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## **EVERYBODY'S PRISONERS: THE ITALIAN EXPERIENCE**

During the Second World War Italian soldiers were everybody 's prisoners of war. This was due to the specific and unique history of the Italian role in the war and has resulted in many and different types of captivity. I'll endeavour to explain these two aspects in my speech.

Italy entered the war a year later after it began. Its choice, already made in the 30s, was on the side of Germany: indeed, the alliance between the two fascist countries was already created and reinforced by political and commercial agreements, military alliance and intense correspondence from the juridical point of view: the Fascist and the Nazi regimes were both dictatorships based on the extreme suppression of political enemies, on the diversity oppression and persecution of minorities, and on racial policy.

The history of Italian captivity can be divided into three periods: from 1940 to 1943; from 1943 to 1945; from 1945 to the different times of the repatriation. During the first period the Italians were either prisoners or captors, even if it's necessary to say that the enemy soldiers detained by the Italians had been for the most part caught on the African frontlines by the Germans. The two allied countries had indeed divided their responsibility for enemy prisoners in geographical areas, and all the enemies caught in the Mediterranean frontline should have been an Italian burden. Italy was neither ready enough to make war nor to take prisoners into custody; therefore captivity in Italy was a hard experience and sometimes war crimes occurred. It needs to be said that war crimes occurred also during the invasion of the USSR and the Balkan countries, and the guilty were not just the Germans, but also the Italians, who were responsible for executions, mass murders and other types of atrocities against the invaded countries' soldiers and civilians. Anyway, the period 1940-1943 was also the phase in which Italian soldiers were caught by the thousands and distributed in many different countries of detention: around 60-70.000 were caught by the Soviets; about 420.000 were caught by the Allies and transferred to Great Britain, USA, India, Kenya, South Africa, Australia

and so on<sup>1</sup>; about 142.000 others were prisoners of Yugoslavia, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece and Switzerland. About 15.000 ended up in Free-France and lived a very hard experience.

In the second period, following the armistice between the Allies and Italy, a unique and difficult situation was created for the Italian prisoners. They were then in their new cobelligerents hands and at the same time they became prisoners of their former allies. The Allies didn't release their former Italian enemies and preserve their prisoners of war status, but transformed them into co-operators available for works connected to the war effort; also in the USSR the Italians remained prisoners. The Germans handled their former comrades, now considered traitors, in a very hard way, depriving them of the Geneva Convention protection and employing them as slave workers.

In the third period, the Italian soldiers went back home. They did this at different times and in different ways: the Italian government asked the Allies to release first the prisoners detained in places where they were in a bad situation, for example in Germany, and only at a later stage, and gradually, the prisoners detained in better places, like USA or UK. This was due to the fact that the Italian authorities were worried about the veterans re-integration into the devastated society of the country after the war: there were no jobs, no houses, no food, sometimes no families for hundreds of thousands of people who went off to war many years before. The Allies welcomed this Italian request above all because they still needed the Italian prisoners as manpower.

Regarding the Italians in the USSR, the matter is different: first of all, the Italian authorities expected many more prisoners than those actually returned; secondly, for a long time, the Soviets held the few prisoners they had and when they were repatriated – from September 1945 to March 1946, but some prisoners only returned in 1954 – among them there were also 9.000 Italians already in German hands, released by the Soviets and later transferred to the USSR as prisoners.

When, eventually, all the Italians returned home, they had become veterans. The Italian veterans' world of the post WWII-era was a non-uniform and a dis-united world, made by men with different and often opposing stories: some prisoners had been in the winners' hands, some had been in the losers' hands; some had cooperated with the Allies, some hadn't; some had believed until the end in the victory of fascism, some hadn't; many had been unaware of politics, all had hoped that their captivity would end soon and to go back home. Above all, all were disappointed by Italy who had sent them to the war and by the different Italy to which they returned, all as losers.

For all the Italian prisoners of war captivity was, like for all the prisoners of every nationality, a very hard experience that transformed their identities. Also even when it was bearable, it had serious consequences on the prisoners' lives: as an important Italian historian has written,

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<sup>1</sup> After the armistice and during the rest of the war, the total sum of Italians detained by the Allies would have been 644.000.

«the mental and physical strain and the psychological crisis don't just depend on the daily ration calories».

My first topic of research is Italian captivity in the UK, the perfect example of a detention which was “good” from a material point of view: the Italian prisoners were well fed, lodged and equipped; they worked in good conditions and their jobs were always normal, safe and paid; they benefitted from the care of international and philanthropic associations and had appropriate medical treatment, recreation opportunities and education possibilities. The “political attitude” towards them was also very positive: they could write home regularly and listen to the Italian radio stations. Italian prisoners knew very well that their condition in captivity was better than those of their families in Italy.

This is a short description of the material situation in which about 155.000 Italian prisoners – the highest amount of Italian soldiers detained by the Allies throughout the Second World War – lived from 1941 to 1946. However, their political, mental, collective and personal situation was modified during the long years of captivity. First of all, it's necessary to say that Italian soldiers' captivity in Great Britain didn't fulfill a custodial need, but an utilitarian one – the British needed their labour above all in the agricultural sector – and that it meant that the full exploitation of manpower needed a good treatment of prisoners. It was something that other captors of WWII – the Germans, in particular – didn't understand and it was the reason why they were not able to optimize the enemy labour force. Instead the UK was able to do it.

Any captivity experience suffered by the Italian soldiers had its own distinctive features and was unique. It was not really comparable to the other situations. As regards that in Soviet hands, it needs to be said that it involved thousands of soldiers, but we don't have conclusive elements: we know that about 292.000 Italian soldiers were sent to conquer the USSR with the Germans. Of these men, 85.000 never returned: about 25.000 of them died in battle or during the withdrawal following the German-Italian defeat of January 1943, a withdrawal made for the most part on foot, in the snow, with very low temperatures for which the Italians were not equipped. About 60.000 of them died during captivity. At the end of the war the Italian survivors of captivity in the USSR were only 10.032.

As everybody knows, the USSR had not signed the Geneva Convention and had always refused to use ICRC. Moreover, «in Stalin's concept, he who, even despite himself, had become a prisoner, was worthy a target of disdain». Captivity in that country was really a fatal experience incomparable to other situations, like all the captivity experiences, but a situation like that of the

Italians – everybody’s prisoners – requires some form of comparison or rather an attempt to pinpoint some common features, in their different displays.

I’ll try to analyze some of these common features – they are many and unfortunately I don’t have enough time to deal with all – regarding the Italian experience. First of all, any Italian P.O.W. was a bargaining chip in any kind of political, diplomatic or economic negotiation between the fighting powers, between his captor and the Italian authorities. It was the case for the Italian soldiers in Allied hands: before the armistice, the good treatment of Italians was for the Allies a kind of guarantee, or a hope in this sense, that the Axis captors would handle their British and American prisoners in the same humane way. After the armistice, the Italian authorities used the Italian prisoners’ availability for works connected to the war effort, but preserving them in the P.O.W. status, to obtain co-belligerent status for Italy. Their work was used as a pledge up to the peace negotiations, to obtain less severe conditions for defeated Italy; their long and late repatriation was used by the Allies as a concession. Also for Germany the post-armistice Italian internees were a bargaining chip: with Mussolini’s Social Republic, to obtain the prisoners’ manpower in work that was really a slave work; with the internees’ families, to try to prevent them taking part in the Resistance movement, threatening retaliation on their loved ones in captivity. Also for the Soviets: the Italian prisoners were for a long time almost a mystery for the Italian authorities, who didn’t know how many they were, in which conditions they were detained, how many were dead or alive. Moreover, they were detained for a very long time to be used in exchange for Soviet refugees abroad or Italian war criminals.

Second, any Italian prisoner of war was seen by his captor like a source of manpower: the Allies, and first of all the British, organized the Italian captivity exactly in this sense, to the point the Italians were not considered dangerous enemies as much as rather useful workers, or better not soldiers, but rather farmers in the war. Also the Germans organized their detention of Italians in the same sense, but they intentionally declined to consider that their workers were first of all human beings, and exploited their manpower – like that of the other nationalities in their hands – without moral concerns or restraint, often till the physical collapse of the prisoners. The Soviets included the Italian prisoners in the Gulag system, that had also the purpose of supplying the state with «huge slave manpower stocks to use in the most dangerous works and in the inhospitable areas».

Any captor transferred and employed their Italian prisoners of war in the way he needed: often they did the same job, used in the agricultural sector, or in the mines, in the railways and so on: but for the Allies – above all for British in UK – the Italians worked with gumboots and safety helmets; for the Germans and the Soviets they worked in the bitter cold with improper equipment,

they were hit and starved, and often they got sick and died. Any captor sanctimoniously presented the work as a possibility, for the prisoner, of personal improvement: actually it was always a kind of exploitation, with the differences between a camp and a lager, often between life and death. At any rate, the work for any captor was both one of the first reasons of the captivity – every country needed manpower first all because its men were at war – and one of its modality.

Third, any Italian prisoner, in any captor's hand, was an object of propaganda and a subject of political re-education. Obviously, the propaganda and re-education aims and weight were different from country to country and we'll see how, but first of all it's necessary to say that prisoners were used in both spheres in more ways: propaganda and re-education had indeed prisoners as subjects because they were directed straight to them, but also to their families; however, propaganda was also addressed to their own prisoners and soldiers detained by the enemy or at war. In what sense: for example, the treatment of prisoners in the UK was good and this was made known to the Italian authorities in the hope of reciprocity and to show that the captor's country could afford a good treatment of prisoners; however, it was also to let their own soldiers at war know that the Italian prisoners were really well treated, but not too much, because no one forgot that they were enemies against whom the brave British boys were fighting. In brief, the British authorities let it be known that the Italian P.O.Ws ate enough, but they could not fraternize with British girls. Doctrine was upheld, at least in the second part, and for the “battle for hearts and minds”.

The propaganda and political re-education of Italian P.O.Ws in Allied hands were precisely based on their good treatment: the Allies wished to demonstrate the Western democratic system's goodness by a show of material prosperity and political liberality. The Italians were considered easily “democratizable” and, above all, convertible into supporters of the Western system. The work to persuade them of Fascism's mistakes went at the same speed as that to avoid that they became Communists.

It was just the opposite of what the Soviets wanted. For them, the propaganda and the political re-education were a central and preeminent point. It was really a matter of indoctrination, in a program looked after by the party with the cooperation of Italian anti-fascists exiles. The aim of the big effort made towards the Italian prisoners – and not just towards them, obviously – was double: to «re-educate the fascist invaders to the “democratic liberties” recalled by Stalin» and to transform them into «“active allies”» at the disposal of the “socialist homeland”, above all when they were repatriated.

The Italian internees in Germany were subjected, for all the time of their captivity, to a violent, hard and brutal propaganda, of which the first author was the Italian Social Republic of Mussolini. Any kind of means and any kind of material and psychological pressure was used to persuade them to take an oath to the Nazi and Fascist regimes and their alliance. Most of 600.000 Italian military internees refused to do it, remaining in the camps, suffering starvation, tortures and cold, often dying. Their continued and repeated “no” was a type of Resistance to all intents and purposes.

To finish this topic, it's necessary to outline something regarding the outcome of propaganda and re-education work. As regards the Allies, the work may have been underhand but was less important for the captors themselves, more interested in the economic output, essentially it failed, because there were too many contradictions between a theory that wanted to teach freedom and a practice that kept the Italians as prisoners in spite of the armistice, the co-belligerence, the cooperation, the end of the war. The Italians could never fraternize with the Allied population, for example, and the freedom was always, for them, something to observe from far.

As regards the Soviets, the political work on prisoners produced conflicting outcomes, raising above all indifference among people only wishing to go home. It's true that many former proud fascists became as much proud anti-fascists but, like for all the Italian soldiers and prisoners of WWII, the acceptance of the idea of anti-fascism was difficult for them because it required a complete reappraisal, both collective and individual, of their personal and national past. In every context of captivity, many remained fascist also in reaction to captivity itself, too long and sometimes, like in the USSR, very hard.

The work of Germany and Mussolini's Social Republic on Italians interned by the Reich was a total failure: the very low adhesion to the Nazi and Fascist offers of collaboration is unquestionable evidence of this.

The last point I'd like to examine regards the memory and the public use made of Italian captivity history. Outside Italy, this history has for a long time been affected by a general underestimation of the Italian role during the war. In Italy, for an even longer time, the one experience broadly discussed and commemorated has been the Soviet one. The harsh Italian captivity in the USSR was useful for political reasons, in a country like Italy where the Cold War was at times extreme and sometimes very lukewarm. Consequently, that experience and its memory, like the veterans themselves, were often exploited for anti-communist propaganda, from the post-war period up to today. Other realities of captivity were for a long time forgotten or neglected. During the 80s captivity experience in Germany started to emerge from the inner depths

of captive's memories and to attract historians' interest. As for the Italians in the Allied hands the matter is totally different. When they returned home, they were defeated veterans in a defeated country and, moreover, were the victors' former prisoners. These men were quickly forgotten and removed from the Italian political scene, because they represented the Italy's "wrong war" of 1940-1943; they had been prisoners of the new and rich allies of their country; they had been absent during the "right war" at the Allies' side. Usually, they didn't narrate their captivity experience, a not heroic one which was not useful in a project of "national redemption", and above all a troublesome one, because remembering the Italian responsibility for the war, a clash which contrasted with the myths of "italiani brava gente" (Italians good people) and of the "common war against the common enemy", Germany, the only guilty party.

Today, thanks to a new historiography, that story has been recovered and deeply studied as an important and crucial section of European and World history. Luckily and finally, war captivity is now considered, in Italy too, as a basic part of the European identity which emerged from the war and is slowly becoming an element of collective consciousness and knowledge.

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