

Strangers in a strange land: the British occupation of Italy in a case-study, Padua 1946

Nicola Cacciatore*

Abstract

The article focuses on the difficult relation between the Allies and the Italian population after the Liberation. In particular, the case-study examined is that of the city of Padua. Here, like in the rest of the North, the Allied armies arrived in April 1945, bringing with them great hopes of social, economic, and political change. However, only one year later, the atmosphere was already radically different and disillusion and frustration set in, just like they did in many other liberated cities. The Allied occupation encountered its own specific problems, which compounded with those sentiments. The beginning of the Cold War, the ruthless political competition, and the Allied personnel itself, not always up to the task, combined into an explosive mixture. Which, in Padua, exploded at the beginning of December 1946, when a British military car run over some people in the city center. Following this incident, the city was ravaged for two days, as riots erupted and the population clashed with Allied soldiers. These riots caused some three hundred wounded and tens of Allied cars and other vehicles were burned. News of these incidents reached even the Italian Constitutive Assembly. Thanks to the documents preserved in Italian and British archives, and the use of contemporary newspapers, it is possible to recount the events as they happened, but also observe how they were interpreted by the British and by the Italians and what actions were taken by the two parts. The case of Padua is interesting in exposing the complicated relations between the Italian population, exhausted by the war and disappointed by the Allied troops, and the troops themselves, often tired and disheartened as well.

* Association for the Study of Modern Italy (ASMI)

Introduction

The Allied administration of Italy has attracted the attention of scholars since the end of the war. However, it was only in the 1970s that the first systematic studies on the Allied occupation policy and on the Allied Military Government (Amg) were published.¹ Among them, the most prominent one was surely *L'alleato nemico*, by David Ellwood in 1977,² which filled a significant gap in historiography thanks to the use of many archival documents that had been released to the public a few years before. Since then, a number of publications appeared and scholarly interest in the subject had grown substantially,³ especially as far as the South of Italy is concerned. The *Mezzogiorno*, in fact, was the area that experienced the Allied occupation for longer while in the North the Resistance was fighting the Nazi-Fascists. However, the problems that the Amg faced in the North were by no mean smaller or simpler than those which hindered its activity in the South. Moreover, the Amg did not seem to have learnt much from its experience in the previous two years. It was seldom up to the task, being severely understaffed; its men were often called to roles for which they had no preparation nor attitude for.⁴ Harold MacMillan, the British Resident Minister in Italy, denounced multiple times the inadequacy of the Allied administration.⁵

¹ I would like to thank the kind people who helped me piece together the events recounted in this article. First of all, Carlotta Francovich, the daughter of Leopoldo, who told me of his father's incredible life. Secondly, Nicola Cossar who also provided many useful insights on Francovich. I also want to thank Lucia Rossetti, librarian at Cervignano del Friuli, who managed to trace Francovich's heir for me. Moreover, I need to thank Cristiano Amedei, Dario Verdicchio, the Padua section of the Anpi, and the Casrec (in particular Roberta Monetti). I also want to thank the people at the Archivio di Stato, who helped me navigate the not-so-well-organized archive of the Prefettura. Finally, I would also like to thank *Occupied Italy's* anonymous reviewer for their constructive criticism that helped me improve the article. Without the help of these people, this work would certainly be less complete.

² D. W. Ellwood, *L'alleato nemico: la politica dell'occupazione anglo-americana in Italia 1943-1946*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1977.

³ A relatively recent example: E. Gobetti (a cura di), *La lunga liberazione*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2007.

⁴ V. Belco, *War, Massacre, and Recovery in Central Italy, 1943-1948*, Toronto, Toronto University Press, 2010, p. 108.

⁵ D. Ellwood, *Liberazione/Occupazione*, in E. Gobetti (a cura di), *La lunga liberazione*, cit., p. 19.

In the North, Padua had experienced tough times during the war. The city and its university paid a high tribute in human lives during the Resistance. Liberation was therefore impatiently awaited, and it was greeted with jubilation. However, like in many other territories, enthusiasm was quick to dwindle. Unemployment, disagreements with the Amg, food shortages and political tension made things difficult. After the end of the war, in May 1945, General J.K. Dunlop⁶ was nominated Governor of the Venetian territory. Seven months later, on the 30 December 1945, the city was returned to Italy and Dunlop was lauded by the region's prefects for his cordiality and common sense.⁷ However, British and Allied troops remained in the city for longer, as Padua became the seat of the Allied Forward Headquarters (Afhq) due to its proximity to the border with Yugoslavia, just like it had been the «frontline capital» of Italy during the First World War.

The incidents

On the 10 December 1946, a series of telegrams started to arrive from the Allied Command in Padua, recounting that a grave incident had happened in the city center. A British driver was involved, as a consequence riots had erupted, with thousands of people taking part in them. The British telegrams for the events of the 10 and 11 are fragmentary, and it was difficult to understand the situation.⁸ From them, it is hard to even pinpoint the exact location of the incident, let alone the dynamics of the subsequent clashes. A more accurate reconstruction is provided by the documents of the city's questura and prefettura. The recently appointed

⁶ For a summary of Dunlop's activity see: F. Agostini, *Il governo locale del veneto all'indomani della liberazione strutture, uomini e programmi*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2012, pp. 15-31.

⁷ F. de Checchi, "Il cimitero di guerra del Commonwealth a Chiesanuova", *Padova e il suo territorio*, no. 81 (1999), pp. 16-19.

⁸ Centro di Ateneo per la storia della Resistenza e dell'età contemporanea (Padova) [d'ora in poi: CASREC], *Public Record Office di Kew*, WO 204/10487 Demonstrations in Padua, 10 December 1946. CASREC, WO 204/10487 Padua Incident, 11 December 1946. CASREC, WO 204/10487 From GHQ CMF to AFHQ, 11 December 1946. CASREC, WO 204/10487 Report from General Harding, 12 December 1946.

prefetto, Carlo Manno,⁹ wrote a long and detailed report on the situation on the 15 December 1944, which illuminates many of the unclear passages in the British ones. For starters, the way the incident happened is clearer. Around midday, a British jeep came down Via Roma towards Piazza Garibaldi and, when it reached the intersection between Via VIII Febbraio and Via Cesare Battisti: «despite the warning to stop given by the policeman Giuseppe di Pietro, [the car] continued to move, running over the policeman himself with its fender.»¹⁰ The policeman, understandably upset, together with a colleague (Orlando Canova) tried to approach the driver in order to give him a ticket, but the soldier grabbed Canova's gun. Another policeman (Antonio Serafin), attracted by this commotion, arrived and, pointing his gun against the driver, ordered him to give back the pistol to Canova. The soldier did it. However, the driver, maybe frightened by the crowd that was gathering around the jeep, turned on the car and sped away:

“however, to avoid some passersby, it swerved on the left running over two people, [...] Because of this, the population's indignation, already exacerbated by the numerous and serious accidents caused recently by Allied vehicles, exploded violently: the driver was pulled out and beaten; [...]. The crowd, meanwhile, which had reached some 10,000 people, begun a protest march[...].”¹¹

The news spread like wildfire, and soon was enlarged beyond reason. The crowd assaulted the nearby Storione hotel,¹² where many British officers had their residence, but was repelled from the premises by the vice-questore who had quickly reached the place of the accident. A youngster managed to rip off a piece of the Union Jack that was hanging from a balcony, but the flag was saved by the British officers who were inside the hotel. The British, at this point, poured gasoline on the fire: «they threw from the hotel's windows cabbages' cores, potatoes

⁹ F. Agostini, *Il governo locale del veneto*, cit., p. 39.

¹⁰ Archivio di Stato (Padova), Prefettura Gabinetto [d'ora in poi: Pg], Cat. XV, *Affari politici e di P.S. 1946-1948*, 646, Incidenti fra la popolazione civile e militari alleati nei giorni 10, 11 e 12 corrente, 15 December 1946.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² It was located in front of the Pedrocchi café, on the Isola del Gallo.

and water [...] they pulled in the flag and hung it on the top floor window, mocking the population.»¹³ The riot quickly spread to the nearby Piazza delle Erbe, where more jeeps were set on fire. In Piazza Mazzini, instead, some soldiers on a truck opened fire against a group of civilians, wounding three of them severely. The situation was out of control and the Italians marched towards the Allied headquarters,¹⁴ toppling and burning Allied cars on their way. Finally, the Italian police managed to disperse the crowd, restoring order for the time being. The final balance for the day was three wounded, thirty bruised and a number of destroyed and damaged Allied vehicles.¹⁵

The next day a company of British soldiers left their barracks in Prato della Valle,¹⁶ without any orders, to protest with the Command in the name of their comrades injured by the Italians the day before. These soldiers marched through Via Roma towards Piazza Insurrezione but soon clashes started with the population and another riot ensued.¹⁷ According to Manno: «a crowd of some 200 English soldiers, armed with large clubs, invaded around 6 pm the city's main road, breaking many shop windows, beating defenseless passersby, and creating confusion.» Manno writes that he quickly alerted the Allied Command who managed to calm the soldiers down and take them away. However, the damage was done and the population once more tried to reach the British Hq in Piazza Insurrezione. This crowd was dispersed by the police before it reached its destination, but the city was in turmoil. Crowds stormed two more hotels, the Regina¹⁸ and the Aquila Nera,¹⁹ where the Allies housed their officers; and the Cinema Palazzo,²⁰ another building requisitioned by the Allies. Only in the evening order was

¹³ Pg, Relazione circa gli incidenti verificatisi nei giorni 10, 11 e 12 Dicembre 1946 a Padova, tra civili e militari alleati, 13 December 1946.

¹⁴ It was located in Piazza Insurrezione.

¹⁵ Pg, Incidenti, 15 December 1946.

¹⁶ The barrack was located next to the Saint Giustina basilica, in the former monastery.

¹⁷ CASREC, WO 204/10487 From GHQ CMF to AFHQ, 11 December 1946. CASREC, WO 204/10487 Report from General Harding, 12 December 1946.

¹⁸ The hotel was in piazza Garibaldi, on the corner with corso Emanuele Filiberto.

¹⁹ The hotel was in via Altinate, on the corner with via Zabarella.

²⁰ The cinema, today Palazzo Benetton, was located on the corner between via del Risorgimento and Corso Emanuele Filiberto.

restored. Meanwhile, the Camera del Lavoro (Cdl – Trade Union) was discussing a strike to protest the soldiers' violence against the population. Manno, together with Colonel Galli, commander of the police and former military commander of the Veneto partisans, managed to avoid this strike «which would only worsen the situation».²¹ The Cdl, thus, only organized a march for the next day, that took place orderly in the afternoon, after a similar one organized in the morning by the students.²² Despite this, more scuffled took place in the evening, involving some British soldiers.²³ However, all those were quickly resolved by the Italian police, which was in a state of high alert and had received large reinforcements from nearby cities.²⁴

The bewilderment of the British before these events is evident from their reports. Clearly, they were not expecting something of this scale, and they were quite unsure about the way forward, as to what kind of story to present to the press and to the Italians. For the time being, the Hq asked the Bbc: «to refrain from repeating inaccurate and sensational statements put out by notoriously incorrect and anti Allied Rome Press».²⁵ And, truth to be told, the Italian press had jumped on the story with great enthusiasm. Both local and national newspapers published articles on the incident and the subsequent riots, seldom painting the Allies in a positive light. The *Avanti!*, affiliated with the Socialist Party (Psiup), gave the news on the 11 December in its Milanese edition, stressing the fact that the Allied troops opened fire against civilians in multiple locations across the city²⁶. The next day, the news was published on the Roman edition of the paper as well, following the new clashes in Padua. The article has a notable subtitle: «how much does the occupation cost [us]» and focuses on the «exasperated» reaction of the population to the violence brought by the Allied soldiers who had left their barracks, described

²¹ Pg, Incidenti, 15 December 1946.

²² CASREC, WO 204/10487 Daily Incident Report, 13 December 1946.

²³ Pg, Incidenti, 15 December 1946.

²⁴ CASREC, WO 204/10487 Report from General Harding, 12 December 1946.

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

²⁶ *Violente dimostrazioni contro militari alleati*, «Avanti!» Edizione Milano, 11 dicembre 1946.

as «possibly drunk».²⁷ The Milanese edition of the same day gave room to the declarations of the Major of Padua, the Socialist Gastone Costa, who naturally deplored the violence and asked the Allied authorities to take action against it.²⁸

As for the *Unità* (the paper belonging to the Pci), it published an article on its front page on the 11 December, claiming that two people were killed and a fourteen-years old boy had been critically wounded in the incidents in Piazza Mazzini.²⁹ The *Unità* then commented on the protests and claimed that they had been caused by a series of false news about other accidents in the province, spread by Fascist provocateurs who wanted to exploit the frustration of the population.³⁰ The next day, a new article appeared describing the actions of the British soldiers in Via Roma as an «attempted ‘progroom’ (sic.)». The soldiers «looked like they had lost their mind»:

“The unfortunate passersby were beaten by the British madmen while other soldiers started to break the shop windows [...] Later on the H.M. soldiers, perhaps satisfied by their barbarous stunt, entered the Regina hotel. From there, they fired their guns against the crowd. More gunshots were fired from the Aquila Nera hotel, another gathering for British [soldiers].”³¹

However, despite this portrayal of the Allies, the *Unità* choose to continue to describe the violent reaction of the population as the product of a Neofascist subversive strategy, rather than as an explosion of exasperation. While this exasperation was justified, the journalist noted that the riots only benefitted the Fascists and the reactionaries, «to the point that one is left to wonder

²⁷ *Brutali violenze inglesi contro i cittadini di Padova*, «Avanti!» Edizione Roma, 12 dicembre 1946.

²⁸ *Nuovi violenti tumulti provocati da militari alleati*, «Avanti!» Edizione Milano 12 dicembre 1946.

²⁹ *Sanguinosi conflitti a Padova in seguito a un'ondata di investimenti*, «L'Unità», 11 dicembre 1946. The boy was Gian Paolo Trevisan, who was actually thirteen, see: *Burrascosa giornata a Padova*, «Il Gazzettino», 11 dicembre 1946.

³⁰ *Ibidem*.

³¹ *Centocinquanta soldati inglesi bastonano a sangue i civili*, «L'Unità», 12 dicembre 1946.

if these incidents were spontaneous or not ». The Padua Communist federation declared that the clashes were the product of a «monarchical and filo-Fascist uproar».³²

Perhaps surprisingly, anti-Allied representations were not confined to the left-wing press. The liberal newspaper *La Stampa* claimed that the initial clashes after the first accident were caused by an Allied officer who taunted the crowd. This officer, according to *La Stampa*: «was beaten and forced to leave the scene, bloodied and without his trousers».³³ On the 12, the paper reported on the new wave of violence in Padua, underlining the devastation of the Cinema Principe and the fact that the demonstrators sung «patriotic hymns»³⁴. The *Corriere della Sera* as well gave a similar description of the events³⁵. In its evening edition, it published also two communiqués, the first by the British command of the 53rd zone, and the second one by the Italian Ministry of Interior. The British expressed their regret for the events, and promised to take action. The Ministry of Interior claimed that order had been restored in the city.³⁶ This claim was, as we know, short-lived, and the next day the *Corriere* described the clashes between the British and the population as a «reprisal» by the soldiers. Once more, attention was drawn to the fact that the Italian crowd chanted patriotic hymns, most notably Mameli's one.³⁷

Finally, *il Gazzettino*, a local paper firmly in the hands of the Christian-Democrats, presented the events in the most detailed manner. In particular, it mentioned an orator who addressed the crowd: «saying our people does not deserve to be treated like colored people by those who claim to have freed us». The paper remarked that the Italian sentiments towards the Allied troops had been for the most part positive, but they were never reciprocated.³⁸ Furthermore, in the local edition of the paper dedicated to Padua, *il Gazzettino* published also a list of accidents

³² *Ibidem.*

³³ *Violenta dimostrazione contro i militari alleati*, «La Stampa», 11 dicembre 1946.

³⁴ *Atti di violenza degli inglesi a Padova*, «La Stampa», 12 dicembre 1946.

³⁵ *Violenti disordini a Padova provocati dagli automobilisti alleati*, «Il Corriere della Sera», 11 dicembre 1946.

³⁶ *Gli alleati promettono la punizione dei colpevoli*, «Il Corriere della Sera» edizione serale, 11 dicembre 1946.

³⁷ *Rappresaglia a Padova di militari inglesi*, «Il Corriere della Sera», 12 dicembre 1944.

³⁸ *Burrascosa giornata a Padova*, «Il Gazzettino», 11 dicembre 1946.

caused on the same day (11 December 1946) both in the city and its province involving Allied vehicles.³⁹ It is clear that the press' interest for this kind of accidents increased because of the Padua events. However, it is similarly clear that accidents were happening quite often and it makes sense that the population would be exasperated. The *Corriere* mentions «daily» accidents caused by Allied vehicles⁴⁰ and the Allied documents themselves recount some of them. As an example, the case of a woman and her husband who were hit by a vehicle and killed in Mestre in September 1946.⁴¹ According to an inquiry conducted by the Italian Ministry of Interior and reported by *il Gazzettino* in November 1946, Allied vehicles caused twenty-four accidents, resulting in thirteen dead and twenty-eight wounded.⁴² After the first day of clashes, the *Gazzettino* reported extensively on the events of the 11 December as well.⁴³

As for the British, their internal documents show that they were quite aware that the responsibility for the incidents was at least partially theirs. On the 12 December, a telegram addressed to the Foreign Office (Fo) spelled the situation clearly: «there is unfortunately some justification for Italian resentment since it is admitted that British troops broke barracks against orders». For this reason, while the Italians were still excited about the events and their papers (especially the left-wing ones)⁴⁴ were publishing «inflammatory» headlines, the line was not to reply to the papers' provocations. The only exception were «factual» reports from the Commands.⁴⁵ Another telegram included three of those reports, evidently written to be published on Italian newspapers. However, as the British Political Adviser in Caserta wrote, all had been ignored by the Italian press.⁴⁶ While this is not entirely true (an abridged version had been published by the *Corriere* evening edition on the 11 and one of them was published

³⁹ *Una serie di gravi incidenti stradali*, «Il Gazzettino di Padova», 11 dicembre 1946.

⁴⁰ *Violenti disordini a Padova provocati dagli automobilisti alleati*, «Il Corriere della Sera», 11 dicembre 1946.

⁴¹ CASREC, WO 204/10487 From HQ ALCOM to AFHQ, 10 settembre 1946.

⁴² *Gravi provvedimenti in atto contro i militari investitori*, «Il Gazzettino», 12 dicembre 1946.

⁴³ *Nuovi incidenti a Padova provocati da militari alleati*, «Il Gazzettino», 12 dicembre 1946.

⁴⁴ CASREC, FO 371/60565 From Rome to Foreign Office, 12 dicembre 1946. *L'Unità*, is described as «particolarmente virulenta» CASREC, CASREC, WO 204/10487, Daily Incident report, 13 dicembre 1946.

⁴⁵ CASREC, FO 371/60565 From Rome to Foreign Office, 12 dicembre 1946.

⁴⁶ CASREC, FO 371/60565 From Caserta to Rome, 12 dicembre 1946.

integrally on the *Gazzettino* on the 12) the protest by the Political Adviser appears to be reasonable. If we consider the one published by *il Gazzettino* (the third one),⁴⁷ in particular, it is clear that the paper took some liberties in the translation. For example, the mention of Italian «hooligan elements», who incited the violence after the accident, disappeared. A few lines below, the «bands of hooligans» described in the original communiqué, who «molested» the officers in their mess hall, became «groups of citizens» who simply «scuffled» with the officers.⁴⁸ It is naturally impossible to know for sure what the intentions of the translator were, but it is legitimate to raise some doubts on their good faith.

On the other hand, these communiqués also show that the military had no intention to shoulder the responsibility for these events, shifting it instead on the Italians. In fact, the fault for the riots was placed on Italian «hooligan elements» who attacked the British soldiers.⁴⁹ Just like the Italian version of the events was shaping on the newspapers, the British Commands were creating their own narrative, that gave little room to the Italians' frustration.

The Padua incidents, meanwhile, had ballooned into a national affair. On the 13 December, the accident and the riots were brought to the attention of the Constitutive Assembly, of which Major Costa was a member. Once more, on this matter, political unity was achieved between parties that were otherwise at each other's throat. Three Venetian Mps spoke before the Assembly: Costa as a representative of the Socialist Psiup, Riccardo Ravagnan for the Communist Pci and Umberto Merlin for the Christian-Democrat Dc. Costa informed the Assembly that Allied vehicles had been banned from the city center in order to avoid accidents, a measure that had been clearly ignored.⁵⁰ According to Costa, the riots were deplorable, but the frustration of the population was understandable.⁵¹ He then concluded saying he hoped that:

⁴⁷ CASREC, FO 371/60565 From Caserta to Rome, 13 dicembre 1946.

⁴⁸ *Un comunicato ufficiale del Comando Alleato*, «Il Gazzettino», 12 dicembre 1946.

⁴⁹ CASREC, FO 371/60565 From Caserta to Rome, 13 dicembre 1946.

⁵⁰ *Protesta unanime dei deputati per le violenze dei soldati inglesi*, «L'Unità», 13 dicembre 1946.

⁵¹ *Gli incresciosi fatti di Padova in un'interrogazione a Montecitorio*, «Il Gazzettino», 13 dicembre 1946.

«the Allied soldiers will understand that they are in a friendly country which is close to regain its independence.»⁵² Rovagnan mentioned that similar events had happened in Mestre a few months before. He claimed that this proved both the Allied drivers' contempt for Italian lives and the Allied Commands' laziness in punishing its soldiers. He also requested the Government to act in order to prevent neo Fascist provocateurs profiting from these incidents.⁵³ Finally, Merlin agreed with both Costa and Ravagnan, expanding on the idea that Allied soldiers were treating Italy as a colony: «we are a defeated and exhausted people, but we did not lose our dignity and therefore we must protest [these incidents]». ⁵⁴ De Gasperi, as Minister of the Interior, deplored the incidents, and asked the population to remain calm and not to lose faith in the British good will.⁵⁵ All those declarations were widely commented and reported by Italian newspapers.

The most inflammatory analysis of the events came from an editorial by Pietro Ingrao, on *L'Unità*, published on the 13 December. Ingrao's article represents the culmination of the arguments proposed by the articles and declarations we saw so far. «What do the occupying troops want in our country?» Asked Ingrao, while recounting various accidents that had happened in Naples, Padua and in the Marche region. He then commented:

“In all civilized countries, murderers end up in jail. The jeep criminals do not. On the contrary: in Padua, the Allied soldiers decided to add insult to the grief they brought upon Italian families. The jeeps were left in the barracks and this time the clubs were brought out. [...] There was a deliberate will to brutally underline [the soldiers'] strength and right to impunity [...].”⁵⁶

⁵² *Protesta unanime dei deputati per le violenze dei soldati inglesi*, «L'Unità», 13 dicembre 1946.

⁵³ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁴ *Gli incresciosi fatti di Padova in un'interrogazione a Montecitorio*, «Il Gazzettino», 13 dicembre 1946.

⁵⁵ *Protesta unanime dei deputati per le violenze dei soldati inglesi*, «L'Unità», 13 dicembre 1946.

⁵⁶ *L'offesa di Padova*, «L'Unità», 13 dicembre 1946.

Once more, the events of the 11 were firmly represented as a reprisal against the population who had dared to rebel against the British arrogance. However, Ingrao warned, those actions were counter-productive for the Allies:

“If the beatings in Padua were designed to ‘punish’ the Italians just like, unfortunately, it is common to ‘punish’ the natives of an island in the Pacific or of a Punjabi village, they were [...] a grave mistake. Because they reminded to the people of Garibaldi and Mazzini that Italy is not an independent nation yet, and that there are men and forces who, going against the principles of the war of liberation, would like to drag it to the rank of a colonial nation, not able to freely decide its destiny but a slave to the foreign occupier’s club.”⁵⁷

According to Ingrao these events were particularly dangerous as they gave provocateurs the tools to erase «the memory of the common fight of the Italians and the English against Hitlerism, to put the blame of a few criminals on all the British people».⁵⁸

However, the Italian press' interest in these events quickly dwindled. Both because there were no new developments, and because of de Gasperi's visit to the US in January 1947. *La Stampa* mentioned the Padua incidents on the 15 December, in an article in which the author wished for the return of tourists rather than soldiers across Europe.⁵⁹ On the 17 December, the news of a fight that happened in a bar in Mira, between British soldiers and Italian civilians, was reported by the *Gazzettino*.⁶⁰ The *Unità* as well commented on this fight⁶¹ and, on the 19, wondered: «is it possible that the constant provocations by the drivers of the murderous jeeps happen without the consent of the Allied military commands in Italy? No [...]». The author's theory was that the accidents were part of a scheme to exasperate the population and justify the

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁹ *I militari hanno viaggiato abbastanza*, «La Stampa», 15 dicembre 1946.

⁶⁰ *Violenze a Mira commesse da inglesi*, «Il Gazzettino», 17 dicembre 1946.

⁶¹ *Inglese e tedeschi contro i civili a Venezia*, «L'Unità», 18 dicembre 1946.

Allied troops presence in Italy for longer to maintain order.⁶² In the following days, on the *Gazzettino* were published articles reporting other incidents and disturbances caused by British soldiers in Padua and in the province.⁶³ However, all remained confined to the local press. The news also appeared on the British press, but only as short articles that mainly reported the British Command's declarations or the Ansa reports.⁶⁴

Nevertheless, if public interest in the incidents quickly dissipated, British internal memoranda and reports on the issue kept circulating during December 1946 and January 1947. First, the British embassy in Rome and the Supreme Command, in contrast with the Fo's wishes, stated that they were against the publication of communiqués that could put the blame of the events on the Italians or even try to censor the press, in order not to further enflame the situation.⁶⁵

The offices in Rome, in fact, had their hands full with the situation as it was. On the 13 December, the Socialist leader Pietro Nenni, at the time Foreign Minister of Italy, sent a formal protest on the Padua incidents to the British and the American embassy that was described as «excitable» in tone. However, the embassy also wrote that it should not be taken «tragically».⁶⁶ To support this evaluation, they quoted a meeting with Malfatti,⁶⁷ who reassured them on the situation.⁶⁸ Additional words of comfort for the British were provided by the Italian ambassador in London, Nicolò Carandini. Carandini said, in a private meeting, that it was in the interest of both Italy and the United Kingdom to let the whole affair die down.⁶⁹

⁶² *Padova e Venezia*, «L'Unità», 19 dicembre 1946.

⁶³ *Vigile notturno percosso da militari alleati*, «Il Gazzettino di Padova», 14 dicembre 1946. *Gravi incidenti stradali*, «Il Gazzettino di Padova», 14 dicembre 1946. *Trambusto in un bar causato da due inglesi*, «Il Gazzettino», 21 dicembre 1946.

⁶⁴ For a few examples: *British Officers Beaten*, «Daily Herald», 11 December 1946. *British troops in Italy clash with 'Hooligans'*, «Daily Mirror», 12 December 1946. *Italians assault British officers*, «The Scotsman», 11 December 1946. *Anti-British riot in Padua*, «The Guardian», 11 December 1946.

⁶⁵ CASREC, FO 371/60565 From Caserta to Rome, 12 dicembre 1946; CASREC, FO 371/60565 From Rome to Foreign Office, 12 dicembre 1946; CASREC, FO 371/60565 From Rome to Foreign Office, 13 dicembre 1946.

⁶⁶ CASREC, FO 371/60565 From Rome to Caserta, 13 dicembre 1946.

⁶⁷ Franco Malfatti, member of the Psiup, who had been a trusted contact of the Allied secret services during the German occupation of Rome. See: P. Tompkins, *Una spia a Roma*, Milano, Il Saggiatore, 2002, p. 98; pp. 111-112. G. Ranzato, *La liberazione di Roma Alleati e Resistenza*, Bari, Laterza, 2019, p. 310.

⁶⁸ CASREC, FO 371/60565 From Rome to Caserta, 13 dicembre 1946.

⁶⁹ CASREC, FO 371/60565 Disturbance in Padua, 14 dicembre 1946.

Meanwhile, as tokens of good faith, the British Command agreed to meet Francesco Turra, head of the Padua CdL,⁷⁰ and to send some penicillin for a girl that had been wounded in the clashes by a British soldier⁷¹. However, the Supreme Command for the Mediterranean (Sacmed) continued to refuse to recognize its responsibilities in the events. Their final report, dated 14 December, claimed that the accident had been caused by an Italian policeman, who steered the jeep against the Pedrocchi, and the riots were caused by Italian «hooligan elements». Moreover: «incidents of this nature, possibly fostered by Leftist elements to embarrass present government, will probably tend to increase as Allied strength in Italy wanes. [...] It is to be expected that accidents involving Allied personnel [...] will be skillfully used by agitator in attempts to stir up Italian crowds.»⁷² Ironically, the Sacmed came to the same conclusion as the Communists: the riots had been caused by provocateurs. Their interpretations differed only on the political affiliation of such men.

However, the personnel in Rome was in disagreement with the evaluation provided by the Sacmed, as it is shown by a document produced on the 16 December which is probably the most coherent interpretation of the events, as far as the British are concerned. As the author wrote:

“I think that [...] the Italian people are just now in a particularly touchy mood. They are disillusioned by the general difficulties of post war world; offended at what they consider as unjust peace terms and irritated by minor personal difficulties arising from continued military occupation. [...] Admiral Stone observed to me that in the present conditions careful driving was the best form of public relations.”⁷³

⁷⁰ CASREC, FO 371/60565 Letter from HQ Public Relations CM, CMF dated 14.12.46, with enclosure, 20 December 1946.

⁷¹ CASREC, WO 204/10487 Daily incident report, 14 dicembre 1946.

⁷² CASREC, WO 204/10487 message from SACMED to AGWAR Washington Troopers London, 14 dicembre 1946. CASREC, FO 371/60565 Cipher telegram from AFHQ to AGWAR Washington, 19 dicembre 1946.

⁷³ CASREC, FO 371/60565 From Rome to Foreign Office, 16 December 1946.

Following this line that aimed at easing the tension, it was proposed to attach to the General Headquarters (Ghq) a civilian adviser to help with public relations and to handle the press.⁷⁴ Moreover, it was also proposed to publicize the punishment for reckless driving inflicted to soldiers, in order to appease the Italians. Another issue was that many of those drivers were actually German pows. The effects that an accident, involving such drivers, would have was predictable. Therefore, it was argued that replacing them with Allied personnel would be a good idea.⁷⁵ The reply to these observations from the Caserta officers was quite vague, and essentially stated that nothing could be done. Army drivers were inexperienced because in the previous twelve months the Commands had been forced to release much of its forces. The replacements were mostly 19 or 20 years old with little experience of driving, military life, or foreign countries. Moreover, lack of personnel meant that nothing could be done concerning the use of German pows as drivers.⁷⁶

Meanwhile, at the end of December, a memorandum was circulated to the Allied Commission (Ac) and the Afhq on the Padua incidents at the end of December. The report, based on information gathered by a «reliable source» claimed that the riots had been caused by Communist elements in order to spread chaos. The two main instigators, according to this report, were the chief of the CdL, Francesco Turra, and an engineering student belonging to the Pci, Leopoldo Francovich.⁷⁷ Francovich, in particular, should be identified as the mysterious orator who addressed the crowd before it launched its assault against the Storione, as reported by the *Gazzettino*. The aim of this Communist scheme was to cause the British embarrassment, as General Montgomery was visiting the «B» area one the border with Yugoslavia.⁷⁸ This conspiratorial interpretation quickly gained traction. It was reported that there had been a

⁷⁴ CASREC, FO 371/60565 From Rome to Caserta, 19 December 1946.

⁷⁵ CASREC, FO 371/60565 From Rome to Caserta, 20 December 1946.

⁷⁶ CASREC, FO 371/60565 From Caserta to Rome, 28 December 1946.

⁷⁷ The «Francovich» mentioned here is certainly the misspelled name of Leopoldo Francovich, who was a member of the Pci in Padua and later Major of Cervignano del Friuli.

⁷⁸ CASREC, FO 371/67731 Padua incidents, 28 December 1946.

similar attempt at starting a riot in Milan,⁷⁹ and that Radio Moscow had made some comments about reckless Allied drivers on the 27 December.⁸⁰

In the end, the British never publicly recognized their responsibilities. Admiral Stone's line of keeping a low profile prevailed, but without any admission of culpability. Stone's reply to Nenni's protest, dated 13 January 1947, contains only vague statements and an invite to the Italian government to moderate the tone of the press.⁸¹ And, when the issue was brought to the British Parliament by Sir Gifford Fox on the 18 February 1947, the first draft⁸² response by the Secretary of State for War was dismissed, as it was considered to be too articulated. The idea was that «the less that can be said about the indigents at Padua at this stage the better»⁸³. The final response, therefore, was cut from six pages to barely one and it was underlined that the riots were caused by a mixture of socio-economic factors. However, it was also stated that the driver was not speeding at the time of the accident.⁸⁴

The liberators/occupiers

The events in Padua are the culmination of a long mounting of frustration in Italy. A frustration that was in no small measure created by the Allies themselves. The Italians complaints about the Amg in the afterward period can be broadly divided into two categories: unfulfilled promises and lack of epuration. Both were connected to the expectations that Italians had for the future of Italy, and in both cases the Allies constituted a convenient scapegoat for Italy's lackluster modernization.⁸⁵ However, while it is true that the Allied never promised to reform

⁷⁹ CASREC, WO 204/10487 From Sacmed to Agwar Washington, 30 December 1946.

⁸⁰ CASREC, FO 371/67731 From Caserta to Rome, 5 January 1947.

⁸¹ CASREC, FO 371/67731 Copy Headquarters Allied Commission A.P.O. 794, 13 January 1947.

⁸² CASREC, FO 371/67731 Disturbance in Padua on 10, 11 and 12 December 46, 23 January 1947.

⁸³ CASREC, FO 371/67731 Letter from A.D.M. Ross to J.H.B. Lowe, 23 January 1947.

⁸⁴ <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/1947-02-18/debates/c385df83-6427-4eb1-b133-696137f796c5/CivilianDemonstrationsPadua> (accessed 28 April 2021).

⁸⁵ T. Piffer, *Gli Alleati e la Resistenza italiana*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2010, p. 10.

Italy or shoulder its economy, it is impossible discard the Allies' responsibilities in creating those expectations indirectly.

The British in particular, had to face this problem. Their propaganda to Italy was often overly-optimistic, promising that an age of abundance would follow in the Allied armies' wake. Moreover, British propaganda had strengthened the image of partisans as redeemers of Italy's tarnished honor.⁸⁶ This led to the success of iconic figures and programs, such as Colonel Stevens and *Radio Londra*.⁸⁷ However, when past promises failed to materialize, British propaganda was not able to provide an answer for the new situation. Both in Naples and Rome, for example, the population was convinced that the Allies would provide food and medicine,⁸⁸ but the already stretched Allied supply lines could not provide for them. Soon, food shortages and the black market became a daily reality for Italians. As for the partisans, the delicate moment of partisan disarmament was handled rather poorly, with many bands dismissed hastily and without proper acknowledgment of their support in the Allies' campaign.⁸⁹ Some of them were grouped with refugees or even Fascist pows.⁹⁰ British propaganda directed to the liberated Italy struggled to present these tribulations in a positive light, as a lot of effort was put into trying to re-educate the population in order to uproot Fascism. Propaganda for liberated Italy was much less optimistic than before and focused on the Italian responsibilities in starting the war and, therefore, in creating the conditions for which the Italians were complaining.⁹¹ While this argument is surely understandable, it appears that little to no consideration was given to the

⁸⁶ This point is well explained by the Psychological Warfare Branch (Pwb) itself in: The National Archives (London) [d'ora in poi: TNA], FO 371/43946, PWB Report No.34 on conditions in Liberated Italy, 16 September 1944.

⁸⁷ L. Valente (a cura di.), *Ascoltando Radio Londra il diario di Leone Fioravanti 1943-1945*, Schio, Edizioni Menin, 2003, p. 11.

⁸⁸ P. De Marco, *Il difficile esordio del governo militare e la politica sindacale degli alleati in Italia*, Italia contemporanea, no. 136 (1979), p. 50. TNA, FO 371/43945, PWB Report No.23 on conditions in Liberated Italy, 19 June 1944.

⁸⁹ T. Piffer, *Gli Alleati*, cit., pp. 232-237.

⁹⁰ For example, see: TNA, Pwb Report, 9 February 1944.

⁹¹ TNA, FO 371/43946, Letter from Russel Barnes PWB to Brigadier General A.J. McChrystal INC, 25 August 1944.

moment when one area, after being overrun by the Allied armies, would switch from one kind of propaganda to the other, producing confusion and frustration. These sentiments were shared by the Allied military as well, as officers protested this policy of unchecked promises made by the Bbc.⁹² Amidst all this confusion, Macmillan was left to wander about the role of the Allies in Italy: «were we to be avenging or ministering angels?»⁹³ This issue was a reflection of the internal division of the British machine in Italy that presented different centers of power that acted independently and often in contrast with one another. In the case of propaganda, for example, multiple ministers claimed competency over the activities of the office for «psychological» warfare, the Pwe.⁹⁴ The results were inter-ministerial struggles that paralyzed its action, making it unable to adapt to problems or new situations.⁹⁵ The case of epuration presents similar characteristics. Italian anti-fascists were impatiently waiting for the purge of the administration and the military from Fascists and rightfully so. However, they were sorely disappointed. Trials were few and far apart, and this led to more frustration.⁹⁶ Notably, it was the British who were more effective in purging the administration in the South, but things slow down noticeably once the Italian Government was involved.⁹⁷ However, the Allies, and the British in particular, were often accused of being lenient with Fascists.⁹⁸

As time passed, the liberators started to look more and more like occupiers,⁹⁹ and the population grew restless. Ruggero Orlando, who worked with *Radio Londra*, noted that the Italians

⁹² TNA, WO 204/7309, Discussion on 15/16 Nov. AMG Fifth Army SCAO IV Crops and Patriots Rep (Adv), 15 November 1944.

⁹³ H. Macmillan, *The blast of war*, London, Macmillan, 1967, p. 543.

⁹⁴ E. Corse, *A battle for neutral Europe British cultural propaganda during the Second World War*, London, Bloomsbury, 2013, p. 41.

⁹⁵ C. Cruickshank, *The fourth arm, psychological warfare 1938-1945*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1981, p. 31.

⁹⁶ R. Canosa, *Storia dell'epurazione in Italia. Le sanzioni contro il fascismo (1943-1948)*, Milano Baldini&Castoldi, 1999, p. 341. H. Woller, *I conti con il fascismo. L'epurazione in Italia 1943-1948*, Bologna, il Mulino, 1997, pp. 84-85.

⁹⁷ N. Gallerano, "L'influenza dell'amministrazione militare alleata sulla riorganizzazione dello stato italiano (1943/1945)", *Italia contemporanea*, no. 115 (1974), p. 8.

⁹⁸ R. Canosa, *Storia dell'epurazione*, cit., p. 27. A. Lepore, *Carlo Sforza alto commissario per l'epurazione le sanzioni contro il fascismo*, Pisa, Pacini editore, 2017, p. 29.

⁹⁹ On this topic, see the reflections by Ellwood in: D. Ellwood, *Liberazione/Occupazione*, cit., pp. 22-23.

struggled to recognize the British soldiers. The soldiers were tired and angry, not at all like the Bbc had depicted them, as kind, competent and sympathetic men.¹⁰⁰

This frustration led, in some cases, to violence. Riots were caused by food shortages¹⁰¹ and Italians sometimes decided to take justice in their own hands. Dissatisfaction with the process of epuration and desire for radical socio-economical changes lead to violence directed against former Fascists and suspected collaborators of the Regime, especially in areas where the rise of Fascism had been particularly violent and the repression of anti-fascism particularly brutal, like in Emilia-Romagna.¹⁰² Fascists held in prison were taken out and summarily executed, often because those who took part in the Resistance feared that they would be released by the Allies or the Italian Government and their crimes would go unpunished.¹⁰³

These issues were compounded by the discussion around the peace treaty, which went on during 1946 and saw a rising frustration in the country for what was considered to be an unjust imposition on Italy, which disregarded the Italian contribution in the war.¹⁰⁴ The publication of the draft of the peace treaty in July 1946 caused widespread protests, both in the Parliament and in the streets. As Benedetto Croce noted in his diary, thinking about the peace treaty: «it forces me to relive the pain and shame of the events, and the foolishness of the English in particular who, for revenge and blind egoism, want to destroy a sister nation [...]»¹⁰⁵ The aversion to the

¹⁰⁰ M. Piccialuti Caprioli, *Radio Londra 1939-1945*, Bari, Laterza, 1979, p. XVI.

¹⁰¹ M. Cuzzi, “Guerra e alimentazione nell’Italia dei conflitti mondiali”, *Progressus Rivista di Storia Scrittura e Società*, no. 2 (2015), p. 74.

¹⁰² M. Storchi, “Post-War violence in Italy: A struggle for memory”, *Modern Italy*, no. 2 (2007), p. 238.

¹⁰³ P. Cooke, *L’eredità della Resistenza Storia, cultura, politiche dal dopoguerra a oggi*, Roma, Viella, 2015, p. 35.

¹⁰⁴ The Italian Government prepared a dossier that was sent to Paris to prove the Italian effort in the war against Germany. Noticeably, this included also the price paid by the civilian population, almost as a form of «expiation». In particular, the civilian victims section mentions those caused by the Allies, specifically those wounded or killed by Allied drivers. See: *Le concours Italien dans la guerre contre l’Allemagne*, Roma, Ministero des Affaires Etrangères, 1946, p. 127.

¹⁰⁵ B. Croce, *Taccuini di Lavoro*, Napoli, Arte Tipografica, 1987, vol. VI, p. 136.

treaty was so solidly bi-partisan that no politician wanted to sign it and, in the end, it was an ambassador, Antonio Meli Lupi di Sorgana, who had to carry the unrewarding task.¹⁰⁶

Padua was no exception in this climate. While immediately after the Liberation the situation was reasonably calm, the first trials against suspected Fascists were conducted in a rushed and superficial manner.¹⁰⁷ In particular, the trial against seven members of the Muti battalion excited the population. Several times the crowd gathered in the courthouse and attacked the cage where the accused were held. In one occasion, they managed to take all seven to Piazza Insurrezione to have them executed on the spot. Only the arrival of the British military police prevented this from happening.¹⁰⁸ Moreover, in Padua banditry was also widespread. Young people, often former partisans, disappointed by the way in which things were run and frustrated by rampant unemployment turned to robbery. Some were still fighting an «instinctive» Resistance, against older power structures. Among the most notable bandits were Fabio Bellini and Pietro Drukovic, two well-known names of the local Communist Resistance.¹⁰⁹ The Pci had a difficult task ahead: to reorganize itself and come out of clandestinely. In July 1946, the Party recalled Aldo Lampredi and put him in charge of this transition. Lampredi, following the line traced by Togliatti, cut ties with the more problematic members of the Resistance and ended the «revolutionary» inspirations of the party.¹¹⁰

As for the Allies, they were not exempt from clashes with the Italians. Already in December 1945, there were scuffles between some youngsters and Allied soldiers.¹¹¹ Another source of friction was the unresolved issue of the border between Italy and Yugoslavia, which affected

¹⁰⁶ E. di Nolfo, M. Serra, *La Gabbia infranta. Gli Alleati e l'Italia dal 1943 al 1945*, Bari, Laterza, 2010, p. IX e p. 251.

¹⁰⁷ E. Ceccato, *Resistenza e normalizzazione nell'Alta Padovana, 1943-48: il caso Verzotto, le stragi naziste, epurazione ed amnistie, la crociata anticomunista*, Padova, Centro studi Ettore Luccini, 1999, p. 293.

¹⁰⁸ A. Naccarato, *La resa dei conti. Desiderio di vendetta e uso della violenza nel primo processo della corte straordinaria d'Assise di Padova*, Venetica, 1998, p. 69.

¹⁰⁹ A. Naccarato, *Conquistare la libertà, organizzare la democrazia Storia del Pci di Padova (1921-1001)*, Padova, Il Poligrafo, 2020, pp. 148-149.

¹¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 164.

¹¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 154.

the Veneto uniquely, because of its proximity and historical ties with Istria and Dalmazia. In July the British had to face riots caused by students from the Venezia Giulia and sparked by the news of the Paris peace conference which had assigned the Istrian peninsula to Yugoslavia.¹¹² However, what is particularly interesting, in the case of the events of the 10 and 11 December, is the quick formation of two distinct blocks that represent each other negatively and are essentially deaf to each other's reasons, a reflection of the national «unification» against the peace treaty. A similar thing had happened during the summer, when a scuffle in Prato della Valle led to the death of a British soldier¹¹³ but it remained confined to the local press. The British were consistently described in the press as alcoholic brutes, arrogant conquerors who were used to handle colonial people with violence. Their troops and the administration were consistently labelled as «occupiers» on the press. The Italians appeared uninterested with the motives of the soldiers who protested, who seems to have been genuinely angry at their Commands who had confined them in their barracks to avoid other incidents, a decision that they considered unjust. The Italian «united front» can be appreciated also in the actions of the prefect, Carlo Manno, who decided that mass arrests would only inflame the situation¹¹⁴ and even those who were arrested on the 10, like Francovich himself, were released the next day without even being identified.¹¹⁵ Moreover, Manno seems rather convinced of the British responsibilities, as in his report they are always depicted as the instigators of all the clashes that happened. On the other hand, part of the British establishment seemed unable or unwilling to engage with the Italians' frustrations and described them as selfish schemers, evoking the specter of a «red conspiracy». The suspect that the Pci was playing a double game had always been present in some sections of the Allied administration and military. It was surely reinforced

¹¹² Pg, Manifestazioni di protesta degli studenti giuliani per le decisioni della conferenza di Parigi. Atti ostili contro militari alleati. 7 July 1946.

¹¹³ S. Dini, "In Prato della Valle, quella notte d'ottobre del 1945", *Padova e il suo territorio*, no. 81 (1999), p. 20-22.

¹¹⁴ Pg, Incidenti, 15 December 1946.

¹¹⁵ Personal communication.

after the events in Greece that lead to a full-fledged civil war which the British themselves, with their intransigent anti-communism, had no small role in instigating.¹¹⁶ However, the idea of a «Red Gladio»¹¹⁷ appears unconvincing.¹¹⁸ As for Padua, there are a few elements that might lay some credence to this theory. Both Francesco Turra¹¹⁹ and Leopoldo Francovich¹²⁰ seem to remember rather proudly their participation in the riots, but the existence of a larger Communist plot is unfounded. The Pci's conciliatory stance, followed by Lampredi, excludes this possibility, and Turra, who was a trusted member of the party together with his brother Leone, was hardly a dissident.

Conclusions

The Padua incidents, therefore, appear to be an interesting case-study on the period of the Allied occupation of Italy. In particular as far as the British image is concerned, which had already suffered during the war for the competition of the Americans, as the latter were considered to be more forgiving of Italy than the former. It appears that the situation was clearly lived as a rigid division between the liberators/occupiers and the occupied who experienced this with extreme frustration. A situation that had already emerged after the liberation of Rome,¹²¹ was often reinforced by the Amg officers themselves¹²² and, finally, was brought to exasperation by the debate on the peace treaty. In Padua, all the problems of the Allied administration combined in a single crisis which made this difference emerge clearly.

¹¹⁶ On this see: P. Papastratis, *British policy towards Greece during the Second World War, 1941-1944*, Cambridge, Cambridge University press, 1984, p. 217. Heinz Richter, *British intervention in Greece from Varkiza to civil war, February 1945 to August 1946*, London, Merlin Press, 1986.

¹¹⁷ G. Donno, *La Gladio rossa del PCI 1945-1967*, Rubettino, Saveria Mannelli, 2001.

¹¹⁸ P. Cooke, *L'eredità*, cit., p. 39.

¹¹⁹ L. Pamploni, *90 anni di camera del lavoro a Padova studi e materiali. 1893-1983*, Padova, CGIL, 1985, p. 302.

¹²⁰ Personal communication.

¹²¹ G. Ranzato, *La liberazione di Roma*, cit., pp. 624-634.

¹²² V. Belco, *War, Massacre*, cit., p. 114.