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WITHOUT A NAME AND A FACE:

THE AUSTRIAN ENEMY IN INTERWAR ITALIAN CINEMA

Francesco Bono

Introduction

In the years since the war's end until today, approximately 100 feature films were produced in Italy with references to WWI.¹ However, it must be noted that the number of films in which the *Grande Guerra*, (the "Great War"), as WWI is commonly referred to in Italy, represents the actual focus of attention is relatively rare. As has been widely remarked by scholars, there has been a sort of reticence in Italian cinema about WWI. Discussing the reasons for that would go beyond the scope of this essay, but I shall, in the course of it, provide some explanations for the phenomenon with

1 Warmest thanks go to Adriano Aprà, Umberta Brazzini, Alessandro Faccioli, Giuseppe Ghigi, Angela Margaritelli, and Alberto Scandola, as well as Biblioteca di Storia Moderna e Contemporanea (Rome), Centro Studi del Teatro Stabile dell'Umbria (Perugia), La Cineteca del Friuli (Gemona), and Mediateca Toscana for supporting my research. I would like to specially thank Hannes Leidinger for the invitation to contribute to this volume.

A full list is provided by Enrico Gaudenzi. Giorgio Sangiorgi, *La prima guerra mondiale nel cinema italiano: Filmografia 1915–2013*, vol. 1 (Ravenna: Longo 1997), 47–77.

regard to the interwar years and, in particular, the 1930s. Moreover, it should also be noted that it is necessary to make the attempt to assess the body of Italian films that deal with WWI in a comprehensive way. So far, scholars have favored certain periods and films, while others have found only scarce attention. In fact, most of the interest has centered until now on the interwar period, as well as on the films by Mario Monicelli—*La Grande Guerra* (1959)—and Francesco Rosi—*Uomini contro* (1970)²—which count among the most important Italian films on WWI. But little consideration has been given so far in the scientific literature on the topic, regardless of the periods or films examined, to the image of the enemy in the Italian films on WWI. This essay will specifically discuss the question, investigating the enemy's depiction in interwar Italian cinema.

2 Here follows a list of works offering an overview of WWI in Italian cinema from the 1920s up to now. They are listed in chronological order: Gian Piero Brunetta, *La guerra lontana: La prima guerra mondiale e il cinema tra i tabù del presente e la creazione del passato* (Rovereto: Zaffoni, 1985); Pier Marco De Santi, *1914–1918: Una guerra sullo schermo* (Roma: Rivista Militare, 1988); Pier Marco De Santi, “La Grande Guerra nel cinema italiano,” in *La Grande Guerra degli artisti*, ed. Nadia Marchioni (Firenze: Polistampa, 2005), 133–154; Marco Mondini, *La guerra italiana. Partire, raccontare, tornare. 1914–18* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2014). Extensively published on the topic is Alessandro Faccioli, “La guerra al cinema,” in *Gli Italiani in guerra: Conflitti, identità, memorie dal Risorgimento ai nostri giorni*, ed. Mario Isnenghi, vol. 3 (Torino: Utet, 2008), 942–951; “Pellicole sul fronte: il cinema e la guerra,” in *Dizionario storico della prima guerra mondiale*, ed. Nicola Labanca (Bari: Laterza, 2014), 380–387; “Il cinema italiano e la Grande Guerra,” in *A fuoco l’obiettivo! Il cinema e la fotografia raccontano la Grande Guerra*, ed. Alessandro Faccioli and Alberto Scandola (Bologna: Persiani, 2014), 14–31.

In the representation of WWI in Italian cinema, *La Grande Guerra* marked a turning point, breaking with the rhetoric that dominated until then. Monicelli's film explicitly distances itself from the films of the interwar period as well as from the wave of other films on WWI made in Italy after the Second World War, as examples: *Il caimano del Piave* (1951, directed by Giorgio Bianchi), *La leggenda del Piave* (1952, directed by Riccardo Freda), *Guai ai vinti* (1954, directed by Raffaello Matarazzo), and *Tradita* (1954, directed by Mario Bonnard). On the whole, a propagandistic and overt patriotic tone characterize the films of the early 1950s on WWI, and they are, in part, productions of mediocre quality. So far, scarce consideration has been paid to them by scholars, but at a closer look, they are not without interest. Ten years after *La Grande Guerra*, the critical reconsideration of WWI in Italian cinema culminates with *Uomini contro*. Rosi's film is an adaptation for the screen of Emilio Lussu's *Un anno sull'altipiano*, one of the most important Italian novels on WWI, first published in 1938 in Paris, where Lussu had found refuge from the fascist regime. Among the Italian films of the 1960s and early 1970s on WWI, of interest are also Alberto Lattuada's *Fraulein Doktor* (1968) and Alfredo Giannetti's *La Sciantosa* (1971). Further, let us mention *Il giorno più corto* (1963, directed by Sergio Corbucci), *La ragazza e il generale* (1967, directed by Pasquale Festa Campanile), and *Armiamoci e partite* (1971, directed by Nando Cicero), which belong to the comic genre, with protagonists who live through picaresque adventures during the war.

Then Italian cinema's interest in WWI decreased. At the beginning of the 1980s, there are *Malamore* (1982, directed by Eriprando Visconti, a nephew of Luchino Visconti, not to be mistaken with one of the masters of Italian cinema), and *Porca vacca* (1982, directed by Festa Campanile). The outbreak of WWI ends Federico Fellini's *E la nave va* (1983), and Paolo and

Vittorio Taviani's *Good Morning Babilonia* (1987) also concludes with WWI, with the protagonists, Andrea and Nicola, who had emigrated to America years before, returning home and dying on the battlefield. Finally, the contribution of Italian cinema to the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of WWI are Paolo Cevoli's *Soldato semplice*, about the comic adventures of a teacher on the front, a "docu-fiction" by Leonardo Tiberi, *Fango e gloria: La Grande Guerra*, and *Torneranno i prati* by Ermanno Olmi, which prosaically describes the hardships of a squad of Italian soldiers crossing snow-covered mountains, where death may strike at any moment. *Torneranno i prati*, by a master of Italian cinema, is an utter condemnation of war, and it stands among the most impressive Italian films on WWI.

An Overview of the 1930s

Our starting point for the following considerations on the representation of WWI in interwar Italian cinema shall be Elter's *Le scarpe al sole* (*Shoes in the Sun*, 1935). Elter's film is commonly regarded as the best Italian production of that time on WWI. It also counts among the major Italian films on WWI in general. Mario Isnenghi, a prominent historian, author of a seminal book in the 1970s on the myth and literary representation of WWI in interwar Italy,³ considers *Le scarpe al sole* as one of the most significant contributions to the depiction of WWI in Italian cinema, putting Elter's film alongside Monicelli's *La Grande Guerra* and Rosi's *Uomini contro*.⁴ The film is about a group of Alpini. The Alpini are a specialized Italian mountain corps who gain great popularity

3 Mario Isnenghi, *Il mito della Grande Guerra* (Bari: Laterza, 1970).

4 Mario Isnenghi, "L'immagine cinematografica della grande guerra," *Rivista di storia contemporanea* VII, no. 3 (July 1978): 345. The essay deals specifically with Elter's, Monicelli's, and Rosi's films.

during WWI. Elter himself served in the Alpini during WWI, and *Le scarpe al sole* is a free adaptation of the homonymous novel by Paolo Monelli from the early 1920s, in which the Italian journalist recalls his memories of WWI. *Le scarpe al sole* was produced on occasion of the twentieth anniversary of Italy's entering the war (the country enters WWI some months after its beginning, in May 1915), and the film, as informs the opening credits, was shot with support of the Italian war ministry.

Le scarpe al sole begins on the eve of WWI. It is summer. A marriage is being celebrated in a village among the Alps. When war breaks out, the camera lingers on the men leaving the village. They say goodbye to wives and children; the younger ones kiss their fiancées, while others leave behind their aged parents, who accompany their sons for a while. We see the men reaching the front, where they fight valiantly for their country. In the scenes showing the Alpini in action, one can detect the influence of the German mountain film genre of the 1920s and especially Luis Trenker's film on WWI *Berge in Flammen* (1931), which may have been a point of reference for *Le scarpe al sole*. Also, Elter seems to have been inspired by Soviet cinema, as remarks a prominent Italian film historian, Gian Piero Brunetta.⁵ For example, the opening scene of the marriage and that of the men departing to the front: On their way to the valley, the men grow in number, as more and more join their ranks, coming from other villages. The beginning sets the tone. The accent falls not on individual, exceptional boldness. Elter's film emphasizes rather the collective dimension, and war is represented as a communal experience that equally involves the soldiers and the women waiting at home for them, while fall follows summer, and winter comes, and days pass

5 Gian Piero Brunetta, *Intellettuali, cinema e propaganda tra le due guerre* (Bologna: Patròn, 1973), 111–112.

by. A quiet tone permeates *Le scarpe al sole*. A light melancholy characterizes the scene in which the Alpini leave home. No expressions of enthusiasm accompany the men who join the war. The war's outbreak is not excitedly welcomed. The composed mood of the scene is distinctive for Elter's film. *Le scarpe al sole* does not celebrate war, as has been rightly observed. There are no heroes, and the audience is invited to identify with the film's characters. Simplicity and a strong sense of duty distinguish them. War is represented as a duty, a task that must be fulfilled, and Elter's film appears distant from the shrill rhetoric and propaganda of other Italian films on WWI of that time.

Le scarpe al sole is one of the few Italian films of the 1930s on WWI. The other two are Giovacchino Forzano's *13 uomini e un cannone* ("13 Men and a Gun", 1936) and Oreste Biancolini's *Il piccolo alpino* (*The Little Alpino*, 1940). There are some more films in which WWI is more or less important, but in those films, it does not represent the thematic nucleus. That is the case of an earlier film by Forzano, *Camicia nera* (*Blackshirt*, 1933), which will be discussed further on. Another case is Mario Bonnard's comedy *Milizia territoriale* (*Territorial Militia*, 1935). This film is about a timid clerk who serves as an officer in WWI. There, he learns to command and finds pleasure in being obeyed. When the war ends, and he comes home, everything is again as before. But one day, he takes courage and rebels. Unfortunately, Bonnard's comedy is lost, making a detailed discussion impossible. Besides these, there are a few more films in the 1930s that make reference to WWI. In particular, let us mention *Passaporto rosso* (*Red Passport*, 1935, directed by Guido Brignone) and *Cavalleria* (*Horsemen/Cavalry*, 1936, directed by Goffredo Alessandrini). *Passaporto rosso* follows an Italian family that emigrates to South America. When war breaks out, the father decides to return and fight for his country, but he falls severely ill, so his son takes his place and dies on the front heroically.

Death is also the destiny of a cavalry officer named Umberto Solaro in *Cavalleria*. The film tells the story of his impossible love for the daughter of an aristocratic family against the background of fin de siècle Italy. When Solaro's horse gets fatally injured, he joins the aviation service. Then WWI breaks out, and he is killed in a battle. In both films, WWI takes up little space. A few scenes summarize the war. In Alessandrini's film *Luciano Serra, pilota* (*Pilot Luciano Serra*, 1938), the main character again is a pilot who fights in WWI, but he leaves Italy after the war's end. Some years later, he is in Africa, fighting in Ethiopia together with the Italian troops. Among them, there is also his son, who has become a pilot as well. In *Luciano Serra, pilota*, WWI is presented as a crucial experience in the life of the main character that influences him deeply, but the film just refers to it briefly. *Luciano Serra, pilota*, *Passaporto rosso*, as well as *Cavalleria* shall be left aside in our study on the representation of the Austrian enemy in interwar Italian films; they have been thoroughly discussed elsewhere.⁶

From the Fascist Perspective

The tiny number of Italian films of the 1930s specifically devoted to WWI may surprise at first. In fact, it stands in apparent contrast to the attention paid to WWI by French and German cinema. The striking rareness of WWI being explicitly thematized

6 See the chapter dedicated to WWI in Gianfranco Miro Gori, *Patria diva: La storia d'Italia nei film del ventennio* (Firenze: La casa Usher, 1988), 58–73; as well as Pierre Sorlin, “Tre sguardi sulla Grande Guerra: I film di finzione in Francia, Germania e Italia,” in *La Grande Guerra: Esperienza, memoria, immagini*, ed. Diego Leoni, and Camillo Zadra (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1986), 827–850. For information on the films, see Gianfranco Casadio's critical filmography: *Il grigio e il nero: Spettacolo e propaganda nel cinema italiano degli anni Trenta* (Ravenna: Longo, 1989).

in the Italian cinema of the 1930s surprises even more, as Mario Isnenghi observes,⁷ if one considers the great importance accorded to WWI by fascism. For a better understanding of the Italian films on WWI of that time, let us briefly recall fascism's interpretation of the war: WWI was assigned a crucial place in the nation's history, and the war was celebrated by fascism as the glorious continuation of the *Risorgimento*. The term indicates, in Italy's history, the epoch of the genesis of the Italian state through the gradual unification of the entire peninsula around the middle of the nineteenth century under the Piedmontese king, Vittorio Emanuele II. The liberation of the towns of Trento and Trieste, which were part of the Habsburg empire and annexed by Italy after WWI, represented the fulfillment of the *Risorgimento*, and the war, as Gianfranco Miro Gori remarks in a comprehensive study on the depiction of the nation's history in interwar Italian cinema,⁸ was regarded as a decisive turning point, which set in motion the nation's renewal. War became a myth, and victory was celebrated as Italy's triumph, shaping a picture of WWI that was in deep contrast with the historical fact that Italy's entering the war was forced by a minority against most political forces and public opinion. *Passaporto rosso*, *Cavalleria*, and *Luciano Serra, pilota* stand exemplary for such an interpretation of WWI and represent an important transition from an older Italy to a new epoch that finds in fascism its privileged interpreter.

That is also the representation widely given to WWI in the Italian films of the 1920s. Several films of that time present WWI as a decisive chapter in the recent history of Italy that eventually leads to the establishment of the fascist regime. Prime examples are some films by Luca Comerio, *Sulle Alpi riconsacrate* (*On the*

7 Isnenghi, "L'immagine cinematografica della grande guerra," 342.

8 Gori, *Patria diva*, 58.

reconsecrated Alps, 1922) and *Giovinezza, giovinezza, primavera di bellezza* (*Youth, Youth, Spring of Beauty*, 1923), as well as the later *Al rombo del cannon* (*At the Roar of the Cannon*, 1928), or Umberto Paradisi's *A noi!* (*To us!*, 1923); all four films are feature-length montage films.⁹ Also focusing on the transition from WWI to fascism are *Il grido dell'aquila* (*The Eagle's Cry*, 1923, directed by Mario Volpe) and *I martiri d'Italia* (*The Martyrs of Italy*, 1928, directed by Domenico Gaido). *I martiri d'Italia* recalls Italy's history from the far Middle Ages to WWI, paying homage to its heroes; the film ends with fascism's seizure of power. Among the films that celebrate the ideal continuity between WWI and the fascist movement, there also may be counted *La leggenda del Piave* (*The Legend of the Piave*, 1924, directed by Mario Negri), *L'Italia s'è desta* (*Italy has risen*, 1927, directed by Elvira Notari), *Redenzione d'anime* (1928, directed by Silvio Laurenti Rosa) and *Brigata Firenze* (1928, directed by Gian Orlando Vassallo). But the large number of films in which reference is made to WWI should mislead no one; WWI seldom occupies a central place. As Gian Piero Brunetta aptly writes, "There is never the intention of fully making a film in which WWI becomes the specific object of the narration."¹⁰ A major part of the films can be assigned to the genre of melodrama, and WWI represents simply a component of the story. For example, *Fenesta ca lucive...* (1925, directed by Mario Volpe) and *Nun è Carmela mia* (1928 Ubaldo Maria Del Colle), films in which WWI causes the sorrowful separation of loving couples. In *Fenesta ca lucive...*, Emma dies from sadness when she and Mario

9 For a description of the films, see Vittorio Martinelli's critical filmography "Documentari degli anni Venti," *Immagine: Note di storia del cinema*, Nuova Serie, no. 27 (Summer 1994): 1–12.

10 Gian Piero Brunetta, "L'immagine della prima guerra mondiale attraverso il cinema," in *Operai e contadini nella Grande Guerra*, ed. Mario Isnenghi (Bologna: Cappelli, 1982), 274.

get separated by the war's outbreak. When Mario comes home and hears of her death, he commits suicide on her grave. War seems to be a fateful moment in the life of many main characters. That is, as well, the representation of WWI in *Napoli è sempre Napoli* (1925, directed by Mario Negri), *Fantasia è surdate* (1927, directed by Elvira Notari), and *L'Italia s'è desta*, in which a Neapolitan scalawag is given the chance of rehabilitating himself in war. War becomes on the screen the "symbolic place of purification and penance," as has been remarked,¹¹ where past crimes can be redeemed.

Let us consider in particular Comerio's *Sulle Alpi riconsacrate* and *Giovinezza, giovinezza, primavera di bellezza*, as well as *Il grido dell'aquila*, which look back at WWI against the background of fascist seizure of power. At the end of the nineteenth century, Comerio worked initially as photographer before moving to film, and he belonged to the most important figures of prewar Italian cinema. In WWI, Comerio was active as a cameraman at the front on behalf of the Italian ministry of war. *Sulle Alpi riconsacrate* and *Giovinezza, giovinezza, primavera di bellezza* are montage films in which footage from the war is combined with scenes of fascist gatherings in the early postwar years. As remarks the press of the day, *Sulle Alpi riconsacrate* intends to celebrate Italy's renewal after WWI, and Comerio's film ends with pictures of the *Camicie nere*, the fascist militias, through whom the spirit of the soldiers fallen in WWI lives on. *Giovinezza, giovinezza, primavera di bellezza* also demonstrates the ideal connection between fascism and WWI. The film is divided in three sections. The first part, *Epopèa nazionale*, is devoted to the war. The second section, *Riscossa civile*, depicts the beginnings of the fascist movement, while the third part, *Il trionfo dell'idea*, shows its growing diffusion. The film's title also refers to the continuity between fascism and WWI. It is

11 Ibid., 280.

a strophe from a popular song of the early 1910s, sung in WWI by the Alpini, which then becomes the fascist hymn.

The fascist revolution as a continuation of WWI is also the topic of *Il grido dell'aquila*. Work on the film started after fascism's seizure of power, and *Il grido dell'aquila* came out in fall 1923, on the occasion of its first anniversary.¹² WWI is regarded in the film as a prologue of fascism's fight for a new Italy. The story takes place in a little town in Northern Italy. The first part, which will be examined in detail later, briefly evokes the war. Here, let us focus on the second part. It illustrates the immediate postwar period and constitutes the film's nucleus. Chaos is reigning, workers strike, and when they destroy a tavern and hit an old, blind man, a former officer who initially supports the strike, a protagonist realizes the mistake. He defends the man, but is killed. Now the "Camicie nere" intervene, and *Il grido dell'aquila* ends with pictures of fascists marching on Italy's capital. The scene evokes the actual march on Rome of thousands of "Camicie nere" on October 22, 1922, which symbolically marked the beginning of the fascist regime.

Il grido dell'aquila clearly suggests a parallel between WWI and the fascist revolution. An ideal line connects the fight against the foreign enemy with the one against the leftist forces conducted by the fascists after the war's ending. At the same time, WWI is celebrated as a continuation of the *Risorgimento*, and fascism represents its glorious fulfillment. The connection is expressed in *Il grido dell'aquila* through the characters of the tavern's owner and his nephew, Peppino. The

12 For an in-depth analysis of the film, see Battista Copello, "Un film fascista degli anni '20: Il grido dell'aquila di Mario Volpe," *Cinema e cinema* VII, no. 22-23 (January-June 1980): 118-130. In the essay little attention, however, is paid specifically to the film's section on WWI. In part dedicated to "Il grido dell'aquila" is also Vittorio Martinelli, "Primi approcci tra cinema e fascismo," *Immagine: Note di storia del cinema* IV, no. 2 (April-June 1985): 7-12.

boy is an enthusiastic fascist. Pasquale, the owner of the tavern who is attacked by the strikers, once had fought on the side of Giuseppe Garibaldi, the legendary hero of the *Risorgimento*, who in summer 1860 landed in Sicily with a thousand volunteers to free Southern Italy from the Bourbons, who then reigned over it. The characters of Peppino and his grandfather emblematically embody the intimate link between the *Risorgimento*, WWI, and fascism.

Depictions of the Enemy

The little attention in Italian cinema of the 1930s for WWI is a marked contrast to the various films about WWI in the previous decade. Scholars generally explain the decreasing presence of WWI in Italian cinema during the 1930s by the overall evolution of the fascist regime. At the beginning of the 1930s, the regime “changed skin,” so to speak. The time of the “Camicie nere” was over; the black shirt that originally identified fascist adherents was exchanged for the double-breasted suit. Hereby, I recur to the metaphor that Italian scholars commonly submit to in order to summarize the ideological metamorphosis of the fascist regime at the decade’s turn. The established fascist dictatorship, which then enjoyed a broad-based support in Italy, increasingly assumed bourgeois-conservative features and strove to remove the memory of the revolutionary and violent character of its earlier days.¹³ In the

13 As Christopher Duggan, *A Concise History of Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 224, puts it, “by the 1930s ‘fascist man’ was no longer a young barbarian. He was a patriotic, hard-working, church-going father.” “In the early 1930s, the fascist regime changed its tactics,” observes Gian Piero Brunetta: “Any reference to fascist intimidation tactics was expunged as policymakers attempted to create the image of a pacified, harmonious Italy that was dominated by a petit-bourgeois ideology.” Gian Piero Brunetta, *The History of Italian Cinema: A Guide to Italian Film from its Origins to the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 91.

1930s, the regime reluctantly looked at its past, and WWI was too problematically and tightly connected to the origins of the fascist movement to fit into the new self-image that the regime wished to spread.

Elter's *Le scarpe al sole* stands exemplary for the depiction of WWI in the Italian cinema of the 1930s. War is celebrated and at the same time its memory is distorted, mystified, and somehow repressed. The film's opening sets the tone: The credit sequence rolls on the background of a pathetically presented mountain landscape. High peaks stand out against a crystal-clear sky, and ascetic cliffs and snow-covered plateaus dominate the imagery. It is an awe-inspiring scenery, on which the camera lingers for a while, and it recurs at the end, closing the film. The mountains and the snow and the blue sky form a frame for the narrative that follows, a majestic backdrop for the deeds of the Italian soldiers. The opening credits are unsatisfactory. It is striking that no chronological and geographical information are provided throughout the film. Where exactly the story is set, or when a given episode takes place, remains unsaid. Almost no specific dates or places are mentioned. We do not know where the village is, for instance, where the narrative starts, or where the fights take place, or the year in which war breaks out and when it ends. An exception is the reference to the city of Trient in the course of a scene in a coffeehouse that we enter together with an Alpino who returns home wounded. As has been briefly mentioned earlier, the present capital of the Italian region Trentino Alto Adige still belongs to the Habsburg empire at the beginning of the last century. The city is annexed by Italy as a result of WWI. In fact, the liberation of Trient and Trieste is one of Italy's goals when the country enters WWI in spring 1915 on the side of Paris and London and against Austria-Hungary and the German Reich. In the coffeehouse, we overhear a discussion about the necessity

to reach Trient as quickly as possible. At the beginning of *Le scarpe al sole*, there is a reference to Russia, too. Some peasants sit in the village's tavern drinking. They talk about the war, and a reference is made to Russia's offensive against Austria. But these aspects are only brief hints. In Elter's film, WWI is explicitly idealized. As Gianfranco Miro Gori remarks, the war depicted in *Le scarpe al sole* is barely characterized as WWI.¹⁴ What is shown on the screen evokes WWI, but does not intend to depict it graphically.

The process of abstraction that WWI undergoes in *Le scarpe al sole*, the vagueness with which WWI is depicted, are all the more apparent if we take into consideration the enemy's representation. It is an anonymous entity. Almost never is the adversary called by name. Most of the time, he simply is referred as "the enemy," without clarifying his nationality. He is nameless, and his identity remains undetermined. Only one reference is made to Austria-Hungary during the film. It happens near the ending: We see the Alpini reconquer their village after it has been occupied by the enemy for some time. There is a board hanging on a wall containing the lettering *K.u.k. Orts-Kommandantur* ("Imperial-Royal Command Unit"). Then an Alpino removes the sign with a stroke of his rifle. The scene is observed from some distance, and it remains a detail. It must be noted, too, that the inscription is in Gothic-style letters, so it is hard to read for a non-German-speaking audience. Apart from that, there is only one point in *Le scarpe al sole* where a clear reference to Austria is made. In the cellar of a deserted house, the Alpini hit upon some barrels of wine, but their officer warns them that the Austrians might have poisoned it. For a moment, they appear troubled, then they seem to not take the danger seriously, as if

14 Gori, *Patria diva*, 64.

it were inconceivable that Austrians could commit such an act of meanness. An Alpino dares a sip; a second sip follows, and it tastes good, and now all drink the wine and merrily empty the barrels. It is worth noting that the scene in which reference is made to the Austrians does not depict a military action; rather, it is all a joke.

Such an image of the enemy stands in marked contrast to its representation in the films of the 1920s. The difference between *Le scarpe al sole* and films from ten years earlier, such as *Il grido dell'aquila* is evident and significant. *Il grido dell'aquila* opens with Italian soldiers marching through a jubilant crowd, on their way to the front. War is still a distant affair, and in the little town in Northern Italy, life goes on serenely and pleasantly. An officer, Manlio Acerri, courts a pretty girl. Her name, not by chance, is Italia. Then, suddenly, enemy airplanes cross the sky. Fear takes possession of the population. Everybody seeks shelter. Bombs fall and buildings collapse. Also, the house where Italia lives with her little brother is destroyed by the enemy attack. Beneath the debris also lies Italia's brother. Some days later, a new play is staged at the local theater, but the show is abruptly interrupted by the news that the front has been broken; the enemy is rapidly advancing. Panic breaks out. The scenes that follow show enemy troops on the march. A cavalry squadron rushes through the landscape. The Italian population flees in fear. The Austrians rage and destroy; they know no mercy. Women and children are prey to the enemy's violence. Then the Austrians attack the town, and a bloody fight ensues. Unfortunately, the only preserved print of *Il grido dell'aquila* has a gap of about ten minutes at this point. In its present version, the film goes on after the enemy's attack, depicting life in town after war's end. That part has already been discussed.

Also noteworthy are the films *Sufficit animus* (*Courage suffices*, 1921, directed Giuseppe Sterni) and *La leggenda del Piave* (1924, directed by Mario Negri), which shall be taken under consideration here as further examples of the negative image of the Austrian enemy in the Italian cinema of the 1920s. The protagonist of *Sufficit animus* is a young officer. When he returns home from the front on a short leave, he finds his village completely destroyed. All inhabitants have fled before the enemy. Over the ruins flutters an Italian flag in shreds. *La leggenda del piave*, instead, revolves around an Austrian spy, and that makes it of special interest for our investigation. The spy worms his way into the confidence of an Italian family, but when the man tries to seduce the young Elena (played by an Italian diva of the 1920s, Diomira Jacobini), he is removed from the house. WWI breaks out, and Elena helps out as a nurse. Then the villa where Elena lives with her family is occupied by the enemy, and the spy appears again and rapes her. The scene, as can be gathered from an old review (the film must be considered lost),¹⁵ is rendered by the metaphor of a white lily crushed by a man's hand and trampled under a pair of boots. Finally comes the day of Italian victory. The enemy retreats. Elena's fiancé, Corrado, dies heroically, while Italian troops are advancing.

The shift in the representation of WWI in Italian cinema at the beginning of the 1930s mirrors the contemporary mutation of the fascist dictatorship and the new character that the regime assumes, as has been previously mentioned. But a further element apparently plays a major role, and attention must be directed at this point to the development of Italian foreign policy in the interwar period. In particular, the different depictions

15 See Vittorio Martinelli, *Il cinema muto italiano: I film degli anni Venti. 1924–1931* (Roma: Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia, 1996), 38.

of the enemy in the early post-war years and in the later films of the 1930s must be put in connection with the evolution of the Austrian-Italian relations during that period.¹⁶ Since the late 1920s, the fascist regime showed an increasing interest in making Austria a closer partner. The strengthening of the Italian-Austrian relations became a primary goal of Italy's foreign policy. Italy engaged itself in favor of Austria's independence, opposing Nazi Germany's ambition to expand its influence along the Danube, and Vienna found in its southern neighbor a supporter against Berlin's aspirations to incorporate the country into the Third Reich. When, in July 1934, a Nazi-supported coup attempt shook Austria, Italian troops were ordered immediately to the Italian-Austrian border, a gesture that exemplarily marks Italy's role at that time as a protector of Austria and its sovereignty. The political friendship also encouraged more intense economic relations, and in spring 1934 a comprehensive agreement of cooperation was signed; it is known as the Rome Protocols. A further agreement with the aim of promoting cultural relations followed in February 1935. Together with the Rome Protocols, it marked the high point of Austrian-Italian collaboration during the 1930s.

The undetermined identity of the enemy in Elter's film, the apparent vagueness as to its nationality, its name, may find an

16 For an overview of the Italian-Austrian relations in the interwar period, see, in Italian, Ennio Di Nolfo, "I rapporti italo-austriaci dall'avvenimento del fascismo all'Anschluss," *Storia e politica* XIII, no. 1-2 (January-June 1974): 33-81; and, in German, Angelo Ara, "Die italienische Österreichpolitik 1936-1938," in Österreich, *Deutschland und die Mächte: Internationale und österreichische Aspekte des Anschlusses vom März 1938*, ed. Gerald Stourzh and Birgitta Zaar (Vienna: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1990) 111-129.

explication in the political alliance between fascist Italy and Austria. In the depiction of the enemy in *Le scarpe al sole*, in its anonymity, one finds mirrored, I would argue, the special relationship binding Rome and Vienna at that time. That explains the carefulness with which *Le scarpe al sole*, as well the other Italian films of the 1930s about WWI, avoid an explicit identification of the enemy with Austria. In fact, the Italian-Austrian friendship may represent a further reason (so far gone unnoticed) why WWI is so scarcely present in the Italian cinema of the 1930s.

From Enemy to Friend

Interesting cases are also presented by Forzano's films *Camicia nera* and *13 uomini e 1 cannone*. Forzano was a peculiar and remarkable figure in the Italian cinema of the 1930s. In the 1910s, he made his name as author of opera librettos for Roberto Leoncavallo, Pietro Mascagni, and Giacomo Puccini. He was also a successful playwright. Among his most important plays are the historical dramas *Danton*, *Campo di Maggio*, and *Villafranca*, written in the early 1930s. Apparently, *Campo di Maggio* and *Villafranca* were conceived together with the head of Italian fascism Benito Mussolini, with whom Forzano was in good relations. In the course of the 1930s and early 1940s, Forzano directed ten films in total; *Camicia nera* was his first one, and the film is exemplarily for the process of indetermination of the enemy's image in the 1930s Italian films on WWI. It is one of the few Italian films from the 1930s that explicitly celebrates the fascist movement; the film was produced by Istituto Luce, a state organization for the production of didactic, documentary, and propaganda films, established by the fascist regime in the early 1920s. Since 1927, Istituto Luce also produced a weekly newsreel, *Giornale Luce*. *Camicia nera* was produced by Istituto Luce as

a contribution to the tenth anniversary of the fascist seizure of power, and the film was released at the beginning of 1933.¹⁷

Camicia nera displays strong ideological affinity with the films of the 1920s about WWI, which celebrate the beginnings of Italian fascism.¹⁸ Forzano's film presents "a filmic synthesis of Italy's history from 1914 to 1932," as the message at the end of the opening credits submits. The story begins on the eve of WWI, in summer 1914, and the main character is a blacksmith who lives in poorest conditions in the "Paludi Pontine," then a swampland region, south of Rome, with his wife and a little son. When Italy enters the war, the blacksmith volunteers for the front. The neutrality position initially assumed by Italy after WWI breaks out is severely criticized by Forzano's film, where merit for Italy's entering the war is solemnly attributed to the future head of the fascist movement. As a matter of fact, the young Mussolini, who in the

17 On the film's production, see Patrizia Minghetti, "Lo 'scandalo' di *Camicia Nera*," *Immagine: Note di storia del cinema* III, no. 2 (April–June 1984): 20–27. Further, on Forzano can be seen, in English, Clive Edward John Griffiths, *The Theatrical Works of Giovacchino Forzano: Drama for Mussolini's Italy* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2000); in Italian, Stefano De Rosa, *Giovacchino Forzano: Un protagonista del Novecento* (Firenze: Borgo San Lorenzo, 1996); and Marco Sterpos, *Scrivere teatro nel regime: Giovacchino Forzano e la collaborazione con Mussolini* (Modena: Stem Mucchi, 2015).

18 For analysis of the film's ideology, see, besides Gianfranco Miro Gori, *Patria diva: La storia d'Italia nei film del ventennio* (Firenze: La casa Usher, 1988); Mino Argentieri, *L'occhio del regime* (Roma: Bulzoni, 2003); and Lorenzo Cuccu, "Il cinema di propaganda: Il 'caso Forzano,'" in *Storia del cinema italiano*, vol. 4, 1924–1933, ed. Leonardo Quaresima (Venezia: Marsilio, 2014), 463–472. In the above analysis, however, little account is taken of the film's representation of WWI.

early 1910s was one of the prominent figures of Italian socialism and directed its newspaper *Avanti!*, played a major role in the political debate that accompanied Italy's entering the war, and the newspaper, *Il Popolo d'Italia*, which he founded after leaving the Socialist party, becomes an important voice for the interventionist party. In *Camicia nera*, we see the blacksmith solemnly reading an article by Mussolini, and the film shows workers and bourgeoisie, peasants and students moved alike by Mussolini's words, while jubilant crowds salute Italy's entering the war. Like the montage films by Comerio and Paradisi, or *Il grido dell'aquila* one decade earlier, Forzano's film underlines the intimate connection between WWI and Italian fascism. After a first part devoted to the immediate pre-war time and WWI, there follows a description of the dramatic situation in which the country finds itself after war's end, and the film recalls the beginnings of the fascist movement. When the blacksmith returns home, chaos dominates. There is no work, and the communists paralyze the nation. The blacksmith thus joins the fascists who fight "the reds," reestablishing order. Until the day of the fascist seizure of power comes; then *Camicia nera* celebrates Italy's economic and social progress under the fascist regime. Under Mussolini's lead, there is social peace, and Italy experiences economic growth. Here lies the nucleus of *Camicia nera*: Like *Il grido dell'aquila*, Forzano's film also puts the accent on the time after WWI, celebrating the fascist movement. The film's title is emblematic. Through the cloth, the "Camicia nera" that becomes the symbol of Italian fascism, the days of its origins and seizure of power are evoked on the screen.

Camicia nera thus contrasts with the evolution of Italian fascism at the beginning of the 1930s. As scholars generally remark, the film seems unaware of the metamorphosis of the fascist regime at the turn of the decade. In its ideology, in the way it depicts the fascist movement and its origins, *Camicia nera* rather mirrors

the 1920s. In this sense, Forzano's film seems out of time, and it marks the end of a period in Italian cinema, in its representation of the fascist movement. At the same time, *Camicia nera* clearly differs from the films of the previous decade about WWI as regards the enemy's image. The film recalls with meticulousness the outbreak of WWI: As a starting point, the assassination of the heir to the Austrian-Hungarian throne, Franz Ferdinand, in Sarajevo on 28 July 1914. Then the film reports in detail the chronology of every nation entering the war. By superimposed text, we are informed that Austria declares war against Serbia on July 28. On the 2nd of August, Germany declares war on Russia. On 3 August, there follows the declaration of war against France and Belgium. On 4 August, England declares war on Germany. On 5 August, there follows Austria's declaration of war against Russia. France declares war against Austria on 11 August, and England follows on 15 August. In the background are images of the various armies, with soldiers marching toward the camera. The national hymns accompany the sequence. But in *Camicia nera*, when it comes to Italy's entering the war, there is no explanation of the countries Italy fought against. Throughout the film, it is never told that Italy's enemy is Austria. Against the background of footage from WWI, there appears a list of towns and mountains where the Italians successfully fought the enemy. It is a long and symbolically leaden list that rolls on the screen: Pogdora, Oslavia, Monfalcone, Sacile, Doberdo, Sabotino, Vodice, etc. But the enemy's name is never pronounced. Its identity appears implicit, but the enemy remains nameless throughout Forzano's film, as if it were not to be recalled that the present friend once had been Italy's enemy.

Little attention has been paid so far in the literature on the representation of WWI in Italian cinema to Forzano's *13 uomini e 1 cannone*. On the contrary, the film appears of great interest. It came out in fall 1936, and there is also a German and an English

version of Forzano's film, titled *Dreizehn Mann und eine Kanone* and "Thirteen Men and a Gun", directed respectively by Johannes Meyer and Mario Zampi and co-produced by the Italian company Pisorno with the German Bavaria and the London-based Two Cities. The film tells of a gigantic cannon and the patrol of thirteen men referred to in the title. The story starts with the cannon having already been in use on the front for some time. It has become a legend amongst the troops. The cannon almost never misses a shot, and all efforts by the enemy to make out its position are unsuccessful. The gun is hidden deeply in the woods and ingeniously masked. Worth noting is the narrative's location, for *13 uomini e 1 cannone* plays in the east, along the frontier between the Habsburg empire and czarist Russia. It makes Forzano's film a remarkable exception among the Italian films about WWI. In fact, it is one of very few films that is not set in Italy or whose protagonists are not Italians. Further examples are Lattuada's *Fraulein Doktor*, which takes place on the western front and features a female German spy, and Sergio Grieco's *Il sergente Klems* (1971), which begins on the western front and then goes on in North Africa after war's end; the protagonist is a German sergeant. Captured by the French, the man manages to escape. Also worth mentioning is a film from the 1920s, *Non è resurrezione senza morte*, by Edoardo Bencivenga, that is set in the Balkans, with two brothers, separated by destiny, who fight in WWI on opposing sides.

In Forzano's film, the soldiers plus a captain in charge of the astounding cannon are Austrians, and that makes *13 uomini e 1 cannone* quite unique among the Italian films on WWI. They are the film's heroes, while the Russians represent the enemy; *13 uomini e 1 cannone* clearly stands on the side of the Austrians. The men come from different backgrounds, and the patrol stands symbolically for all and everyone. Among them, we meet a teacher and a peasant, a pharmacist and a student, a musician and a librarian. There is also

an acrobat and a painter, while one of the men openly admits that he does not work: “My father is very rich,” he explains. They are presented as capable, courageous, and cheery. When fights temporarily stop, they sing some song, and the musician plays his violin. Meanwhile, the teacher teaches a comrade to read and write, and when a high-ranked general announces inspection, the men take a bath in a nearby brook, and all are merry. In spite of the social differences, they are sincere comrades, and happy to share at table what delicacies they may privately own. The audience is explicitly invited by the film to identify with the Austrians. They stay at the center of the narrative and from the very beginning gain our sympathy.

Our investigation concludes with *Il piccolo alpino*. It was the last Italian film on WWI produced during the *Ventennio*, a term that commonly refers to the twenty years of fascist regime, from the end of 1922 to July 1943, when the Italian king after the Anglo-American landing on Sicily removed Mussolini and had him arrested, and a new government was formed under Marshal Pietro Badoglio. Biancoli’s film is an adaptation of the homonymous novel of 1926 by Salvator Gotta. One of the most popular Italian novelists of the interwar period, Gotta sympathized with fascism from early on. He was the author of numerous novels and theatrical pieces, many of which were brought to screen; he also contributed to various films. Among others, he conceived, together with Biancoli, the idea for Alessandrini’s *Cavalleria*. *Il piccolo alpino* enjoyed huge success, being one of the most read books for children in Italy in the 1930s. It was also the most successful Italian novel on WWI of the interwar period. In second place ranks Monelli’s *Le scarpe al sole*.¹⁹

19 For a chart of the most popular Italian novels on WWI, see Marco Mondini, *La guerra italiana: Partire, raccontare, tornare. 1914–18* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2014), 172.

The protagonist of *Il piccolo alpino* is a boy named Giacomino. He is the little Alpino referred to in the title. Giacomino lives with his father and a grandmother in a town in Northern Italy. In the film, in contrast to the novel, his mother has long been dead. While hiking in the mountains, Giacomino and his father are surprised by a storm. The boy is saved by some mountaineers. His father is believed to be dead. When the war breaks out, the boy joins a group of Alpini. Biancoli's film is released at the end of 1940; a new war was ravaging great parts of Europe. In June 1940 Italy, too, entered the war at the side of Nazi-Germany, believing that war would last just a few weeks and be easily won. While the country joins in WWII, Biancoli's film clearly aims at reassuring the Italian audience. A harmless picture is given of the war. Giacomino experiences a thrilling adventure, and everything ends well, with the boy also finding his father again. It is noteworthy that death has almost no place in the film. With one exception, it does not exist. A boy joining Giacomino on his adventure is wounded near the film's end by an enemy's shot. He dies on the day of Italy's victory, with Giacomino and his father at his side, to the sound of a military fanfare playing in the background.

At the same time, the new world war that fascist Italy enters in summer 1940 influenced the whole way in which WWI is depicted in Biancoli's *Il piccolo alpino*. In particular, let us consider again the enemy's image. In *Il piccolo alpino*, the enemy practically disappears from the screen. While it could occasionally be seen in *Le scarpe al sole*—although it is mostly shown briefly and from some distance—in Biancoli's film, the enemy disappears fully. Throughout the film, we get to see the enemy only a couple of times. References to the enemy are made in the dialogues, but without ever mentioning the enemy by name. The occasional roaring of cannons in the distance reminds of its presence, but we hardly catch a glimpse of the enemy. The first time that we see the

enemy is the moment when two spies kidnap Giacomino. They wear Italian uniforms, and they make no comment; their nationality remains concealed. They are rather clumsy and do not really seem dangerous, and Giacomino easily frees himself and warns the Alpini, who promptly capture the spies. Later, we briefly glimpse the enemy while Giacomino and the other boy attempt to deliver an important message that they are trusted with to the Italian headquarters. It is just one shot, quite short, and what we get to see of the enemy are barely a couple of legs. It is a meaningful shot. In *Il piccolo alpino*, the enemy has no name and no face, and that is meant literally. The last time that we get a sight of the enemy is while Giacomino and his companion cross the river to reach the Italian positions. Two enemy soldiers notice the boys and fire. Again, they do not speak any words. Their muteness further contributes to their anonymity; it makes an identification impossible.

Giacomino gets in direct contact with the enemy after losing his way during a snowstorm. The year is 1917, and it is Christmas, as informs a superimposed text, and the building that we are entering is an Austrian orphanage. Here we find again Giacomino. As we learn in the ensuing scene, the boy was found in the mountains by Austrian soldiers and accepted into the orphanage. He is fine; the statement that sometimes can be found in the literature on WWI and Italian cinema that Giacomino is captured and held prisoner by the Austrians,²⁰ is wrong and misleading. On the contrary, the enemy actually saves Giacomino's life. In the orphanage, they are celebrating Christmas. There is a joyous atmosphere. Under the guidance of the institute's director, the boys sing a Christmas song. Then the director urges Giacomino to sing a song, too, and

20 Thus write for instance Gori, *Patria diva*, 63; and Gianfranco Casadio, *Il grigio e il nero: Spettacolo e propaganda nel cinema italiano degli anni Trenta* (Ravenna: Longo, 1989), 79.

suggests “O sole mio.” Instead, Giacomino sings a patriotic song, and everybody seems outraged, and the boy is brought back in his room. The reason for the outrage is purposely left unclear. Is it the song’s tone, which contrasts with the Christmas atmosphere? Is it because it is an Italian song? The director himself had expressed the wish of hearing one. In fact, nothing suggests in this scene that Giacomino is standing in front of the enemy. That the Austrians among whom the boy finds himself are actually the enemy remains untold, and when an Italian prelate later visits the orphanage asking about the boy, the director is ready to entrust Giacomino to the clergyman. But Giacomino in the meantime escaped from his room through the window.

At two points in *Il piccolo alpino*, the enemy is actually mentioned by name, but the film is careful not to identify that image with the Austrians. The film opens by a superimposed text that reads: “March 1915. On the eve of the war against the Habsburgs.” It is a peculiar and meaningful phrasing. It is just a detail, but quite significant. The film evidently takes care to avoid any explicit reference to Austria. Instead, it evokes a historical entity, the Habsburg Empire, that already belongs to history. At the film’s end, the enemy gets called by name again. At the hospital, Giacomino reads to his friend the communiqué by the Italian general-in-chief Armando Diaz announcing the victory against Austria-Hungary. Once more the enemy is referred to by the name of an old historical entity lying back in the past. The effort is evident to present WWI as a conflict led by Italy against an old dynasty and a state that do not exist anymore. Manifestly, any parallelism between the enemy and the later Austria, which in the 1930s became a close partner of fascist Italy, was to be avoided. In the meantime, Austria, too, ceases to exist. The country was now part of Nazi-Germany. Its annexation by force to the Third Reich takes place in March 1938. That might be a further reason why,

in *Il piccolo alpino*, there are hardly any references to Austria. As if the film wanted to remove the fact that an Austria had actually ever existed. Once again, the history of WWI is being reshaped on the screen to adapt to the present.