

*A neglected story*  
*German prisoners of war in Italy (1945-1947)*

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**Introduction**

The story of German military prisoners in the hands of the Allies at the end of the Second World War is progressively shifting out of living memory and becoming an interesting topic for both scholars and ordinary readers. For years, the experiences of German prisoners have been neglected by historians; rarely has it even been possible to discuss in a dispassionate way the difficult conditions in which the prisoners lived. The reason for this neglect is self-evident: the suffering of the Germans in the aftermath of their surrender could not be compared to the suffering of Germany's victims. Since the collapse of the Berlin wall, a barrier that in some ways symbolised the price that Germany had to pay to Europe for its guilt in the war, the self-perception of the German people has started changing. A new generation that has no memory of the war and Nazism has helped to move beyond the crippling guilt that haunted Germany until the 1980s. Beginning in the 1990s, a benign revival of German national pride occurred, affecting the historical memory of the country. The literary elite that once confined itself to harsh censure of the guilt and the wickedness of its own people, began also to tackle once taboo subjects, such as the suffering of German civilians during the Second World War; the romance of Günter Grass *Im Krebsgang* is, for example, extremely significant.

The evolution in popular consciousness of the war is demonstrated in Jörg Friedrich's popular book *Der Brand: Deutschland im Bombenkrieg*, published in 2002.<sup>1</sup> This book tells the story of the Allied bombings of Germany without overlooking the horror experienced by German civilians, and, as such, is a clear marker of the change in German historiography, which finally accepts treating the topic of German suffering.<sup>2</sup> Within this new historiographical paradigm it is now also possible to re-examine the plight of German prisoners in the aftermath of the war.

The basis for this field of study was widely prepared by the activity of the German Federal Ministry for the Exiled, Refugees and Mutilated, which, since 1959, has tried to bring to light the fate of over 11 million German prisoners after the war. Writing on German prisoners has focused on two geographic areas. The experience of detention in the Soviet Union was the first to draw the attention of scholars, especially in the German Federal Republic. Interest was generated by the especially harsh treatment meted out to the huge mass of prisoners in the Soviet camps. These German prisoners were often charged for war crimes and condemned, in many cases, to 25-30 years of forced labour. A key factor stimulating academic interest on these soldiers was the fact that many of them remained in the Soviet camps until 1955. In Western Europe, the French case, although characterised by a much lesser degree of severity than the Soviet one, was interesting because of the ideological position of the authorities involved; France was the only country in Western Europe that pursued a rehabilitative scientific course for the soldiers of the vanquished army.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, in the last twenty years, popular interest regarding the capture of Germans by the other Allied armies has grown. The study of the American case has stimulated a heated debate, instigated by the book *Other Losses*, written by the Canadian journalist James Bacque.<sup>4</sup> In this book,

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<sup>1</sup> J. Friedrich, *Der Brand: Deutschland im Bombenkrieg 1940-1945* (München: Propyläen, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> It is beyond the scope of this article to explain fully why such topics were taboo in Germany. In short, it was widely feared that acknowledging the agonies of Germany's civilians would be a useful tool to Nazi apologists or aggressive nationalists who could use it to argue for an equivalency in suffering between Germans and Germany's victims, thereby mitigating the atrocities committed by the Third Reich.

<sup>3</sup> G. Tingaud, *Le traitement des prisonniers de guerre allemands en France après la seconde guerre mondiale*, «Revue d'histoire diplomatique», n. 2-3, (1999): p. 121. See also F. Theofilakis, *Les prisonniers de guerre allemands en mains françaises dans les mémoires nationales en France et en Allemagne après 1945*, «Cahiers d'histoire. Revue d'histoire critique», n. 100, (2007).

<sup>4</sup> J. Bacque, *Other losses. An investigation into the mass deaths of German prisoners at the hand of the French and Americans after World War II* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1989).

the author focused on the death of German prisoners, starved in “camps of slow death” under French and American authorities. Bacque’s book was somewhat extreme and was criticised by a number of historians, but it was useful insofar as it demonstrated the growing public interest in the topic.<sup>5</sup>

Today, although a healthy literature exists exploring the plight of German prisoners during and after the war in France and Russia, there is a gap in the historiography concerning Italy, an especially complicated case with a large number of German prisoners and complex ideas of ‘victimhood’. The German army in Italy at the end of hostilities consisted of about 500,000 soldiers—including Austrian nationals. This army had been in the Italian peninsula for several months before it surrendered. Some groups of these prisoners remained in Italy until after the spring of 1947—nearly two years. Yet the only writing on the topic comes from the memoirs of those Italians, mainly fascists, who shared their detention with the *Wehrmacht* soldiers,<sup>6</sup> and a handful of studies which only superficially or tangentially address the German prisoners.<sup>7</sup> This article aims to shed light on the story of the German soldiers in Italy after the surrender in May 1945 and during their stay through, for most of them, the end of 1946, and in some cases beyond.

### **The German surrender on the Italian front and the condition of the prisoners**

In 1943, despite the status of co-belligerent obtained with the declaration of war against Germany on October 13<sup>th</sup>, 1943, Italy was a vanquished state. Italy was excluded from participation in the German surrender and therefore from the handover of

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<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Stephen Ambrose’s review of Bacque’s book in *The New York Times* (February 24, 1991). This popular interest has had less success working its way into academic research.

<sup>6</sup> Among the memoirs written by Italian prisoners the most important are; V. Orsolini Cencelli, *Padula 1944-1945: diario di un prigioniero politico* (Milano: Mursia, 2000); M. DEL DOSSO, *Quelli di Coltano* (Milano: Editore Giachini, 1950); P. Ciabattini, *Coltano 1945. Un campo di concentramento dimenticato* (Milano: Mursia, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> The most significant survey concerning the detention of the Germans is the one edited by Patrizia Dogliani about the camp system of Rimini-Miramare: P. Dogliani (ed.), *Rimini Enclave 1945-1947. Un sistema di campi alleati per prigionieri dell’esercito germanico* (Bologna: Clueb, 2005).

prisoners. In summer 1944 instructions were given by the Allies regarding the issue of captured and surrendered Germans:

The divisions that cooperate with the Allies do not maintain German prisoners; after the interrogation the prisoners have to be conducted to the prison camps of the Allied units from which the Allied division depends. Each Italian command maintains a complete list of the captured Germans.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, after the German surrender of May 2<sup>nd</sup> 1945, the entire German army passed into the hands of the British and American authorities. The Italian authorities, excluded from the agreements between the Germans and the Anglo-Americans, were to provide the necessary logistic support for the management of a mass of half million people, without having control over them. The Allies were then to use the prisoners according to their needs and would repatriate them when conditions allowed. However, Italian authorities became more involved in the process after the Anglo-American decision to increase their influence in Italy. With increasingly sour Anglo-American/Soviet relations, the Western Allies were prompted by Soviet activities, such as the reestablishment of stable diplomatic relations with Italy, to establish closer relations there. Yet they were also conscious that Italy was and remained an ex-enemy. Consequently, London and Washington adopted several initiatives in order to improve their standing among the Italian people and to promote the recovery of civil life in the country. In this context, the use of the thousands of German prisoners in Italy appeared to be a cheap and convenient means to attempt the restoration of Italian infrastructure and to enable the recovery of productive economic activities.

On May 14<sup>th</sup>, 1945 the Allied Commission on Italy addressed a memorandum to the Italian government in which it proposed to place at Italian disposal the captured German prisoners of war for use as labour in reconstruction activities. The prisoners would technically remain under the authority of the United States and the United Kingdom, who would now supply their shelter and provisions. Guarding the prisoners would be the responsibility of the Italian authorities, who would have to supervise all of the projects. It would also be the responsibility of the Italians to provide the materials and tools necessary for the work. Although they did not specify the exact number of the

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<sup>8</sup> *Communication of the Operation office of the Army, Salerno, 27 August 1944, in Historical Archive of the Italian Chief of Staff of the Army, folder I-3, vol. 163, file 2.*

transferable prisoners, Allied authorities made available an overall number of 100,000-150,000 German prisoners.<sup>9</sup> The Anglo-American decision to use the prisoners in Italy corresponded to similar initiatives of other European governments. At the very same moment, in France it was decided to employ German prisoners of war for the clearing of mined camps and the reconstruction of communication routes<sup>10</sup>; the United States also confirmed their intention to use German prisoners for such works.<sup>11</sup>

The Italian Prime Minister, Ivanoe Bonomi, accepted the proposal, but did not make explicit the precise number of prisoners he needed, or the places in which they would be employed.<sup>12</sup> He was suspicious of the offer, and these doubts were well-grounded. As the general secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Renato Prunas, pointed out, first informally and then in a written report, the employment of German soldiers in Italy would have legitimated the use of Italian prisoners as similar forced labourers abroad.<sup>13</sup> Formal objections were also put forward by the legal office of the same ministry; on the basis of international treaties that were in force at that time, specifically the 1927 Geneva Convention on Prisoners of War, it was forbidden to use prisoners for works considered “unhealthy and dangerous”.<sup>14</sup> However, the potential benefits of using prisoners as labourers seemingly outweighed the objections, and the ministries, together with the Intergovernmental Committee for Reconstruction, were

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<sup>9</sup> *Memorandum of the Allied Commission*, 14 March 1945, Central State Archive (from now onward CSA), Presidency of the Council of the Ministries (from now onward PCM) 1944-1947, folder 19.5, file 36069.

<sup>10</sup> See the correspondence from Paris in the *Manchester Guardian* (22 March 1945).

<sup>11</sup> *Communication of the Italian Embassy in Washington to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, Washington, 26 May 1945, CSA, PCM 1944-1947.

<sup>12</sup> *Letter of Bonomi to Stone*, 15 March 1945, CSA, PCM 1944-1947.

<sup>13</sup> The unhappy fate of the tens of thousands of Italian prisoners still in Russia may have been the source for Prunas' concerns. *Report of Prunas to PCM*, Roma, 18 giugno 1945, CSA, PCM 1944-1947.

<sup>14</sup> *Memorandum of the Legal Office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Secretary general of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, Rome, 12 June 1945, Historical Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (from now onward HAMFA), Cabinet Archive (from now onward CA) 1943-1958, box 52. The chief of the office, the famous expert of international law Tomaso Perassi, suggested a number of legal “tricks” that would have helped Italy in the case of controversies that could have emerged. He suggested, for instance, not to consider the prisoners as German citizens anymore: since Germany had ceased to exist as a state, the prisoners could be considered under the occupants, that could impose on them the normal ruling power of the sovereign state.

invited to put forward concrete proposals about how to use the prisoners.<sup>15</sup> The Ministry of Agriculture, given the pessimistic forecasts of the annual harvest, had no need for the prisoners.<sup>16</sup> The Ministry of Transportation also had no desire for prisoner labour.<sup>17</sup> Only the Ministry of Industry provided a plan of employment for 6,000 prisoners in the mining sector: 4,000 in coal, lead and zinc mines in the province of Cagliari; and 2,000 in pyrite and lignite mines in the province of Grosseto.<sup>18</sup> Individual firms were also given the opportunity to request prisoners, and prefects were charged with the duty of assessing these applications. Businesses in Lazio requested prisoners for railway works in the area of Avezzano, for the restoration of the area of Bracciano and, moreover, to employ in the rehabilitation of the key railway lines Florence-Bologna and La Spezia-Genoa.

The local authorities who were the intermediaries informing the central authorities of the various requests for German prisoners expressed their doubts about the initiatives and warned explicitly that prisoner labour should not negatively affect the employment of Italian workers, many of whom were desperate for work. The prefect of Rome, Persico, suggested employing the prisoners in activities where demand for labour outpaced the supply of willing workers: clearing the mining camps and draining the flooded lands in the province of Latina, as well as mining activities in the Sardinian provinces.<sup>19</sup>

The issue of protecting the Italian labour market was considered during the first intergovernmental meeting about this issue, which took place in the Prime Minister's office on June 15<sup>th</sup>, 1945. Before the meeting, the Ministry for Home Affairs received reports from the prefect of Florence detailing several cases of the exclusion of Italian citizens from productive activities. This led the Italian representatives to propose to the Allies that the use of prisoners be limited to the aforementioned clearing, draining and mining activities. The representative of the Ministry of War, General Supino, affirmed that 10,000 German soldiers would have been sufficient to clear all the mines in the

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<sup>15</sup> *PCM Cabinet to the ministries of Industry, Agriculture and to the intergovernmental committee for the Reconstruction*, 24 May 1945, CSA, PCM 1944-1947.

<sup>16</sup> *Ministry of Agriculture to PCM*, 8 June 1945, CSA, PCM 1944-1947.

<sup>17</sup> *Ministry of Transportation to PCM*, 9 June 1945, CSA, PCM 1944-1947.

<sup>18</sup> *Memorandum of the ministry of industry*, no date available, CSA, PCM 1944-1947.

<sup>19</sup> *Communication of Persico to Bonomi*, Rome, 3 June 1945, CSA, PCM 1944-1947.



Italian peninsula. Although the Allied representatives accepted the position of the Italian government, they said that they would determine for themselves whether the activities suggested would mean employing prisoners of war in dangerous or unhealthy activities, and thereby go against the Geneva Convention.<sup>20</sup>

During the second meeting, on June 7<sup>th</sup>, several reservations about the use of sappers for minesweeping had been abandoned, but concerns about the employment of prisoners in the drainage of malarial swamps were upheld. The distinction was rooted in well-established juridical reasoning: the concept of danger was relative, therefore minesweeping would not be considered dangerous if the person employed was a qualified specialist. On the other hand, the concept of unhealthy was more absolute, and the use of prisoners in the malarial swamps would have automatically infringed article 27 of the Geneva Convention.<sup>21</sup> On June 9<sup>th</sup>, Bonomi presented to the Head of the Allied Commission, Admiral Ellery Stone, a detailed—though incomplete—plan for the use of German prisoners. The confusion stemming from the recent liberation of Northern Italy made it impossible to identify all of the locations in need of prisoners' labour. Considering this, several proposals were put forward: 3,000 German prisoners for earth displacement in the Po Valley toward Comacchio; 2,000 for the same purpose in the lower Tiber, near Fiumicino; 3,000—increaseable to 10,000—for mine-clearing in Pescara and Chieti, Ancona, Pesaro, Rimini, Cesena, Faenza e Forlì, Florence, Pistoia, Lucca, Pisa, Livorno, Siena, Viterbo, La Spezia, Genoa, and Venice; 4,000 to work in the mines of Carbonia, Montevecchio and Monteponi in the province of Cagliari; and 2,000 for the mines of lignite and pyrite in the province of Grosseto. The number of prisoners

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<sup>20</sup> *Memorandum of the Political Affairs Division of the ministry of Foreign Affairs*, Rome, 6 June 1945, HAMFA, CA 1943-1958, folder 52-Germany.

<sup>21</sup> *Memorandum of the Political Affairs Division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, Rome, 11 June 1945, HAMFA, CA 1943-1958, folder 52-Germany. The use of prisoners for mine clearing was supported by a consistent part of the population and the press. In June 1945 the most important national newspaper, *Il Corriere della Sera*, announced that the Germans would have taken part in the clearing of over 150,000 hectares of territory, on which it was estimated there were 5 to 6 million mines, whose clearing would have required, considering the available resources, 7-8 years. *Prigionieri tedeschi adibiti allo sgombero di territori minati*, «Il Corriere della Sera», 14 July 1945 and *Alleviare la disoccupazione. S'invoca l'allontanamento dal lavoro dei prigionieri tedeschi*, «Il Corriere della Sera», 27 July 1945.

could be increased if necessary, although it was limited *a priori* the maximum 100,000 prisoners initially offered.<sup>22</sup>

The use of German prisoners for reconstruction, which would have transformed Italy in a manner similar to France, became immediately impracticable. The insertion of Germans in the productive framework of the country occurred during a very harsh moment for the national economy; between the spring and summer of 1945 the problem of unemployment was a serious one. The problem was particularly acute in some areas of the country because of war damage to infrastructure that hampered the productive systems and the flow of people who were coming back from the battlefields or prison camps. Several initiatives were launched to confront this emergency. These, however, were extremely limited in their results. It proved extraordinarily difficult to reinsert ex-combatants and partisans into the social and economic structure. At the end of September the problem became so acute that the ironically named Minister for Reconstruction, Meuccio Ruini, put forward an ambitious public works plan that aimed to put at least half of Italy's 2 million unemployed to work.<sup>23</sup>

In some Italian provinces, where the concentration of Germans was higher and the social and occupational emergency more serious, the cohabitation of civilians and prisoners became unsustainable. Tuscany and Emilia Romagna were the two regions where the majority of the German prisoners were located. As the Allies advanced further north, the number of prisoners sent to these two provinces increased constantly.<sup>24</sup> In May 1945, the numbers of both German prisoners and repatriated Italian ex-combatants were significant.<sup>25</sup> Since the beginning of June, the Prefect of Florence

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<sup>22</sup> Letter of Bonomi to Stone, Rome, 9 June 1945, ACS, PCM 1944-1947.

<sup>23</sup> Record of the session of the Council of the Ministries, 28 September 1945, in A. RICCI, (ed.), *Verbali del Consiglio dei Ministri*, vol. V (Roma: Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato, 1995), pp. 620-621.

<sup>24</sup> For the first debate on prison camps in Tuscany see *Psychological Warfare Branch Report n. 32*, Florence, 2 September 1944, in R. ABSALOM, (ed.) *Gli alleati e la ricostruzione in Toscana (1944-1945)* (Florence: S. Leo Olschki, 1988), p. 247.

<sup>25</sup> V. SPINI, *Il Comitato Toscano di Liberazione Nazionale di fronte al problema della ricostruzione*, in E. ROTELLI (ed.), *La ricostruzione in Toscana dal CLN ai partiti. Il Comitato Toscano di Liberazione Nazionale* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1981), p. 222.



had been pointing out how the addition of Germans to the city's workshops was negatively affecting the occupational situation.<sup>26</sup>

Employment was not the only challenge. Autumn arrived before the problem of finding suitable accommodations for all the prisoners and evacuees was solved, leaving many to bivouac in the open. At the end of November, when the number of repatriated reached 17,000 in Florence—and when the average temperatures drop dramatically and the city typically receives its greatest rainfall—the town authority finally began to provide accommodations to the evacuees in private houses.<sup>27</sup> An even worse situation developed in Livorno. The whole province had been worn out by the war and battle damage destruction did not spare the countryside. In the spring of 1945 there had been significant urban migration, and arrivals had to compete with the German prisoners and repatriated Italian soldiers for space and food. Exacerbating the challenge was the destruction of city infrastructure; by June, of a pre-war urban population of 140,000, 32,000 had lost their homes.<sup>28</sup> American authorities attempted to alleviate the problem by lodging German prisoners downtown, barracking them the two main fortresses of the city. This decision took approximately 10,000 beds from civilians, and forced the closure of several nearby businesses, costing around 500 jobs. The situation deteriorated further as the German prisoners of war, whose comradeship had been rekindled by weak surveillance, often assumed an attitude of defiance unacceptable to the civil population. The Carabinieri urged the removal of the Germans from the downtown area<sup>29</sup> and Prime Minister Parri had to intervene in July, asking the Allied Commission, to remove the Germans from there as well as from some Florentine factories.<sup>30</sup>

The Allied authorities had been short-sighted in their use of German prisoners in the rebuilding of Tuscany. By barracking the prisoners in the cities and employing some

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<sup>26</sup> *Paternò to the ministry for Home Affairs*, Florence, 4 June 1945, CSA, PCM 1944-1947. The prefect would have solicited once again an intervention to the Allied Commission on June the 23<sup>rd</sup> 1945.

<sup>27</sup> *Report of the American consul in Florence*, W.W. Orebaugh [Voluntary Report n. 17: *Politico-Economic Situation in the Florence District*], 21 November 1945, in *Gli alleati e la ricostruzione in Toscana (1944-1945)*, p. 331.

<sup>28</sup> *National Liberation Committee (NLC) of Livorno to the PCM*, 25 June 1945, CSA, PCM 1944-1947, folder 1.6.1, file 39330.

<sup>29</sup> *The vice-commander general of the Carabinieri, Taddei, to the ministry for Home Affairs*, Rome, 12 October 1945, CSA, PCM 1944-1947.

<sup>30</sup> *Parri's address to the Allied Commission*, 3 July 1945, CAS, PCM 1944-1947, folder 19.5, file 36069.

of them in production and skilled labour instead of Italian workers, the Allies undermined their own goal of promoting a better relationship between Italians and the Allies, as well as the long term reconstruction of Italy.<sup>31</sup> In other regions the use of German prisoners led to a worsening of many Italians' socio-economic status. In the province of Bari, in centres such as Andria, Corato and Minervino, the plague of unemployment, exacerbated by the use of prisoners for several road repair projects, worsened so much that Prime Minister Parri had to send the vice-president of the Ministers' Council, Mauro Scoccimaro, to help. As in Tuscany, the Italian authorities pressed urgently to end the barracking of German prisoners in the province of Bari and to stop employing them.<sup>32</sup> However, it was the events in Campania that precipitated a turning point on the matter of German prisoners. Naples was the point of convergence of ex-combatants repatriating from Africa, Great Britain and India, who all became a burden on the town's economy when they were unable to find jobs.<sup>33</sup> Yet German prisoners of war were employed in harbour works instead of the town's local labour. On September 22<sup>nd</sup>, during the Prime Minister's visit, a riot broke out. His cortege was harassed and some coaches were damaged. The demonstrators, guided by the dock workers, burst into and destroyed the Chamber of Labour.<sup>34</sup>

These events were interpreted as the consequences of a widespread degeneration of order in the whole southern area; Naples seemed the epicentre of the reaction of forces that could undermine the stability of the city as well as the entire region.<sup>35</sup> After the events in Naples, Prime Minister Parri made a firm address to Admiral Stone: "Italy is now passing through the most delicate phase of its economic life, in which the most worrisome aspect – as you know – is unemployment. I strongly ask you to intervene in order to not worsen our material and psychological situation".<sup>36</sup> The Allied authorities understood the situation and on June 25<sup>th</sup> General Joseph McNarney, acting Supreme Allied Commander of the Mediterranean theatre of operations, announced the

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<sup>31</sup> V. SPINI, *Il Comitato Toscano di Liberazione Nazionale di fronte al problema della ricostruzione*, p. 330.

<sup>32</sup> *Ministry for Home Affairs to the PCM*, 19 August 1945, CAS, PCM 1944-1947.

<sup>33</sup> G. CHIANESE, *Ceti popolari e comportamenti quotidiani a Napoli*, in *Alle radici del nostro presente. Napoli e la Campania dal fascismo alla Repubblica (1943-1946)* (Napoli: Guida Editore, 1986), p. 53.

<sup>34</sup> *Disordini a Napoli durante la visita di Parri*, «Il Corriere della Sera», 23 September 1945; *Nuovi Particolari sugli incidenti di Napoli*, «La Tribuna del Popolo», 23 September 1945.

<sup>35</sup> G. CHIANESE, *Ceti popolari e comportamenti quotidiani a Napoli*, p. 54.

<sup>36</sup> *Parri's address to Stone*, 17 September 1945, CSA, PCM 1944-1947, f. 19.5, n. 36069.

immediate dismissal of 7,000 German prisoners in the Neapolitan area promising faster repatriations of the prisoners. This meant a reduction in the total number of prisoners in Italy to 50,000 in December.<sup>37</sup> In this way they tried to restore calm, not only in the harbour area but also in the main corporations such as Eternit, RAF and Cantieri di Secondigliano, where the employment of German prisoners exacerbated a situation that was already volatile.<sup>38</sup> On September 8<sup>th</sup> Admiral Stone wrote to Prime Minister Parri assuring him of the fast dismissal of the prisoners.<sup>39</sup> And the situation improved significantly, as it did also in Livorno where at the same time the Allied military representative met with the civil and trade unionist Italian authorities, pacifying them.<sup>40</sup> At the end of September 1945 Coltano, one of the most important camps in the province of Pisa, was cleared of most Germans, with only “non-cooperating” fascist prisoners remaining.<sup>41</sup>

In other areas, the situation evolved more slowly. In Apulia, for example, the dismantling of the camps did not lead to an effective removal of the Germans. On the contrary, the situation worsened significantly because the Allied authorities were obliged to barrack prisoners in towns and to allow the restoration of their chain of command, in order to keep the troops under control. In Taranto, the prisoners were organised in units descending from a general, who billeted in the centre of the city.<sup>42</sup> The situation evolved similarly in Alto Adige. Since the camps in Southern and Central Italy were closed, the prisoners were sent to the North for their final repatriation. Before leaving Italy, they concentrated a last time in Bozen, where they underwent further investigations. If they were deemed ready to be liberated, they were put on a convoy direct to Austria and Germany. The troops piling up in South Tyrol coincided with the

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<sup>37</sup> Mcnarney's declaration is reported by *Il Corriere della Sera*, 26 September 1945.

<sup>38</sup> CGIL to PCM, Rome, 11 October 1945, CSA, PCM 1944-1947, folder 8.1, file 50251.

<sup>39</sup> Stone's address to Parri, 8 October 1945, CSA, PCM 1944-1947, folder 19.5, file 36069.

<sup>40</sup> *Record of the meeting between the representatives of the military Command, the Allied Commission and the Italian trade unions about the situation in Livorno*, 18 October 1945, CSA, PCM 1944-1947.

<sup>41</sup> *Ho parlato con i gerarchi nel campo di Coltano*, «*Il Corriere della Sera*», 27 September 1945. The camp of Coltano was officially dismantled at the end of October 1945 with a big echo on the press: *Il campo di Coltano ha chiuso oggi i battenti*, «*Il Corriere della Sera*», 25 October 1945.

<sup>42</sup> *The general Commander of the Carabinieri, Brunetti, to the ministries of Foreign Affairs, Interior and War*, Rome, 31 October 1945, CSA, PCM 1944-1947. This created an unsustainable situation that brought the minister for Home Affairs to solicit the removal of the prisoners. *Ministry for Home Affairs to the PMC*, Rome, 19 November 1945, CSA, PCM 1944-1947.

rekindling of the issue of Alto Adige; in the decisions of the great powers on the post-war balance, the campaign for the restitution of the region to Austria resumed. On more than one occasion, German soldiers sided with Tirol's irredentists, causing several riots.<sup>43</sup> The situation was potentially explosive and this forced the Italian authorities and the Allies to intervene together in order to rapidly repatriate the last German troops.

At the end of 1945 the issue of German prisoners in Italy was improving. The large concentrations of prisoners from Kesselring's army ended and the bulk of the soldiers were repatriated. Yet the rapid departure of *Wehrmacht* soldiers did have a downside, as it led to a delay in the mine clearing operation on the Italian peninsula.<sup>44</sup> It was not even possible to retain German army experts who were specifically requested for employment by northern Italian firms.<sup>45</sup> However, neither was every German repatriated between the end of 1945 and the first months of 1946. As the Italian authorities knew, "an undefined number, but, by the evidence we have it is sure that it is a very big figure", escaped from the camps remaining, in many cases, in Italian territory.<sup>46</sup> In several cases, the Allied authorities themselves kept entire detachments of German prisoners in order to maintain military structures and plants.<sup>47</sup> Allied troops remained in Italy until the peace treaty came into force in September 1947, and with

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<sup>43</sup> *Cabinet of the ministry for Home Affairs to PCM*, Rome, 28 November 1945, CSA, PCM 1944-1947, folder 19.5, file 53941.

<sup>44</sup> According to the minister of War, Jacini, the mortality index of the mine-clearers came up to 15-20% and increased significantly if the work was carried out by privates. *Record of the session of the Council of the Ministries of 21 November 1945*,. About the issue of the mine clearing: *La bonifica dei campi minati ed altri ordigni bellici in Italia dal 1944 al 1948*, Bologna 1984.

<sup>45</sup> These requests could not be satisfied because, according to the agreements of the end of 1945 between the Allied Commission and the Italian Government, war prisoners would have not been liberated in Italy, except those who had domicile in Italy before the war. *Record of the joint meeting of the representative of the ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Allied Commission*, Rome, 2 January 1946, HAMFA, Political Affairs Division (form now onward PAD) 1946-1950, folder Germany, box 2 (1946). Liberation procedures for those partly entitled have been applied in such a restrictive manner that only just 20 German soldiers have been effectively repatriated at the end of 1946. *General and Private Affairs Division of the ministry for Home Affairs to the ministry of Foreign Affairs*, Rome, 30 September 1946, HAMFA, PAD 1946-1950, folder Germany, box 2 (1946).

<sup>46</sup> Disoriented soldiers often committed robberies and criminal acts because they could not find sources of sustainment. *Ministry of Foreign Affairs' address to the ministry of Domestic Affairs*, Rome, 13 April 1946, HAMFA, PAD 1946-1950, folder Germany, box 2 (1946).

<sup>47</sup> In April 1946, the prefect of Foggia indicated the worsening of the workers' upheaval in relations to the employment of German prisoners in the construction of an allied camp of aviation, *The minister of Home Affairs, Romita, to PCM*, 6 April 1946, CSA, PCM 1944-1947, folder 19.5, file 36069.

them stayed many Germans. This explains why, even midway through 1947, the Italian ministry of Foreign Affairs received letters such as the following:

I kindly request you, dear Sir, Minister of Foreign Affairs, to do your utmost during the next peace negotiations in order to make our prisoners of war finally come back home. In order to make them able to help their children to gain their daily bread and to make them gain again faith in the justice of law. This is violated by the detention of a hundred thousand German prisoners of war. My husband, according to what his companions said, should be in Italy. I address you this fervent prayer in favour of my country, of my State and Europe.<sup>48</sup>

Many German soldiers who survived the conflict disappeared in the confusion afterwards. The last attempt to find them was led by the Christian-Democrat Member of Parliament Hoefler. He was dispatched to Rome by Chancellor Adenauer, in order to search for the last prisoners left on what was previously the southern front of the Third Reich.<sup>49</sup>

## Conclusion

This article has aimed to illuminate the story of the German army in Italian territory after the Second World War. The failed attempts to use the Germans for reconstruction explains partly why the experience of these prisoners has remained to glaringly absent from collective memory; the unsuccessful employment of them in the reconstruction of infrastructure, communications, railways, harbours, and roads meant that they became less a potential resource than a destabilising factor for the occupation and civic harmony. It hastened their repatriation and, consequently, caused their fleeting presence to be largely forgettable. Nevertheless, this case represents an important step towards a broader understanding of the mechanisms for the dismantling of Axis forces in the Mediterranean area.

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<sup>48</sup> *Letter (in Italian) of a German woman to Sforza*, [probably 1947], HAMFA, CA 1943-1958, folder Germany, box 52.

<sup>49</sup> *Record of the ministry of Foreign Affairs about the Adenauer's visit to Rome*, Rome, 8 June 1951, HAMFA, PAD 1946-1950, folder Germany, box 89.

The story of the detention of German prisoners in Italy transcends the experience just of the German army; it represents also an important moment for the story of many Italians. In Italian contemporary historiography what has been called the “saga of the vanquished” is gathering momentum. After a long period characterized by the ideological prohibition of studying the ‘wicked’, in the last two decades historians and writers of history are paying increasing attention to the people and groups that decided to remain loyal to Fascism. In this perspective a comprehensive assessment of the structures and rules that characterized the Allied camps in Italy can also contribute to a better understanding of the story of Fascist prisoners in the hands of the Anglo-Americans, and on the impact of Allied policies on an Italy which was both ally and enemy; liberated and conquered. The experience of the internment of German prisoners after liberation represents, paradoxically, a significant moment both for the process of epuration from Fascism and the building of neo-fascist identity.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> In a book published a few years ago the Italian historian Giuseppe Parlato discussed the importance of the stay in the allied camps for the identity and first development of neo-fascism. See G. Parlato, *Fascisti senza Mussolini. Le origini del neofascismo in Italia, 1943-1948* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2006), pp. 117-147.