige to the new state, already a lot precarious from the point of view of legitimacy and popular consent. So yes found it preferable to minimize and sweeten the problem of these prisoners, giving them a name that distinguished them from other prisoners of war, thus suggesting the impression that the Italians enjoyed better treatment. However, the problem of military internees was subsequently reopened by Mussolini who, to give more prestige to RSI, wanted to create an Italian army through recruitment to be carried out mainly among inmates in the camps. Hitler however, he was not at all interested in creating a new Italian army, nor much less to give up the mass of free labor represented by IMI. THE Germans eventually conceded the creation of only four divisions, a symbolic army which was to serve exclusively for a political revaluation of the state of Mussolini,

9 G. Schreiber, *The Italian military*, cit., P. 455.

The Italian military internees in the camps of the Third Reich 9

Page 6

and they agreed to propose joining the IMI; therefore, from the autumn of 1943 it began a propaganda work within the camps that aimed to recruit members of the CSR, parallel to the attempts already started to recruit fighters for militia units to be included in the SS. The propaganda was carried out by civilians and soldiers of the RSI, but it was hindered by the Germans who discouraged any accessions with selection criteria very rigid: it was evident that they preferred to use IMI as workers, in order to be able to thus freeing German forces to be sent to the front rather than as fighters. In the first months of captivity, the IMIs were however subjected to targeted pressure to recruit volunteers for RSI or SS. The propaganda work was carried out by both fascist exponents than Nazis who, apparently, more than focus on arguments ideological, highlighted the poor conditions of the inmates and promised a better standard of living for those who have opted. Often the propaganda work was based on humiliating threats, especially when it was aimed at soldiers, as emerges ad example from the following testimony:

The General told us a few words: by adhering you had the treatment of the soldier and officer

German who eats well and is well paid. Our families would also be treated better. Those who did not want to join would now be abandoned to theirs destiny and they would think hunger and the Polish winter to serve them. This speech, made to

people who, hungry, scarcely covered, had been outdoors for more than an hour at several degrees below zero, it had a deleterious effect. An infinite sadness and discouragement seized us; we were asked to be mercenaries, because we did not speak of the homeland, but of the pay and food 10 .

However, despite the threats, this first phase of the unspoken propaganda great results and, perhaps also for the tone in which they were proposed, the adhesions were probably less than 5%, since those who had ideological reasons to confirm the his loyalty to Nazi-Fascism had already enlisted before, immediately after the disarmament. Greatest instead the same propaganda was successful during the winter of 1943, when the cold, the hunger and physical debilitation caused by several months in the Lager led to many ad stick.

We know little about the fate of these opting soldiers; Schreiber calculates that from 8 September 1943 to March 1944 the adherents were about 186,000, of which one part was employed in the German army and the others, about 15,000, in the new army by Mussolini 11 . Initially, however, they remained in the Lagers for a long time, enjoying a better food than the other prisoners, and they accounted for those who had

10 Testimony reported in G. Rochat, *Memorialistics and historiography* , cit, p. 37.

11 The total indicated by Schreiber takes into account all members, even those who opted before

being deported to the camps. G. Schreiber, *The Italian military* , cit., P. 454.

10 Michela Cimbalo

opposed a refusal a temptation continues to adhere. The memory of the treatment reserved for opting parties, in fact, it often recurs in the memoirs of former IMI, with ni such as the following:

Every day around 12 who had joined the Social Republic ... passed to the center of field crossing it all ... and they headed to the barracks with the mess tin full of pasta and the lid of the same with the portion of stew ... my stomach and I do not hide that at times, exchanging ideas with my comrades, we were almost tempted to join 12 .

For the soldiers, the campaign for enlistment in the fascist army ended before winter, while that for officers continued until early February 1944, since for the CSR the adhesion of the officers had a greater political value; the the repatriation of Italian soldiers returning from forced labor would have created more embarrassments and problems that benefits.

From February 1944 the officers who remained in the concentration camps were concentrated in large numbers

Oflag and they were no longer offered to enlist, but a voluntary introduction to the work, which could only take place after signing a formal declaration with the

which they undertook to work for Germany until the end of the war, while still remaining military internees ¹³.

From the spring of 1944 the idea of transforming IMI into workers took shape civilians, to supply important needs concerning both the relations between the two states and the

Italian internal situation. First of all, the persistence of the prison situation of the IMI in the German camps could only harm the consent of the Italian population towards CSR; but, above all, CSR was encountering more and more difficulties in finding manpower to send to Germany to satisfy German requests. Germany for its part urgently needed foreign labor to liberate German forces to be sent to the front and to support the productive effort envisaged by the campaign of mobilization of all the forces of the country to carry out "total war". It was therefore necessary to increase the productivity of IMIs, and this was only possible improving their material and psychological conditions of life since, as now the Germans were also forced to note, the internees lacked the strength to

12 G. Caforio, M. Nuciari, *"No!" Italian soldiers interned in Germany, analysis of a refusal*, Franco Angeli, Milan 1994, pp. 24-25.

13 In fact, however, the start-up of work was not always voluntary. In fact, already from this period there were numerous cases of officers declared "volunteers", but in reality forced to work. In this regard, cf. P. Desana, *The way of*

Lager: the longest, but straightest, to go home. Choice of unpublished writings on internment and deportation, edited by C.

Sommaruga, Ugo Boccassi Publisher, Alessandria 1994; Id., *Italian officers in the Nazi camps: resistance against injunctions of work in application of German provisions and the Hitler-Mussolini agreement of 20 July 1944*, in «Quaderni di storia contemporanea», no. 3, 1988, pp. 11-34.

The Italian military internees in the camps of the Third Reich 11

work and the status of prisoners also negatively affected their tivity.

With the meeting between Hitler and Mussolini of 20 July 1944 this was sanctioned transformation, from which all officers were temporarily excluded. The pass wise to civilian workers provided for the signing of a declaration in which the ex-internees pledged to work until the end of the war for Germany at same conditions as Italian civilian workers. Most of the inmates refused to sign the declaration of commitment and the Germans, who did not foresee a similar one reaction, they often resorted to threats and ill-treatment to convince them, until they decided on 4 September 1944 to declare them all transformed by authority into civilian workers. Only the officers did not have to be transformed by authority, but the Germans reserved the

possibility of individual and collective injunctions for work. The officers in any case, they should have signed the declaration of commitment, e since there were numerous cases of refusal, many of them already came in this period compulsorily sent to work. According to the Italian embassy in Berlin, dei 588,000 IMI that on 1 July 1944 were still in the concentration camps, in November-December

br of the same year had not yet changed status from 80,000 to 100,000 men, including some 15,000 officers 14 . But from 31 January 1945 these too last, both effective and complement, were forced to work as workers civilians, excluding only generals, admirals, doctors and chaplains.

In conclusion, the transformation of IMIs into civilian workers was carried out by the Germans

solely for utilitarian reasons, hoping to obtain an increase in production ability to overcome the difficulties that the Nazi regime was encountering in the recruitment of foreign labor. However, considering that about two thirds of the inmates they changed *status* only because forced, we can imagine that their performance it didn't get much better.

During their imprisonment, the IMIs were therefore offered various forms of collaboration with Nazi-fascism, a collaboration that most of the inmates do refused to offer. Regarding enrollment in the RSI or in the German army it is rather difficult to give a quantitative evaluation of this phenomenon, to establish that is, how many soldiers actually chose to collaborate. Obtainable data from memorials offer very low percentages, around 2% of the total interned, but fragmentary evaluations are inevitably insufficient to grasp the totality of the phenomenon 15 . Adhesion was probably higher, oscillating between 23% proposed by Schreiber and the percentages advanced by Rochat, ranging from 10%

14 G. Schreiber, *The Italian military* , cit., P. 600.

15 This percentage is already reductive at first sight, considering that only Mussolini's divisions received

from 13,000 to 15,000 men, who already represent in themselves at least 2% of the total number of inmates, and that these

the tens of thousands of Italians enrolled in the SS and the *Wehrmacht* must be added .

12 Michela Cimbalo

25% for soldiers for officers 16 . Even accepting the highest percentage proposed by Schreiber, however, it can be deduced that more than three quarters of the military

captured they refused to serve Nazi-Fascism. This collective refusal therefore requires a more in-depth analysis, to understand why these men locked up in the camps e forced to live in inhumane conditions they did not want to collaborate in any way with the former German allies, even if this would have resulted in a marked improvement of their living conditions.

The reasons for this choice, provided both by the former IMI themselves and by

historiography on the subject, are varied and articulated, since it does not seem possible to draw a unique motivation for the behavior of all prisoners. To this about it we cannot help but take into consideration the proposals put forward by Rochat, deriving from the analysis of the memorials left by the former IMI, which will no below integrated with the sociological analysis proposed by Caforio 17 . It is first of all necessary to make a distinction between the reasons that led to the officers to this refusal and those who moved the soldiers instead, since it was not only a question of two groups composed of different elements and with different responsibilities deriving from their role, but above all officers and soldiers found themselves living two modes of very different imprisonment. For the behavior of the former we can identify three fundamental components- there. First of all, fidelity to the oath taken, and therefore fidelity to the king and to the institutions, very strong motivation especially for the elderly, which could be variously understood and for example accepted by those who, despite having lost all confidence in monarchy, he still felt tied to the military institution. That's the real point of reference of a large part of the Italian Army was the king, rather than the fascist regime, lo it can be understood very well by reading the description that Nuto Revelli gives of his arrival in the Modena officers' school, where he spent two years before being sent to fight in Russia: The first fixed point that you learned at the Academy was this: that the king was number one in the nation's hierarchy. The Prince of Piedmont followed HRH (His Royal Highness). Finally there was His Excellency Benito Mussolini, head of the government and minister of war; not the "duce". The first was therefore the king and in the Academy *Youth* was not sung , we sang the Sardinian hymn, solemn as a church song 18 .

16 G. Schreiber, *The Italian military* , cit., Pp. 454, 455; G. Rochat, *Memorialistics and historiography* , cit., Pp. 35-36, 49-50.

17 v. G. Caforio-M. Nuciari, "No!" *The Italian soldiers interned in Germany* , cit . ; G. Rochat, *Memorialistics and historiography* , cit . ; Id., *The sources for the study of the internment of Italian soldiers in Germany (1943-1945)* , in «Bulletin of the Center of didactic documentation of the Province of Florence », num. monograph: *World War II and internment of the Italian military in Germany (1943-45)* , October 1994, pp. 55-69; Id., *The society of the camps. General elements of the prison of war and peculiarities of Italian events in the Second World War* , in N. Labanca (edited by), *Fra*

extermination and exploitation. Military internees and prisoners of war in Nazi Germany (1939-1945) , Le Lettere, Florence 1992, pp. 127-145.

18 N. Revelli, *The two wars* , Einaudi, Turin 2003, p. 51.

Italian military internees in the camps of the Third Reich 13

Fidelity to the oath taken mainly influenced the officers who, however social extraction, culture and established values made it a fundamental cornerstone of his own identity, while it had practically no value for troop soldiers, forced to participate in the war without any choice, even if indirect-mind could also have an effect on those soldiers who modeled tament of superiors.

The second reason identified by Rochat, the need to defend his own dignity of men, is instead a component that in all probability unites them choices of officers and soldiers. The direct experimentation, on one's own body, of the results of the Nazi-fascist dictatorships, led the prisoners to refuse any offer coming from responsible for their current and miserable situation: on the one hand, fascism, which had them

led in that ruinous war, on the other hand the Germans from whom they had received a humiliating and bestial treatment, they had often been reduced to captivity by deception, and

who now based propaganda to persuade them to opt only on the offer of money e of better food, thus considering them as mercenaries. The humiliation resulting from the brutality of the capture, augmented by an Italian surrender in itself humiliating, from the transfers in the freight wagons and from the welcome received upon arrival in the

Lager, he found a reaction and an overcoming of his own in the defense of his own dignity of men, capable of not yielding to hunger and threats and thus affirming the their moral superiority over the jailers. The modalities of the surrender and the conditions imprisonment influenced the elaboration of a refusal to any form of collaboration. tion with the Germans, previously little loved and now experienced as merciless masters, arrogant in offering a different degree of slavery in exchange for better food. There discovery that the alliance between the Italian and German people, so much propagated by

fascism, was actually non-existent accompanied, in fueling hostility towards the Germans, to a mechanism of clear distinction between an "us" and a "them" which acted as

support for the threatened individual identity, which could thus be strengthened by radicalizing hostility towards an external enemy.

A further element to consider is the strong rejection of fascism and war Nazi-fascist. It must be evaluated in all its nuances, since the total lack of habit of political debate meant that not all IMIs were able to take awareness of the political significance of this refusal, of deciding a conscious break

with fascism, so that, if hostility to war was by now a widespread feeling, and equally widespread was the belief that it would soon be over, only a minority had experienced a profound political maturation in the camps. In many prisoners, the ideological motivation often came within a second moment, to validate a first more instinctive refusal, to counterpose a motivation higher than ever to the ever stronger German pressure. Also in memorials left by ex-IMI it is often noted that ideological motivation is the most argument exposed to distortions of memory, since history exerts a strong weight on it personnel after his imprisonment, and the schemes disclosed at the commemorative level

e
14 *Michela Cimbalo*

official in the postwar period, for which many ideological motivations appear in reality accrued retrospectively 19 .

The resistance in the camps was therefore scarcely politicized on a conscious level, e it could not have been otherwise, given the political unpreparation generated for twenty years

of the fascist regime and also considering that many of the prisoners had spent the last few years

far from Italy, on the various war fronts where they had been forwarded; but the break with the

fascism was somehow implicit in the choice of IMI, since it went to undermining the prestige of CSR and also contributed materially to create difficulties for nazi-fascism. In addition to this, it is important to emphasize above all the fact that the interned during their imprisonment they found themselves faced with the unprecedented possibility of opting for

choose between joining or opposing the regime, and the prevailing reaction was the refusal to obey, the affirmation of an identity through dissociation from fascism; were

behaviors of self-subtraction that we can reasonably attribute, more than to one the political consciousness - existing but strongly minority - matures towards a real collapse

of the propensity to obedience, variously declined in the forms of adherence to compliance

mismo, total resignation, or warrior fury, which until 1943 had marked the relations between subjects and the monarchical-fascist state 20 .

Finally, it is necessary to consider another fundamental element that particularly influenced lies on the choice of officers, which is what RoCHAT defines the formation of a "Lager society" 21 . Faced with the condition of internment, which aimed at a strong depersonalization of the individual and the creation of a closed society, without any contact with the outside, the loss of one's individual identity came offset by the identification of inmates in the community, by the creation of a collective identity that would help maintain their own. The constitution of a group characterized by strong cohesion could support individual weaknesses and self lie moral forces, counteracting the individualistic and selfish dynamics e

providing strong support against possible failures. Furthermore, in this perspective the events were not perceived as an expression of an individual destiny, but as one generalized condition, a "historical" destiny, which thus received a sort of elevation because of the fact that it was shared by many men and was a counterbalance to the

19 This is evident from statements of this type, with which some former IMIs justify their choice beyond

forty years after the events: «Because we young people of that time began to dream and understand what it would be

a European Union under a democratic regime was beautiful ", or" so that our rulers also remembered the

veterans and not only of the resistance ». v. G. Caforio-M. Nuciari, *"No!" The Italian soldiers interned in Germany* , cit., P. 33.

20 S. Peli, *The Resistance in Italy: history and criticism* , Einaudi, Turin 2004, p. 183.

21 G. Rochat, *Memorialistics and historiography* , cit., P. 38.

Italian military internees in the camps of the Third Reich 15

Page 12

inhumane in which prisoners were forced to live. With this in mind, the refusal of IMI in collaboration with Nazi-fascism may have represented, at least in one first, the extreme attempt to resist the destruction of one's own identity and the refusal to recognize in the Germans subjects entitled to make proposals and to expect collaborative behavior from prisoners.

In the concentration camps for officers, the formation of this collective dimension of resistance

it was favored by the eventual presence of a senior officer of great prestige; these could become the reference point for the organization of cultural activities, religious and recreational, useful for an elevation from the state of brutalization induced by concentration structure as well as for the formation of a collective consciousness. For as for the soldiers, the dispersion in small camps and the frequent transfers not they allowed the formation of such a strong Lager society, nor the heavy work he left material time for cultural activities, which in fact were a prerogative of the camps for officers. Nonetheless, even for the soldiers the group cohesion was a fundamental element to be able to face a situation that favored selfishness e individualisms, since in the Lagers no one could resist without the help of others.

Living conditions of IMIs in the camps

During their imprisonment, the Italian military internees were locked up in special concentration camps,

the soldiers in *Stalag* located mostly in Rhineland and Westphalia, where the densest was fabric of heavy industry, while the officers were concentrated in *Oflag*, located in a first period mainly in Poland. In these concentration camps the IMI lived in inhumane conditions which, although not comparable to conditions of life of racial deportees and political prisoners in extermination camps, were source of enormous suffering.

Upon entering the camps, the Italian soldiers were searched and deprived of all valuables, they were assigned an identification number and would be

became their new name inside the Lager and were housed in barracks crumbling and overcrowded, with wooden bunk beds covered only by a straw mattress perpetually infested with parasites such as bedbugs and lice. The barracks were cold and humid and the fuel supplied by the Germans was always scarce; besides, everyone had

available only the clothing he was wearing on the day of capture, so the cold was one of the factors of greatest suffering. It accompanied the cold hunger constantly, since the food supplied in the Lagers was absolutely insufficient and qualitatively very poor, almost devoid of proteins, fats and vitamins. In fact, the daily food consisted of a soup of potatoes or other vegetables, one broth without substance that was distributed only once a day, accompanied from paltry rations of bread with a little margarine or jam. The partition of the bread was made every day through accurate measurements and draws by the same
16 *Michela Cimbalo*

prisoners, in order to eliminate any possibility of recrimination. One of the prisoners, taking turns, would turn his back and were asked "to whom this?"; to which he he randomly gave his companions rations of bread.

A loaf of bread, that heavy and humid German bread that the war has made known throughout Europe, it was divided geometrically into equal parts; so the parts are equal-up to the gram with sensitive scales like those of pharmacists, and when he was almost absolute in weight and shape and he was still drawing lots. The customary cry: «to whom

this!" I think it was for a long time the nightmare of former internees 22 .

In the afternoon some lime infusion was then distributed, often used by prisoners also to wash themselves because it was the only uninfected water they could find in the Lager.

Hunger, a perennial and nagging thought, the most recurring element in the memories of officers and soldiers, it was also a major topic of conversation in Lager, as emerges from this testimony:

The typical attitude of the prisoner ... in Germany it is hunger, it has been hunger; Nail fixed has never been ... I don't know ... girls, or literature or ... NO, hunger; so the people were completely in their minds thinking about eating; and there were people who wrote

some books, whole notebooks ... I remember they wrote the recipes and exchanged recipes ...

Anything comes out of your head, you hardly even remember relatives, nobody ... you think about

eat, because you are starving 23 .

And hunger was also the main cause of death in the camps since the inmates, debilitated by malnutrition and forced to live in an unhealthy environment, they were more

easily subject to various diseases, which in that situation often led to death and could also generate epidemics. On the other hand, the hygienic-sanitary conditions

were very bad: the infirmary of each camp was made up of absolutely local unsuitable and lacked the necessary medicines, so much so that often the most practiced "cure"

it was simply a reduction in food. The toilets consisted of latrines formed by a long pit in the ground covered by a canopy, for which the prisoners they were forced to fulfill their needs in front of everyone. Showers were also collective and had to wait for their turn in the cold, naked, while the clothes were subjected to disinfestation. At least once a day it was compulsory to show up to the roll call in the courtyard, where the prisoners could remain lined up for several hours

feet and cold. The field was surrounded by barbed wire through which current flowed

22 A. Natta, *The other Resistance. The Italian soldiers interned in Germany*, Einaudi, Turin 1997, p. 118.

23 G. Caforio, M. Nuciari, *"No!" The Italian soldiers interned in Germany*, cit., Pp. 23-24.

Italian military internees in the camps of the Third Reich 17

electric and was guarded by sentries from the top of the turrets, who had order to shoot anyone who got too close to the barbed wire.

Connections with the rest of the world were almost non-existent and this affected decisive way in worsening the morale of the prisoners. The postal service that had to deliver letters and packages from families it worked very badly for the Italians, and the letters were obviously subjected to censorship. Due to the lack of communication with the outside world could in some cases make up for the construction of one

clandestine radio, which allowed to pick up some news on the real trend of the war and therefore to make predictions on the duration of imprisonment. But a radio was above all a means of connecting with reality, a precious support tool moral. In the *Oflag* of Wietzendorf the Germans tried in every way to find the radio clandestine present in the camp, with continuous searches in the barracks of the prisoners nieri. They never managed to find it, but they were sure of its existence when, the morning after the Anglo-Americans landed in Normandy, they found that a thousand paper boats floated in the puddles of the Lager 24 .

These were broadly the conditions of life in the IMI camps, albeit many details could vary from Lager to Lager. However, a distinction must be made between the living conditions in the *Oflag* and *Stalag*, as the officers were forced to work only later, while the soldiers were immediately obliged to grueling jobs, with 12-hour shifts a day, 6 or 7 days a week, to make up, together with other prisoners, for the lack of enlisted German workers in the *Wehrmacht*. This slave army was not organized in a rational way, since the prisoners were mostly reduced to unskilled workforce without it took into account the work they had done as civilians. The Italian soldiers had experiences

different from each other: they were divided between about sixty main concentration camps in Germany alone, which were then divided into smaller camps, the *Zweiglager*, separated from the main camp from a geographical but not an administrative point of view, the internees of which were constituted in *Arbeitskommando* (work teams). They were mainly employed in industries, in manual labor outdoors and in the countryside, where it seems that the living conditions were slightly better. The heaviest work they owed to confront the soldiers sent to the coal mines of the Rhineland and Silesia; but some soldiers also ended up in SS-run concentration camps such as Dachau and Dora, Buchenwald subcamp where the prisoners were used to prepare

24 See E. Ciantelli, *The mirror*, Le Lettere, Florence 2005, p. 78. Regarding the presence of clandestine radio in the Lager of the IMI and the ingenious ways in which they were built and saved from German searches, cf. in particular U. Dragoni, *That clandestine radio in the Lager*, Edizioni Paoline, Cinisello Balsamo 1986; O. Olivieri, *Una radio called "Caterina"*, in ANEI, *Resistance without arms: a chapter of Italian history (1943-1945) from the testimonies of Tuscan soldiers interned in the Nazi concentration camps*, Le Monnier, Florence 1984, pp. 228-240; V. Viali, *I have chosen imprisonment: the Resistance of Italian soldiers in the Nazi concentration camps, 1943-1945*, ANEI, Rome 1983.

18 Michela Cimbalo

underground installations and then for the manufacture of the V1 and V2 25 bombs. A "slave market" was then active, so the various *Stalag*, and in a second. At the time, the *Oflag* also hired skilled labor to civilian companies selected from the mass of Imi. The companies presented their requests to the *Arbeitsfront* (Labor Front), which transmitted them to the leaders of the Lager who proceeded to deviate to the selection, through real auctions that took place in the field, during which the physical conditions and abilities of the prisoners deployed were evaluated in review, usually in the presence of delegates from the companies concerned. Pietro Testa, Italian commander of the *Oflag* of Wietzenhof, thus tells of an auction of prisoners that took place in January 1945: The next day was the most demeaning of episodes. The Germans summoned to the theater the officers of the 7th and 8th battalions and there a commission of genuine slavers proceeded to the choice of goods. The officers had to parade one by one in front of the spotlight where

German entrepreneurs evaluated the appearance, touched the limbs and gave the judgment of choice or refusal 26 .

The imprisonment of the soldiers was generally harsher than that of the officers and it was

characterized not only by the obligatory work right away, but also by a systematic use of the violence by the Germans, often arbitrary and casual, which was to serve a to obtain more performance and to break any will to resist. In fact, it seems that the corporal punishment was inflicted abundantly on non-commissioned officers and soldiers 27 , while

three punishment for officers were arrests; instead the collective punishments they were used for both groups. The soldiers also suffered enormously from feeling of absolute isolation from the civilized world, a feeling amplified by the dispersion in various Lagers.

Another notable difference between life in the *Oflag* and life in the *Stalag* was constituted the possibility for officers to organize cultural activities within the camp, for which cycles of conferences were organized in various *Oflag* held by the same prisoners. nieri, debates, literary or artistic competitions, theatrical performances and religious ceremonies giose; in some fields it was possible to build a chapel and a library. All these

25 They were probably sent to concentration camps run by the SS, particularly Italian soldiers

opposed to any form of collaboration and who had carried out construction works in civil life. On the subject see

in particular G. Schreiber, *The Italian military* , cit., pp. 314-315; G.

Rochat, *Memorialistics and historiography* , cit . , pp. 45-46;

C. Pilesi, *The damned of the Dora camp* , in P. Piasenti, *The long winter of the camps: from the Nazi camps, thirty years later* , La Nuova Italy, Florence 1973, pp. 269-278.

26 P. Testa, *Wietzendorf* , edited by the Study Center on deportation and internment, Litostampa Nomentana, Rome

1973, p. 226. On the subject cf. also G. Mayda, *History of the deportation from Italy 1943-1945. Military, Jews and politicians*

in the Lager of the Third Reich , Bollati Boringhieri, Turin 2002, p. 332 and ss.

27 Emblematic in this regard is the testimony of Domenico Lusetti, a soldier who notes in his diary that

February 23, 1944 had been "a great day" because "no one tasted the whip." See G.

Schreiber, *op. cit.* , p.

623.

Italian military internees in the camps of the Third Reich 19

activities, if they certainly did not transform the Lager into a pleasant place to live, they had

the great merit of strengthening the morale of the inmates, making them recover in part

lost dignity and thus encouraging their willingness to resist German offers. It may seem a strange image that of men locked up in a Nazi concentration camp who spend part of their time studying, organizing plays and concerts, while many of them die every day of hunger and hardship. But actually all of that had the specific intent of encouraging inmates not to let themselves go to despair, recovering the awareness of being men and not beasts, and thus activating in each one the necessary energies not only to resist German pressures, but even to simple survival. Primo Levi, who spent a long time in Auschwitz, Lager in which the organization of cultural activities was absolutely unthinkable e where "just being able to take a look at a newspaper was an unprecedented and dangerous event-

~~I know " 28 , strongly felt the need to maintain some contact with culture, even if it was only a reciprocal recitation with fellow prisoners the poems that they knew each other by heart, since they allowed me to re-establish a link with the past, saving it from oblivion and fortifying it~~

my identity. They convinced me that my mind, albeit constrained by daily necessities- it had not ceased to function. They promoted me, in my eyes and mine interlocutor. They gave me an ephemeral but not stupid vacation, indeed a liberating one differential: in short, a way of finding myself. [...] Culture could therefore serving [...] could embellish a few hours, establish a fleeting bond with a companion, keep your mind alive and healthy 29 .

The demoralization that could arise in the prisoners was in fact a significant factor. boast, fueled by the bestial treatment they received from the Germans, by the conditions of life, from separation from the outside world and from uncertainty about one's own destiny. In this situation was inevitable that even the worst aspects of each would emerge man and that selfishness took over, since everyone was busy mainly to survive. Cultural activities, fueling the force of cohesion of the group, they were a valid bulwark so that everyone did not slip into starvation and in individualism.

The isolation from the world and the material conditions were then worsened by the fact that

the Italian military was excluded from the aid of **the International Red Cross**, because they had been declared interned and not prisoners of war and Germany had entrusted to RSI the competences of "guarantor power". This choice responded to a twofold

28 P. Levi, *The drowned and the saved* , Einaudi, Turin 1986, p. 111.

29 Ibidem, pp. 112-115.

20 *Michela Cimbalo*

intent: on the one hand it was providing a further weapon for RSI to assert its own legitimacy, giving Mussolini the chance to show the country that it was the government Italian in first person to take care of the assistance to IMI, which did not come then left to yourself; on the other, relieving the **CRI** of its duties towards IMI, Germany reserved greater control over the issue. Indeed it had to

be the Italian embassy in Berlin to handle IMI assistance and controls and inspections in the concentration camps and this gave the Nazi regime more control direct on assistance operations, without considering that the Italian government massive pro-German propaganda could accompany the assistance.

In order to fulfill all these purposes, at the end of January 1944 the creation of the **SAI**, the Internship Assistance Service, but it was only really established at the end of March. So until the spring of 1944 the IMIs received none assistance, just in the period in which hunger and cold were felt most and while the stronger were the pressures to induce them to join.

The CRI still tried in every way to help IMI, but collided with the net refusal of Germans and Italians ³⁰. The Italian ambassadors in Berlin opposed the idea that the CRI sent parcels to the inmates, claiming that the food provided would have bore labels from enemy countries that could favor anti-fascist propaganda. In actually, by this time the SAI had just started to work and the SAI did not he wanted IMIs to be grateful to other countries for the help they received. Subsequently, with the transformation of IMI into civilian workers, the Reform Service food was suspended, as it was said that the prisoners no longer had any need. But around October it was realized that the SAI was unable to guarantee not even a minimum of assistance and CSR found itself asking for help from the CRI, which overcame the formal problem of labels with the idea that the cans would be opened by camp officials. The result was that, on the rare occasions that ai prisoners who were still in the camps, packets of food arrived, they saw them delivered unpackaged, with tobacco, flour and any other food all mixed together.

It remains to be considered how the lives of these prisoners changed since, by the summer of 1944, they were declared civilian workers and came apparently "Liberated" from the Lagers. In general, despite the propaganda clamor that fascism gave to the transformation, very little materially changed in the lives of the soldiers, which they continued to work hard. Also don't forget that in many cases the transformation was completed by authority, with recourse to threats and ill-treatment.

³⁰ As regards the conduct of the International Red Cross on the issue of IMI, cf. in particular L. Cajani, *Notes for a history of Italian military internees in German hands (1943-1945) through the archive sources*, in N. Della Santa (edited by), *The Italian military interned*, cit, pp. 81-119.

Italian military internees in the camps of the Third Reich 21

Some small advantage came from the fact that they were now paid in money current and that the food situation had slightly improved; but it is also true that in the last months of the war the situation inside Germany went considerably getting worse and, despite having some money to spend, it was often difficult to get hold of

even essential provisions, not to mention that the already very modest wages were plentiful, greatly reduced by companies. Italian workers now had the opportunity to stay a little longer outside the Lager, but since they worked until the evening even this apparent advantage was actually non-existent. Also, ever since the Gestapo became responsible for their surveillance and punishment; in case yes were refused to work or were found guilty of infractions and sabotage, the companies sent a complaint to the Gestapo, which then sent them to the fields of labor punishment (or, as they were called, of "re-education"), for the purpose of wear them down and overcome their resistance 31.

Life changed instead for those officers who, following the transformation of 20 July 1944 (but most only from January 1945), were started for the first time turned to work, and thus experienced a tougher existence. On the other hand, stay in the Lagers during the last months of the war it certainly did not prove to be an advantage, since in this period the food situation in the camps worsened drastically, arriving in recent months I have been giving rations equivalent to those provided in concentration camps.

Furthermore, from October 1944 the camps of the IMI passed under the jurisdiction of the SS of Himmler, who exercised a surveillance and a system of harsher punishments.

An event long ignored: the IMIs between historiography and memory

The history of the deportation to the Nazi concentration camps of the Italian military internees captured

after 8 September 1943 was for a long time ignored and removed, much public opinion as well as from historical research. The publications on this topic they were mostly the work of former internees, and are mainly made up from memorials; the first large core of testimonies was published in the immediate postwar period, and is made up almost exclusively of memories of officers, in some cases collected in anthologies 32. The following decades saw a long period of silence on the story and then a resumption of publications, above all since the 1980s. From this moment works by

31 Regarding the *Straflagers*, the so-called "re-education" camps, cf. P. Desana, *La via del Lager*, cit.

32 Among the most important anthologies of memoirs we point out: A. Benelli, A. Benedetti (edited by), *Men and Germans*.

Writings and drawings of deportees, Casa di Arosio editions for war orphans and deportees, Milan 1947; P. Piasenti, *Il*

long winter, cit.; ANEI, *Resistance without weapons*, cit. In the latter work, unlike the previous ones, it is given

ample space also to the memories of the soldiers.

22 Michela Cimbalo

more general character, not limited only to memorials, and also simple soldiers they began to publish their memoirs 33.

Studies on the internment of the Italian military have therefore initially suffered, at least until the 1980s, of having been almost totally relegated in the field of memorials, with a strong lack of general studies capable of deepen the subject in its entirety, as well as historical works capable of include this story in the more general context of the study on deportation and on Nazi policy of exploitation of deported workers. However, it must be emphasized that when a real historiographical research on the subject has begun, memorialism proved to be a fundamental source, since it allowed make up for the lack of other sources, and in particular the lack of archives of individual Lagers that have almost totally disappeared. The analysis of memorials made it possible to reconstruct what were the real living conditions of IMIs in the camps, allowing to deepen the particular situations that the inmates experienced in the various fields, as well as the different conditions of imprisonment that the soldiers had to face respect to officers; he therefore highlighted how the story of the deportation of the Italian military is rather complex, as it is actually made up of a myriad of particular and different stories, which in many respects are still to be explored by part of the historiographical research.

An important stimulus to the studies was given by ANEI (National Association ex internati), which in the decades following its foundation, which took place in 1946, was engaged in collecting the testimonies of former IMI, and encouraging the publication of diaries, literary and poetic writings, iconographic and photographic documents. Always

the publication of the “Quaderni del Centro Studi sulla deportazione and internment ”and the organization of various conferences on the subject, including

of fundamental importance the one held in Florence in 1985 for the 40th anniversary of liberation. It can be said that this conference has helped to open a new one research phase on internment, since not only former IMI participated, but also scholars of various disciplines, thus managing to draw up a general balance of studies from multiple perspectives ³⁴ . The publications of reports referring to individual Lager ³⁵ , which allowed a more precise analysis of living conditions in the fields, making up for the lack of direct sources, such as reports of the commanders of the various camps, who were almost completely dispersed.

33 Regarding the analysis of the various phases that the study of the internment of the Italian military has gone through, and how this story has been dealt with by Italian historiography but also by Italian society as a whole

in particular: N. Labanca, *The official memory of military internment. Times and forms* , in Id. (Ed.), *Fra extermination and exploitation* , cit., pp. 269-299; Id., *Catabasi. The return of the Italian military internees, between history and memory* , in Id. (Edited di), *The memory of the return. The repatriation of Italian military internees (1945-1946)* , Giuntina, Florence 2000, pp.

XV-LXVIII; G. Rochat, *Memorialistics and historiography* , cit.

34 N. Della Santa (edited by), *The Italian military interned* , cit.

In more recent years some works have been published that have included the story of IMIs within a broader analysis. On the German side we point out the recent contribution by Hammermann 36 , focusing on the analysis of living conditions in Lager and referring above all to the events of the troops. But fundamentally importance was above all the work of Gerhard Schreiber 37 , which is based on a long research work in the German archives and reconstructs a complete picture of the story, from the fall of Mussolini to the repatriation of the Italian soldiers. Analysis of the archives

Germans allowed Schreiber to get to document figures relating to number of prisoners captured, the percentages of adhesions to Nazi-fascism, the dead during imprisonment, etc., which are the most reliable data we have so far. Moreover the study of the story seen "from above", or through the German sources, comes to integrate and validate the vision of the prisoners expressed by memorials.

On the Italian side, the proceedings of the international conference held in Florence in 1991, entitled *Between extermination and exploitation* , which offer a comparison

of Italian internment with the events of prisoners of war from other countries 38 .

The sociological analysis conducted by Caforio and Nuciari on a sample of former IMI instead he investigated the reasons for the refusal to collaborate with the expressed Nazi-Fascism

by the internees 39 , while *The memory of the return*, edited by Labanca, presents a collection of oral sources through which a fundamental aspect of the history of former inmates, or the moment of repatriation and the impact with the new one reality of Italian society 40 . Recently published is the work of Mayda, which includes the events of the IMI in the broader context of the history of deportation from Italy between 1943 and 1945, together with the analysis of racial and political deportation 41 . And finally

it should be noted that a recent book by Santo Peli on the history of the Resistance in Italia 42 devotes an entire chapter to the history of IMI and the reasons why this is has long been neglected also by the historiography on the Resistance.

Actually at least until the mid-1980s the story of deportation of IMI was also omitted by the historiography on the Italian Resistance, so much so that until the 1990s no history of the Resistance dealt with the problem of internees as an important topic. This may surprise, also given that many former inmates who have written about their experience have always tended to tell their stories in the context of the Resistance to Nazi-Fascism. On the other hand this is a topic that has long been debated even among former IMIs, since, as it is seen, the reasons attributable to their choice are various and different and it does not seem

36 G. Hammermann, *Military internees* , cit.

37 G. Schreiber, *The Italian military* , cit.

38 N. Labanca (edited by), *Between extermination and exploitation* , cit.

39 G. Cafori, M. Nuciari, *"No!" The Italian soldiers interned in Germany* , cit.

40 N. Labanca (edited by), *The memory of the return* , cit.

41 G. Mayda, *History of deportation from Italy* , cit.

42 S. Peli, *The Resistance in Italy* , cit.

24 Michela Cimbalo

possible to bring all these different behaviors under the sign of a strong e
conscious anti-fascism. Indeed, it is precisely from the analysis of memorials that
I know a profound political unpreparedness, which only a few will see relevant
transformations during internment. ANEI itself has provided in this regard
different evaluations over time, insisting for a long time in proposing itself as an
association

apolitical and focusing more attention on the issue of claiming the extreme
loyalty to the military oath rather than on the importance of political rejection of the
Nazi-fascism expressed by IMI, a theme that has been re-evaluated only in more recent
years 43 .

The silence that for a long time has enveloped this chapter of history has various
reasons. First of all, it highlights the difficulty of ex-deportees to tell
to revive their own history, to dust off painful and partly still incomprehensible
memories,

difficulty increased in many cases by a latent sense of discomfort in having to affirm
of having been victims of the Nazi concentration apparatus, as well as of a real one
difficulty in integrating into post-war Italian society. So most of the
former IMI survivors took refuge in painful silence and fatigue since

"Nobody wants to recall the concentration camp because he spent months there and
months in a condition of brutality that mortifies everyone's dignity as a man " 44 . IS
common to many inmates is the intention to take refuge after repatriation in the sphere of
private, family and work; and actually the memorials of former IMI of which
we have is quantitatively much more scarce than the existing memorials for
example on partisan warfare. Furthermore, in the immediate postwar period the question
of

veterans in general was neglected both by institutions and by public opinion: i
veterans were too many and too heterogeneous from many points of view. Address this
problem would have involved a collective review of Italian participation in the
war and, even before, the adhesion to fascism. It was also feared that strong
politicization of veterans' associations could have led to a re-edition
of combatantism and reducism, phenomena considered by many to be responsible for
having

opened the way to fascism in the first postwar period 45 . The fact should not be
underestimated

that all former prisoners embodied the tragedy of a past that no one wanted
to review; as Revelli recalls "after the war, when the survivors were repatriated
from the various imprisonments, people were already distracted, already willing to forget,
so much was there

hurry to start living again " 46 . Just think of the difficulties encountered by Primo Levi

in publishing immediately after the war *If this is a man* , rejected by Einaudi

43 For a more in-depth analysis of ANEI's activity from the post-war period to today and its political setting,

that we do not have the opportunity to deepen here, v. N. Labanca, *The official memory of internment* , cit .; Id.,

Catabasis. The return , cit.

44 U. Dragoni, *The reasons for silence* , in N. Della Santa (edited by), *The Italian military interned* , cit., P. 162.

45 In this regard, cf. in particular C. Pavone, *Notes on the problem of veterans* , in N. Gallerano (edited by),

The other postwar. Rome and the South 1943-45 , Angeli, Milan 1985, pp. 87-106; N. Labanca, *Catabasi* , cit.

46 N. Revelli, *Preface* , to L. Collo, *The Disarmed Resistance: the story of the Italian soldiers imprisoned in the German concentration camps* ,

Marsilio, Venice 1995.

Italian military internees in the camps of the Third Reich 25

because it was addressing a topic that did not seem to attract enough interest in public. Therefore, in the post-war period the question of veterans was addressed only from the point

view of the assistance, and this too was only partially done, and the intention mind a political approach to the issue. Only to the story of the veterans from captivity in Russia a wide propaganda emphasis was given, as the story, in the climate of cold war, could be exploited in an anti-communist function. For this it was widely used in the electoral campaigns of 1948, especially in the areas from which came most of the Alpine soldiers who died in Russia, leaving aside remember that it was Nazi-fascism that attacked Russia and Italian fascism a send the Alpine troops to that front in desperate conditions.

On the other hand, the IMIs had lived through a story that appeared to be clearly separate from the Italian events of those years, because they had remained far from Italy for the whole

period of the Resistance, and they were neither protagonists nor spectators. This them it shared with the political deportees, who were also excluded for a long time from the history of the Resistance;

but on the IMI issue there were further problems compared to political deportees, as they represented the remains of the army that had fought alongside the Nazi smo, so putting them at the center of attention would have implied awareness of the weight of the fascist war and of the almost total acquiescence with which it had been

carried forward. Military internees had previously been war fighters wrong and then the "justified absentees" of the war that had instead represented the moral and political rebirth of Italy, the partisan war. Indeed, many Revelli writes years after:

We too, the fighting partisans, have been slow to realize that the imprisonment in

German camps was a page of the Resistance at least as noble and heroic as ours war of liberation. We believed, mistakenly, that only the armed struggle deserved a just recognition 47 .

For a long time the inmates were therefore only recognized at most participation in a "passive" resistance, unarmed, not comparable to war partisan and in any case also questionable, as it started from a refusal of the fascism devoid of a real anti-fascist perspective, that is, devoid of a project positive and constructive politician. Fully include this collective rejection in history of the Resistance would have meant casting shadows on that image of the Resistance identified with a politically conscious and clearly you anti-fascist, with a continuity between the political opposition to fascism during the twenty years and the partisan war. It would have meant, in other words, re-evaluating how much

47 Ibid.

26 *Michela Cimbalo*

the armed resistance was totally the fruit of radical anti-fascist convictions e how much these had instead developed in its participants precisely during the fight. Indeed, one cannot fail to consider the political unpreparedness of the society of time, the damage caused by twenty years of the fascist regime; ignore that raw material that the Resistance had at its disposal was mainly depoliticized means feed the myth of a fascism that failed to scratch the conscience and prevents to study the Resistance as a real movement, with all its ambiguities and its own difficulty. And of course it also prevents you from evaluating all those forms of resistance to

fascism that are not part of the armed struggle and their relations with it. A emblematic case is represented for example by the condition of political deportees, for a long time excluded from the history of the Resistance, even if their events were more directly comparable to the partisan experience. One remembers it effectively witness who had the double handicap of being political and female deported and, while having directly taken part in the Resistance before being interned in the camp of Ravensbrück, after the war it was forced to clash with the superiority complex of the fighter in arms: «When you tried to tell your adventure, they shot always out the heroic act: "But we!" The Germans had killed them, the Fascists there they had killed them and we were prisoners » 48 .

In evaluating how such an interpretation of the Italian Resistance was established however, we must necessarily consider the heavy aggressions and resistance armed and those who had been part of the partisan formations suffered in postwar, both political and judicial attacks. In such a climate it was an even more energetic defense of the armed struggle is needed, to be claimed as a decisive element of the liberation and birth of the Republic, for which others types of resistance necessarily took a back seat.

Nor should we forget the tendency of all Italian historiography to favor political-military aspects, so that, only with the affirmation in the seventies-eighties

of a real interest in social history, of a systematic use of oral sources and of a fruitful contamination with other sciences such as sociology and anthropology was It is possible to elaborate a less monumental and more attentive idea of the Resistance variety of forms of opposition to fascism, and thus broaden research to issues deportation, the role of women in the Resistance, draft evasion e the attitude of the civilian population.

Finally, one could be led to think that the IMI affair could find at least some consideration on the part of the military authorities, more than others they should have appreciated the inmates' extreme loyalty to the army and country.

48 Testimony of Lidia Beccaria Rolfi, in A. Bravo, D. Jallà (edited by), *La vita offesa. History and memory of the Lagers Nazis in the Tales of Two Hundred Survivors* , Franco Angeli, Milan 1986, p. 195. *The Italian military internees in the camps of the Third Reich* 27

But even on this front the question was not talked about willingly, since remembering the refusal opposed by many inmates in the camps involved recalling the choice of those too

soldiers who had sided with Nazi-Fascism, for which they preferred to be silent about a problem that would have involved discriminating judgments and that could ruin the military career to someone.

The case of the "casse di Testa" testifies effectively. Pietro Testa, who was was the Italian commander of the Lager of Wietzendorf, he had brought back part of Italy of the German archive and all the Italian documentation of the camp, also included a thorough investigation of the behavior of all the officers who were there passed, indicating who had opted for CSR and who had opposed and which ones consequences he had suffered. These documents, delivered to the Ministry of Defense and there

remained at least until 1965, then disappeared into thin air 49 .

For all the reasons explained above, the history of IMI has long been forgotten, either celebrated only by those who were the protagonists. It therefore still appears valid the warning from Della Santa, also a former inmate, according to which «of ours story cannot be made a whole epic, or on the contrary a dark parenthesis of history Italian " 50 . On the other hand, it is precisely the inattention that historiography and institutions

Italians have addressed this issue, can provide interesting food for thought on the developments of Italian political history, as well as on the various stages it has paid the historiography of the Resistance. The events of the IMI start from a date well specifies, and lately somewhat discussed, that is 8 September; therefore remember that in that historical moment not only was it possible to make a choice, but that it was necessary and unavoidable, and led to very different outcomes. Furthermore, the rejection of Nazi-fascism

expressed by IMI can be considered as a new, particular piece from insert within the history of the Italian Resistance, as a further nuance of the wide range of modalities through which the separation of the

Italian society from the fascist regime and the rejection of the dictatorship and its wars.

49 Regarding the desire not to create discrimination between former IMI and the specific case of documents filed by

Head, cf. in particular P. Desana, *La via del Lager*, cit., pp. 91-97; V. Giuntella, *The national association of former internees e*

the historical memory of internment, in N. Della Santa (edited by), *The Italian soldiers interned*, cit, p. 70-80.

50 N. Della Santa, *Historical memory and choices of the present*, in Id. (Edited by), *The Italian military interned*, cit., P. 158.

28 Michela Cimbalo

Note to drawings

The images reproduced in these pages come from the Natale private archive Borsetti, and have been partially published in the volume of memoirs *La mia Resistenza non*

army 51 . Additional officer from Friuli, immediately captured in France after September 8, Borsetti was imprisoned in the camps of Czestochowa, Chelm, Wietzendorf and Grosslűbow; in the autumn of 1944 he was then sent to compulsory work

in Hamburg, where he was released in May 1945 52 . During the time of his captivity, which lasted almost two years, Borsetti kept various notebooks, on which he wrote down events and thoughts

and above all drawings, through which he "photographed" the reality of the Lager