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INTRODUCTION

The Italian Resistance: historical junctures and new perspectives

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Abstract

This introduction to this special issue of *Modern Italy* explores how the emphasis on fascism in recent scholarship and public discourse risks its mythification and cultural rehabilitation, and urges a rebalancing of historiography to highlight the pivotal role of the Italian Resistance in shaping Italy's democratic identity. Marking the eightieth anniversary of Italy's liberation and the thirtieth anniversary of *Modern Italy*, the issue examines lesser-known aspects of the Resistance, such as marginal groups, gendered experiences and transnational perspectives. Contributions include studies on Roma Resistance fighters, the Catholic underground press, American soldiers of Italian descent, and women in the Liberal Party. The articles emphasise the liminality and creative potential of the Resistance as a transformative period that redefined political and cultural identities.

Keywords: Resistance; Italy; historiography; fascism; Allies

This special issue of *Modern Italy*, edited by Rosario Forlenza and Gianluca Fantoni, stems from a need that we might define as political: the concern that the emphasis on fascism in recent decades has favoured the cultural hegemony of the post-fascist or neofascist right, particularly in some areas of Europe.

Fascism is thriving: university courses on fascism have many students enrolled, fascism captivates the public, and it sells well in bookstores. To be clear: there is nothing inherently wrong with that. On the contrary, some recent works have contributed to reintroducing into the historiographical debate the notion of a general form of fascism, which had been marginalised in the early 2000s to make room for the study (and political condemnation) of twentieth-century totalitarianism, of which fascism was seen as merely an expression – and, in the case of Italian Fascism, not even the most reprehensible one (Bartolini 2024). The fascination with fascism is not limited to academic writing, however, but has also given rise to a vast amount of online content produced by enthusiasts or those nostalgic for fascism. By virtue of its accessibility and availability free of charge, this material often reaches and influences a much larger audience than professional historians are typically able to. The centenary of the March on Rome in 2022 saw an extraordinary number of publications and studies on fascism. But how can the allure of the anniversary be resisted? This special issue was also conceived because of an anniversary: it celebrates the 80 years that have

passed since the Italian national insurrection (25 April 1945) and the liberation of Italy from Fascism.

However, we must pose a question: is the fascination with fascism – its political, cultural and social aspects – along with the debates about the consensus it had in Europe and the inevitable corollary of fascist dictators' supposed charismatic leadership, contributing to its mythification? Are factors such as admiration for the Italian rationalist architecture of the 1930s or recognition of the cinema produced in those years prompting its positive reassessment? Are we consigning fascism to history, or are we resurrecting it as a political form and a cultural object?

While we do not have a definitive answer to such questions, we are convinced that shifting the focus from fascism to the resistance against fascism would certainly help to place fascism itself in the right perspective: as a nefarious ideology whose various manifestations were entirely detrimental to Italian and European society. Resistance is an integral part of the history of fascism, as some authors have recently reminded us, for, without the latter, the former would not have existed. See, for example, the recent and monumental work by Halik Kochanski, whose very structure reflects how resistance arose gradually and largely in reaction to the measures fascism took in the occupied countries, as well as to the overall climate of fear and repression it had created (Kochanski 2022). However, the public, the average European citizen, knows many things about fascism – also thanks to films and documentaries – but very little about the men and women who opposed it, how they did so, and why. This, we believe, is the task of historians today: to rebalance the historiography on the 1930s and 1940s by studying resistance to fascism at least as much as fascism itself, if not more.[1] This special issue represents our effort to move the needle in that direction.

This political and cultural motivation was supplemented by some historiographical observations, which convinced the two guest editors that this special issue was necessary. One such observation is that there is a limited amount of literature in English on the Italian Resistance, and much of it is dated.[2] However, we were not only interested in producing more literature on the subject; we were also looking for a specific type of contribution. Thus, this issue was conceived according to certain guidelines that justify the selection of the articles.

The first criterion was marginality. We wanted to shed light on aspects of the Resistance that have remained on the fringes of historical research and debate, and to talk about lesser-known groups, unusual episodes, and unexpected Resistance fighters. Hence the inclusion of Chiara Nencioni's article on Roma Resistance fighters, who were long forgotten by a republic that had retained much of its colonial and fascist-era racism (but anti-Romani sentiment dates back to the early post-unification years, as demonstrated in the article). Another little-known figure, with elusive and even contradictory characteristics, is that of the Catholic partisan. Alessandro Santagata's article reconstructs in particular the contribution made to the Resistance by the Catholic underground press, which also played an important part in shaping the image of the Catholic patriot/partisan, their religious and political motivations and their behavioural models, particularly in relation to the use of violence. But, as those who are hostile to the Resistance and its moral and political legacy always remind us, in the end, it was the Allies who liberated Italy, not the partisans. So, we thought it was appropriate to acknowledge the Allies' contribution to the liberation.[3] One particular group of liberators is examined in Francesco Fusi's article: American soldiers of Italian descent fighting in Italy. In US government plans, they were meant to be the propagators of American-style democracy among a population that needed to be educated politically and regenerated morally. At times, this is what they were, but for many, the experience of the encounter with their once fellow countrymen proved to be much more complex both emotionally and in terms of an understanding of their own identity. Detaching these actors from fixed categories and established overtly ideological historical

interpretations – we refer specifically to approaches to the study of the Resistance that seem outdated to us, such as active and passive choice, death of the *Patria* and grey zone – these contributions show how individuals and communities generate political and cultural meanings in the liminal uncertainties of their everyday experience, with a real effect on history.

We also wanted to discuss the Resistance from a gender perspective, and this is the reason for the inclusion of the articles by Iara Meloni and Rossella Pace. The latter also falls into the previous category – that of the marginal stories of the Italian Resistance – because the resistance of the members of the Italian Liberal Party is little known. It is, however, noteworthy from a qualitative standpoint. It should be noted that women were particular protagonists of the Liberal resistance. For example, their high levels of education, which included knowledge of English, made them valuable in the eyes of the Allied governments. As for Iara Meloni's article, it offers an overview of the ways in which women in the Resistance have been discussed in Italy, from the initial silence to more recent historical and mainstream outputs. This article is therefore a valuable tool for any future research on the topic, particularly due to the transnational perspectives taken by its author. Transnationality – that is, placing the Italian experience of the Resistance within a European perspective – was one of the goals we had set for ourselves, following the trends in more recent literature.[4] It will be up to the reader to judge whether we have succeeded in achieving it. A transnational perspective is essential to overcoming the provincialism that characterises not so much historical research as the public debate on the Italian Resistance. Comparing it with other experiences highlights the similarities between all resistance movements and renders polemics, such as those regarding partisan responsibility for Nazi massacres or the immediate postwar settling of account, baseless and positively misleading. The Italian Resistance, while having its own unique characteristics, was not exceptional: it had its bright and dark moments, its successes and its mistakes, just like all the others. And, like all the others, it provoked a fierce reaction from the occupiers and from domestic fascists. What was truly exceptional, in Italy as well as in the rest of Europe, was the resistance itself – an experience both liminal and extreme, and, fortunately, one that occurs rarely.

We also thought it was important to place the entire Italian Resistance in a long-term perspective, or a vertical one, so to speak. This is where Rosario Forlenza's and Andrea Rapini's articles come in. The former attempts to reflect on the true meaning of liberation from Fascism and on the legacy of Fascism itself. Have we ever truly freed ourselves from fascism? Not just in terms of its continuity within the republican state, but in terms of the political form of fascism that still persists? Was it even possible for this to happen? Perhaps fascism is like a virus, one that, once contracted, remains in the body, ready to re-emerge in different forms, mutating, just like all viruses. If there is a cure for such a virus, it is certainly antifascism, and this leads to Andrea Rapini's article, which offers a reconstruction of the forms and meanings of antifascism in present-day Italy. It also discusses the current crisis of antifascism, whose root cause is identified in the rise of a neoliberal vision of democracy, which no longer seems to need the values of antifascism.

Common to all the articles, and the guiding thread of this special issue, is the idea of 25 April as a liminal moment – that is, a moment of creative potential that generated new political and cultural meanings, new relationships between and among the political authority and the citizens, and new forms of political identity. From this perspective, the liberation of Italy, the Resistance, and the historical juncture between 8 September 1943 and 25 April 1945 were not simply an unstructured, violent and chaotic moment between the old and the new, but a 'ramified sequences of occurrences',[5] where the roots of democratic subjectivity and imagination of post-Fascist Italy are to be looked for. The lived experiences of the histories of resistance, those covered in this special issue and those not covered, were open manifestations of autonomy and the constitution of subjectivity. They created an empty

space of power that challenged political structures of domination and became, simultaneously, the background against which new meanings and practices of democracy were articulated and crystallised. Not all these meanings and practices were incorporated into the structures and institutions of the new Italy. Yet all of them contributed to the regeneration and revitalisation of Italy's democratic body politic, reshaping history and endowing the fledgling republic with the energy and strength to engage the tremendous tasks and challenges of the postwar period (Forlenza 2019).

As with all special issues, this one inevitably leaves some important aspects of its subject unexplored. Among the topics we had hoped to include – but could not, for various reasons – are the military's contribution to the partisan war and the role of the reconstituted Italian army in the liberation. We initially planned to feature a reflection on the contribution of Italian Jewry to the partisan struggle, but this too was eventually omitted. Our aim was not so much to focus on a distinct Jewish resistance, as we recognise that such a movement did not exist per se. Rather, Italian Jews fought predominantly as Italians – whether as socialists, communists, members of the Action Party, liberals, and so on. What we aimed to explore was the significance of Jewish participation in the Resistance, particularly in light of the heated debates that have recently emerged during the 25 April commemorations, specifically regarding the presence of the Jewish Brigade.[6] Indeed, an article examining the rituals of 25 April, their regional and local variations and their evolution over time is another piece we regret not being able to include.[7]

This special issue was also an opportunity to test a working method, which we like to define as democratic and horizontal. All contributors reviewed the abstracts from the very beginning, and there were opportunities for exchange on the various articles, with constructive suggestions offered by each contributor on their co-authors' pieces. We would like to thank our contributors for the collaborative effort they put into the production of this special issue, as well as for the timeliness and exceptional diligence that everyone has demonstrated throughout the many months of this project. At every step, we could feel that we were all motivated by the aim of making this publication a significant contribution to the study of the Italian Resistance and its dissemination, both in Italy and abroad. Notwithstanding this internal review process, each article was also subject to the usual peer review, and we therefore thank the peer reviewers for their insightful suggestions and criticism. Our gratitude extends to our translators. Aside from Forlenza's piece (with many thanks to our associate editors, Nicolas Virtue and Nick Carter, for proofreading it), the original contributions were in Italian. We had to place significant demands on *Modern Italy*'s team of translators, but, once again, they rose to the occasion. Our heartfelt thanks go to Stuart Oglethorpe, Andrea Hajek, Ian Mansbridge, Megan Wolfreys and Simranjit Kaur for their exceptional work. A final thank you goes to *Modern Italy*'s co-editor, Milena Sabato, who assisted us in countless ways, particularly by solving a series of technical issues thanks to her deep knowledge and understanding of the ScholarOne online publishing system – a knowledge unmatched by that of *Modern Italy*'s other editor and co-editor of this special issue, Gianluca Fantoni (to his shame!).

The special issue also includes an important contribution by Mirco Carrattieri, an expert in public history, presented in the form of a Contexts and Debates piece. This provides an overview of local associations and research centres that collect archival material on the Resistance and produce scholarship on the topic through periodic publications, websites, public initiatives and/or the management of museums. Many of these organisations also offer educational activities, often targeted primarily at younger audiences. Emerging particularly from the 1990s onwards, in parallel with the crisis of the antifascist paradigm, these local institutes, which often are part of networks such as the Rete Parri, have played a vital role in sustaining interest and research on the Resistance, arguably to a greater

extent than occurs within universities. The contribution by Carrattieri aims to serve as a resource, especially for young researchers, who wish to engage with the study of the Italian Resistance.

We mentioned that this special issue is being published to mark the eightieth anniversary of the liberation, but there is another important milestone in 2025. This special issue coincides with the thirtieth anniversary of the founding of *Modern Italy* (1995–2025). We believe there is no better way to commemorate both occasions, as modern Italy was born from the Resistance – through the sacrifice of partisan women and men who gave up the dream of Italy as a great power, choosing instead to create a nation that might be smaller but more honourable. We believe they succeeded in this mission, at least in the short and medium term. With this special issue, we hope to have achieved a similar success in researching their wartime feats and the legacy they left behind.

Notes

1. Recently, French historian Claire Andrieu lamented a similar situation in France, where 'trés peu de chercheurs se lancent dans une thèse sur la Résistance' (Too few researchers undertake a thesis on the Resistance) (Andrieu 2024).
2. For example, Delzell (1961); Battaglia's *Storia della Resistenza Italiana*, first published in 1953 and translated into English in 1957; Quazza (1972); Puzzo (1992); Lamb (1993); Claudio Pavone's monumental work *Una guerra civile*, first published in 1991 and published in English in 2013 with the title *A Civil War: A History of the Italian Resistance*; Ellwood (1985); Behan (2009). Some of the most recent publications, in English, include Caroline Moorehead (2019) and the translation of Ada Gobetti's diary by Jomarie Alano (2014). Additionally, the special issues of *Modern Italy* in 2000 (5 [2]) and 2007 (12 [2]) – edited by Philip Cooke and by Philip Cooke and Jonathan Dunnage respectively – offer varied perspectives on the Resistance and liberation.
3. On the relationship between partisans and Allied forces, see Cacciatore (2023).
4. See, for example, Philip Cooke and Ben H. Shepherd (2013) and Wieviorka (2019). For a recent publication in Italian, see Chiara Colombini and Carlo Greppi (2024).
5. See the conceptualisation of the 'event-history' proposed by William H. Sewell (1996).
6. See Fantoni (2021).
7. But one can refer to the recently published book *25 Aprile*, by Luca Baldissara (2024).

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Gianluca Fantoni focuses on the public use of history and the use and abuse of history for political purposes. On the topic of the Jewish Brigade, he has published an article in the *Journal of Modern History* (March 2021) and a book with Einaudi (2022). An English version of the book is expected in autumn 2025. He also studies the relationship between cinema and history; on this topic, he published the book *Italy Through the Red Lens: Italian Politics and Society in Communist Propaganda Films (1946–79)* with Palgrave US in 2021. He teaches contemporary history at Nottingham Trent University and is a co-editor of *Modern Italy*.

Rosario Forlenza works at the intersection of history, politics and anthropology. He is the author of *On the Edge of Democracy: Italy, 1943–1948* (Oxford University Press, 2019) and co-author, with Bjørn Thomassen, of *Italian Modernities: Competing Narratives of Nationhood* (Palgrave, 2016) and *Italy's Christian Democracy: The Catholic Encounter with Political Modernity* (Oxford University Press, 2019). He is working on totalitarian experiences in interwar Germany, Italy and Russia, and on the global history of Christian Democracy. He is an Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science at Luiss University, Rome.

Italian summary

Questa introduzione al numero speciale di *Modern Italy* esplora come l'enfasi sul fascismo nella recente storiografia e nel discorso pubblico rischi di favorirne la mitizzazione e la riabilitazione culturale, sollecitando un riequilibrio storiografico che evidenzi il ruolo cruciale della Resistenza italiana nel plasmare l'identità democratica del Paese. In occasione dell'80° anniversario della Liberazione d'Italia e del 30° anniversario di *Modern Italy*, il numero esamina aspetti meno noti della Resistenza, come i gruppi marginali, le esperienze di genere e le prospettive transnazionali. I contributi includono studi sui combattenti rom della Resistenza, sulla stampa clandestina cattolica, sui soldati americani di origine italiana e sulle donne del Partito Liberale. Gli articoli mettono in risalto la liminalità e il potenziale creativo della Resistenza come periodo trasformativo che ha ridefinito identità politiche e culturali.

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