

RESEARCH ARTICLE

‘Beyond Paisans’: Italian-American service members and the Allied liberation of Italy

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Abstract

During the Second World War, hundreds of thousands of American soldiers of Italian origin were drafted into the US military and sent to fight overseas against the Axis powers. For many, this was an opportunity to demonstrate their loyalty to the country and remove suspicions raised by Italian communities’ ties with the Fascist regime. The prospect of fighting in their homeland aroused mixed feelings among those who were sent to Italy from June 1943. On the one hand, the presence of cultural and family ties stimulated the establishment of supportive relations with Italians and was seen by Washington as a useful tool for promoting ‘good occupation’ policies in Italy. However, the ethnic background of these soldiers did not always act as a socialisation factor with Italians, but sometimes gave rise to contradictory and even hostile attitudes that were linked to harsh judgements about Italians’ responsibilities for Fascism and their predisposition, or otherwise, to democracy. This article reconstructs the contribution made by these ethnic personnel to the liberation of the peninsula and the particular views they held of Italy and Italians between war and liberation.

Keywords: Second World War; Italian Americans; ethnic identity; Allied occupation

An ‘ethnic’ look at the liberation of Italy

I am looking towards my arrival in Italy with great anxiety and much interest. Truthfully, I am excited at the thought of visiting Rovito, my birthplace, and that of my parents and relatives, and to see my grandfather, grandmother (if they are still alive), my aunts, and many relatives. This, I hope, will give me the opportunity to learn something about Italy and what they had to endure under Mussolini and Fascism.¹

Franco Donato, a US sergeant with the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), noted these impressions in his diary on 7 November 1943. Donato was born in 1916 in Rovito, in the province of Cosenza, and emigrated to the United States at the age of 12. He returned to his homeland as a non-commissioned officer of an occupying power that had come to destroy the vestiges of 20 years of Fascist oppression. Italy, until recently an enemy country, was not foreign to him. In the United States, Donato had grown up in Chicago’s Little Italy as a ‘hyphenated American’. Without renouncing his Italian and Calabrian background, he had attended US high schools, learned English and participated in the opportunities of a

wealthy society, introjecting habits and interests linked to American popular culture and sport (he had also been a wrestling instructor).² As a member of the Italian-American generation born or raised in the US, he belonged to two worlds: the Italian microcosm of family and neighbourhood and the macrocosm of US society (Vecoli 2005, 130). Strengthened by this dual identity, he regarded the Allied military campaign in Italy from 1943 from a particular perspective. The impressions noted in his diary show him eager to better understand the land that contributed to forming his own 'diasporic identity', defined through a continuous physical, emotional, symbolic exchange between the country of origin and the host country,³ with only an unresentful nod to the question of Italians' collective political responsibilities for Fascism.

However, the impressions of Daniel Petruzzi, a captain in the Allied Military Government (AMG), who landed in Sicily in autumn 1943, were of a completely different nature. On leaving the US, Petruzzi said he resented Italians, not only because Fascist Italy had helped drag the US into the war, but also because, after the opening of hostilities, the anti-Italian climate that had spread in the US had cast doubt on his loyalty to the country. Petruzzi was outraged by this. After all, he was a third-generation Italian American, born and raised on US soil like his parents (his grandparents had emigrated from Basilicata at the end of the nineteenth century), he had attended college, was a big fan of Babe Ruth's Yankees, and called himself 'one hundred percent American'. His connection with Italy, where he had no direct relatives and had never visited, was only symbolic, even if the idea of having to fight there caused him some 'mental turmoil'. However, he had an ambivalent attitude towards Italians. On the one hand, he was correct and helpful; on the other, he did everything to avoid them getting too personal and, above all, considering them their equal: 'I was determined not to allow them to get familiar' (Petruzzi 2000, 18, 109).

Whether accentuated or not, the Italian heritage of Donato and Petruzzi, as for other Italian-American soldiers, conditioned their experience under arms in Italy. But in what ways? Did their backgrounds constitute a psychological obstacle to participating in a war that could damage their communities of descent? Or did it prove to be a useful tool for US military, strategic and political interests in Italy? Were these Italian-American soldiers willing to accept some common identity with the Italians? Or, like Petruzzi, did they dislike being treated like *paesani*? The various attitudes assumed by these combatants in Italy depended on several factors, such as the degree of attachment to the country of origin, the degree of Americanisation, and the accrued judgement about Italians' responsibilities for Fascism or their capacity for democracy. What made the difference was the way in which each of them, in the context of Italy in 1943–5, lived their Italian heritage in relation to their sense of belonging in the US – that is, their identity as 'ethnic Americans'. This contribution aims to reconstruct the ways in which these Italian-American personnel regarded their experience in the country, Italy and Italians more generally between the war and the liberation. In doing so, it uses personal testimonies taken from oral interviews and memoirs, contemporary or written after the fact, selected from a larger and more varied sample. The subsequent memorial reworkings carry a methodological warning to consider the subjective, rhetorical and performative character that can impel protagonists to assign value judgements to their experiences, inserting the story into a particular memorial paradigm. Many war memoirs of Italian Americans, in fact, can be ascribed to the memorial canon of the so-called 'good war', aimed at affirming on a political and moral level the 'just' nature of US intervention in the war (Terkel 1984). This paradigm is based, however, on an excessively mythologised image of the good US soldier, not participating in the violence of war (Bodnar 2010, 32), and tends to elide some controversial aspects of the US war effort, such as the brutal and racial nature of the war fought on the Pacific front (Dower 1989) or the discrimination against some US ethnic minorities, mobilised but deprived of civil rights

(Takaki 2000). Even finding oneself fighting a ‘total war’ could lead to repressions and silences among soldiers, a typical tendency in post-traumatic memories (La Capra 2001). The prospect of being sent to fight in Italy, as we will see, aroused a certain unease in some Italian-American soldiers linked to the possibility of having to take up arms against Italians and potentially even their own blood relatives, a trauma that was not always revisited at a memorial level. The reliability of these testimonies, therefore, must not be measured only by their actual ‘adherence to the facts’, but also by their divergence from them: that is, it will be necessary to consider the unsaid and the repressed, as well as what was later reworked.⁴

Italian Americans: an ethnic identity between consent and descent

Ethnic identity is not an easy category to define. Instead of a ‘natural’ fact transmitted unchangingly by descent, it should be understood as a subjective and often ‘imagined’ reality. In other words, it is a cultural construction within which individuals or groups perceive themselves and differentiate themselves from others by claiming characters, traditions, habits and symbolic elements – not necessarily authentic – often freely selected or unconsciously incorporated as reference models (Fabietti 2013, 178–179). It is, therefore, a cultural identity defined in interaction with other groups of individuals (Cornell and Hartmann 1998, 72–85). Sometimes, in response to categorisations imposed by others, a group can become self-consciously aware of its own ethnic specificity (Jenkins 1997, 70–72). This is the case with the Italian minority in the United States. When Italians arrived en masse between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, their self-perception was not as a national group, but based on their regional origins (Franzina 2007). It was the US authorities and public opinion that standardised them within the single ethnic category of Italians, but also classified them, in some states, in racial terms due to their unproven ‘whiteness’ (Guglielmo and Salerno 2003; Luconi 2021). Added to this were various prejudices and stereotypes that described Italians as violent, criminal and subversive, as well as unreliable and unruly (Connell and Gardaphé 2010; Sanfilippo 2011). Italian immigrants began to organise themselves as a homogeneous group, in part to defend themselves from such discrimination, forging their own ethnic identity as Italian Americans (Nelli 1983; Alba 1985), an identity defined, in the multi-ethnic US of the time, through a dialectic between ‘descent’, represented by the tradition of the origin country, and ‘consent’, the desire to self-recognise as a group with common interests within the host society where they aspired to be accepted (Sollors 1986). The period between the two World Wars was a critical juncture for Italians’ inclusion in US society (Luconi 2007a, 2011). The relationship between ‘descent’ and ‘consent’ was at the centre of various tensions during that period. On the one hand, due to the restriction of migratory flows imposed in the 1920s, the second generation of Italian Americans became more numerous than that of their fathers who had immigrated from Italy, and the former showed a desire to free themselves from family culture and tradition, without necessarily denying it (Luconi 2003, 93). Conversely, Fascism’s rise to power stimulated a further strengthening of the ethnic awareness of Italian Americans. The regime’s appeal to the US public (Hull 2021) made Italian Americans proud of their heritage and therefore vulnerable to Fascist cultural propaganda, though this failed to stem their progressive Americanisation (Pretelli 2012; Luconi 2000a). The dialectic between ‘descent’ and ‘consent’ was exacerbated by the Italian intervention in Ethiopia, which marked the highpoint of Italian-American mobilisation in support of the regime, but also the start of the crisis in diplomatic relations between Italy and the United States. With the outbreak of the Second World War, Italian-American adherence to prewar Fascism, although motivated by ethnic pride rather than by ideological choice, raised for them a problem of ‘dual loyalty’.

In December 1941, after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the 695,000 immigrants in the US with Italian citizenship were designated ‘enemy aliens’ and restrictive measures were imposed on their personal freedoms. On 19 February 1942, Executive Order 9066 ordered the internment in special camps of any enemy aliens judged to be suspicious. Although Italians constituted the largest foreign group, they were considered less dangerous than the Japanese and German minorities, which suffered more restrictive measures. Around 110,000 Japanese Americans and 25,000 Germans were interned, while only 3,567 Italians were arrested and 367 interned (Basile Chopas 2017). The political weight of the Italian-American vote certainly contributed to limiting the punitive measures against Italians and determining the early lifting of the enemy alien stigma, announced on Columbus Day, 12 October 1942.

‘Americanness’ and ‘dual loyalty’

The rehabilitation of Italian Americans was also helped by the rapid reorientation of their communities in favour of the US war effort. The ethnic press, in particular, despite having beaten the drum for Fascism, after Pearl Harbor gave wide coverage to the many patriotic activities undertaken by the Little Italies in favour of Washington, emphasising the high rate of voluntary enlistment in the US armed forces and the discipline and heroism shown by Italian Americans on the various war fronts (Rossi 2023). This helped to remove the enemy alien stigma, but also to overturn prejudices about Italians as being cowardly and unruly. The prominence given by the Italian-American press to highly decorated fighters such as Sergeant John Basilone – born in Buffalo to parents from Campania and fallen heroically at Iwo Jima, the only marine of the Second World War to have received the Medal of Honor and the Navy Cross – served to demonstrate not only the devotion of Italian Americans to the US but also their skills in battle (Frontani 2014).

During the war years, Italian Americans were the largest ethnic group enlisted in the US military (Bruscino 2010, 58), estimated to number about 850,000 (Pretelli and Fusi 2022, 60). The majority were young people born in the early 1920s on US soil, and, as such, already partly ‘Americanised’. Their experience under arms supporting the Allied war effort constituted a decisive moment for the effective entry of Italian Americans into the US ‘melting pot’ (Belmonte 2001; LaGumina 2006). However, this Americanisation did not equate to a renunciation of their ethnic identity, nor did their loyalty to the US mean rejecting their country of origin (Luconi 2012). After the Allied invasion of Sicily and the signing of the armistice with the Badoglio government in September 1943, Italian-American communities put pressure on the US government to exonerate Italy from an unconditional surrender and a punitive peace (Luconi 2007b). In support of these demands, a reductive reading of Fascism was often offered, differentiating between the regime and ordinary Italians, and blaming Mussolini for deceiving the Italian people, who were traditionally predisposed to freedom and linked by historical bonds of friendship to the United States.⁵ For example, Charles Poletti, the Italian-American governor of New York, who later became the point man for the AMG in Italy, expressed himself in December 1942 thus:

From the days of Columbus, men and women of Italian birth or extraction have played a notable part in the building of our great democracy in America ... The Italian people, I feel sure, now realise that they are misled by Mussolini into becoming vassals of Hitler. They have never had their heart in this war.⁶

The approximately 51,000 Italian prisoners of war (POWs) held in the United States were also presented by the Italian-American press as victims of Mussolini’s war (Keefer 1992;

Conti 2012), and their discipline, good conduct and desire to collaborate with the Allies were praised.⁷

Although in a different context, a similar reading – one that aimed at separating the responsibilities of the regime from those of Italians – also characterised the propaganda of the BBC’s Italian Service, where various Italian antifascist intellectuals worked (Lo Biundo 2022). The situation for Italian communities in the UK, however, differed from that in the US. In Britain, the stigma of ‘dual loyalty’ heavily influenced the treatment accorded to Italian immigrants and POWs (Sponza 2002; Insolubile 2012). Moreover, unlike the Italian-American case, the enlistment of the Italian British in the UK armed forces was limited, especially as combat personnel (Ugolini 2013).

The absolving representation of the Italian people as victims of Mussolini, in addition to being destined for subsequent success in postwar Italy (Focardi 2013), was matched in US popular culture, where Fascism was generally portrayed as a grotesque and unimpressive regime and Italians were considered to be harmless people who were essentially in solidarity with the United States, unlike the Germans and the Japanese (Guglielmo 2000). This benevolent reading was also proposed by the Italian-American judge Michael Musmanno, who was engaged as an AMG officer in Italy from 1943. In view of the close blood ties across the ocean, Musmanno went so far as to depict the war between Italy and the United States as an unnatural war between a ‘mother’ and her ‘children’ (Musmanno 1947, 8). Indeed, the fear of a ‘civil’, ‘fratricidal’ war between Italians and their overseas cousins was a raw nerve in Italian-American sensibility (Gambino 2000, 215–216; Luconi 2012, 159). The risk was real: many Italian-American soldiers still had parents and relatives in Italy, some of whom were enlisted in the Italian army.⁸ The idea of taking up arms against them was therefore traumatic for some. The ‘enemy alien’ John Spataro was confronted with a worst-case scenario by his recruiter, which left him terrified: ‘You got a brother over there in Italy? If we tell to shoot your brother, are you going to shoot him?’ (Fox 2000, 195). The dilemma of ‘dual loyalty’ made it more difficult for Italian Americans to demonstrate their patriotism in Italy. According to the Sicilian American Paul Piscano, the paradigm of the ethnic hero embodied by John Basilone in the Pacific against the Japanese was not reproducible in Italy: ‘It would be very painful to see that same act of courage demonstrated against Italians’ (Terkel 1984, 141). According to a widespread belief, most Italian-American recruits given the choice would have volunteered for the navy or marines, in the hope of being sent to the Pacific rather than to Italy (Mormino 1986, 219). However, although this kind of response did occur, the idea of a mass enlistment of Italian Americans in the Pacific is inaccurate (Pretelli and Fusi 2022, 95). Most Italian-American recruits, especially second-generation ones, were willing if necessary to do their duty in Italy. Albert DeFazio of Pittsburgh made it clear that if Italians ‘shot him, he would have shot back’.⁹ James Altieri, sent to Italy with Darby’s Rangers, wrote:

[N]aturally I would much prefer to fight the Germans or the Japs. I would feel bad about fighting the same people my father came from – but I feel that when the time comes, that factor won’t interfere with my duty as an American soldier. (Altieri 2014, 22–23)

In some cases, first-generation Italian Americans proved to be no less resolute. For example, Anthony Vittiglio, born in Cassino and emigrated to the US at the age of 15, reported:

I didn’t like ... fascism. That’s why I came to the States ... And I got called into the Army ... and I said, this country gives me food, I like this country, so I volunteered to

[go overseas]. I was thinking at that time Italy was at war, too. I said, 'Maybe I'll go in Italy' ... [but they said no, maybe they thought I was a spy or something].¹⁰

The question of the reliability of Italian-American recruits sometimes led military authorities to deem them unfit for active service on the Italian front, especially those who were not yet US citizens and still had relatives in Italy. Such was the case for Arthur Bruno, born in 1922 in Lamezia Terme and emigrated to the US in 1935.¹¹ But, in reality, these were limited cases. Most of the time their ethnic heritage did not prejudice soldiers being employed on the peninsula.

In addition to the desire to demonstrate their full 'Americanness', other motivations could strengthen the decision to fight in Italy, such as the desire to contribute to the defeat of Fascism. Antifascism, in truth, was a minority element among the Italian-American recruits and it was not uncommon for some of them to naively reiterate the good-natured judgements expressed about the Fascist regime by their fathers.¹² However, there was no shortage of others who came from families with more solid antifascist traditions.¹³ Furthermore, there were also several Jewish exiles among those enlisted in the US forces who had left Italy because of the racial laws and, as in the case of Alex Sabbadini from Rome, gave a distinctly more antifascist meaning to their participation in the Italian campaign (Sabbadini 2017).

In any case, fighting in Italy meant not shirking the prospect of having to wage war on Italians. The majority of Italian-American soldiers did not shy away from having to wage a 'total war' in the country. According to General Patton, Italian-American soldiers 'pay no attention if they are asked to bomb the country of their fathers and grandfathers: they bomb it and fight to occupy it' (Mercuri 1992, 37). In fact, Air Force Sergeant Peter Monaco did not object when he was assigned the task of bombing his parents' home town, Ariano Irpino.¹⁴ The Italian-American press usually presented the Allied bombing of Italian cities as a sad but inevitable necessity that even Italian-American airmen, although pained by it, could not escape.¹⁵ An exception, therefore, is the story of radio gunner Frank Bartolomei, who, asked to bomb his parents' home town in the Tuscan Apennines, asked to be exempted but was refused (Amicarella 2009, 166). The extensive use by the Allies of aerial bombing on Italian cities (Labanca 2012; Baldoli and Knapp 2012) raised some doubts at the time among Italian-origin soldiers, who had much less regard for the more devastating air raids carried out over Germany and even the atomic bombings of Japan, which were almost always judged to be legitimate and indispensable for victory.¹⁶ Mixed reactions among combatants in Italy were aroused particularly by the bombing of the medieval abbey of Montecassino, with disparities between those who, although deeply disconcerted by the reckless destruction of artistic heritage, supported military necessity (Petrucci 2000, 216) and those who expressed harsh criticism 'both on aesthetic grounds and on military grounds' (de Grazia 2011, 256).

Not just a 'good occupation'

As soon as the invasion of Sicily began, the Italian-American press praised the Italian military surrender to the US advance guard and the benevolence with which US soldiers were welcomed by the local population. The media's aim was to declare Sicily's hostility to Fascism and the deep-rooted feeling of brotherhood between Italy and America (Baris 2015; Patti 2013). Traces of similar elements can be found in some combatants' memoirs, as well as in the US military authorities' directives. For example, the guide issued to US soldiers in Italy after 8 September 1943 stated: '[I]f you are an American of Italian origin you will be sure of a warm welcome anywhere.'¹⁷ However, the attitude of the Italian population

before the armistice was not always supportive. The Italian-American Phil Rocco, captured by the Italians in North Africa and taken to Sicily, was insulted by a crowd of civilians who called him a traitor to the homeland (Rocco 2005, 12–13). Michael A. Scambelluri, a paratrooper and a prisoner in Sicily, was showered with insults because he was Italian American, tortured and then mortally wounded (Avagliano and Palmieri 2021, 38). It should also not be overlooked that some units of the Italian army put up strong resistance to the Allied vanguard in Sicily. The Italian American James Altieri, faced with tough opposition from the ‘Livorno’ division, abandoned any hesitation about killing Italians if necessary: ‘Gone too were my silly compunctions about fighting Italians. If my own brothers had shot at me like this, I would be just as anxious to kill them’ (Altieri 2014, 209). However, when faced with two Italian soldiers who begged for their lives, Altieri spared them. On the other hand, five Italian-American soldiers of the 34th Infantry Division ‘Thunderbird’ participated in the massacre of 73 unarmed Italian and German POWs on 14 July 1943 at Biscari (Mangiameli 2012). As emerged from the subsequent court martial, these soldiers of Italian origin not only showed no empathy for the Italian prisoners, but some had also apparently been responsible for violence against civilians and abuse of women (Harris 2009, 54, 60–62). However, in Canicatti on the same day as the Biscari massacre, Italian-American soldier Joseph Salemi disobeyed an order from his superior, Colonel George Herbert McCaffrey, to fire on a crowd of civilians who had been caught looting basic necessities (Salemi 1998). Days earlier, the Italian-American Major Frank E. Toscani had been installed by McCaffrey as military governor of Licata, one of the first liberated Sicilian towns, as he was the only officer in the group who spoke Italian (Toscani 1983, 14–15). The writer John Hersey drew inspiration from Toscani’s appointment for his 1944 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *A Bell for Adano*. The novel centres around the figure of Major Victor Joppolo, Italian-American governor of the fictional Sicilian town of Adano, as Toscani’s alter ego, the model of a ‘good’ and ‘humane’ officer who, playing on his ‘ethnic’ heritage, works to improve the miserable material and moral conditions of the townspeople and, at the same time, re-educate them about democracy (Hersey 1944). The story of Toscani and the figure of Joppolo, who over the years became a symbol of US ‘good occupation’ policies (Carruthers 2016), are representative of the centrality that Italian-American components of the AMG had to the US political and military authorities in the Italian context (Coles and Weinberg 1964, 165–167). The presence of these ethnic personnel could help tighten the bonds of sympathy between the Allies and the local population and capitalise on the country’s consent to the Allied occupation and the political mission of the United States (Patti 2020). A significant number of Italian-American officials were placed in the ranks of the AMG, many of whom used their ethnic background in the application of their roles. Charles Poletti was described by the Italian-American press as ‘the right man for the right place’, in the belief that as ‘the son of an Italian immigrant’ he knew ‘the needs of ordinary Italian people’ through ancestral instinct.¹⁸ Although his policies were not always popular among Italians, Poletti often leveraged aspects of character and identity that expressed his ‘Italianness’, such as joviality or religiosity. Meanwhile, insisting on his experience as a successful Italian American – the son of a stonemason who became governor of New York – Poletti sponsored the ‘civilising’ mission embodied by the United States, from Sicily to Lombardy (Di Capua 2005; Quinney 2021). This was a mission that many Italian-American soldiers believed in. Sergeant Frank Sclafani, an Italian American from the Bronx, apparently went around quoting passages by Thomas Paine: ‘We fight not to enslave, but to set a country free and make room upon the earth for honest men to live in’ (Martin 1967, 101). Cornelius ‘Kio’ Granai, an Italian American from Vermont and provincial legal officer in Leghorn, repeatedly rebuked some of his comrades who treated Italians as the ‘underdog or conquered people’, recommending that they use ‘a little more Americanism’ (Granai 2000, 45, 53). The aforementioned Musmanno, military governor of Sorrento, was undoubtedly the Italian American most empathetic with Italians

and the most convinced supporter of the idea that they venerated freedom and were therefore predisposed to democracy. Musmanno pleaded for the mitigation of penalties imposed on Italians for food-related crimes due to their poverty, something that William A. Lessa, an AMG civil affairs officer with origins in Puglia, also did several times. However, this was not always the case. Perhaps no one managed to match the behaviour of Stuki, the fictional Italian American portrayed by John Horne Burns in *The Gallery* (1947), who, having arrived in Naples with the AMG, harasses Italians for the sole purpose of avenging his father, who had been forced to emigrate overseas in his youth due to the family's poor living conditions. However, the Italian American De Antonio, AMG transportation officer in Naples, proved to be less than helpful with the locals, whose good faith he doubted: '[N]inety-nine out of a hundred Neapolitans are crooked. I should know, I'm a native of Naples myself,' he declared to his superior (Hill and Hill 1982, 20).

Convinced of their democratising mission, some Italian-American administrators expressed mixed opinions on the actual contribution that Italians could make to a future democratic arrangement. Several expressed appreciation of the role of the National Liberation Committees (Comitati di Liberazione Nazionale or CLNs) and the antifascist parties: '[T]hese were the people to bring democracy to Italy, not the monarchical idiots of Brindisi,' wrote Alfred de Grazia (2011, 207). William Lessa also established fruitful relationships with exponents of communism, even going so far as to declare that 'somehow the Italians seem to be the only Nation which can combine Communism with being a decent ordinary person'. And yet the sectarianism and fragmentation within the *ciellenista* (members of the CLN) front led him to doubt the extent of Italians' democratic literacy: '[I]t was my opinion that newly liberated Italians who had just emerged from years of fascism had little idea of a true democracy' (Lessa 1985, 142, 246). Similar judgements were repeated during the partisan insurrection of April 1945, when the reckoning with the enemy resulted in acts of savage purges. Daniel Petruzzi, faced with the scene of the beaten bodies of Mussolini and his acolytes kicked by the crowd, was disgusted: 'You have barely been liberated from barbarism and already you are acting worse than your oppressors' (Petruzzi 2000, 308). Lessa's judgement on Piazzale Loreto was bitter: '[U]ndoubtedly, this was a glorious event in the lives of the partisans, who thinking that they had covered themselves with glory had only succeeded in covering themselves with ignominy by what I would call their "necrosadism"' (Lessa 1985, 223). As is known, the relationship between the Allies and the Italian Resistance was complex and sometimes tense, especially during the final stages of the conflict. At that time, partisan dissatisfaction with Allied disarmament policies, which often lacked adequate co-ordination and coherence (Cacciatore 2023, 163–206), and Anglo-American fears of possible excesses and disorder by the armed formations of the left heightened mutual suspicion. However, as the Allied command did not consider the threat of a revolutionary partisan insurrection in Italy to be realistic, their approach to the partisan problem remained pragmatic throughout the conflict, distributing aid and supplies to the Italian Resistance based on the actual military potential of the individual partisan formations, and not on the basis of their political colouring (Piffer 2010, 113–114; Berrettini 2014, 63–86). Allies and partisans of different orientations therefore found themselves working side by side, at times despite obvious difficulties and friction, at others forging bonds of collaboration and even open sympathy. Figures such as Petruzzi worked closely with the Italian partisans, defending many of their demands. Petruzzi, head of the AMG Patriot Branch following the US Fifth Army, was able to earn the trust and recognition of some partisans for his gentle and understanding dealings with them (Petruzzi 2000, 16, 294). 'Between the members of our mission and Lieutenant Petruzzi,' one partisan leader wrote, 'a current of sympathy rapidly developed. The young lieutenant showers us with courtesies. Thanks to him, all doors open to us ... he is our guardian angel' (Lalli 1964, 102–105). General Alessandro Trabucchi, military commander of the Piedmontese CLN,

expressed himself no differently; for him, Petruzzi ‘was frank, intelligent, understanding ... he was undoubtedly one of the very few, among the Allied officers, who understood that Italians are guided much more by courtesy than by distrust and the whip’ (Trabucchi 2014, 153).

The common heritage often facilitated the establishment of relationships between Italian-American personnel and Italian partisans (Petracchi 2010, 273–274), so much so that ethnic components in the context of the Italian campaign were widely used by US intelligence. Around 79 per cent of the OSS agents employed in the field in missions to support the Italian Resistance were first- or second-generation Italian Americans, often recruited on the basis of their knowledge of Italian or regional dialects (LaGumina 2016, 17). The 14 Italian-American agents of the *Walla Walla* mission who parachuted in to the area around Chiavari in July 1944 because of their knowledge of the language got on well with the Ligurian partisans, with whom they spent their free time playing cards and joking (Pretelli and Fusi 2022, 285). The partisan Nello Dunchi established a fruitful collaboration on the Gothic Line with the OSS captain Nevio J. Manzoni, the ‘son of people who emigrated from Bologna’ who ‘spoke with a Bolognese accent’, and he made the acquaintance of other Italian-American agents, each with different ancestry: ‘One spoke strict Neapolitan, so much so that I didn’t understand it. Another was Venetian, another from Turin’ (Dunchi 1982, 213, 216).

Relations with the Italian population

Although the language of Italian Americans was often a ‘creolised’ language that mixed words in dialect, Italian and English (Carnevale 2009, 36) to the extent of being ‘a bastard jargon’ (Maiuri 1956, 133), it generally favoured the establishment of good relations between ethnic soldiers and the civilian population. Other common cultural elements contributed to this familiarisation. For example, the Italian ancestry and Catholicism of Gino Piccirilli, an Italian-American soldier with roots in Abruzzo, served to reassure the family of Marisa Petrucci, a young woman from Leghorn, of the respectability of her suitor when he asked for her hand, thus avoiding for her the moral censure often reserved for Italian girls who spent time with Allied soldiers.¹⁹ It is no coincidence that, between 1943 and 1945, about a third of all Italian ‘war brides’ married Italian-American soldiers (Varricchio 2015, 146). On the other hand, some Italian Americans were not exempt from the often predatory ‘sexualisation’ that characterised gender relations between US soldiers and civilians in Europe (Ellwood 2012). Alfred de Grazia, who landed in Sicily, described how he resolved his ‘sexual abstinence’:

Thus I found myself unthinking, unrepentant, and quite ready for sex in Syracuse ... I passed a couple of hours with supple Nuccia ... I was not so naive as to fail to bathe thoroughly, but, in my vanity, did not ask whether she needed compensation beyond food, drink, cigarettes and bedding down on my bedding roll unrolled. She asked for nothing, taking with her a pack of American cigarettes. (de Grazia 2011, 177)

Petruzzi also ‘took advantage’ of his authority as an AMG officer in Naples:

That afternoon, a cute little blonde appeared with her ‘uncle’, to offer anything in gratitude for their liberation from the monstrous Huns. She became my regular date. I requisitioned a swank apartment in a posh section near Via Chiaia, and Lydia and I moved in together. (Petruzzi 2000, 118)

Others, faced with the ‘familiar’ prostitution market, expressed their regret, realising that what lay behind it was the considerable poverty Italians suffered because of the war.²⁰ Many Italian Americans were compassionate towards Italians in need. Joseph C. Sangermano, robbed by a Neapolitan *scugnizzo* (street urchin), was shaken after managing to track the child down at his home by the miserable living conditions of the family and, forgetting about the theft, sent them food supplies.²¹ It was not always like this, however. De Grazia declared himself ‘dismayed and disgusted by social conditions in Naples and inclined to blame the Neapolitans’, who seemed ‘unashamedly and hopelessly manipulative, demanding, rhetorical, irrelevant, unimpressed by any conquerors or liberators’ (de Grazia 2011, 278). The often pleading or flattering nature of the Italians who continually turned to him for favours, as if he were ‘the password to riches’, also upset Cornelius Granai (2000, 50). Nello Camilli also reiterated widespread prejudices about the primitive and backward nature of southern Italian society: ‘[T]he people around here are enough to make anyone lose their appetite. They look for lice and bed bugs in each other’s hair, and they do it out in public’ (Camilli 2014, 59). It is easy to understand why not all Italian Americans were inclined to recognise Italians as their equals. Others noted the existence of common ties, despite their irritation. When a fellow soldier pointed out his physical resemblance to some Italian prisoners, the Italian American Edward J. Denari noted:

My first reaction was outrage to think the ethnicity association completely overlooked my being a red-blooded all-American guy – I was greatly offended. My second thought came through quickly as I told myself the truth. You now, in a way he is right. I relate to these Italian men, they are a part of my heritage even beyond the physical aspects and my heart goes out to them. (Denari 2003, 136)

Many Italian Americans serving in Italy were keen to search for their roots. In this sense, visits to the places their families had emigrated from held a particular significance (Rios 2013; Fusi 2018; Pretelli and Fusi 2022). Especially for second-generation Italian Americans, the climate of ‘celebration’ with which they were welcomed by relatives or *paesani* allowed them to immerse themselves in the rites and customs of their homeland, which they had known with perhaps less authenticity in US ethnic neighbourhoods, re-establishing the bond with their own heritage and making them feel ‘how eternal blood ties are’.²² Although at times these visits had the opposite effect of strengthening the American identity of the soldiers, who perhaps remained alienated by the economic backwardness of their communities of origin or by cultural practices that could appear archaic and incomprehensible (Siciliano 2004, 94), in many cases they gave new life to their ethnic identities. Anthony Caponi, who returned as a US soldier to the country from which he had emigrated as a young man, reflected:

I returned as a stranger, serving a foreign army, part of an impersonal instrument of fear and destruction. I came alone. And, like any other soldier viewed as an individual, I regained my identify of brother and son, regardless of what flag I served. I was [a] local hero. I was of Pretare [Ascoli Piceno] and of their blood, involved in a war no soldier had started. I was home. (Caponi 2002, 166)

Even Alex Sabbadini, who returned to Rome, where he embraced his brothers once more, managed to reconcile this multiple identity. This is how his son describes Alex in his biography of his father:

He also started to feel proud once again of his Italian heritage, an emotion that he had distanced himself from these last five years because Italy was in the enemy camp. He was also now proud to be a recently minted Italian American, representing the best of both cultures and being part of the Liberation. (Sabbadini 2017, 142)

For him, a Jew forced to leave Italy, contributing to the liberation of his country produced a sense of redemption that was not simply personal. Although aware of the responsibilities Italians bore for Fascism, he was convinced that in the end they had been ‘unwitting prisoners’, and therefore could be partially excused (Sabbadini 2017, 142, 187). This perspective differs from that characterising the return of some German-American soldiers who participated in the Allied occupation of Germany. For these combatants, especially if they were Jews, the weight of guilt for Nazism conditioned their return to their homeland, inhibiting any feeling of compassion towards the Germans, who were considered irredeemable (Dash Moore 2004, 217; Schmitt 1989, 206–207). Although there were exceptions, it was not uncommon for US personnel of German origin stationed in Germany with the AMG to intransigently apply ‘non-fraternisation’ and de-Nazification measures (Grossmann 2007, 33, 45; Gatkze 1980, 163; Carruther 1995, 76–78). Unlike their German-American counterparts, Italian-American personnel posted in Italy generally seemed less troubled by the question of Italian responsibilities. Anthony Caponi, on his return to his country of origin, expressed no disappointment when he was approached by two avowed local Fascists, who emphasised their blood relationship with him to ingratiate themselves. Having made peace with his ethnic roots, Caponi declared himself ‘glad to accept everyone’s renewed kinship’ (Caponi 2002, 166–167).

Conclusions

The presence of a large number of Italian-origin personnel in the US armed forces deployed in Italy was often seen as a factor for mitigating the normal asymmetries of war between occupiers and occupied. The linguistic and cultural proximity between Italian Americans and Italians allowed for mutual recognition that facilitated the establishment of relationships of solidarity. There were, of course, exceptions; the attitude of these ethnic service personnel towards Italians was sometimes ambiguous, revealing itself as supportive or resentful depending on the degree of intensity with which each of them lived their Italian heritage in relation to their Americanness. On the other hand, since the Italian Americans had been recognised as agents of democratisation of the country and of Italians, the initial fracture between descent and consent, between ethnic heritage and American identity, was at times recomposed.

Allied personnel of Italian origin were more or less explicitly assigned the task of promoting an image of the US among Italians as an attractive society in which democracy, freedom and wellbeing coexisted. Here, these service members had an advantage. If during the war the image of America had stimulated contrasting representations in Italians, the strong ties established by transoceanic emigration had mostly fuelled positive visions of the US as a land of opportunity and freedom (Cavallo 2020, 216–219). With the start of the Italian campaign in 1943, those transnational ties became strong elements around which to build the idea of a future common destiny for the two countries – a call that came not only from Washington or the various Little Italies, but also from the Italian antifascist forces, sometimes from the most unexpected of sources. In July 1945, for example, a delegation of Italian partisans led by Vincenzo Guarniera, alias ‘Tommaso Moro’, one of the commanders of the revolutionary partisan movement *Bandiera*

Rossa, delivered a petition to the US ambassador in Rome asking to be able to continue the battle for freedom by fighting alongside US troops in Japan. The document stated:

A great many Italians or Americans born in Italy live in America and especially in the US. Many of them are relatives of the undersigned officers. That's why in Italy the war against the United States of America was never felt and wished and why Italian people has given a warm-hearted hospitality to Americans either during the liberation war. Italy and America have many mutual destinies [sic].²³

These partisans indicated that the existence of transnational and diasporic ties was a guarantee of a common destiny, similar to the way in which the presence of Italian-American soldiers in the US armed forces had served to reinforce the image of two countries historically united by a disposition towards freedom and democracy.

After the war, the contribution made by Italian-American soldiers in defeating Fascism on the level of politics and identity had different outcomes in Italy and the US. For Italian-American communities, participation in the conflict allowed them to achieve complete Americanisation – that is, full political and social integration into the US mainstream, reflected in part in the development of memorial policies emphasising the role of Italian Americans in the war. This also stimulated a strengthening of their ethnic pride, which was also reflected in the maintenance of close political ties with the mother country, and for which Italian-American communities continued to lobby within the international relations framework established by the two countries between the postwar period and the Cold War (Luconi 2000b). In Italy, however, the role played by Italian-American personnel in the liberation of the country had little relevance on either the political or memorial level. As has been noted, their contribution was never commemorated by the postwar Italian authorities, surviving only in the literary and cinematographic imagination or in memorial traces in small localities (Pretelli and Fusi 2022, 401–411). While post-1945 Italy focused its memorial rhetoric on the role played by the Italian Resistance to German occupation (Focardi 2005), the contribution of these armed ethnic personnel was generically confused with that played by the Allied armies of liberation. There are various reasons for this silence, but certainly the composite and ambiguous nature of the Italian-American identity, the complex and often painful character of the diasporic experience that gave it substance, and the duplicity maintained by some in Italian-American communities regarding Fascism made it difficult for Italians to create an unified memory from that experience.

Notes

1. Diary of Franco Donato (courtesy of Clorinda Donato), 7 November 1943.
2. NARA II, RG 226, Records of the OSS, Entry 224, OSS Personnel Files, 1941–5, box 192, f. 'Donato, Franco', Application for employment and personal history statement.
3. The term 'diasporic identity', like 'diaspora', is a concept that lends itself to various definitions. Here it is understood more as a cultural construction than as the automatic outcome of migration (Sökefeld 2006).
4. On the problems of direct testimonies after the events, see Portelli (2017, 13).
5. 'People's Justice', *Il Progresso Italo-Americano (PIA)*, New York, April 1945.
6. 'Throw Out Hitler and Mussolini, Poletti Urges Italians by Radio', *New York Times*, 28 December 1942.
7. 'Agevolate i prigionieri di guerra italiani', *La voce coloniale*, New Orleans, 8 July 1944; 'Nato in America e per una strana circostanza è fatto prigioniero dagli Alleati nell'Africa del Nord', *PIA*, 14 May 1943; 'Rivede dopo trentasei anni il figlio che si trova negli Stati Uniti prigioniero di guerra', *PIA*, 4 October 1943.
8. 'Soldati italiani fatti prigionieri dai loro congiunti', *PIA*, 25 October 1945.
9. Interview with Albert DeFazio, 1 June 2017.
10. Library of Congress, Veteran Oral History Project (LCVOHP), interview with Anthony Vittiglio, p. 2.

11. NARA II, RG 226, Records of the OSS, Entry 224, OSS Personnel Files, 1941–5, box 89, f. 'Bruno, Arthur', Security Office, Investigation Report, 18 June 1943.
12. According to Dominic Battistella, Mussolini, before allying himself with Hitler, 'was doing a good job'; see LCVOHP, box 2658, folder 5, interview with Dominic Battistella, p. 10. For Anthony Cella, 'Mussolini had organised Italy very efficiently ... There was no begging, no tipping, trains were on schedule'; see Eisenhower Presidential Library, Abilene, Kansas, World War II Participants and Contemporaries Papers, 'No Finer Heritage: The Life of Joseph Anthony Cella', p. 31.
13. John Heinz History Center, Italian American Oral History, Pittsburgh, interview with Walter Vicinelly.
14. 'Per compiere il suo dovere il serg. Monaco bombarda il paese dei genitori', *PIA*, 3 March 1944.
15. 'Piloti americani dolenti di gettar bombe sull'Italia', *PIA*, 10 October 1943.
16. For examples of the lack of remorse regarding the bombing of Germany and Japan, see the testimonies of Italian Americans Denari (2003, 144–145), John Assenzio (Brokaw 1998, 235–236) and Fred Olivi (2006, 151).
17. See *Soldier's Guide to Italy*, no publication details but 1943, p. 5; Buchanan (2008, 223, 235).
18. 'L'"Amgot"' in Sicilia e l'Opera del Tenente Colonnello Poletti', *PIA*, 1 August 1943.
19. Interview with Gino and Marisa Piccirilli, 8 December 2013.
20. LCVOHP, diary of Lawrence Falcone, 30 January 1944, p. 28.
21. LCVOHP, J.S. Sangermano, *My Memoirs*, p. 7.
22. 'Il sergente Zarillo visita i nonni paterni e materni nella Basilicata', *PIA*, 3 July 1944.
23. TNA, WO 204/2793, Rehabilitation of Italian Partisans, Italian Patriots enlistment into US Army, The Command of the Brigade 'Moro', 20 July 1945.

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Italian summary

Tra le truppe statunitensi che combatterono in Italia tra il 1943 e il 1945, contribuendo alla liberazione del paese dal nazifascismo, prestarono servizio anche numerosi soldati d'origine italiana, figli e nipoti di emigrati nati e cresciuti negli Stati Uniti. Per molti di questi l'Italia, un paese allora formalmente nemico, non era però del tutto estraneo. Alcuni di loro vi mantenevano ancora legami parentali, condividendo altresì con gli italiani tratti culturali comuni. L'affinità culturale e linguistica, infatti, spesso agì con questi ultimi come fattore di socializzazione. D'altra parte, forme di risentimento 'etnico' e giudizi taglienti sulle effettive responsabilità degli italiani rispetto al fascismo resero l'esperienza di guerra di questi soldati italoamericani più controversa e talvolta contraddittoria. Il saggio ricostruisce il contributo dato da questo personale etnico alla liberazione della penisola e la peculiarità di vedute con le quali questo guardò all'Italia e agli italiani tra guerra e liberazione.

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