

Racism or common humanity?

Depictions of Italian civilians under Allied war and occupation

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Abstract

*Allied attitudes toward Italian civilians during the Second World War ranged from vindictiveness colored by racism to genuine sympathy and a feeling of common humanity. The former views found their practical expression in the British bombing strategy of “dehousing” to undermine the moral of Italian workers and Winston Churchill’s justification of treating civilians harshly to punish them for having supported Mussolini. The spiteful attitude continued past the armistice and contributed to an occupation policy that rendered the Italians worse off, at least in terms of supply of food, than when the Germans were in control. Journalistic and literary sources supplement the picture of casual racism and resentment on the part of the occupying troops, but sometimes also compassion. Novels, diaries, and reportage from US and British soldiers and journalists present on the ground in 1943-1946 provide powerful testimony of the state of Italian life under war and occupation. The troops who did the most harm to Italians – the bomber crews who destroyed their homes and strafed them along the roads – were mainly concerned to save their own lives. Glimpses of guilt for civilian casualties appear in some sources, however, including Joseph Heller’s famous novel, *Catch-22*, and they reinforce the overall sense of ambivalence and moral ambiguity.*

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Introduction

Wars often produce a demonization and dehumanization of adversaries -- especially “total wars,” when societies are fully mobilized and the survival of the nation itself is at stake. World War II is a classic example. Denigrating people as insects, or anything less than human, seemed to ease the process of mass extermination -- of Jews and Roma by the Nazis, for example -- or through obliteration bombing of cities by the Allies. One might even identify degrees of dehumanization. Americans sometimes managed to distinguish ordinary Germans from the Nazi regime, whereas when it came to the Japanese they were all more commonly treated as subhuman monsters. The pattern was reflected at home in the more than 100,000 people of Japanese descent rounded up and held for years in internment camps, compared to the much smaller number -- in absolute terms and proportionately -- of Italian-Americans or German-Americans interned. Arguably, racist dehumanization contributed to the policies of aerial destruction, with Japanese cities subject to relentless firebombing and two attacks by the atomic bomb -- a weapon whose creation was justified by fear that the Germans would build one first, yet used against Hiroshima and Nagasaki months after the German surrender.¹

Tens of thousands of Italian civilians perished in the Allied bombing raids of World War II -- far fewer, though, than in either Germany or Japan. Does that mean that racism and dehumanization of Italians played less of a role in Allied military policy toward Italy? Did Allied political and military leaders, bombing crews, soldiers, and citizens recognize a common humanity in Italian

¹ John W. Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (W. W. Norton, 1986); Arjun Makhijani. “‘Always’ the target?” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* (May/June 1995).

civilians even as their countries were at war, or at least after the armistice? This article examines the Allies' understanding of the status of Italian civilians by relying on a range of sources: the statements and behavior of the top military and political leaders; the depictions of Italian civilians in journalism and fiction based on the authors' experiences during the war and occupation; and the views of pilots and bombardiers expressed in memoirs and in the most famous novel about bombing Italy -- Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*.

Attitudes toward Civilians in Wartime

Among the Allies, the British were the first to fight against the Italians, immediately following Benito Mussolini's opportunistic invasion of France in June 1940. The Italian army engaged British forces in Africa and Mussolini sent Italian planes to attack the United Kingdom directly by joining the Germans in the Battle of Britain. As victims of Italian aggression, with their homeland's survival at risk from Axis assault, the British could be expected to have demonized their Italian adversaries as they sought to defend themselves. In fact, even under German bombardment, opinion was divided on whether bombing civilians was an appropriate response: "In London, the most heavily bombed area, the proportion of those against retaliatory bombing, 47 per cent, exceeded the 46 per cent who supported it."² The Americans found themselves in a different position. Home to many Italian immigrants, some of whom joined other Americans in their admiration of Mussolini and fascism, the United States was less inclined to demonize Italians, even after Italy declared war against it in December 1941 -- and American civilians never came under attack from Italian planes.³ Nevertheless a vast majority of Americans expressed no qualms

² Richard Overy, "Constructing Space for Dissent in War: The Bombing Restriction Committee, 1941–1945," *English Historical Review*, vol. 131, issue 550 (2016), 603.

³ Justin H. Vassallo, "The Americans Who Embraced Mussolini," *Boston Review*, 17 February 2021; Katy Hull, *The Machine Has a Soul: American Sympathy with Italian Fascism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021).

about the use of air power against civilian objects. “A Gallup poll taken shortly after the bombing” of the Abbey of Monte Cassino in February 1944 “found that if military leaders believed it necessary to bomb historic religious buildings and shrines in Europe, 74 percent of Americans would approve and only 19 percent disapprove.”⁴

In his wartime policies toward Europe, Franklin Roosevelt had sought to distinguish between belligerent leaders and regimes, on the one hand, and their citizens, on the other, not least to maintain support for the war from US populations of German and Italian descent. (Japanese-Americans were another matter.) Churchill was disinclined to make such distinctions in rhetoric or behavior. The urban bombing by the Royal Air Force that followed Italy’s entry into the war in June 1940 sought deliberately to demoralize Italian industrial workers and their families with its goal of “dehousing” – destroying their homes. Granted he considered Mussolini’s attack on Britain’s ally, France, a fundamental betrayal, still it is hard to resist the impression that Churchill’s attitude toward the Italians as a people stemmed from a fundamental racism. Visiting the United States in May 1943, Churchill announced, in a whiskey-propelled conversation with Henry Wallace, the US vice president, that he expected “England and the United States to run the world” following the Allied victory. “Why be apologetic about Anglo-Saxon superiority?” he demanded. Wallace accused Churchill of advocating “Anglo-Saxondom *über Alles*.”⁵

At a press conference during the same visit, Churchill elaborated on his view that the Italian people as a whole bore responsibility for Mussolini’s crimes and should be subjected to pressure during the course of military operations. “I think they are a softer proposition than Germany,” he averred, but to induce Italy to leave the war, “I wouldn’t count on anything but the force of arms,” which

⁴ Rick Atkinson, *The Day of Battle: The War in Sicily and Italy, 1943-1944*, New York: Henry Holt, 2007, 441.

⁵ The conversation with Wallace is described in Atkinson, *Day of Battle*, 21.

could provoke “a change of heart” or “a weakening of morale.” Recognizing the control that the fascist dictatorship imposed on Italians, Churchill still considered them guilty for succumbing to it:

They have sinned -- erred -- by allowing themselves to be led by the nose by a very elaborate tyranny which was imposed upon them so that it gripped every part of their life. The one-party totalitarian system, plus the secret police applied over a number of years is capable of completely obliterating the sense of personal liberty.

And thus they were led by intriguing leaders, who thought they had got the chance of five thousand years in aggrandizing themselves by the misfortunes of their neighbors who had not offended them in any way, into this terrible plight in which they find themselves.

“I think they would be very well advised to dismiss those leaders,” he continued, “and throw themselves upon the justice of those they have so grievously offended.” According to the transcript of the press conference, the reporters were amused by Churchill’s allusions to bombing the Italians into surrender: “All we can do is to apply those physical stimuli (laughter) which in default of moral sanctions are sometimes capable of inducing a better state of mind in recalcitrant individuals and recalcitrant Nations (laughter).”⁶

That same month, May 1943, British aircraft dropped leaflets over Naples with this message:

Hitler and Mussolini condemned Italy to become a no man's land. No man's land: with this name the strategists define that desolate sector between two opposing battle fronts...If we tell you that Italy will become no man's land, we are serious about it; your country will be exposed to bombing, machine-gunning, the most complete disorganization; countless houses will end up in flames,

⁶ Excerpts from the Joint Press Conference with Prime Minister Churchill, 25 May 1943, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/excerpts-from-the-joint-press-conference-with-prime-minister-churchill>.

corpses will accumulate in cities and countryside. Cold in winter, infections in summer, dismay, hunger will multiply.⁷

The view that ordinary Italians bore responsibility for Mussolini's war and could and should do something about it had already been circulating in the US press in the wake of reports of the devastating bombing of the cities of Italy's northern industrial triangle (Milan-Turin-Genoa) in the autumn of 1942. A *New York Sun* article about the bombing of the latter city reinforced the views of Allied leaders who sought to blame the entire population for the sins of the dictator: "If to total war its civilian population must pay a bitter price in life and suffering, that population should charge the bill to the inventors of total war, of whom not the least important is Signor Mussolini...Unless the Italian people shall themselves throw off the yoke of their domestic and alien masters, the bombing of Genoa is but a token of the full payment that will be exacted."⁸ To the extent that such views were held by political and military leaders and soldiers and bomber crews, one could expect that concern to avoid harm to Italian civilian life would not figure prominently in bombing strategies -- or in treatment of Italians under occupation once Italy had surrendered.

US military practices evinced, at best, a general indifference toward civilians. In July 1943, General George S. Patton's forces occupying the Sicilian town of Gela faced resistance from Italian and German troops. He ordered a naval bombardment, a mortar attack with white phosphorous shells. The fragments burrowed into the soldiers' limbs down to the bone and continued burning. The effects "seemed to make them quite crazy," Patton reported, "as they rushed out of the ravine, shrilling like dervishes with their hands over their heads." Patton at other

⁷ The leaflet, preserved in the prefectural archives in Naples, is quoted in Martina Gargiulo, "Uscire dalla catastrofe. La città di Napoli fra guerra aerea e occupazione alleata," *Diacronie. Studi di Storia Contemporanea* 33, 1/2018, 5.

⁸ *The Bombing of Genoa*, "New York Sun", 24 October 1942.

times seemed to demonstrate some sense of humanity, for example when he acknowledged to his diary the civilian toll of the Sicilian campaign. The entry for 19 July 1943 reads: “At Caltanissetta, we killed at least 4,000 civilians by air alone and the place smelled to heaven as the bodies are still in the ruins. I had to feel sorry for the poor devils.”⁹ Five days later, as General Geoffrey Keyes’ 2nd Armored Division was approaching Palermo, Patton “called off the air bombardment and naval bombardment because I felt enough people had been killed.”¹⁰

Even after Italy withdrew from the war, Italian civilian continued to face the wrath of the US Army as it confronted the Germans in southern Italy. As first-hand reports recount, the US style of warfare inflicted tremendous levels of harm. The war correspondent Richard Trevaskis describes Lt. Col. William D. Darby of Arkansas consulting his map to identify a target on 19 September 1943, eleven days after announcement of the armistice. “I want to give this a hell of a pasting. I want to start out with the mortars again tonight. I want to blast the crap out of this hill, and the living daylights out of that hill. The chemical mortars will cover that one with W.P.”¹¹ The chemical, white phosphorous, is the one that General Patton described as burning so deep into people’s bones as to make them shrill “like dervishes.”

The next day Trevaskis came upon “Majors Max Schneider and Roy A. Murray talking with two ragged Italians” about the disposition of German forces. The Americans had been pounding their town of Angri without even knowing whether there were any soldiers there. “One of the two Eyeties spoke English,” writes Trevaskis, “with an unmistakable Brooklyn accent.” He handed

⁹ US Library of Congress, George S. Patton Papers: Diaries, 1910-1945; Annotated transcripts; 1943-1945; 19 July 1943, 4, <https://www.loc.gov/item/mss35634028/>.

¹⁰ Patton diary, 23 July 1943, 3-4.

¹¹ Richard Tregaskis, *Invasion Diary*, New York: Random House, 1944, 132-133.

over a text with the heading, “Commune di Angri, Salerno Province,” and signed by the mayor or *podesta*:

To the English Commander: Excuse me if I communicate to you that in many days that your batteries let come on our city a shower of projectiles that make a great destructions of houses and men, women, children and so on.

All the population of the city, more than 20,000 inhabitants, are sudden fear for the men wounded and death.

Will you please change the position of your cannons and do not shot on our city. This is that appeal that all the population of Angri does to you.

Commander, save our children, save our old men, save our women, save this population, please God bless you.

Major Murray “wrote out an answer which he gave to the English-speaking Italian, and told me that he would check to see whether there were any Germans in the town or not. The message read: ‘We will try to respect your wishes, as we certainly do not intend to harm the Italian population.’”¹²

A low point in the Allies’ treatment of the Italians -- aside from the devastation wrought by area bombing of cities -- came with the near-disastrous landing at Salerno, the day after the armistice saw Italy try to leave the war. In his memoir, *Naples ’44*, the British intelligence officer Norman Lewis recounted in gruesome detail one particularly egregious treatment of a civilian more than a week after the Italian surrender.

Here I saw an ugly sight: a British officer interrogating an Italian civilian, and repeatedly hitting him about the head with a chair; treatment which the Italian, his face a mask of blood, suffered with stoicism. At the end of the interrogation, which had not been considered successful, the officer called in a private of the Hampshires and asked him in a pleasant, conversational sort of manner, “Would

¹² *Ibidem*, 138-139.

you like to take this man away, and shoot him?" The private's reply was to spit on his hands, and say, "I don't mind if I do, sir." The most revolting episode I have seen since joining the forces.¹³

Lewis had been told that US commanders ordered their soldiers not to take surrendering Germans prisoner at Salerno but to bludgeon them to death with the butts of their rifles -- a clear war crime.¹⁴ Yet to beat and murder Italian civilians was something else again. The scene did not augur well for Allied treatment of Italians under occupation.

Attitudes during Occupation and Resistance

In August 1944, more than a year had passed since the king had summoned the Grand Council of Fascism to depose Mussolini, an action that induced Galeazzo Ciano, the foreign minister and Mussolini's son-in-law, to flee to Germany. It was as if the king, representing the Italian people, were following Churchill's advice "to dismiss those leaders." Yet Churchill was still finding it hard to shake the sense of betrayal provoked by Mussolini's opportunistic attack of four years earlier. Nearly a year after the armistice that led to Italy's change in status from enemy to captive friend in need of liberation, the prime minister was still casting blame on ordinary Italians, using the loose term "nation" to refer to -- apparently -- everybody:

When a nation has allowed itself to fall into a tyrannical regime it cannot be absolved from the faults due to the guilt of that regime, and naturally we cannot forget the circumstances of Mussolini's attack on France and Great Britain when we were at our weakest, and people thought that Great Britain would sink forever...¹⁵

¹³ Norman Lewis, *Naples '44: An Intelligence Officer in the Italian Labyrinth*, William Collins, 1978. Entry for Salerno, 20 September 1944, 64.

¹⁴ *Ibidem* 37, 56-57.

¹⁵ Churchill, from the *Times* (London), 29 August 1944, quoted in David W. Ellwood, *Italy 1943-1945*, New York: Holmes & Meier, 1985, 103.

In conversation with Soviet leader Iosif Stalin at the British Embassy in Moscow in October 1944, Churchill acknowledged that in the midst of the ongoing war and Allied occupation “the Italians are in a miserable condition.” But he personally “did not think much of them as a people.” His main concern was that Stalin keep the Italian communists from causing trouble for the occupation authorities or the postwar government.¹⁶

Churchill mistrusted the partisans fighting against the Germans and Italian fascists under the banner of the Committee of National Liberation. His suspicion of their political intentions contributed to his general hostility toward the Italians and produced confusion in British occupation policy. The situation, complained the British Foreign Office, “means trying to treat the Italians as friends and foes at the same time.”¹⁷ An Italian contact with the liaison officer Major Oliver Churchill described an attitude common among the British, “almost a caricature of the military and imperial British mentality”:

He was a sincere friend of those whom he knew and felt to be pro-British and moderate but as to Italians in general they remained for him “enemy aliens,” i.e., nationals of a country which had declared and made war on Britain and was still subject to an occupation regime. As an officer of a conquering army he would never have understood why the occupying forces could and should not use their authority, and if necessary the whip, to bring into line a few anti-democratic, communist and pro-communist agitators, who reminded him of the fascists and whom he thoroughly disliked.¹⁸

The shared views of the otherwise unrelated Winston Churchill and Oliver Churchill were evidently common among the British. “The British were spiteful in their behaviour to the Italians,”

¹⁶ Record of after-dinner conversation at the British embassy, Moscow, 11-12 October 1944, quoted in *Ibidem*, 117.

¹⁷ Quoted in *Ibidem*, 71.

¹⁸ Quoted in David Stafford, *Mission Accomplished: SOE and Italy 1943-1945*, London: Vintage Books, 2011, 207-208.

wrote the historian Eric Morris, “treatment that continued long after the war.”¹⁹ In a memorandum for President Roosevelt, Myron Taylor, the president’s envoy to the Pope, had similarly described the British attitude toward the Italians as “cold, unforgiving, and at times actually cruel.”²⁰ A slightly more generous characterization would be “ambivalent.” A year after the armistice, and just four days before he was appointed Chief Commissioner of the Allied Central Commission for Italy, Harold Macmillan complained to Anthony Eden, the British foreign minister: “We cannot reconcile the contradictions in our Italian policy. Sometimes they are enemies; sometimes they are cobelligerents. Sometimes we wish to punish them for their sins; sometimes to appear as rescuers and guardian angels. It beats me.”²¹

Official documents were rife with cultural stereotypes of the Italians. Early in the war, a British guide, prepared for agents promoting antifascist propaganda, contained some points about Italians “always to keep in mind.” They “have an acute sense of humor,” are logical, jealous, vain, and theatrical.²² From stereotype to casual racism was a short step, as first-hand accounts and fictionalized reportage revealed in the language used to describe the Italians: dago, ginzo, eyetic.²³ Not even Americans of Italian descent -- whose linguistic skills were essential for the occupation -- escaped ridicule.²⁴ They were subject to the slur familiar from life back in the States, “wop” (apparently derived from the Neapolitan dialect’s *guappo* for a swaggerer, pimp, or ruffian). General Patton used the word in his diary description of a Ranger unit that “had killed 50 and

¹⁹ Eric Morris, *Circles of Hell: The War in Italy, 1943-1945*, New York: Crown, 1993, x.

²⁰ Memorandum for the President Roosevelt concerning Anglo-American relations in Italy, n.d., quoted in Ellwood, *Italy 1943-1945*, 119.

²¹ Note of 10 September 1944, quoted in *Ibidem*, 105.

²² Directive from the Political Information Department to the Foreign Office, 18 September 1940, quoted in Sergio Costagli, *Bombe su Cuneo 1943-1945: Attacchi dal cielo. Le missioni segrete della Special Force Number One*, Boves: arabAFenice, 2016, 259.

²³ Alfred Hayes, *All They Conquests*, New York: Lion Books, 1950 (originally published in 1946), 95, 98, 101.

²⁴ S. Costagli, *Bombe su Cuneo*, interview with Calton M. Smith, 26 March 2001, 194.

captured 250 Wops.”²⁵ One of the subplots of *All They Conquests*, Alfred Hayes’ 1946 novel of Rome under US occupation, concerns a married American woman having an affair with Captain John Pollard. Racialized attitudes toward Italians come through in her physical description: “She had nice legs, a long throat, and being dark, people sometimes thought Antoinette was Italian, and then Pollard liked saying, ‘Hell no. She’s a white woman.’”²⁶

Harry Brown’s 1944 novel, *A Walk in the Sun*, conveys the feeling of ambivalence about their role on the part of the occupying soldiers, even when they are not viewing the Italians through racist lenses. One scene recounts a bantering conversation between two occupying soldiers, caught in the midst of uneasy transition from killing to saving Italian civilians: One calls the other “a traveling salesman...selling democracy to the natives.” “What do you mean I’m a traveling salesman?” asks the other. “I’m a murderer.”²⁷

The Allies’ ambivalence was a matter of life or death for Italian civilians. They were literally starving under occupation. Efforts to grow food in the territories over which the war had raged were hindered by the mines left hidden in the fields. In *All They Conquests* Hayes reports a conversation among two friends traveling across Rome in the back of a rickety *camionette*. They are contemplating whether the darkening skies portended a rainstorm that would aid the harvest.

“Even if there is rain, how will they cultivate the fields? They are full of mines.”

“That will be a job, clearing the mines.”

“There will be a harvest all right,” the man in the raincoat said. “A harvest of explosions. There

²⁵ Patton diary, 12 July 1943.

²⁶ A. Hayes, *All They Conquests*, 69.

²⁷ Harry Brown, *A Walk in the Sun*, New York: Carroll & Graf, 1985 (originally published in 1944), 148-149.

are the magnetic mines, the bakelite ones, the glass, the cement, the wooden ones. One thing Italy has more than enough of: mines.”²⁸

In the waning days of the war and the first weeks of occupation, the American writer Edmund Wilson traveled extensively in Italy and wrote letters to a friend describing the situation in each region. He too highlighted the problem of the landmines. In the Abruzzi, where he traveled “all the way to the Adriatic in a jeep” he found “the devastation is unimaginable, large towns with not a building left and the country still planted with mines, which the young men are getting killed digging up for 20 lire (20 cents) a day -- miles and miles of this.”²⁹

Elsewhere in Italy Wilson found similar devastation. “Naples is absolutely ghastly,” he wrote. “I saw nothing but either ruined streets of pulverized plaster or battered buildings with garbage strewn on the pavements, a few gruesome cuts in in the butcher shops and thousands of dirty children running about the streets. No police, no street lamps, no traffic except an occasional donkey cart.”³⁰ He arrived in Milan “just after the partisans had taken over and the Allied troops came in. They told me that there had been wild excitement during the first days of the expulsion of the Germans, the Mussolini execution, etc., but immediately afterwards everybody relapsed into a kind of state of tense exhaustion. The people looked awful: starved and stunned and with deeply stamped expressions of anxiety and resentment such as I have never seen anywhere else.”³¹

Information provided to the British Foreign Office makes clear that officials back in London were aware of the dire situation on the ground, in Naples, for example. David Ellwood writes that they were “well informed” on the subject of Italian starvation, “to the extent of knowing that *if* the

²⁸ A. Hayes, *All They Conquests*, 138.

²⁹ Letter to Mamaine Paget, 28 May 1945, Edmund Wilson, *Letters on Literature and Politics, 1912-1972*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977, 420-421.

³⁰ Letter to Mamaine Paget, 28 April 1945, in *Ibidem*

³¹ Letter to Mamaine Paget, 13 May 1945, in *Ibidem*, 418.

promised March deliveries of sugar and cheese had ever arrived in Naples, the total daily calories available to each individual would have been 615, compared with 1378 on German rations.” One source of the supply problems, according to Ellwood, was “the peculiar British attitude to the treatment of Italy characterized in no small part by vindictiveness.”³²

How different was the US approach? As the British and Americans sought to cooperate in occupying Sicily and southern Italy in the wake of the armistice of September 1943, they endeavored to coordinate their efforts. In a chapter that aptly poses the question “Liberators or occupiers?” Ellwood cites conflicting guidelines for the representatives of the Allied military government (AMGOT). The occupation directive for Sicily, for example, offered this overview:

The administration shall be benevolent with respect to the civilian population so far as consistent with strict military requirements. The civilian population is tired of war, resentful of German overlordship, and demoralized by the Fascist regime, and will therefore be responsive to a just and efficient administration. It should be made clear to the local population that military occupation is intended: (1) to deliver the people from the Fascist regime which led them into the war; and (2) to restore Italy as a free nation.³³

At the same time, General Administrative Instruction No. 1 directed AMGOT officers to be “guided in your attitude towards the local population by the memory of years of war in which the Italians fought against your people and your Allies.”³⁴ The British perceived the Americans as too soft on the Italians and too eager to rehabilitate them. As one official complained in February 1945 to Anthony Eden, the British foreign minister, the Americans had “never really felt themselves at war with Italy” and “wish to go full-steam ahead” in reconciliation with the Italian population.³⁵

³² D. Ellwood, *Italy 1943-1945*, 127, 131.

³³ Combined Chiefs of Staff directive quoted in D. Ellwood, *Italy 1943-1945*, 52.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, 52.

³⁵ Quoted in D. Ellwood, *Italy 1943-1945*, 172.

Few accounts give either country's occupation forces high marks. Grigg writes, for example, that the Allied military government "was an expensive and insensitive apparatus which, to put it mildly, did little to generate enthusiasm for the Allied cause."³⁶ Ellwood is a bit more equivocal. "The question of the civil affairs officers' attitudes, generally and individually, is one the mass of documentation produced by the occupation leaves unanswered on the whole," he avers, "though it seems reasonable to suggest that outside headquarters the single officer, left very much on his own, ruled according to his own personality, his own prejudices, and his own civil and military background."³⁷ What we know from reportage and lightly fictionalized accounts, such as John Hersey's *A Bell for Adano* (1944), confirms Ellwood's sense that individual attitudes made a difference. Hersey's account, based on the US military occupation of Licata, Sicily, conveys a generally positive portrayal of Major Victor Joppolo, modeled on the Italian-American military governor, Frank Toscani.³⁸ A conversation between Joppolo and a military police sergeant named Borth conveys the ambiguous status of Italian civilians and the ambivalent attitude of the liberator-occupiers. They come across the corpse of an Italian woman with her leg blown off. "Awful," the Major said, "that we had to do that to our friends." "Friends," said Borth, "that's a laugh." "It wasn't them, not the ones like her," the Major said. "They weren't our enemies."³⁹ Joppolo eventually impresses Borth and the locals with his efforts to revive the town's economy, but he runs afoul of his nemesis, the cruel General Martin, evidently based on General Patton, and is removed from his post.

³⁶ John Grigg, *1943: The Victory That Never Was*, New York: Hill & Wang, 1980, 110.

³⁷ D. Ellwood, *Italy, 1943-1945*, 141.

³⁸ Douglass Martin, *F.E. Toscani 89, Dies; Model for Hero of 'Bell for Adano'*, "New York Times", 28 January 2001.

³⁹ John Hersey, *A Bell for Adano*, New York: Knopf, 1944.

Naples provides some of the most disturbing evidence of Allied attitudes and mistreatment of the people they were supposed to be liberating. Some accounts, such as this one by a British pilot stationed there, express considerable sympathy for the people in the bombed-out city, left without housing or food:

Walking along the back streets from the camp they were shocked to see families with bedding and their few possessions out on the pavements, living in absolute abject poverty. Men with missing limbs, looking very sullen, were standing or lying around. Some played cards, some begged, whilst the women -- either very thin or bloated and in their shabby black dresses with untidy, unkempt hair -- looked on hopelessly. Those same ragged children with their pot bellies they had seen in the barren homesteads of the country were now on the pavements of Naples soulfully, pleadingly watching them pass by, through their large, round, dark brown eyes.

They could hardly walk a few paces without being accosted by prostitutes and women openly offering their young daughters for bars of chocolate. There were older children begging, pestering them for money, cigarettes or chocolate.⁴⁰

Neapolitans had suffered both from the Allied bombing and from vast destruction and sabotage by the retreating Germans. Yet, according to many sources, their plight did not invoke sympathy. The British, writes Morris, “continued to treat the Italians with contempt.”⁴¹ As he explains, the occupation troops were especially harsh:

the local people suffered the indignities of systematic looting, invariably by the second echelon and rear formations (fewer opportunities were afforded to the fighting men). There was precious little sympathy from the military authorities, who treated the Italians more as a conquered people and in the absence of sanctions, pillage and abuse were a common enough experience.⁴²

⁴⁰ Maurice G. Lihou, *Out of the Italian Night: Wellington Bomber Operations 1944-45*, Barnsley, UK: Pen and Sword Books, 2008, 77-78.

⁴¹ E. Morris, *Circles of Hell*, 198.

⁴² *Ibidem*, 199.

“In the towns and cities,” argues Morris, “those who lived in the liberated south experienced harder times than those under German occupation” elsewhere in the country. Prostitution was widespread, one of the few escapes from starvation. “The price was so low and the importuning so persistent that the Allied soldiers regarded the local people with contempt. The Italians were dirty and ragged too, and in their ignorance the soldiery thought they were always like that.”⁴³

Less than a week into the Allied occupation of Naples, the Germans’ booby traps were still inflicting a horrifying toll. On 7 October 1943, Tregaskis recorded in his diary how “a great mine blew up under the Naples post office.” “Noel Monks,” a seasoned war correspondent from Australia who had been the first foreigner to witness the devastation at Guernica, “kept repeating, ‘It was awful. It was awful.’ He estimated that more than 100 people including Italian civilians -- men, women and children -- were killed. Other estimates were lower, but all agreed that the first-aid crews were hauling many bodies from the debris.” Tregaskis adds his own view: “The worst part of the news was that several American Army engineers had been killed.”⁴⁴

Norman Lewis’s account of Allied-occupied region of Campania provides some horrifying accounts of Allied brutality toward the suffering population. In Naples,

the story was that this little boy was one of a juvenile gang that specialised in jumping into the backs of army lorries when held up in traffic and snatching up anything pilferable. We heard that they had been dealt with by having a man with a bayonet hidden under a tarpaulin in the back of every supply-lorry. As soon as a boy grabbed the tailboard to haul himself in, the waiting soldier chopped down at his hands. God knows how many children have lost their fingers in this way.⁴⁵

⁴³ *Ibidem*, 303. See also Marie-Louise Berneri, “Italy To-day: The Price of Liberation,” *War Commentary* (December 1944), reprinted in her *Neither East Nor West: Selected Writings 1939-1948*, London: Freedom Press, 1988, 99-106.

⁴⁴ R. Tregaskis, *Invasion Diary*, 165.

⁴⁵ N. Lewis, *Naples '44*, entry for 14 March 1944, 289.

He describes the Allies' treatment of the city of Benevento both during the fighting and after.

This ancient city of fifty thousand inhabitants was purposelessly destroyed in May of last year [1943] by an air-raid carried out by Flying Fortresses, and now, fifteen months later, it shows no signs of resurrection. The beautiful eleventh-century Lombard-Saracenic cathedral is only a shell, and its unique bronze doors have disappeared. I am told that only one house in five has been left standing.

The Allied occupation, initially by Canadian forces, offered no respite. "The departed Canadians have left a bad memory in Benevento. It was the Sergeant-Major's habit to carry a whip with which he flogged people out of his way as he strolled through the streets."⁴⁶

Lewis seemed particularly struck by the injustice of the Allies' approach, given what he had experienced and heard of ordinary Italians' generosity toward the soldiers during the combat:

When the men were hungry they would decide on a small house they liked the look of in a village street, knock on the door, explain who they were, and ask for food. In no case was this ever denied them. After they had eaten they were often offered beds for the night, and for this purpose were shared out among the neighbours. Sometimes they were urged to stay as long as they liked -- in one case to settle down and become members of the local community. Money was pressed on them. The old people in Italian villages treated them as sons, and the young ones as brothers.

Lewis stresses the Italians' sense of common humanity, even with their enemies.

John Horne Burns served as a second lieutenant in US Army intelligence in North Africa and Italy, including in occupied Naples, where one of his jobs was censoring letters of prisoners of war. His 1947 novel, *The Gallery*, named after the Galleria Umberto Primo, the arcade in Naples through which his characters pass, became a best-seller. Sometimes his American soldiers express such

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, 12 August 1944, 473, 475.

opinions as this: “When we got overseas we couldn’t resist the temptation to turn a dollar or two at the expense of people who were already down...we didn’t take the trouble to think out the fact that the war was supposed to be against fascism -- not against every man, woman, and child in Italy.”⁴⁷ Such lines induced one reviewer to claim that the author’s “appreciation of the Italian people sometimes bordered on ‘sentimental idolatry.’” What stands out more, however, is Burns’ depiction of the opposite attitude of the occupying troops -- hostility infused with racism.⁴⁸ Burns’ novel covers both the period of combat between US forces and Mussolini’s army, as surrendering Italian soldiers are taken as prisoners of war (P/W), and the post-armistice occupation. In the early phase, a duty officer warns “that we mustn’t fraternize with the P/W.”

--Fraternize, my arse, the mess sergeant said after the officer had gone. Who wants to fraternize with an Eyetie? They fired on our boys in Africa didn’t they? And they’re doin it now in Italy.

--They did it because they were told to, the pfc said.

He was a liberal and wore horn-rimmed spectacles.

--I say put the bastards against the wall, the mess sergeant said.

He always shouted his opinions.

--You forget the Geneva Conventions, the pfc said gently.

--Sure, we treat em white! the mess sergeant said, looking at his buddy Jacobowski. So in twenty years they can declare war on us again. What have they got to lose? They’ll live better’n they did in the Eyetalian Army...Friggin wops...Dagos...⁴⁹

One of Burns’ narrators suggests that “most Americans had a blanket hatred of all Italians. They figured it this way: These Ginsoes made war on us, so it doesn’t matter what we do to them, boost their prices, shatter their economy, shack up with their women.”⁵⁰ Although expressed more

⁴⁷ John Horne Burns, *The Gallery*, New York: New York Review of Books, 2004 (originally published in 1947), 259.

⁴⁸ *John Horne Burns, Novelist, 36, Dies*, “New York Times”, 14 August 1953.

⁴⁹ J. Burns, *The Gallery*, 95.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, 260.

crudely, such views bear much in common with some of Winston Churchill's vindictive pronouncements about the Italians.

Some American soldiers adopted rather Churchillian views on bombing as well. Not all of them were repulsed by seeing up-close the results of the Allied air raids against Naples, for example. Burns describes the reaction of two officers visiting the city at the end of July 1944.

Major Motes appraised the ruin around Naples Harbor.

--Goddam it he cried, exalting. See what happens to people who declare war on Uncle Sam?

Lieutenant Mayberry wondered aloud:

--I wonder how many greasers are still lying under that rubble?...Well, Italy was always overpopulated. Musso sends the birthrate up, so we choose our own means of bringing it down."⁵¹

Although legally responsible for their well-being under the Geneva Convention rules of military occupation, Motes "declared that he'd never lift a finger to help feed a people which had declared war on the United States."⁵²

Alfred Hayes, in his 1949 novel, *The Girl on the Via Flaminia*, set in occupied Rome, conveys similarly hostile attitudes in the words of a US soldier:

Bloody young Eyetie. They were all a bloody lot, the sergeant thought, the young ones, hanging around the cafés, black marketing, with their hair oil and their swimming hot eyes. Bloodier than Wogs, standing there on the sidewalks, looking at you as though you'd just robbed the poor box. Should have knocked off a few more of them coming up the coast road from El Alamein, the sergeant thought. Better off all around. Bloody beggars.⁵³

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, 199.

⁵² *Ibidem*, 201.

⁵³ Alfred Hayes, *The Girl on the Via Flaminia* (1949), Apple ebook, 172-173.

His Italian characters are resentful of the American behavior, and, in the soldiers' eyes, inadequately grateful.

"Why do the Americans boast so much?" she said. "Why do the Italians complain so much?" he answered.

"We've suffered!"

"We didn't cause it," he said.

"You bombed our cities."

"The Germans were in them," he said.

"And now you," she said.

He looked at her. He had become an enemy...

"Be grateful," he said, trying not to be angry. Not now, at least. "If we hadn't walked up here from Salerno," he said, "you'd still be doing the tedeschi's laundry..."

"Perhaps," she said, "it would have been better!"⁵⁴

Many soldiers and reporters on the ground recognized the toll imposed by the Allied invasion on civilian life. They expressed a degree of compassion absent from official pronouncements by political and military leaders. Don Robinson, a US army sergeant, in an account of his experiences in Italy published in 1944, describes one tragedy elicited in conversation with an Italian refugee:

"[Luigi,] why did you come to Naples," I asked.

"My family is here."

"How did you come?"

"I walked."

"How long did it take you?"

"Three days."

Like all my Italian conversations, it was choppy and strictly factual. Luigi was silent a moment.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, 88-89.

Then he said:

“Naples is beautiful, isn’t it?” I agreed with him, then tried a polite inquiry.

“How is your family?”

“My mother is dead, killed by the bombs,” Luigi said. His eyes, I noted, were red.

Robinson highlighted the contrast between Americans and Italians in the dangers faced during the war. He found himself “rejoicing that no one I knew was likely to be forced to walk three days to rejoin his family, only to find at the end of his trip that his mother had been killed by bombs. That is one thing that is appreciated by the American soldier in danger: he knows that his family is all right.”⁵⁵

Perspectives from the Air

Bill Maudlin, the cartoonist beloved for his depictions of ordinary infantry “dogfaces,” in his postwar memoir also turned a sympathetic eye on civilian victims. As the liberators arrived in Sicily, “not all the natives felt like kissing our hands,” he acknowledged, based on how they had suffered during combat. Particularly troublesome were instances of strafing, when gunners in airplanes would fire their machine guns at civilians on the ground. Maudlin describes coming upon a crowd of people in a village square, mourning over the body of a little boy, “horribly shot up.”

One of our fighter planes had made a single strafing pass over the town, and this was the only casualty. There is no way of knowing whether the pilot thought he saw a legitimate target or was just being exuberant, but as far as the village was concerned that man had come all the way across the ocean for the express purpose of killing that child.⁵⁶

Maudlin himself fell victim to the practice that killed so many Italian civilians, in a case of “friendly fire” during the winter of 1944, when US troops were “dug into the hills overlooking

⁵⁵ (Sergeant) Don Robinson, *News of the 45th*, Norman, OK: Oklahoma University Press, 1944, 142.

⁵⁶ Bill Maudlin, *The Brass Ring*, New York: W.W. Norton, 1971, 177.

Bologna” and “a pair of American P-51 Mustangs were strafing us.”⁵⁷ He continued to harbor a negative attitude toward the US air forces for their callous treatment of civilians.

Novelists, such as Alfred Hayes, captured the mix of hope and disappointment experienced by Italians caught between the hated fascists and the dangerous Allies, raining bombs from the skies. He writes of Giorgio, a Roman who “had been employed in the War Department building as a clerk, and the planes had come, the first of the days when the Alleati had bombed the stazione, and the air-raid sirens, late as usual, had sounded throughout the city.” Instead of cowering in the bomb shelter, Giorgio ran up to the roof: “Here! Here! Drop one here!” he yelled “This is the War Department! Imbeciles, drop one here!” The bombers bypassed Giorgio’s recommended target and aimed for the railroad yard. One bomb fell nearby and hit the apartment of Giorgio’s brother, “effectively destroying all of it, and only by some incredible charity of fate not taking his brother’s family with it.”⁵⁸

Hayes does not offer any insight into the thinking of his fictional crew who flew over the War Ministry to bomb instead an apartment building near a railyard. For the views of pilots and bombardiers we turn to a more famous work, *Catch-22*. In Joseph Heller’s 1961 novel the characters are thoroughly preoccupied with saving themselves from death, apparently giving little thought to civilian casualties. The novel’s conceit is that each crew member has to reach a quota of missions before he would be sent home following the last one -- but the unit commander keeps raising the quota after each successful “last” mission.

Heller himself flew sixty missions from Italy as a bombardier in a B-25 medium bomber of the 488th Bombardment Squadron, 340th Bomb Group, 12th Air Force. Originally the crew were

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, 233.

⁵⁸ A. Hayes, *All They Conquests*, 22-23.

told they could go home after 25 missions. The novel is based on Heller's wartime experience. The title comes from the ruse that tempts crew members to try to get out of serving on a mission: feigning insanity. But the phenomenon of *Catch-22* "specified that a concern for one's own safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was the process of a rational mind," so anyone who tried to avoid those missions by reason of insanity was by definition sane and must fulfill the missions.⁵⁹

Thus, *Catch-22* reflects common wartime attitudes of soldiers who are keener to save their own lives than those of unarmed civilians. Until the Allies managed to destroy the German and Italian air defenses, flying bombing raids was indeed one of the most dangerous military activities of the war. The British lost over 55,000 air crew members in raids over Europe between 1939 and 1945, "the highest loss rate of any major branch of the British armed forces."⁶⁰ US Army Air Force casualties numbered 47,483 out of 115,332 members, including more than 26,000 dead.⁶¹ Fear of being shot down or seriously wounded by "flak" preoccupied Captain John Yossarian and the other characters in *Catch-22*. "All was contaminated with death," we read, "during the Great Big Siege of Bologna when the moldy odor of mortality hung wet in the air with the sulphurous fog and every man scheduled to fly was already tainted." The mission to destroy the ammunition dumps that the heavy bombers had been unable to target accurately enough was delayed by rain. "Each day's delay deepened the awareness and deepened the gloom. The clinging, overpowering conviction of death spread steadily with the continuing rainfall, soaking mordantly into each man's

⁵⁹ Joseph Heller, *Catch-22*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011 (originally published 1961), 170. Heller's wartime service is documented, among other places, in the archives of a crewmate: Sidney Schneider Papers, #6319. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library, Ithaca, New York.

⁶⁰ Mark Fielder, "The Air War, and British Bomber Crews, in World War Two," BBC, 17 February 2011, archived at https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwtwo/air_war_bombers_01.shtml.

See also: <https://www.airmen.dk/stcdaloss.htm>.

⁶¹ <http://personal.psu.edu/kbf107/Losses.html>.

ailing countenance like the corrosive blot of some crawling disease.”⁶² The cumulative total of civilians killed in the Allied bombing of Bologna number nearly 2500, with more than 2000 wounded, and hundreds of buildings destroyed.⁶³ Yet Heller’s narrator, so fulsome in the depiction of the air crew’s fear of death, is silent on the deaths below.

Some readers might wonder at the fictional soldiers’ relative lack of concern for the civilian lives and property being obliterated by their bombs. Heller, however, finds ways to smuggle in acknowledgment of the harm caused by the missions, right from the outset. The novel opens with Yossarian in hospital, faking an illness to avoid further missions. He is assigned the task of censoring letters.

To break the monotony he invented games. Death to all modifiers, he declared one day, and out of every letter that passed through his hands went every adverb and every adjective. The next day he made war on articles.

When he had exhausted all possibilities in the letters, he began attacking the names and addresses on the envelopes, obliterating whole houses and streets, annihilating entire metropolises with careless flicks of his wrist as though he were God.⁶⁴

Later in Rome, Yossarian meets a victim of bombing for the first time, a woman called Luciana, whom he takes to dinner and to bed. She is reluctant to remove her blouse, which hides a horrible scar.

He winced at the many tortured nights she had spent in the hospital, drugged or in pain, with the ubiquitous, ineradicable odors of ether, fecal matter and disinfectant, of human flesh mortified and

⁶² J. Heller, *Catch-22*, 108.

⁶³ Comune di Bologna, “Bombardamenti aerei subiti da Bologna,” <https://www.storiaememoriadibologna.it/bombardamenti-aerei-subiti-da-bologna-95-evento>.

⁶⁴ J. Heller, *Catch-22*, 8.

decaying amid the white uniforms, the rubber-soled shoes, and the eerie night lights glowing dimly until dawn in the corridors. She had been wounded in an air raid.

“*Dove?*” he asked, and he held his breath in suspense.

“*Napoli.*”

“Germans?”

“*Americani.*”

His heart cracked, and he fell in love. He wondered if she would marry him.⁶⁵

The poignant moment dissolves into farce as Heller introduces another example of a Catch-22.

Luciana is not a virgin, so no one will marry her, she says. Yossarian claims he will. He must be crazy, then, she says. Therefore, she can’t marry him.

“Ma non posso sposarti.”

“Why can’t you marry me?”

“Perchè sei pazzo.”

“Why am I crazy?”

“Perchè vuoi sposarmi.”⁶⁶

Only one incident in the novel depicts indecision or regret on the part of the bombing crew for what they are doing, as opposed to the risk to their lives from doing it. The incident, it turns out, was based on an identifiable actual case, the attack on a village on Italy’s border with France in the Val d’Aosta. The intended target, known in Italian as the Ponte San Martino, was built by the Romans in 25 BCE. The Allies called it the Settimo Road Bridge. The 488th (Heller’s unit) and 489th bomb squadrons carried out the mission on 23 August 1944, but not without serious misgivings from some crew members – according to both the novel and the subsequent research of a local historian, Roger Juglair. “They’ll be bombing a tiny undefended village, reducing the

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, 158.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*

whole community to rubble,” complains Yossarian’s crewmate Dunbar, and without having warned the inhabitants to flee.⁶⁷ Later, we learn how Dunbar coped with his moral dilemma, in the opening line of the next chapter: “Yossarian no longer gave a damn where his bombs fell, although he did not go as far as Dunbar, who dropped his bombs hundreds of yards past the village and would face a court-martial if it could ever be shown he had done it deliberately.”

Indeed, in the actual case, one of Heller’s crew effected a dangerous maneuver to avoid bombing the town. The rest of the planes dropped their bombs -- some 120,000 tons of them. Much of the town, including city hall, an elementary school, and a kindergarten, were damaged. The bridge, however, emerged unscathed. The dead numbered 130, including 40 children and nine soldiers.⁶⁸ The diary entry for the 489th bomb squadron for that day reads: “This period was one of ordinary activity with nothing special to note.”⁶⁹

Juglair’s research leads him to place the blame for the attack in a broader context. “The massacre of Ponte San Martino, he argues, “was not an anomalous event, extraneous to any rule and strategy of war.” Rather, “like tens of thousands of other civilian deaths in many villages scattered throughout Italy,” it was a consequence of an Allied strategy that focused on destroying lines of communication “in the course of a terrifying war against the Nazi-Fascist dictatorship. But if someone wants the real culprit,” he argues, it is Mussolini, for his insistence in joining Nazi Germany’s wars.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*, 326.

⁶⁸ Roger Juglair with Silvana Miniotti, *Ponte San Martino: Martirio di un paese valdostano*, Saint-Christophe: Musumeci Editore, 2008. For a summary in English, Daniel Setzer, *Raid on the Settimo Road Bridges*, 2010, <http://www.dansetzer.us/Settimo.pdf>.

⁶⁹ Quoted in Setzer, *Raid on the Settimo Road Bridges*.

⁷⁰ <https://23agosto1944.wordpress.com/le-vittime/storie/>.

Heller's final word on civilian deaths in the Allied war against Italy comes in his chapter, "The Eternal City," when Yossarian and Aarfy spend their leave in Rome. Aarfy has raped an Italian woman and thrown her out the window to her death.

"Aarfy seemed a bit unsettled as he fidgeted with his pipe and assured Yossarian that everything was going to be all right. There was nothing to worry about.

"I only raped her once," he explained.

Yossarian was aghast. "But you killed her, Aarfy! You killed her!... You've murdered a human being. They are going to put you in jail. They might even hang you!"

Aarfy's reply conveys the moral tension implicit in a war that entailed hundreds of thousands of deaths of combatants and civilians alike, and an air campaign that killed countless civilians, both unintentionally and intentionally. Yet deliberate murder of an individual was still considered a crime. Aarfy asks Yossarian: "I hardly think they're going to make too much of a fuss over one poor Italian servant girl when so many thousands of lives are being lost every day. Do you?" Heller the author answers the question when the military police arrive. They arrested *Yossarian* for being in Rome without a pass. "They apologized to Aarfy for intruding and led Yossarian away between them, gripping him under each arm with fingers as hard as steel manacles."

Conclusion

Allied attitudes toward Italian civilians during the Second World War ranged from vindictiveness colored by racism to genuine sympathy and a feeling of common humanity. The former views found their practical expression in the British bombing strategy of "dehousing" to undermine the moral of Italian workers and Winston Churchill's justification of treating civilians harshly to punish them for having supported Mussolini. The spiteful attitude continued past the armistice and contributed to an occupation policy that rendered the Italians worse off, at least in terms of supply

of food, than when the Germans were in control. Journalistic and literary sources supplement the picture of casual racism and resentment on the part of the occupying troops, but sometimes also compassion. The troops who did the most harm to Italians – the bomber crews who destroyed their homes and strafed them along the roads – were mainly concerned to save their own lives. Glimpses of guilt for civilian casualties appear in some sources, including Joseph Heller’s famous novel, *Catch-22*, and they reinforce the overall sense of ambivalence and moral ambiguity.