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**MEMOIRS OF THE RUSSIAN CAMPAIGN AND THE NEW SEMANTICS  
OF THE ITALIAN SOLDIER****МЕМУАРЫ О КАМПАНИИ В РОССИИ И НОВАЯ СЕМАНТИКА  
ИТАЛЬЯНСКОГО СОЛДАТА****Giordgio Scotoni**  
**Джорджо Ренато Скотони***Воронежский государственный педагогический университет, Россия, 394043, г. Воронеж, ул. Ленина, 86**Voronezh State Pedagogical University, 86 Lenina st., Voronezh, 394043, Russia**e-mail: giorgioscotoni@ya.ru*

*Resume.* In winter 1942-1943 the defeat of the 8th army (ARMIR) on the Soviet-German front was the worst catastrophe of the Italian army during the Second World War. The article describes the memoirs of that campaign, focusing on the peculiarities of the so-called "history from the bottom up". Its hard-core is the saga of Alpine Corps, shaping the national epic of the "withdrawal from the Don lines": hundreds diaries of soldiers fighting isolated in the snowy steppe to emerge from the Soviet encirclement. The specific feature of the Italian historical literature on the Russian campaign is the new semantics of "anti-hero". Unlike official reports, many veterans wrote about the loss of ideological stereotypes and moral values of the Italian troops during the withdrawal and tried to give a realistic picture of the collapse of the 8th army. Among them, the most famous is Mario Rigoni Stern, who took part in the expedition of the Alpine Corps. His book, "Sergeant in the snow", is included in school curricula. Other survivors and memoirists added to the picture of the Italian sacrifice on the Russian front. In this article, the author has set himself the task to provide a view of the relevant sources and analyse the specificity of the Italian narrative of the defeat.

*Аннотация.* Зимой 1942-1943 гг. разгром 8-й итальянской армии (АРМИР) на советско-германском фронте стал самым крупным поражением за 150-летнюю историю итальянских Вооруженных Сил. До сегодня итальянцы вспоминают погибших в снегах России. В статье рассказывается о том, как развивалась так называемая история «снизу». Действительно в итальянской историографии литература о «трагическом походе на Дон» является многочисленной. Подавляющую ее часть составляют мемуары альпийцев: сотни воспоминаний об «одиссеях» отдельных солдат или подразделений образуют народную память о войне на Дону. Специфическая черта итальянского подхода это новая семантика «антигероя». В отличие от официальных изданий, в большинстве мемуаров рассказывается правдиво об утрате во время отхода традиционных ценностей итальянского общества и армии. Среди тех, кому удалось сформировать новое представление событий через свои воспоминания самым известным является Марио Ригони Стерн, участник разгрома в составе Альпийского корпуса. Повесть Стерна «Сержант в снегу», посвященная судьбе солдат, потерпевших сокрушительное поражение в России, включена в итальянскую школьную программу. Но и другие ветераны мемуаристы описывают достоверную картину морально-психологического состояния итальянских военнослужащих, оказавшихся участниками жесточайших боёв на Дону. В настоящей статье, автор поставил себе задачу воссоздать типичные настроения на основе источников, как дневников и мемуаров, и рассмотреть некоторые специфичности итальянского истолкования событий разгрома 8-й армии на советско-германском фронте.

*Key words:* Second World War, Italian 8th Army, Russian front, veterans' memories.

*Ключевые слова:* Вторая мировая война, 8-я итальянская армия, русский фронт, мемуары ветеранов.

Russian campaign of the Regio Esercito (Royal Army) played a key role in shaping the Italian memory of the Eastern Front. Since the beginning of operation "Barbarossa" Italy took part in Axis' invasion of Soviet Union with an Expeditionary Corps (Corpo di spedizione italiano in Russia - CSIR), 3 divisions, 63.000 men. CSIR was reinforced in summer 1942 with the 8th Italian Army – 7 infantry divisions and 3 Alpine divisions, 229.000 men including support units – assigned to protect the northern flank of the German Army Group "B" attacking Stalingrad. During the Soviet winter offensives of 1942-1943 in the Middle Don ("Little Saturn") and on the Upper Don ("Ostrogozhsk - Rossosh operation") 8th Army was almost completely destroyed.

The "Second defensive battle on the Don", as it was called in national historiography, was one of the bitter defeats in the 150-year history of the Italian army. According to Historical Office's reports, Italian casualties were 84.830 dead, 29.690 wounded or missing<sup>1</sup>; approximately 50.000 troops were taken

<sup>1</sup> AAVV: Le operazioni delle unità italiane al fronte russo 1941 –1943. Roma: USSME - Stato maggiore dell'esercito, Ufficio

prisoner by the Red Army, more than 50% died in POW camps. So, the defeat experienced on the Don has left a characteristic imprint in the Italian perception of the Russian campaign.

Since the '50s a flood of memoirs began to be published: Eastern Front's veterans wrote hundreds of autobiographical accounts of their individual odyssey in Russia. Authors were not high-ranking members of the 8th Army's staff but, in majority ordinary soldiers or junior officers. Unlike official reports, tailoring events to absolve the upper echelons of the Italian Army of any responsibility for the military collapse, veterans shared their war experiences trying to give a realistic picture of the disaster.

It's remarkable that, while innumerable diaries and war histories have been written, there is little scholarly research about the 8th Army. Under this respect there is a cultural continuity between the narrative published in the post-war period and the contemporary works dedicated to the Eastern Front: only in recent years the national historiography started to discuss the traditional framework, known as "the myth of the good people". Until today the war of Italian units in Soviet Union continues to be portrayed by means of those memoirs, printed in millions of copies.

Several features characterize the Italian narrative on the Russian campaign. At first, to understand how the few survivors perceived the 8th Army's defeat and preserved the memory of the comrades, it's to be underlined an operational peculiarity. During the December offensive, Soviet forces attacked and encircled Italian divisions on the Middle Don in a giant trap. Once the front lines were overwhelmed, Red Army's armoured columns penetrated deep into the zone behind and destroyed or capture headquarters and supply centres. In the offensive on the Upper Don in January 1943 the tactic was exactly alike: Soviet tanks attacked on both sides Alpine Corps cutting divisions off from the rest of Axis front and then annihilated its troops.

The most of 8th Army materials were lost in the withdrawal from the Don lines - 97% of artillery, 76% weapons, 70% of trucks - and almost the whole divisional documents. Due to the lack of historical records, veterans' diaries became the most important source and played a key role in shaping the collective memory of the defeat.

This narrative told the story of the campaign "from the bottom up" and is called "history from the bottom" or "the memory front": its hard-core is the saga of the Alpine Corps that founded the national epic of Russian anabasis. So, revising the "Second defensive battle on the Don" from that point of view, the defeat was portrayed as a heroic tragedy in which brave and poorly-equipped Alpines, performing their patriotic duty, became victims of the corrupt Fascist regime, the incompetent military hierarchy and the untrustworthy German allies, who abandoned them in order to save themselves from disaster. This view of the Eastern Front went unchallenged for over 70 years.

The very distinctive feature in the new semantics of Italian soldier is that declines heroism in a tone conflicting with traditional pictures. On the Eastern front most Italian troops viewed themselves as part of an army lacking of means (trucks, tanks, supplies), fighting without a strategy and a clear mandate, unable to play a role equal to Germans.

Just as it happened to Vietnam's veterans of US Army, the self-portrait of soldier sent in Russia is no more the image of a superman in hero's clothing, but the image of an anti-hero. "The propaganda's myth of victorious warrior, free-and-easy, that was the official canon during the twenty years of Fascist rule, was replaced by the image of the suffering Alpines, not winners but victims. The memories of Russian campaign were no more celebrating the brave troops but the Italians' self-sacrifice, their capacity for suffering, their ability to survive the scourge of war, despite of all"<sup>1</sup>.

In the case of Alpine Corps, the authors were able to shape a completely different look and in that way they perpetuated the myth of mountain troops. Instead of the Fascist ideological stereotypes or the rhetoric of military virtues, the new semantics re-established the archetypes of Patriotism, Duty, Honour using the moral filter of antimilitarism to purify traditional values. This approach is summarized in the preface of "Vojna kaput", the masterpiece of alpine veteran Gino Beraudi: "The generations repeat the mistake to dress warriors in hero's clothing, - he wrote - because whether before or after (if one loses or wins), inevitably there's fanfare, flowers, women's laughter, applause and medals: but within the intermezzo there's mud, lice anguish, fear (overcome or not, always fear), and the only thing that remains pure is blood (...) But the price of wasting that purity has too high a cost"<sup>2</sup>.

In the Italian narrative's canon, for the first time the opposite poles were reversed. The new semantics adopted a logic that identifies friends and enemies exchanging roles. In consequence of the poor treatment Italian troops experienced from their allies and of the subordinate role that the Royal Army found itself in during the campaign, the Wehrmacht's soldiers were portrayed usually as 'the bad Germans'.

By contrast, most of veterans expressed their affection for the Russian population. Due in large part to the propaganda of the Catholic military chaplains, who preached that a small minority of 'godless' Bolsheviks had been holding in hostage a Christian country, Italian troops made a distinction between the Communist regime and civilians. Sent far from their homeland to wage war against people they didn't

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storico, 2000. p. 464

<sup>1</sup> Mondini M., "Alpini, Parole e immagini di un mito guerriero" Bari Laterza 2008. p. 159

<sup>2</sup> Beraudi G. Vainà kaputt. Guerra e prigionia in Russia (1942-1945). Rovereto, La Grafica - Museo Storico Italiano della Guerra, 1996. p. 9



consider enemy, 8th Army's soldiers were in majority peasants, accustomed to a life of hard work, obedience, sacrifice: in the villages of Black Soil regions they feel the same way of life.

Empathy caused also a characteristic dichotomy: on the one side Italian perceived the war as a struggle against 'Bolshevism', personified by the Red Army, on the other hand the local population appeared to be harmless and docile with the occupying troops.

In the post-war period, adopting those new narrative codes it was possible "to create on the basis of the Russian anabasis a public memory that consoled the sorrow, telling the "withdrawal from Don lines" as an unfortunate but glorious story (...) So the reversal of the Italian defeat was the way to create a new mythography."<sup>1</sup>

From the '60s leading memoirists of the new semantics were Mario Rigoni Stern - «Il sergente nella neve» (The sergeant in the snow), and Giulio Bedeschi - «Centomila gavette di ghiaccio» (One hundred thousand pots of ice). Both authors were wildly popular despite they had motivations radically different from each other.

The two masterpieces reflect opposite points of view. Alpine officer, Bedeschi served as a doctor in Greece, then on the Russian front. Sharing his war experience, he suited the personal purpose to create an immortal tribute to the heroic comrades fallen in action on the Balkans and in Russia. In his preface wrote: "The tragedy of mountain troops in winter battles on the Don river, fighting to open a breach in the encirclement during their withdrawal across the Russian snows reached such top of suffering to be indescribable; surely the sufferings often crossed the limits of human endurance."<sup>2</sup> Bedeschi underlines that his aim is "to cleanse the civilization from barbarism of war" and quotes Tuculide - "the evil is also being able to prevent evil and not to prevent it" – to criticize the Italian conduct of war. He is often reminiscent of Remarque. In fact, celebrating the Alpine traditions, author attempts to create a new "warrior legend" and to make losers proud again of their military virtues. The culmination of this effort is in the end of his book – the fake report of Sovinformburo. According to Bedeschi the 8th of February 1943 Radio Moscow broadcasted the following bulletin (number 630) of Soviet Supreme Command: "The only military unit to consider undefeated in the Russian lands is the Alpine Army Corps." Of course there is no proof of this bulletin.

The sergeant Rigoni Stern, on the contrary, lived the traumatic experience of the defeat as a catharsis. His masterpiece is focused exclusively on the withdrawal and is hailed as the best first-hand written account of the Italian soldiers on the Eastern front.

Indeed in January 1943 the breaking down of the hierarchical structures and organizational links of the Alpine Corps to divisional level became a prelude of the Italian Army's collapse after surrendering in September 1943. In both cases, from the beginning the troops were abandoned without orders. "An element stands out in the framework of exceptional severity and gravity of the 8th Army's disaster. The command structures collapsed totally and consequently collapsed the trust of the troops; the soldiers were disoriented and lived a sharply negative experience (...) More or less consciously, all memories tells about the loss of the traditional values and military virtues of Italian society during the withdrawal."<sup>3</sup>

In the brutal Russian winter, marching in columns without means of transport and provisions, the isolated units lived in an authentic barbarity: "Is there anyone among us who still knows how to speak of goodness? Can one really emerge improved from a beastly world?"<sup>4</sup> But, at the same time the soldiers found themselves in the position to choice how to survive in the vast, alien land. Most of them were paralyzed by shocking dilemmas - to surrender in the snowy steppe or to break fighting through the Soviet encirclement, to search alone a way out or to stay united in comradeship. Few men, alone in front of dramatic personal decisions, acquired a new consciousness.

Nuto Revelli, lieutenant of the Alpine division "Tridentina" is the best known among those who reacted to the crisis of the Italian army and changed their mind. This author testified the metamorphosis experienced from Italians on the East. He writes: "Our return from Russian front is an important moment, a moment's respite, a moment to relive the experiences just suffered. Feelings, rages and contradictions explode. Each one of us has emerged from that endless tunnel, changed by the hell of the withdrawal. It's difficult for each of us to recognize our former identity."<sup>5</sup>

Revelli's diary - «Mai tardi» (Never too late) – became a symbol of the so-called "twentieth generation": teen-agers devoted to military career and educated in the cult of imperial destinies of Fascism. His biography shows in which way Russian campaign acted as a catalyst. Preface to the 1962 edition describes the process that started in 1939, when he entered Military Academy of Modena. "In Modena there was another hierarchy between the king and Mussolini - sums Revelli, referring to the Royal Army - "the king was the number one. If the first days this inverse hierarchy alarmed me, then I take it easy. In the end, Duce was only a corporal and his 'black militia' was nothing else then a caricature (...) Army seemed to me the answer, providing a young man the path to a new faith for the nation. But also military education

<sup>1</sup> Mondini M., "Alpini, Parole e immagini di un mito guerriero" Bari Laterza 2008. p. 186.

<sup>2</sup> Bedeschi G. Centomila gavette di ghiaccio. Milano, Mursia, 1997. p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> Rochat G. Memorialistica e storiografia nella campagna italiana di Russia 1941-43. In AA.VV «Gli italiani sul fronte russo» Bari, De Donato, 1982. p. 470-471

<sup>4</sup> Revelli N. La guerra dei poveri. Torino, Einaudi, 2014. p. 109

<sup>5</sup> Revelli N. Le due guerre. Torino, Einaudi, 2003. p. 123



turned out to be a lie: the army was led by old generals, fans of the First world war, terrible backwardness, absurd formalities revealed the hopelessness of all claims of the Fascist Italy to be a great power." <sup>1</sup>. Then, on the Don front the revelation: "the thousands of troops sends to the death with cynicism and incompetence revealed to which extent was unscrupulous the Italian high command; it shows the false face of motherland, full of disgusting rhetoric and treacherous officers only interested in salary and medals."<sup>2</sup>. So Revelli rejected his previous identity, national pride, youth ideals.

In a quite similar way, other veterans lived in Russia a cathartic experience. Giusto Tolloy was the first who wrote his memories in the new semantics' style. He served on the Eastern front as a Staff officer to the 8th Army's Command; during German occupation in 1944, he printed in Turin under the pseudonym of Mario Tarchi his famous diary - "Con l'armata italiana in Russia" (With the Italian army in Russia).

The book suite the political purpose to provide an outline of the corrupted High Command from inside the Italian Staff. Tolloy represents the relationship between the high-ranking officers and troops by an antagonistic opposition: at the top the distant commanders, impersonal, sentencing soldiers to death to capture a nameless height; at the bottom the soldiers, united in comradeship, who pay the responsibility of the war.

The 8th Army's General Staff is portrayed as a club of incompetent senior officials, playing a tragic carnival in parade uniforms. "The Information Office is farcical: the head-office colonel has served as military attache in Moscow before the beginning of hostilities against USSR. He is unable and slow-witted and organized a mammoth structure, with a staff including hundred fifty officers instead of sixteen; that staff fails to give any results. In vain did he bring with him some Russians White collaborationists: at first he dressed them as Italian officers, now in civilian clothes to serve in intelligence; but instead of reporting informations they bring calves, pigs and flour. [...] Then there is the Propaganda Department, consisting of forty-two officers. On the other hand there is the Office of War Economy; its staff consists of only twelve officers and can not work because - under the rules of German-Italian Convention - we have no right to exploit the territory. The 8th Army's Office of Civil Affairs is in the same condition: a general of the Royal Carabinieri, with the title of 'Inspector of police services in the USSR'; a general lieutenant of the Fascist militia, without command on troops, other offices and the Superintendent's Office. A total mass of five hundred heterogeneous officers, which would be enough fifty. [...] About the personality of the Army commander, Italo Gariboldi little to say: his rule, resembling that one of a constitutional monarch, is reduced to spread merely rhetorical orders, to deliver ritual speeches, to confer medals, to attend official lunches."<sup>3</sup>.

Last but not least, two features mostly characterize the Italian memories of the Russian campaign: the denunciation of the German savagery and, by contrast, the celebration of the utmost humanity of the Russian people.

The hateful image of the allies is due not only to the atrocities that Wehrmacht committed in the occupied territories but also to the subordinate role that the Royal Army found itself in during the campaign. In attempt to sever any connections with Axis partners many authors used the propagandistic iconography of the "Good Italian", in opposition to the "Wicked German". In his memories, Lieutenant Eugenio Corti wrote "I abhorred the Germans for their cruelty (sometimes I even thought that they are not to be called men) and for the really trivial arrogance with which they demonstrated that they considered any person of other nationality as an inferior being, born to be exploited. They were sure of their right to exploit and expected that all the nations should be grateful to their oppressors."<sup>4</sup>.

Lieutenant Revelli begins to hate allies on the Russian front. But, unlike Corti, when he returned to Italy, his contempt turned into the choice to join partisans: "I felt that I could not fight with the Germans but only against the Germans. It was an intimate feeling, which I was almost ashamed. However, today, the hate makes me cry that we have to avenge the Alpines, death due to the Germans."<sup>5</sup>.

On the Soviet-German front Italian soldiers were shocked by the unbelievable cruelty of the Wehrmacht against population. "In Russia, the allies' behaviour gave the clearest evidence of the wrong choice of Fascist Italy; Germans acted fierce toward the prisoners of war and the Russian civilians, and showed brutally their feelings of racial superiority."<sup>6</sup>. Many 8th Army's veterans in their diaries revealed for the first time the atrocities of Axis' "new order", giving evidence of the extermination war conducted by German army to establish a colonial regime in the East.

In November 1942, Lieutenant Cristoforo Moscioni Negri, just upon the arrival of his Alpine detachment at the Don front, witnessed the execution of Soviet partisans in the village of Datça. "In a small square the Italian and German soldiers are brought together around the gallows. It's very simple and crude. A platform, a rotary table and three rope at the top, for three partisans: the first one is a big and

<sup>1</sup> Mondini M. "Alpini, Parole e immagini di un mito guerriero" Bari Laterza 2008, p. 160

<sup>2</sup> Revelli N. La guerra dei poveri. Torino, Einaudi, 2014. p. 16.

<sup>3</sup> Tolloy, G. Con l'armata italiana in Russia Torino: De Silva, 1947. p. 19-20

<sup>4</sup> Corti E. I più non tornano: diario di ventotto giorni d'accerchiamento russo nell'inverno 1942-43, e un'aggiunta. Milano, Garzanti, 1948. p. 138.

<sup>5</sup> Revelli N. La guerra dei poveri. Torino, Einaudi, 2014. p. 59

<sup>6</sup> Mondini M., "Alpini, Parole e immagini di un mito guerriero" Bari Laterza 2008 p. 186.



strong young man, then an elderly man, the third is a woman who looks old; her face is covered with a shawl. With great difficulty they climb the scaffold on the ladder, slipping on the stairs because their hands are tied on the back. The Germans look at them and laugh. Then sergeant announces the verdict and prepares them to be hanged, carrying a rope around their neck. He removes the shawl and I notice that the woman is young, quite a girl: she looks anxious but makes an effort to stay quiet. The old man is crying, moving from one foot to the other like a dancing monkey. The young man is like a rock and looks at us coldly, with contempt. We don't hang them at once because those who have cameras want to take pictures of the execution and have to measure distance. Then, finally, someone turns on hinges the rotary table and the bodies rest suspended in the air. The old man died at once, the rope of the young man broke, but the rope around the woman's neck held her mouth and she floats in the air, like a fish. My eyes are fixed on the body of the girl, who could not die and is swaying, turning, dangling from a rope. I heard around laughing. Then I take the gun and move forward, but a German quickly than me shoots the young man on the earth, at first, then at her. Maybe his hand trembled because he shot the whole gun's magazine and only the last two bullets hit her head. Then lay down the gun and leave the square in silence. The rest of soldiers are still laughing and taking pictures."<sup>1</sup>

Giovanni Scaglia served in the 452nd Artillery Division. Its train left Italy under escort and reached Soviet front in March 1942: "From Trento to Dnepropetrovsk railways route lasted 20 days, there we stopped. It was at the end of March. Still to arrive at Dnepropetrovsk, we saw how Russian prisoners charged of resistance were killed in a small village. Russian prisoners of war travelled on the same train with us, but under escort, in the Germans goods-wagons ahead. We saw the execution from the train. I remember that one of them, a young man came out and ran. He ran almost 200 meters to the grain fields. The Germans shot him at first and then killed the others (...) In Dnepropetrovsk a family of Jews lived in a house near our camp. The captain said, "Bring them to eat." I went sometimes and brought soup or something else. That was twenty days long. Then spies gave in the family to the Germans and they killed all. How can they do it? - I asked myself. - What have the Jews done wrong? But the Germans did worse. One day, Germans ordered 700 civilian Jews, aged from one to ninety years, to march 20 km back and forth. There were mothers with children in their arms, women, men, boys, girls, old people. After the march the Jews were forced to dig a pit 4-5 m in diameter and the SS ordered the police to shoot the Russian Jews. You should have seen it! Maybe I will not believe telling that but it's true. I saw the Germans in the bunch of people pulling the babies from mothers' hands, throwing them up and shooting them with guns. Why didn't they kill the mothers before? We could not do anything: if we protested, we could have been shot. When I saw the carnage, I ran away."<sup>2</sup>

Artillerist Scaglia, was only one of the witnesses of genocide in the Soviet Union.

In the summer of 1942 many Italian soldier understood what was happening, Lieutenant Giuliano Cassandrini, served in the Alpine Division "Tridentina". He wrote: "I left in train to the Russian front July 19, 1942. The echelon consisted exclusively of support units to ensure the divisional logistic services. 24 or 25 of July, we reached the important railway station of Brest-Litovsk. In those days, there was an intense traffic of German trains. So we had to make a halt for a few days, to give priority to the German train carrying troops and equipment to the front. During the forced stop, we saw a couple of young girls dressed in jacket with blue and white stripes, and a yellow star. They were carrying a can and walked between trains, collecting human excrement with bare hands. It struck us all. We tried to know from the girls why they had such a disgusting work. One of them, a fifteen year Jew told us that she was prisoner of the Germans; her family was from Lublin, the father was a lawyer, the mother a teacher. Then her parents were arrested and massacred by German SS; she and her two younger brothers were sent to the concentration camp, where her two brothers were killed and burned. She also showed us the tattoo on his arm to indicate the serial number. She was sent to various intensive work and now this was her last work, together with other young Jewish. For the first time we listened about the brutal behaviour of the Nazis. That shocked me and my alpine comrades so much that we could hardly believe that the Germans behaved in such monstrous way toward the Jews. We gave the girl chocolate, biscuits and cigarettes, and asked her to tell us about other facts."<sup>3</sup>

In the diaries of the 8th Army's survivors the execration for the ruthless behaviour of the Germans, was exacerbated by the poor treatment Italian troops experienced from their allies during the withdrawal, and also in consequence of the Nazis' occupation of Italy. To characterize Wehrmacht's soldiers the veterans adopted endless variations of the "Teutonic brutality" stereotypes. The duplicitous Germans are always portrayed as men insensible to any human solidarity and devoid of military honour.

On the contrary, the Italian memoirists usually celebrate the charity of Russian population. A characteristic feature is the humanity (*umanità*) of the peasants, despite the low conditions they lived in. When Italians arrived on the Don rivers as occupying troops they mixed freely with the people and had manageable relationship with them.

<sup>1</sup> Moscioni Negri C. I lunghi fucili: ricordi della guerra di Russia. Bologna, Il Mulino, p. 25-26

<sup>2</sup> Scaglia A. The history of the war in the memories of veterans. From Storo, Italy to the Don rivers and back. In: AAVV: War on the Don 1942-1943 Materials of the international conference Voronezh, VGU, 2008. p. 599

<sup>3</sup> Bertinaria P. La tragedia italiana sul fronte russo (1941-1945) Rimini Chigi 1997 p. 571.



The image of the "Eastern enemy", depicted in veterans' diaries is often opposite to that one of the Fascist official iconography. In autumn 1942 Alpine lieutenant Carlo Handel notes: "All the families in this region have a very strong sense of hospitality. Their homes in Podgorny are clean, though the musty smell which reigns everywhere in the homes of the peasants (...) Contrary to first impressions, these people live rather well. They do not have the facilities and entertainment of our Italian peasants who live closer to the human settlements, but in the bosom of their family they have everything to live well. Conversely we are surprised to note how much is widespread the study of languages and sciences, even in the poorest homes. Here we have, for example, two girls, which in appearance can be compared with the simple cowherd of our Alps; but they studied trigonometry, anatomy, literature, German, English. In fact, the cultural level here seems much higher than to us. Someone even learn Italian."<sup>1</sup>

In the winter, when the Red Army attacked and the 8th Army was ordered to withdraw, the Italians found themselves in the hard position of being enemies that had to rely on the conquered population in order to be saved. During the withdrawal endless columns moved further to west across the snowy plains; thousands of exhausted and hungry men continued to walk for days, trying to survive to the freezing process.

Indeed most of the Russian people showed mercy (pietà) towards these soldiers. "In January 1943 the wounded, frostbitten troops of the Alpine corps often received compassionate assistance in the form of shelter and food by Russian civilians, mostly women. Italian soldiers were occupants but, due to their catastrophic conditions part of the local population perceived them not as enemies, but as men who were on the brink between life and death, and evoked compassion."<sup>2</sup>

Peasant farmer who gave shelter to Alpine soldiers in the vast steppes, were mentioned with gratitude in numerous memoirs. Aristide Rossi, artilleryman of Alpine Division "Tridentina" in his diary wrote: "In the first days of the march the wind burned my face and the frost fettered all movements. One evening during a snowstorm I did not find a shelter for the night. The village where we stopped, numbered only few little hut, and all were full of soldiers. I was alone and did not know what to do; my coat was soaking wet of snow, the cold was severe I noticed a lone house a kilometer from the village and came to it, hoping to find something to eat. This was a great imprudence: the possibility of being killed by the partisans increased if we were isolated. I was alone when I came into the hut. There was an old man with a couple of women. I was tired and made a move towards a stool, to sit on it. But the old man kicked the stool throwing it away. I aimed the rifle at him, and the two women screamed. The old man was frightened and raised his hands. My situation has become very critical, but after a while I lowered my rifle. The old man understood and dropped his hands. We looked into each other's eyes. At that time a ray of humanity lighted into the soul to both us. I muttered, "Ia italiani, niet germanski!" And the situation became easier. I asked for food, and they offered me some potatoes, which I devoured greedily, then I lay down in a corner, trying to have a rest, but keeping my rifle in hand, without fuse. I kept awake then slept, but fortunately the night passed and nothing happened. If they wanted to kill me, they could easily do it. At dawn, I hurried to the column. Poor Russian peasants: although exasperated from occupation and robbery they were very good persons."<sup>3</sup>

Sergeant Luigi Venturini was captured along thirty seven Staff officers of Alpine Division "Julia", near Valuiki. On the long road to the POW camp the prisoner suffered from pneumonia. In his memories Venturini recalls the mercy of the enemy, and the "angel of Popovka" who saved him. "Early in the morning on the frozen road the group of prisoners is assembling again. We only stayed in the house. I pray God to help us! Here came the guard, an elderly reservist, dressed in civilian clothes and armed with a gun. He tells us sharply: "Get up!" With the few Russian words we know, we explain to him that I had a high fever and Mario shows his swollen leg. Tension grows up. The guard points the gun at my chest; a little more pressure on the trigger and I'm dead. He repeated: "Get up!". We continue to plead. Moments are endless, but we see that he is perplexed. Suddenly he raises gun off my chest and spits out on the ground muttering something I don't understand. He says: "To hell!", then some words accompanied with gestures that mean: "stop here, today will come another column; you had to join it!"

(...) We are sitting in the house in silence, waiting for that column. I have high temperature. Hunger haunts us. We decided to go out in the street. Slowly we go along the path, which crosses the village. Hand in hand, we walk in the snow around the village, heading to the last hut, which borders the white wilderness. Encouraging each other, we knocked on the door. An elderly woman opens to us. A few words, we asked her if there was something to eat. Conversation becomes difficult. The woman said, repeating the words with precise gestures that it is not allowed to provide assistance to prisoners of war. We try to pray, promising to leave immediately if she gives us something to eat. She makes us enter, repeating that if the soldiers see it, they would send her to jail. We sit right next to the monumental stove. She opens the oven door and takes a pot with boiled potatoes; it gives us two, along with a pinch of salt and a piece of dry black bread. "I do not have anything else." We thank a lot and eagerly eat food that gives us the life.

<sup>1</sup> Handel C. *Russia 1942-1943 Diario di guerra*. Trento, MST, 2011 p. 46.

<sup>2</sup> Filonenko S.I. «Popolazione locale ed occupazione sul Don tra il 1942 e il 1943: contrapposizione ed antagonismo» in: AA.VV *La Campagna di Russia*, Roma, Ed. Nuova Cultura, 2013. p. 146.

<sup>3</sup> Rossi A *Nella terra dei girasoli senza gloria e senza ignominia* Trento, ANA, 1997. p. 43.



The room is warm and I dress a hot plate; I feel even more heat and a dry cough shake me again. The old woman watches us shaking the head. When we finish to eat it appeals to us with words and gestures, "Go in the other huts they give food to the Italians." We thank in Russian and continue our pilgrimage. (...) Walking in deep snow, we reach other houses away from the road. My temperature rises. I feel that something serious is going on. Mario encourages me, but I have no energy; I drag my feet with difficulty. We reach a distant hut, that may be less dangerous for us and for those who accept us. Once again open us an elderly woman. We show our miserable state, seeking asylum. A few moments of silence and the woman said: "Damned war!" The sun is going down and the night falls. I hope that enemy have mercy on us... Without a word, the woman let us to enter and sit on the bench next to the table. She begins to cook something in a large oven; then gathering straw, prepare a bed and tells me to lie down. Immediately I lose consciousness falling in a troubled sleep. Cough and temperature torment me. I open eyes and see the woman next to me, looking at me. Mario said: "you're delirious, you're talking, coughing". The woman, anxiously tells Mario that I had pneumonia and then leaves. She returns twenty minutes later with a pot of milk, puts it on the stove and pours the honey into boiling milk. With the help of Mario she makes me drink. My mouth is burning, but she forces me to drink to the last drop. It causes me a strong reaction: chest seems to explode into a cough. Then I lost consciousness again. I woke up in the morning. Holy woman was glad to see that I open eyes and said something quietly, as if I were her son. Mario tells me that she helped me all night. The temperature made me rave for a long time; then I calmed and slept. Our benefactress warmed milk with dry bread. Then she went out, asking us to wait and rest. She returned an hour later and starts preparing a sleigh to take us to the hospital of Podgornoe. My temperature is still high. I am covered with a skin. Then the woman and Mario lift me and loaded me on a sled, with a cow in harness. My friend set down and the brave woman, holding in check the cow, left the village to Podgornoe. It was very cold. I tried not to cough, but was impossible. I look at this woman, against whom we have come to fight in her country. Who else could do it? She saves the lives of her enemies and, perhaps, she has one son at the front! Now I begin to understand the magnitude of her feat: from this woman in a devastated village of the deep Russian steppes we learn the Gospel of Christ! It struck me. I realize that I started to pray for her. Our saviour skilfully sleds."<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Venturini L. La fame dei vinti. Udine, Ed. Gaspari, 2003. p. 42-46.