


---

This is the **accepted version** of the journal article:

Rodrigo, Javier. «A fascist warfare? Italian fascism and war experience in the Spanish Civil War (1936–39)». , , : 2019. DOI 10.1177/0968344517696526

---

This version is available at <https://ddd.uab.cat/record/276037>

under the terms of the  <sup>IN</sup> COPYRIGHT license

## A FASCIST WARFARE?

### ITALIAN FASCISM AND WAR EXPERIENCE IN THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR (1936-39)

Javier Rodrigo<sup>1</sup>

#### **Abstract**

Initiated as an armament, strategic and diplomatic assistance, the fascist intervention in the Spanish Civil War soon made Italy a belligerent country in the conflict. Once failed the initial Coup d'Etat plan, the Corpo Truppe Volontarie (CTV) was created to help Franco, but also as a tool to build fascist Spain and, indeed, fascist Europe. Far from irrelevance or trivialization, this paper examines a crucial part of the Italian intervention in Spain: a multi-faced combat and war experience.

#### **Keywords**

Fascism, Spanish Civil War, Italy, war experience, violence.

---

<sup>1</sup> This work was supported by the Spanish *Ministerio de Economía y Competitividad* by means of the Research Project *Culturas políticas, movilización y violencia en España, 1930-1950*, [HAR2014-53498-P].

(...) Salve Duce, per Te noi pugniamo / Legionari del fascismo siam /

In alto il pugnale, da forti / Noi vogliamo la Spagna liberar (...) <sup>2</sup>

### ***Introduction: The raised dagger***

‘*In alto il pugnale*’, with the dagger raised, as is depicted in so many photographs. The fascist salute accompanied by a steel blade was the symbol of the *Corpo di Truppe Volontarie* (CTV), the expeditionary corps composed of over 78,000 Italians sent by Mussolini to fight in the Spanish Civil War.<sup>3</sup> According to the CTV anthem, the corps was created to liberate Spain and to inaugurate a new History there, to bring a smile back to the faces of a people oppressed by ‘the Reds’, and to build a fascist Europe. Much of the historiography on international intervention in Spain – whether written from diplomatic, military, geostrategic or memorialist perspectives – has either

---

<sup>2</sup> “Hail, Duce, for You we fight / Legionnaires of fascism are we / Raising high the dagger of the strong / We will free Spain”. Antonio V. Savona and Michele L. Straniero, *Canti dell’Italia fascista (1919-1945)* (Milan, Garzanti, 1979), pp. 306-307.

<sup>3</sup> The basic historiography of Italian intervention in the Spanish Civil War includes John Coverdale, *La intervención fascista en la Guerra Civil española* (Madrid, Alianza, 1979, or. 1975). Paul Preston, ‘La aventura española de Mussolini. Del riesgo limitado a la guerra abierta’, *La República asediada. Hostilidad internacional y conflictos internos durante la Guerra Civil*, (Barcelona, Península, 1999), or the most important research up to date, Morten Heiberg, *Emperadores del Mediterráneo. Franco, Mussolini y la guerra civil española* (Barcelona, Crítica, 2004). An excellent review on the debates of the Seventies is Denis Smyth, ‘Duce Diplomatico’, *The Historical Journal*, 21/4 (1978), pp. 981-1000. More recent, Brian Sullivan, ‘Fascist Italy’s Involvement in the Spanish Civil War’, *Journal of Military History*, 59 (1995), pp. 697-727. Pro-Franco and anti-communist visions are present in Licio Gelli and Antonio Lenoci, *Dossier Spagna. Gli italiani nella guerra civile (1936-1939)* (Bari, Giuseppe Laterza, 1995), Pierluigi Romeo di Colloredo, *Frecce Nere! Le camicie nere in Spagna 1936-1939* (Genova, Clu, 2012) and Massimiliano Griner, *I ragazzi del ‘36. L’avventura dei fascisti italiani nella Guerra Civile Spagnola* (Milan, Rizzoli, 2006).

celebrated Mussolini's support for Franco in a completely acritical way, or relegated this support to a position of complete insignificance. This insignificance has been defined as threefold: geostrategic, military and political. In geostrategic terms, it has been observed that the CTV was unable to control the Western Mediterranean. Militarily, historians have suggested that the force never recovered true prominence after the much-discussed defeat at Guadalajara in March 1937<sup>4</sup>. In political terms, most historians have underlined the low levels of fascist devotion among the CTV's combatants and the *Duce's* supposed failure to implant fascism in Spain<sup>5</sup>. Apart from the classic works by Coverdale, Saz, Heiberg or - more recently -, Viñas, the CTV has rarely been taken seriously by historians of the Spanish Civil War. On the few occasions where its historical importance has been acknowledged, its relevance has been confined to the period between July 1936 and March 1937: between the sending of the Savoia airplanes and the Battle of Guadalajara.

This re-evaluation of Mussolini's war in Spain is based on the premise that the Italian fascist intervention which took place from 27 July 1936 up to the end of the Civil War was far from inconsequential. In fact, it played a decisive role in the evolution and outcome of the conflict. The predominantly political and diplomatic historiography of

---

<sup>4</sup> From a military perspective, Alberto Rovighi and Filippo Stefani, *La partecipazione italiana alla guerra civile spagnola* (Roma, Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito, 1992), José Luis Alcofar Nassaes [José Luis Infiesta], *CTV. Los legionarios italianos en la Guerra Civil Española 1936-1939* (Barcelona, Dopesa, 1972.), *La aviación legionaria en la guerra española* (Barcelona, Euros, 1976), *La marina italiana en la guerra de España* (Barcelona, Euros, 1975).

<sup>5</sup> A different vision, that assumes Mussolini's success in his fascistization project, in Heiberg, *Emperadores*, part 4.

Italian involvement in the Civil War has contributed substantially to our knowledge of Italian motivations from the perspective of international geostrategic considerations and Italian foreign policy. However, it has also tended to overlook the development of the intervention itself, and to ignore its military and political dimensions. As this article will demonstrate, these military and political aspects provide us with the most important means of understanding fascist participation in the Spanish Civil War.

The final count of 78,474 troops (45,000 regular army, 29,000 MVSN fascist militia (*Milizia Volontaria per la Sicurezza Nazionale*)) may not appear numerically significant at first glance. However, if we understand Italian involvement as an intervention in support of an allied faction in a domestic war, we see that Italian troops represented a quarter of the total forces used in conquering the fascist empire, and almost double the number of soldiers who fought in the International Brigades. Mussolini achieved the true internationalization of the Spanish Civil War, deploying the largest contingent from one single foreign country to Spain. His troops accounted for approximately one tenth of the estimated overall total membership of Franco's Army, and he spent the equivalent of an entire annual budget for the armed forces – some 8.5 billion liras – in Spain<sup>6</sup>. As well as the well-known land operations in Malaga, Bermeo, Santander, Aragon, Catalonia and the Levante, we must also consider the considerable

---

<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, Italians in Spain arranged radio stations, newspapers, the CIAUS, two hospitals (Zaragoza and Valladolid, with 1,000 and 1,500 beds), and even a forced Workers' Battalion. On the use of forced labour, see Javier Rodrigo, *Cautivos. Campos de concentración en la España franquista, 1936-1947* (Barcelona, Crítica, 2005). For a wide vision of Italy's involvement on the war, Javier Rodrigo, *La guerra fascista. Italia en la Guerra Civil española, 1936-1939* (Madrid, Alianza, 2016).

importance of the military actions by air and sea.<sup>7</sup> Finally, the Italian forces created platforms of political action, economic penetration, and cultural impregnation in Spain. These were represented by a range of bodies and individuals including the PNF (Partito Nazionale Fascista), the SIM (Servizio informazioni militare), the Army, Milizia agents, representatives of private enterprise, as well as representatives of the Ministries of Industry, Foreign Affairs and Popular Culture. The war helped the Italians to explore techniques of war such as the bombing of civilian populations, something which occurred in Aragon, Valencia and Catalonia. Italian intervention in Spain, in spite of the interpretations proposed by Cantalupo, had a strong and clearly apparent political content.

The massive Italian intervention in Spain, which must be understood in the broader context of supremacist interventionism in Europe, followed the failure of the Spanish military Rebels' attempt to seize power through a coup d'etat in July 1936<sup>8</sup>.

---

<sup>7</sup> First as *Aviación del Tercio*, then as *Aviazione Legionaria*, between July 1936 and April 1939, Italy sent to Spain 414 fighters, 44 assault planes, 68 reconnaissance aircrafts, 213 bombers and 20 seaplanes, together with 5,699 people (862 officers, 573 non-commissioned officers). It was soon been surpassed in speed, maneuverability and weapons by the German Condor Legion, the tripling in size but not in number of planes. No less important was the participation of the Regia Marina: 89 surface ships and 58 submarines held, respectively, 677 and 91 missions. Surface units performed at least two bombings, shooting 195 shots and 12 torpedoes. Made submarines fired 245 shots and 71 torpedoes, sinking six steamers and busting nine more. In addition, there were 258 trips supplies, transfer of troops or wounded. On the Condor Legion, among many others Stefanie Schüler-Springorum, *La guerra como aventura. La Legión Cónдор en la Guerra Civil española 1936-1939* (Madrid, Alianza, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> On the historical context and immediate precedents see Nicola Labanca, *Una guerra per l'impero. Memorie della campagna d'Etiopia 1935-36* (Bologna, Il Mulino, 2005). Robert Mallet, *Mussolini in Ethiopia, 1919-1935. The Origins of Fascist Italy's African War* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015). Giorgio Rochat, *Le guerre italiane 1935-1943. Dall'impero d'Etiopia alla disfatta* (Turin, Einaudi, 2005). On the immediate aftermath, Davide Rodogno, *Fascism's European Empire*.

Some weeks before the coup took place, the Rebels were already receiving support from the fascist powers. The coup was prepared through a long series of contacts between its leaders and the Italian government. These preparations included the signing of contracts for the purchase of large quantities of weapons<sup>9</sup>. Driven by fascist anti-communism and opposition to the Popular Front, combined with objectives of geostrategic control of the Mediterranean, the construction of a fascist empire and the fascistization of Spain, in 1936 Mussolini launched a geostrategic, diplomatic, military and political intervention outside Italy. The characteristics of this intervention mean that it fits clearly within the parameters established by Alan Kramer in his definition of *fascist warfare*.<sup>10</sup> This specific way of waging war involved rapid movements, or *guerra celere*, aggression veiled in voluntarist, positive, protective and transformative rhetoric, fascination with aerial warfare as a *clean* means of transforming the enemy rearguard, and the convergence of weapons and ideas in a political fascistization that ran parallel to military activity. This was possibly the most fascist of Mussolini's wars up to that point: Ciano wrote on 22 February 1939 that those who had laughed so heartily at the Italian intervention in Spain would one day understand that the true foundations of the Mediterranean Empire of Rome had been laid on the banks of the Ebro River, in

---

*Italian Occupation during the Second World War* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006), among many others.

<sup>9</sup> That could well mean the provision of a long armed confrontation, for Ángel Viñas, 'La connivencia fascista con la sublevación y otros éxitos de la trama civil', in *Los mitos del 18 de julio* (Barcelona, Crítica, 2013), pp. 79-181.

<sup>10</sup> Alan Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction. Culture and Mass Killing in the First World War* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 329.

Barcelona and in Malaga.<sup>11</sup>

This *fascist warfare* was orchestrated in Spain through a series of common experiences such as enlisting, combat, death, discipline, life in the rearguard and responsibility for violent practices. Rather than a traditional examination of military tactics, two other dimensions of the Italian war in Spain will be analysed here: personal combat experiences and the experience of violence, including the bombing of civilian populations. In order to carry out this analysis, this study uses official and personal sources. These sources, laden as they often are with metaphor, hyperbole and politically partial representations, must be read and used with caution. Nevertheless, they provide us with a unique and immensely valuable window into Italian troops' experiences of combat, death and *fascist warfare* from below.

### ***Clean and Dirty. The elements of the Fascist identity***

The Mussolini regime conceived and staged its imperialist invasion of Ethiopia just before it became involved in Spain: first in the coup and then in the Civil War. The Ethiopian episode was saturated with melodrama, with concepts of light and darkness, salvation and condemnation, black and white (literally), and with portrayals of

---

<sup>11</sup> Galeazzo Ciano, *Diario 1937-1943*, ed. Renzo de Felice (Milan, Rizzoli, 2004, or. 1946), pp. 257-258.



spectacular action that would culminate in the ultimate liberation of virtue. Though not all the paraphernalia of the Africa campaign crossed the Straits of Gibraltar into Spain, significant canonical similarities existed. Most books – memorial, official or otherwise – published in Italy on actions in Spain depict a cycle of sinfulness, sin and redemption followed by resurrection and the triumph of truth, light and goodness. Other common elements include the portrayal of Spain – especially the Republican side – as dirty, diseased, backward and uneducated. The fascist evangelization mission would bring cleansing, light, hope and victory.<sup>12</sup> This was, of course, propaganda. However, one element of fascisms that must not be forgotten is that combatants often believed their own propaganda. This phenomenon was especially common in the case of those volunteering to fight in a war, even an undeclared and irregular one like the Spanish conflict.

Enthusiasm, perfection, beauty and voluntarism are the words most frequently repeated in Italian sources to describe the volunteers in Spain, along with other words pertaining to the semantic realm of heroism, bravery and courage. Mechanisms to facilitate participation in the internal conflicts of other countries – such as a Foreign

---

<sup>12</sup> There are several books, if not official, ie published by State institutions such as Foreign Affairs, Army or Popular Culture ministries, clearly consistent with their standardized view of Spain, the Civil War and the CTV. Some examples of the rethoric and propagandistic importance given to the topic in Italy are: Gaetano Amoroso, *Mortai e Lupi in Catalogna* (Turin, Rattero, 1941). Maurizio Bassi, *Da Cadice ai Pirenei* (Florence, Le Monnier, 1941). Marco Alessi, *La Spagna dalla monarchia al governo di Franco* (Milan, Istituto per gli studi di politica internazionale, 1937). Curio Mortari, *Con gli insorti in Marocco e in Spagna* (Milan, Treves, 1937). Francesco Belforte, *La guerra civile in Spagna* (Milan, ISPI, 1938). Marco Alessi, *La Spagna dalla monarchia al governo di Franco* (Milan, Istituto per gli studi di politica internazionale, 1937).

Legion – did not in Fascist Italy, meaning that there no defined system of recruitment. In this situation, recruitment for the Spanish conflict was based on a mixture of Blackshirt volunteers, the Army, and ‘forced volunteers’. Leaving aside the pilots and technicians of the summer of 1936, the first Italian combatants arrived in Cadiz and Vigo in September 1936. They were incorporated into the *Tercio de Extranjeros*, or foreigners’ unit. According to Emilio Faldella, these volunteers ‘flooded in with enthusiasm’, with ‘desire for combat’, determined to create ‘the Italian volunteer tradition of victory and glory as soon as possible on Spanish territory’.<sup>13</sup> However, much of the historiography on this subject has dismissed these narrations as insincere, propagandistic or entirely false, opting instead for lines of research based on the compulsory nature of the mobilization, the lack of true fascist sentiment in the CTV or its overall political irrelevance. Indeed, Gabriele Ranzato has noted that there exist very few personal sources which are unaffected by the filters of fascist propaganda, at least in relation to the overall group of Italian combatants in Spain.<sup>14</sup> Crucially, beneath the surface of discussions on the compulsory versus voluntary nature of the Italian presence in Spain lie debates regarding the success or failure of the fascism as an alternative form of social organisation.

---

<sup>13</sup> Emilio Faldella, *Venti mesi di guerra in Spagna (luglio 1936-febbraio 1938)* (Florence, F. Le Mannier, 1939), p. 231. His private files were consulted by Renzo de Felice, *Mussolini il duce. II. Lo Stato totalitario (1936-1940)* (Turin, Einaudi, 1996, or. 1981).

<sup>14</sup> Gabriele Ranzato, “Volontari italiani in Spagna: identità e motivazioni”, Id., Camillo Zadra and Davide Zendri, *“In Spagna per l’idea fascista”: legionari trentini nella guerra civile spagnola 1936-1939* (Rovereto, Museo Storico Italiano della Guerra), p. 12.

Though there were as many motives and real experiences as there were combatants, it is clear that they share certain common elements. Davide Lajolo, a lieutenant in the Mussolini's regular army who had requested a post in Africa, was called up at the same time as a companion in the Italian fascist militia, the *Milizia Volontaria per la Sicurezza Nazionale* or MVSN. Their officers had received a pamphlet inviting them to join up to participate in 'combatting Bolshevism'.<sup>15</sup> Eighteen-year-old Rodolfo de Neri considered the endeavour as something akin to 'the Spanish *Reconquista*'; the priest Leone Pangallo saw it as a fight 'against vile Bolshevism'; Ubaldo Procacci declared he had no wealth, but only his youth to offer.<sup>16</sup> These men's profiles are similar to those of the other early volunteers: the 3,364 men (less than 5% of the total of 78,000) who enlisted in the Foreign Legion in the summer of 1936.<sup>17</sup> Others included adventurers such as nineteen-year-old Giuseppe Cordedda, without strong nationalist feelings, who set out for 'unknown places' in a 'spirit of adventure' and with no interest in politics or even the double pay he would receive. 'I dreamed of new places, so many battles, acts of heroism and glory'.<sup>18</sup> Some left for – and even returned from – a 'tourist's war'.<sup>19</sup> Some enlisted entirely for work-related reasons, thinking they

---

<sup>15</sup> Davide Lajolo, *Il "voltagabbana"* (Milan, Rizzoli, 1981), pp. 41 y ss.

<sup>16</sup> Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores (MAE), Archivo Burgos (AB), legajo 1460, expediente 18 and legajo 1464, expediente 26.

<sup>17</sup> Tracy H. Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight: Political Socialization of Youth in Fascist Italy, 1922-1943* (London, Chapel Hill, 1985), p. 239.

<sup>18</sup> Giuseppe Cordedda, *Guerra di Spagna. 100/17, alza zero* (Sassari, Chiarella, 1996, or. 1983), p. 7. Lajolo, *Il "voltagabbana"*, p. 40.

<sup>19</sup> Nino Isaia and Edgardo Sogno, *Due fronti. La grande polemica sulla guerra di Spagna* (Florence,

would be sent as volunteer workers to Ethiopia or to participate in the reconstruction of Spain.<sup>20</sup> Others even expected to join agricultural projects, though such plans were undone by the Second World War. As Franco himself confirmed in a conversation with Ambassador Viola in May 1939, after they dined together in Leon in honour of the Condor Legion, in ‘Spain in about two years there will be a dearth of reconstruction workers and a need for labourers in agricultural and industrial intensification’. The plan was to make two million farmable hectares of land available to Italian labourers.<sup>21</sup> Subsequently, Lajolo indicated that the Italians should also be compensated for their courage and acceptance of the risk of death. In a private communication between an officer and the Count of Turin, which was intercepted by the secret services, the first asked: ‘and who wants to go and get killed for a nation that is not his own?’<sup>22</sup>

Though economic determinism is a plausible explanation in some cases, it should never be interpreted as the only one.<sup>23</sup> The image of a CTV with no fascist identity which consisted of poor elderly volunteers, young adventurers and ambitious officers simply is not substantiated by primary sources. The role of fascism, in the case (which I do not share) that we identified it exclusively with the Milizia Blackshirts, was

---

Liberal Libri, 1998).

<sup>20</sup> Lajolo, Il “voltagabbana”, p. 43.

<sup>21</sup> Archivio Storico del Ministero di Affari Esteri (ASMAE), Affari Politici (AP), busta 58, unnumbered document, telegram.

<sup>22</sup> Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ACS), Ministero degli Interni (MI), Direzione di Polizia Politica (DPP), Segreteria Personale del Duce (SPD), Carteggio Riservato (CR), foglio 1 and 5.

<sup>23</sup> Dimas Vaquero, *Credere, Obbedire, Combattere. Fascistas italianos en la Guerra Civil española* (Zaragoza, Mira, 2009,) pp. 183-184, following the opinion from Olao Conforti, *Guadalajara, la prima sconfitta del fascismo* (Milan, Mursia, 1967).

far from irrelevant. For the moment, the Milizia was the one who put the bulk of the victims in Guadalajara (417 versus 161 of the Regio Esercito) and Santander, as they were majority in CTV's infantry until the middle of 1937. In other words, while the vociferous hard-core fascists did not constitute the majority in total numbers, they were the largest group at the beginning of the intervention, and during its most important moments: Málaga, Guadalajara, Bermeo and Santander. The number of officers and NCOs was lower in comparison to the Army, but within the total of infantrymen, the proportions are quite similar, and even slightly weighted towards the Blackshirts. Among other things, because the Artillery weapon belonged virtually all to the Army, as happened in auxiliary services too.

For Mario Berti, CTV Commander-in-Chief in 1938, 'the pride of the volunteer combatants was to give themselves fully to the highest ideal of Italian-ness and fascism'; this was 'their great motivation for taking up arms.' Lodoli wrote in 1939 that he had offered his twenty-year-old body to fascism with only one idea: 'sacrifice, mission, crusade'.<sup>24</sup> Several censored letters deposited in archives relate one soldier's enthusiasm regarding this 'twenty-day hell of sublime beauty' in reference to Guadalajara: an experience of death, pain and solitude that he felt should be tasted by 'every youth in the new Italy'.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Renzo Lodoli, *Domani posso morire. Storie di arditi e fanti legionari* (Rome, Ed. Roma Fascista, 1939), p. 79.

<sup>25</sup> ACS, MI, SPD, CR, busta 71, fogli 1-4 and 5-6, unnumbered documents.

Evidently, there was an enormous difference between what was happening in Republican Spain and what was actually known about it, especially in a context of scarce information and inordinate political manipulation in Italy.<sup>26</sup> Many legionnaires based their decisions to go to fight in Spain on distorted, propagandistic information. Indeed, stereotypes and biased news reports regarding anti-clericalism, killings of priests and sacrophobic violence carried immense qualitative weight in motivating the first wave of enlistments. Echoes of religious persecution in revolutionary Spain had helped to magnify what Giulio Castelli described – in 1951's *La Chiesa e il fascismo* (a somewhat risky interpretation written six years after the end of fascism) – as the 'generous, heroic participation of Italian volunteers' in the fight 'against barbarism and atrocities of international atheistic communism in all its Bolshevik extremism and terrorism'. According to Dario Ferri (a pseudonym given by the person who interviewed him, who did not have permission to reveal the individual's real identity), the volunteers went into combat as the 'new legionnaires of Christ'.<sup>27</sup> 'We volunteers', they would say, 'are the true crusaders of the fascist idea that will triumph with our infallible victory over all Spain, imposing on our enemies the human and divine truth it brings with it'. These fascist Italians were on a sacred crusade 'for the homeland and for Christ' against

---

<sup>26</sup> Paolo Murialdi, *La stampa del regime fascista* (Rome and Bari, Laterza, 2008, or. 1986). Paul Corner (ed.), *Il consenso totalitario. Opinione pubblica e opinione popolare sotto fascismo, nazismo e comunismo* (Roma and Bari, Laterza, 2012).

<sup>27</sup> Massimo De Lorenzi, *Teruel-Malaga 1936-1939. Un antifascista svizzero e un fascista italiano nella guerra civile di Spagna: memorie di lotta, sofferenze, passioni* (Varese, Edizioni Arterigere, 2010), p. 123.

atheistic terrorism and Bolshevik barbarism.<sup>28</sup>

Edgardo Sogno's perspectives on the war were later collected in a small volume *Due fronti*, where he recalls his decision in 1938, at the age of 22, to fight for the victory of the 'national' Spain and 'eject the communists from within Europe'.<sup>29</sup> The violent 'revolution' of the war facilitated a clash between 'Bolshevik materialism and Roman Catholic spiritualism',<sup>30</sup> only a poor Italian or a bad fascist would not have followed the 'so, so many Italians who spontaneously go there, where the Ideal [sic] calls them'.<sup>31</sup> The section of *La Grande Proletaria* attributed to Arconovaldo Bonaccorsi ('Count Rossi') is clearly plagiarised from the Spanish falangist Agustín de Foxá, and as such repeats many classic images of Red terror and odious characterisations of the enemy. Nevertheless, its rhetoric provides some enlightening insights into Italian fascist anti-revolutionary perceptions. 'Count Rossi' depicts a Spain of 'azano [sic, referring to Azaña] and *quirosa*' [sic, referring to Casares Quiroga] which has been turned into 'a province of the Socialist Homeland', a 'branch office' of the Soviet Union in Europe. This 'forward base' is full of loveless women with flaccid bellies and rickety, hunchbacked men, alcoholics reeking of blood, people who have never set foot in a

---

<sup>28</sup> Castelli, cit. in Aldo Albonico, 'Accenti critici di parte fascista e cattolica alla cruzada', *Italia y la Guerra Civil española. Simposio en la Escuela de Historia y Arqueología de Roma* (Madrid, CSIC, 1986), pp 1-8.

<sup>29</sup> Isaia and Sogno, *Due fronti*, p. 66. The same motivation, in Domenico Palladino, *Terza offerta. Ricordi della guerra civile di Spagna* (Bari, Palladino Editrice, 1967), also expressed by the father of the 12-year-old Italian fascist in Spain Alberto Angelini, *Altre verghe per il Fascio* (Roma, Il Legionario, 1941), p. 2.

<sup>30</sup> Luigi Incisa, *Spagna nazional-sindacalista* (Bologna, Cappelli, 1941), p. 6.

<sup>31</sup> Angelini, *Altre verghe*, p. 2.

museum and satanic beings with ferocious smiles, driven by diabolical obsession.<sup>32</sup> Mussolini himself wrote in the Proceedings of the Grand Council of Fascism that in Spain for the first time - and perhaps the last - the Blackshirts had faced Bolshevik forces on the international stage in the first confrontation between two revolutions: the reactionary one of the nineteenth-century reactionary, and the twentieth-century fascist one.<sup>33</sup> Later on, another book in honour of the legionnaires described them as 'Volunteers for Civilization, defenders of human and divine law, soldiers of the new Europe' who would be endowed with the 'supreme and eternal principle' of faith, progress, peace, concord, exaltation of life, for honouring women and defending children, for opposing the 'spasmodic hordes', the 'barbarians', the 'unleashed human beasts' and their obsession with death, massacre and savagery.<sup>34</sup>

This narrative would permeate all Italian fascist cultural, literary, scientific and technical fields just as European Red Terror literature had. General Sandro Piazzoni recalled how the national anthem played as the volunteers were shipped off to Spain to face 'sacrifice and death for the triumph of fascism over Bolshevism and of social order over crazed criminal barbarism'.<sup>35</sup> This offensive and defensive anti-communism would protect fascist identity: volunteers would not be shedding their blood under a foreign

---

<sup>32</sup> Arconovaldo Bonaccorsi et. al., *La Grande Proletaria* (Rome, Centro Editoriale Nazionale, 1958), p. 464.

<sup>33</sup> Belforte, *La guerra*, vol. III, p. 9.

<sup>34</sup> *Legionari di Roma in terra iberica* (Milan, Sagdos, 1940), p. XXI.

<sup>35</sup> Sandro Piazzoni, *Le Frece Nere nella guerra di Spagna (1937-39)* (Rome, Edizioni della Rivista Nazione Militare, 1939), p. 13.



flag, but ‘for the salvation of a common civilization’ under the fascist flag, as only the *Duce* understood. ‘Anti-fascists’ included all the enemy forces and fascism was what ‘democratic Bolshevism’ strove to bury. To some, ‘so much Italian blood sacrificed’ for the cause was crucial for Spain but not always considered beneficial for Italy. However, this was not mere generosity and sacrifice. These aristocrats, imbued with warrior courage, would fight to fulfil the ‘political and spiritual objectives of the Italian Nation [sic]’.<sup>36</sup> ‘It was right’, said Italian National Volunteer Commander Eugenio Coselschi in the commemorative volume *Legionari di Roma*, that in ‘Mediterranean Spain one fought and won in the name of Rome’. To defend the Mediterranean was to defend ‘the tradition and unity of the entire European continent’ and to stop ‘Soviet leprosy’, that ‘voracious Empire’ from corroding its shores.<sup>37</sup>

The same metaphors of corruption, dirtiness and darkness appear in many other texts dedicated to exalting the heroism of the legionnaires. These carriers of light, evangelizers of the fascist idea, fought against the Bolshevism that had ‘begun’ the war and the democracies that had supported the Madrid government long before the first fascist support arrived, according to Enrico Martini. For him, faith drove the desire for combat: the noble ideal of maintaining Latin civilization in Spain. Legionnaires were guided ‘by the light of an idea that is the bloodline of fascism, the new crusaders were the Italo-Roman lineage’ and Arian carriers of faith that would renew the world under

---

<sup>36</sup> Luigi Mosca, *Camicie nere a Guadalajara* (Naples, Partenope, 1941), p. 13.

<sup>37</sup> *Legionari*, p. XXIII.

the emblem of the Littorio.<sup>38</sup> This emblem was of central importance to legionnaire Bruno Salvatore, who died as a lieutenant of the First Frece Nere Regiment in December 1938. In January of the previous year, he wrote home from aboard the *Sardegna*, ‘navigating in our sea’ towards Spain, giving thanks for the opportunity to demonstrate through victory that for him Italy was more than a word, as were peace and victory: with peace would come the ‘greatness, liberty, unity of this country and of our people’ and from it would emanate the ‘victory of liberating and civilizing fascism over the barbarianism of Masonry and communism’.<sup>39</sup>

Civilizers against barbarianism, evangelizers against the dark practices, liberators against oppression. ‘They do not like us’, wrote Franco Bonezzi in his diary: ‘the Reds describe us as thieves who have come to Spain to plunder its riches and take its lands’; but ‘*noi ce ne freghiamo*’ (I do not care). One day, everyone would understand why they had come to ‘this land martyred by the Red barbarians’.<sup>40</sup> Renzo Lodoli wrote later that they knew they would be treated as misled or self-promoting mercenaries, legionnaires, adventurers or even conscripts; ‘but they did not see our faces, or perhaps they did not want to’. These were not the faces of the war’s bureaucrats or gas suppliers, but of those who carried the dagger, the most beautiful part of the war. No conflict between faith and obedience clouded these faces, though many

---

<sup>38</sup> Enrico Martini, *Croce e spada contro falce e martello* (Rome, s.r., 1939), pp. 285-6 and 289.

<sup>39</sup> CTV's letters, in Gentile Campa, *Lettere familiari dalla Spagna: di un legionario caduto nella battaglia dell'Ebro* (Florence: Rinascimento del Libro, 1939) and Giacomo Fiori, *Cuore di Legionario: lettere di Giacomo Fiori, caduto in Spagna* (Rome, Vittorio Ferri, 1939).

<sup>40</sup> Alessandro Bonezzi, *Il diario del nonno fascista* (Rome, Robin, 2006), p. 4.

were rewarded for their sacrifice with a shovelful of dirt and a cross of wood.<sup>41</sup> Many volunteers, at least those who wrote and published their memoirs, felt they were heirs to a long ancestral tradition: from the ‘volunteers of the Black Bands of Giovanni and Attendolo Sforza, the victorious sailors of Venice and Genoa, Pisa and Amalfi’, to the soldiers of the ‘Savoy, the Visconti, the Gonzaga, the Scaligeri’, to the men who with Napoleon had ‘reached the heart of Russia victoriously while the Russians had never reached the heart of Italy and never will’.<sup>42</sup>

The redefinition of the past proposed by fascism established the CTV as one more link in the long chain of the Italian tradition of volunteering for just causes, in defence of the nation or of European civilization. The instructions received were to ‘shed your blood unconditionally for the Homeland’, for from this the ‘legionnaires of the DUCE extract righteousness and force’ to achieve the victory that would usher in the New Order.<sup>43</sup> Thus, Italy would join the sacred union of fascism, and the Crusade to defend European civilization against the scum of Europe<sup>44</sup>. Italian fighters, though they were outnumbered ‘four to one’ by enemy volunteers, would take on the enemies of Europe, of fascism and of Spain: a nation with ‘simplistic and fickle’ people who were being subjected to ‘persecution, their most sacred sentiments violated’.<sup>45</sup> Accordingly,

---

<sup>41</sup> Lodoli, Domani, pp. 14-15.

<sup>42</sup> Francesco Odetti, *Trenta mesi nel Tercio* (Rome, M. Carra, 1940), p. 205.

<sup>43</sup> Mosca, Camicie, p. 10.

<sup>44</sup> Guido Pietro Matthey, *Legionario di Spagna* (Turin, Società Editrice Torinese, 1941), p. 48. Lodoli, Domani, p. 70.

<sup>45</sup> Licio Gelli, “*Fuoco*”!... *Cronache legionarie della insurrezione antibolscevica di Spagna* (Pistoia,

the abject, criminal, merciless Reds were ‘humanity’s most despicable people’, renegades of ‘the most sacred, the Homeland’, sold out to ‘the foreigner’, ‘mercenaries of the Soviet, of Masonry and other putrid dark international organizations’. Vittorio Ceccherelli explained to his girlfriend that when such cowards ‘outnumber us ten to six, they all throw themselves’ into combat; yet when they were outnumbered five to one by the Italians, ‘just one of our men can fight alone and bravely with no help from anyone’.<sup>46</sup> Cowards like these had no honour, and the legionnaires would ‘cleanse Spain of this putrefaction’, ‘exterminate’ the delinquents, the deserters, the ‘assassins of the Homeland and Civilization’.<sup>47</sup> This was a matter of faith and right was on their side. As the Frece Nere hymn declared: ‘the first enemy out front / we will crush his head mercilessly’.

Twenty years earlier this religious, fascist faith had led Francesco Odetti to fight in Tripoli, then in the bloody trenches of Carso, in Fiume, in the March on Rome, in Ethiopia and finally in ‘this extreme fringe of European land to fulfil my duty as an Italian and a fascist’.<sup>48</sup> For Lodoli, it was also what made it possible for a legionnaire to live for months ‘only for the crusade. Someone called him crazy and accused him of being an adventurer. *Se ne fregò* (he did not care)’.<sup>49</sup> Dario Ferri, a proud fascist - albeit

---

s.r., 1940), pp. 13 and 32.

<sup>46</sup> Enrico Santoni, *Ali di giovinezza, ali di Vittoria: Come visse e morì Vittorio Ceccherelli, medaglia d'oro. Con prefazione di Giuseppe Valle* (Florence, Vallecchi, 1939).

<sup>47</sup> *El Legionario*, 6, 17 april 1937.

<sup>48</sup> Odetti, *Trenta mesi*, pp. 19-20.

<sup>49</sup> Lodoli, *Domani*, p. 152.

one who he hid behind a pseudonym - , saw all the legionnaires as ‘inspired by a single faith’, which many like him carried from Africa and Spain to the Eastern Front in 1941 and to the Republic of Saló.<sup>50</sup> Such was the faith of Davide Lajolo, who felt there was a crucifix between his fingers, the nails of a Christ who suffered to save the world. He saw the Italians who had fallen in the battle of Guadalajara as part of the same sacrifice.<sup>51</sup> This faith, according to Luigi Mosca, fed a victory that began in Spain and lifted its wings to cross the Apennine Mountains, flying over the Mediterranean, soaring over the imperial causeways to the ocean: The *Duce* had ‘conceived the New Europe long ago and the war in Spain marks the beginning of this unavoidable reality’ - a reality that would lead to the reconstruction of a Europe based on justice and equality among peoples.<sup>52</sup>

This ardent faith in the *Duce*, and the strong emphasis placed on Mussolini’s religious dimensions, echoed most resoundingly in imperial reification and *fascist war*, in the sense that being fascist elevated all individuals to the level of supreme communion with ‘the hero’. Such was the faith of the fascist volunteer, who embodied the ancient legions of Caesar. On Armed Forces Day in May 1939, the pamphlet *Volontari dell’Esercito nella guerra di Spagna* was published with a cover picture – recognizable throughout the Christian world – of Saint George killing the dragon. It

---

<sup>50</sup> De Lorenzi, Teruel-Malaga, p. 159.

<sup>51</sup> Davide Lajolo, *Bocche di donne e di fucili* (Osimo, Barulli, 1939), pp. 49-50.

<sup>52</sup> Mosca, *Camicie*, p. 16.

exalted the 'heroic tradition of volunteers, a magnificently recurrent flame in our political and military history' that burned 'in all the battlefields of Europe and beyond, anywhere that people fought for the victory of a great idea'. The flame of this tradition had now been reignited on Spanish soil, where 'the old and the very young, citizens of all categories, castes and conditions' united by a single creed, (reportedly) responded with one voice.

There is no shortage of testimonies which describe CTV combat experiences. These accounts, written by journalists, observers and field nurses or doctors, are filled with stark – and strongly propagandistic – tales of courage and bravery. Alfonso Pellicciari, a legionnaire who became disabled during the war, described how there was such disregard for danger, such decisiveness and speed, that a large percentage of casualties involved injuries to the lower limbs. Due to their legendary fearlessness, enemy combatants assumed that the CTV soldiers were wearing armour and tried to shoot them in the legs by aiming just above the ground.<sup>53</sup> Annibale Bergonzoli wrote that the modest heroes of the Littorio Division went smiling into combat and fell smiling into the arms of death, as though in a lover's embrace, proud of the victories achieved.<sup>54</sup> In his own words, glory never came without sacrifice and martyrdom. The general himself – who was nicknamed 'electric beard' – could always be found at the

---

<sup>53</sup> Alfonso Pellicciari, *Arriba España* (Turin, Studio Editoriale Torinese, 1938), p. 65.

<sup>54</sup> In his foreword to Lajolo, *Bocche*, pp. XI-XII.

forefront of the battle - between danger and glory - where he was eventually injured.<sup>55</sup> In his exalted narratives, Lodoli represents the reckless abandon of the legionnaires more clearly than any other writer. He sustains that the legionaries considered trench warfare, defensive waiting and the war of positions as antithetical to their collective character. Indeed, they hated such forms of combat and saw them as a trap which would undermine their spirits. CTV fighters imagined themselves as 'battering rams' designed for assault tactics. They considered muskets, machine guns and mortars as minor weapons: the real weapon was the bomb.<sup>56</sup>

These memoirs paint sugar-coated or biased pictures of the wartime reality: fear, cowardice, lice, nits, vermin, cruelty towards living enemies or viciousness towards their corpses are never present. Aldo Santamaria constructed his account of the geography of the war by presenting the testimonies of brave CTV members who believed that they belonged to the only army capable of annihilating the bloody bandit enemy. Testimonies tell of the heroic Second Lieutenant Federico Padovani, who fell fighting against the Basque battalions in the north - 'ferocious Reds' who sought to force the Italians into retreat. The testimonies also describe the experiences of tank soldier Renato Zanardo, who launched himself against the enemy in the midst of an 'indescribable hurricane of fire' in order to keep the Reds from blowing up a bridge. Zanardo then refused to be sent to the infirmary to have his hand amputated until the

---

<sup>55</sup> Lodoli, Domani, p. 107.

<sup>56</sup> Op. cit., p. 90.

enemy had retreated. The testimonies overflow with patriotic obedience, national grandeur and modest heroism such as that of Private Mario Donda, who when praised responded that he had only done his duty. Legionnaire Ferrara Guisepe Lorenzi wrote to his mother that she should be proud to be ‘an Italian mamma, just as I am proud to be here among so many young people, fighting for a just and holy cause’. He wrote to his ex-combatant father that now it was the son’s turn to represent ‘our great and beautiful Mother Italy’. These would be the last words he wrote before his death.<sup>57</sup>

Heroism, fearlessness, *arditismo* (Italian temerity). Dario Ferri (a pseudonym) described the enormous amount of nerve that was required to implement a combat tactic unique to Italian assault battalions: first they threw grenades from positions close to the target and then immediately fought body to body with pistols or knives against shell-shocked enemies.<sup>58</sup> According to their General-in-Chief, the Frece Nere motto *per vincere aggredire* (‘Victory by Assault’) expressed ‘our tactical doctrine, derived from our fascist spirit, forged in the strong foundations of the national war and the radiant days of the March on Rome and our rebirth’.<sup>59</sup> This fascist conception of war was born of bravery, invincibility, faith and exalted patriotism. According to Lodoli, there was no fear, only pride - as well as a strange sense of happiness - , amongst fighters ‘drunk on every passing moment, happy to suffer’.<sup>60</sup> Major Luigi Mosca lost a leg to a bomb in

---

<sup>57</sup> Aldo Santamaria, *Operazione Spagna, 1936-1939* (Rome, G. Volpe, 1965), pp. 79, 85 y 97.

<sup>58</sup> De Lorenzi, Teruel-Malaga, p. 131.

<sup>59</sup> Piazzoni, Le Frece, p. 189.

<sup>60</sup> Lodoli, Domani, p. 23.



Trijueque; after requesting amputation without anaesthetic so he would feel the saw in his body, he only lamented the torment of ‘having had to abandon the battlefield’.<sup>61</sup>

Alma Giola, a volunteer Red Cross nurse, corroborated this temerity. Letters to relatives from soldiers in the *Gradisca* and *Aquileia* hospital ships were obviously rewritten and quite possibly modified (or even invented) in order to give the legionnaires a ‘heroic, glorious story’. Twenty-two-year-old fascist Eugenio Pacitto was proud finally to become a ‘true legionnaire’ by having shed his blood for Nationalist Spain. Bloody shrapnel became a ‘universal relic of pure Italian blood’ which was prized above ‘any gold’. When Lieutenant Cassandra of Rome was injured by an explosive bullet in a clash with greater numbers of Reds, he exclaimed upon the amputation of his right arm that ‘I still have the left to carry on with’. At twenty-five, Ugo Diappi from Milan – who had volunteered in Africa before Spain – was injured in both legs. He was more wounded in spirit than in the flesh, as he lamented having to interrupt his fight against the ‘Bolshevik criminal hordes’ and counted the days until his return to the front where ‘one fights, one suffers, one falls in the name of God, but always victorious’. Sicilian Giovanni Pizzurro actually escaped from hospital so he could return to battle. Another Sicilian, Salvatore Ciluppo, was considered ‘a perfect fascist full of enthusiasm in the fight against brutal communism’. His compatriot Seleni, a gunner from Ragusa, lost both legs in an ‘action of superhuman heroism’ but felt the pain of not being able to

---

<sup>61</sup> Mosca, *Camicie*, p. 92.

‘return to the front to avenge my fallen comrades’ more acutely than that of mutilation.<sup>62</sup> One report sent to Mussolini described a legionnaire with a fatal injury, whose feet had also frozen and whose final request was for pencil and paper to write: ‘long live the *Duce*’.<sup>63</sup>

Clearly, descriptions of CTV combat experiences in war and post-war publications rather brazenly sought to bury, under tonnes of faith and blood, the March 1937 fiasco of Guadalajara and the nickname of ‘cowards’ conferred on the CTV by enemies and allies alike. Wartime jokes gave the CTV initials new meanings, such as ‘*Cuando Te Vas*’ (when you leave) or ‘*Corren Tutto Veloce*’ (retreating at full speed). Witty verses were also crafted in their honour: ‘Guadalajara is not Abyssinia / here the Red bombs actually explode’, or ‘Fewer trucks and more balls / shameless Bergonzoli / General of many defeats / to take Trijueque / with the tykes you bring / you need more than firing squads / you have to come with balls’.<sup>64</sup> Captain Federico Garofoli observed that tension between the Rebels and the Italians had been mounting since the victory at Malaga, which the latter group had described – in exaggerated terms – as something the Spanish troops would never have achieved without them. In reality – and judging by the warnings regarding insufficient training that the CTV General Staff had been issuing

---

<sup>62</sup> Alma Giola, *Voci di legionari feriti. Documento storico della crociata fascista in terra di Spagna* (Como, Cavalleri, 1941).

<sup>63</sup> Mimmo Franzinelli, *Stellette, croce e fascio littorio: L’assistenza religiosa a militari, balilla e camicie nere, 1919-1939* (Milan, Franco Angeli, 1995), p. 263.

<sup>64</sup> Vaquero, *Crede*, p. 124.

since January 1937<sup>65</sup> – the victory in Analucía had been little more than a treacherous mirage, a dream which had been shattered abruptly by the nightmare of Guadalajara.

*A good lesson for the future. Violence and transformation*

Almost all war narratives are built on antagonisms of good/bad, clean/dirty, light/darkness. The Italian narrative of the Spanish Civil War was no exception. However, while most of the first-person memoirs penned by legionnaires during or just after the war are clearly idealised or exaggerated propagandistic constructs, this does not mean that they are devoid of interpretative value or that they are uninteresting to historians. Books in this category were mainly written by committed volunteer fascists such as Lodoli and Lajolo, who found the reality of Spain that they had liberated to be somewhat frustrating, and who viewed the Italy they had returned to as bourgeois, grey, conformist and lacking in military fascist voluntarism. They may have exaggerated their numbers and relative importance, or interpreted events in excessive, laudatory and self-justifying ways that placed the brave and daring ‘we’ – the valiant fascists – in sharp contrast with a disgusting ‘they’<sup>66</sup> – the cowardly scum. However, military documentation suggests that this ‘they’ also extended to Spaniards in general, even to their comrades in arms: those poor, backward, proud, naïve *hidalgos*.

---

<sup>65</sup> ASMAE, Gabinetto (GAB), busta 472, unnumbered report, pp. 1-6.

<sup>66</sup> Lodoli, Domani, p. 38.

The first report written by Roberto Farinacci during his 1937 political mission was revealing in this regard. In spite of his doubts regarding the military rebellion's fascist qualities, it was clear to him from the beginning that the coup was profoundly brutal and that the political cleansing taking place on the home front was shaping the New Spain. 'Let us not be deceived' about 'the efficiency of our political work': blood was being shed in the midst of 'widespread indifference', and everyone spoke of 'firing squads 'in the same way they talked about the cinema'. Spaniards could agree on nothing but to 'massacre each other daily'. Farinacci thus inaugurated a written propensity toward moral superiority, Italian supremacy and disgust or disdain for Spaniards that would colour most fascist agent and informer reports on Spain. The population had seemingly become accustomed to the sanguinary climate; no one was in a hurry to 'end this carnage'. Indeed, many 'wear mourning clothes' but 'speak with indifference of how their brother, son, or husband has been shot'. Farinacci indicated to his friend Mussolini that mass shootings were problematic for the Italians, who had come neither to quench Spanish bloodlust nor assist in vengeance, but to defend fascism from communist attack. The race to exterminate in equal numbers made barbarism almost a sport, but the Spaniards only wanted the comfort of 'food, siestas and leisure'. The cafés were always full, you couldn't get a seat in the bullfights, no one grasped how the fate of Mediterranean civilization – which safeguarded the 'ancient history of Spain'

– was at stake in this combat.<sup>67</sup>

The CTV had no power or authority regarding violent practices in the field, judicial investigation, or the treatment of prisoners and civilians in newly occupied areas or quartering sites. Many CTV members noted that the references to the integration of the defeated into the community which characterised the statements of the military and political authorities ran contrary to the policies of cleansing and repression being implemented by the ‘nationals’. This situation is referred to in numerous reports. Ettore Muti lamented in 1936 how in Badajoz and Mérida, where the Italian Savoia-Marchetti 81 airplanes had been very prominent, all prisoners were shot ‘in reprisal for their valiant and exhausting defence’. He stated that ‘our beautiful fascism is something entirely different’.<sup>68</sup> Sandro Sandri, on an inspection tour from San Sebastián to Cádiz and Toledo in October 1936, wrote to Ciano that he had spoken to many prisoners before they were executed ‘as is the norm’. These included female militia members, ‘poor creatures (...) who had lost all sense of femininity and who died bravely saluting the firing squad with their closed fists lifted high’. Sandri conceded that testimonies of the ‘Red terror’ – of the communists hanging captured Civil Guards by the testicles, inserting explosives into men’s anuses to blow them sky high, raping women and butchering children in towns as they retreated – were appalling. However, he also noted

---

<sup>67</sup> ASMAE, Ufficio Spagna (US), busta 2. ACS, SPD, CR, busta 44 and Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito (USSME), fascicolo 18, busta 2. In ASMAE, US, busta 1, Farinacci's reports to the Fascist Gran Consiglio and notes about his meetings with Spanish relevant politicians.

<sup>68</sup> ASMAE, GAB, foglio 792.

that they were somewhat incongruous, given that retreating forces have little time for such excesses. Furthermore, he observed that the ‘Whites’ demonstrated a similar lack of scruples. Upon entering a village, they began ‘cleansing’, not by torturing, but simply by killing. ‘From the *Generalísimo* to the last soldier, all are willing to exterminate mercilessly’. Bodies were doused with gasoline and burned like animal carcasses, with no respect or concern for people’s names. ‘By the time the insurrection ends, one can assume that between 800,000 and 1,000,000 people will have disappeared’. In Seville, fifty people were being executed each sunrise, and the city’s 15,000 left-wing party members were expected to meet this fate. In Asturias, an additional 30,000 miners would be needed to replace those executed.<sup>69</sup>

In Malaga, in the North and in Alicante, the reports composed by Italians in Spain spoke of horrible actions and mass executions. However, in the interest of clarity it should be noted that, according to the existing documentation, Italian disgust with these practices was not indicative of benevolence or humanitarian feeling toward the victims. Indeed, Gaetani, Cantalupo’s envoy to Malaga, saw the violence as something which was completely necessary, even if it was proving excessive in the Spanish case. Instead, the Italian attitude stemmed from a concern that the ‘nationals’ were making tactical and political errors - seen as a product of the Spanish character – which would create serious problems for future reconstruction. As the *Duce* would have been able to

---

<sup>69</sup> ASMAE, GAB, busta 472, unnumbered report, p. 3 .

read in a 1937 report, in contrast to his own good heart, ‘the sanguinary nature of Spaniards is most violently manifest in this war (...) torturing prisoners, the execution machine operates incessantly’.<sup>70</sup> However, Italian disregard for Rebel violence seems rather paradoxical if we consider that Italian soldiers continually praised the proactive beauty and creativity of war: the broadest possible sphere of violence, cleansing and purification. For them, destruction was a prerequisite for reconstruction and coexistence, with violence a necessary condition for integration into a fascist national community. Italian surprise, disapproval or rejection regarding Rebel violence must therefore be understood in a nuanced way. Firstly, such expressions were usually purely personal or exceptional and did not reflect the political, military or legal position of the fascist state and its representatives. Secondly, the Italians – officially or individually – were not opposed to violence as such, only to excess. It was essentially a question of scale: they did not reject the nature of violence but its extent.

Thus, they rejected Queipo de Llano’s declarations to an Italian legation in November 1937: that after the war Spaniards would not convert, and so ‘we must free ourselves of this people. We must continue executing or create great concentration camps in the Canary Islands or in Fernando Po [sic]’.<sup>71</sup> There was also concern that Falangists were participating in executions despite being officially prohibited from doing so. These actions were dismissed by Falangist Tito Meléndez before Danzi, the

---

<sup>70</sup> ASMAE, US, busta 10, unnumbered report, p. 10.

<sup>71</sup> ACS, Ministero di Cultura Popolare, GAB, busta 75, unnumbered report, p. 3.

head of propaganda of the Italian Military Mission in Spain, as ‘completely personal reactions’.<sup>72</sup> Alarm over the indiscriminate execution of prisoners after the conquests of Malaga and Santoña led to a request that prisoners not be handed over to Spanish soldiers.<sup>73</sup> All this, along with the initial complaints regarding the 1936 bloodbath, sought to deflect Italian implication in these crimes or dissuade the ‘Red masses’ from turning against the occupying forces. There was no rejection of violence, only doubts regarding its indiscriminate use. This applied to the pilots, the ‘*volontari della morte*’ (volunteers of death), who arrived in July 1936 to cleanse Spain and had – like Vittorino Ceccherelli – ‘the honour of being the first to enter’ combat. Ciano certainly did not reject violence, fascinated as he was by the bombing of civilian populations. Neither did the military administrators of Workers Battalion 155 that was created in Miranda de Ebro with 400 Republican prisoners serving the CTV. The camp authorities - as the director of the San Juan de Mozarrifar concentration camp complained - imposed punishments which contravened the code of military justice, such as tying prisoners by their hands and feet to trees or lampposts ‘for several days’. Frece Nere officials from Dario Ferri’s unit summarily executed four Civil Guards who had shot at them from the Girona castle as they occupied the city.<sup>74</sup>

Attanasio claimed that the Italians never committed murder and always treated

---

<sup>72</sup> ASMAE, US, busta 10, unnumbered report.

<sup>73</sup> USSME, fascicolo 18, busta 4, unnumbered report, p. 3.

<sup>74</sup> De Lorenzi, Teruel, p. 133.



prisoners of war humanely according to international conventions; they stayed out of political matters and were always regarded as ‘clever and brave little Italians’.<sup>75</sup> The reality, however, was infinitely more complex. CTV reports by the same author recognized onsite executions of unarmed prisoners in Malaga, and even in Guadalajara. There, however, they could not hide behind the presence of Spanish troops, as the reports emphasized that the Italians had been left on their own. The Italians had little control over Rebel violence (rearguard cleansing was not their mission) and feared it would have the effect of making resistance stronger and more desperate. However, direct archival and memoir sources point toward the disturbingly reality that the CTV was another muscle in the long arm of the Rebels in their war on ‘the anti-Spain’. Their clear involvement in the aerial bombing of civilian populations, *by direct order from Rome*, serves as the best confirmation of this, as we shall now see.

The question of aerial bombing is crucial to understanding Italian participation in the Spanish Civil War and the notable differences in criteria and warfare between Spaniards and their fascist allies. The bombing of towns, cities and civilian populations, along with submarine warfare in the Mediterranean (eleven ships were sunk and four were captured in August and September 1937 alone) influenced the direction of Italian international policy. Aerial bombing was not halted after the end of the war in the North. In late September 1937, the Italians had 376 airplanes in Spain, compared to 42 Spanish

---

<sup>75</sup> Sandro Attanasio, *Gli italiani e la guerra di Spagna* (Milan, Mursia, 1974), p. 257.

planes. By that time, they had sent 5,580 tonnes of bombs; including over 94,000 incendiary bombs, 47,000 50kg bombs and 260,000 fragmentation bombs ('spezzoni').<sup>76</sup> Italian proximity to the base in the Balearic Islands, and also to Italy itself (from where numerous attacks on Barcelona were launched) allowed the Italians to participate with even greater intensity in Francoist territorial advances in Aragon and Catalonia. Italian forces bombed Lleida on 2 November 1937 (wounding many civilians, including schoolchildren), Barbastro on 4 November and other parts of Aragon such as Bujaraloz, Caspe and Alcañiz, ending an intense year of aerial destruction. However, this destruction was but a prelude to the campaign of 1938, the year in which the *Aviazione* would carry out its highest number of attacks. These bombing raids, which increasingly targeted non-combatants, formed part of a mission to 'terrorize the Red rearguard and especially urban centres.'

Almost all the larger cities along the Catalan and Valencian coast were bombed regularly during these months by both the Italian forces and the German Condor legion. These included Tarragona and Reus (more than fifteen times), Gavá, Badalona and Mataró. From its Logroño base, the *Aviazione* devoted itself fully to supporting the territorial occupation of Aragon (Alcañiz, Sariñena, Fraga, Monzón) and inland areas of

---

<sup>76</sup> ASMAE, Ufficio di Collegamento, busta 46, unnumbered report, document p. 85. The *Aviazione* was also involved in reconnaissance flights and military intelligence: Diego Navarro and Guillermo Vicente, 'Photographic air reconnaissance during the Spanish Civil War, 1936–1939: doctrine and operations', *War in History*, 20/3 (2013), pp. 345-380.

Catalonia. However, few aerial raids had such lasting repercussions as those carried out on the Republican capital of Barcelona. The bombardment which took place on New Year's Day was ordered by Mussolini and carried out by General Valle, though Ciano had not been notified beforehand. General Valle wrote that this aerial terror campaign had two objectives: to demonstrate clearly that Italian planes could carry a tonne of bombs for over a thousand kilometres and to 'give the Reds in Barcelona a New Year's welcome that will cause them to meditate on the Teruel defeat.' In complete radio silence and with 850 kilograms of bombs loaded into his S.79, bombs were dropped from 3,000 metres (and from 5,000 meters when reflectors were lit), catching the defenders by surprise: the gunners must have been out 'celebrating New Year's Eve'. As an epilogue to this macabre report, General Valle thanked the *Duce* for the 'high honour' of having been chosen for this mission and having demonstrated 'with legitimate pride' that in the nineteen years that had passed since his last bombing raid, his physical prowess and military experience had remained, as always, in the hands of Italian fascist fortune<sup>77</sup>.

This terror campaign on Barcelona reached its greatest intensity with the attacks of 30 January and especially 16-18 March. Italian planes bombed the port and city centre for up to eight days in January, destroying aerial defence shelters such as the San

---

<sup>77</sup> Obviously, all this has very little to do with the widespread (and strongly rebutted) vision by Italian historiography, of the *italiani brava gente*. See David Bildussa, 'Il mito del bravo italiano', in Luigi Borgomaneri ed., *Crimini di guerra. Il mito del bravo italiano tra repressione del ribellismo e guerra ai civili nei territori occupati* (Milan, Guerini e Associati, 2006), pp. 113-132, or Angelo del Boca, *Italiani brava gente?* (Milan, Neri Pozza, 2005).

Felipe Neri church. Ciano confessed in his diaries that the report which described the 30 January bombing raid was the most horrifying one that he had ever read, despite the fact that the attack had been conducted by only nine S.79 planes and had lasted only one and a half minutes: ‘pulverized buildings, interrupted traffic, panic that turned into madness, with 500 dead and 1,500 injured. A good lesson for the future’, as it revealed the ineffectiveness of anti-aircraft defences and shelters. Thus, ‘the only means of salvation against aerial attacks is to abandon the cities’. On 16 March, Mussolini directly ordered the *Aviazione* to ‘initiate from this evening’ a ‘violent action on Barcelona’ in the form of ‘rhythmic hammering’ with thirteen flights organized in such a way that the city centre would experience the bombs and sirens from beginning to end.<sup>78</sup> This supplies empirical evidence of the degree of autonomy that the *Aviazione Legionaria* exercised with respect to Francoist command. Scholars consider the Italian bombing of Barcelona to be a series of deliberate attacks on civilian populations on the home front. In 1938, there were also attacks on munitions and weapons factories, ports, airports and petrol deposits, all of which were located outside the city centre.

The *Aviazione Legionaria* chain of command did not even go through the CTV command, but depended directly on the government in Rome. The bombings of Barcelona, Alcañiz, Granollers, Alicante, and later Sitges or Torrevieja were indiscriminate attacks on military and civilian targets; their random nature was intended

---

<sup>78</sup> USSME, fascicolo 18, busta 9, unnumbered document.

to terrorize non-combatants and decrease resistance. This conclusion has been corroborated by others. The Republican government created an independent commission in Toulouse to investigate six bombing raids on Alicante, aerial attacks on Barcelona in August 1938 and on the Levantine coast in 1939. Retired Captain R. Smyth-Piggott of the Royal Air Force and Commander F.B. Lejeune analysed the distances between explosions and their potential objectives, such as ports and railway stations, noting the absence of large military factories or weapons deposits in these locations<sup>79</sup>. They concluded that the bombings were deliberate attacks on civilian areas.

The attacks also prepared the ground for subsequent land occupations by the CTV. While I have not found any explicit order to this effect, it seems a valid conclusion if one considers which places were bombed most severely. It is no coincidence that the actions of the *Aviazione Legionaria* focused on the places where the Frece Nere acted in 1938: locations between the Maestrazgo and the Mediterranean Sea. The Italo-Spanish occupation of Tortosa on April 19, which divided Republican territory, was facilitated by an intense bombardment that broke bridges and the defensive lines of the Republican Army. The *Aviazione* was following orders from Rome, in support of the conquering troops, with the aim of avoiding a repetition of the disaster of Guadalajara. In conclusion, we have no archival or memoir sources to identify Italian combatants as in their entirety neither as mercenaries, nor as idealistic

---

<sup>79</sup> MAE, legajo 833, expediente 28, report, pp. 1-10.

Fascists, nor as unemployed *straccioni* looking for a paycheck. They were not sexual predators, but neither were they beatific, Christian soldiers concerned with the wellbeing of women and children. However, if we move beyond these platitudes, direct archival sources point in the most unsettling and disturbing direction: the identification of the CTV - and above all the *Aviazione Legionaria* - in land operations, as a key muscle of Franco's executioner's arm against the anti-Spain.

### ***Conclusion***

The CTV's history in Spain began with military and diplomatic support for the Rebels and evolved to transform the force into another belligerent power in a foreign land. The Italians were crucial to the success of the Rebel army in occupying Malaga, Bermeo and Santander, in breaking through and stabilizing the Aragon front, in the occupation of Barcelona and Girona and in concluding the Levantine campaign. They participated with similar success in terror campaigns in the Republican home front, in bombing raids on Valencia, Alicante and Barcelona. They were also responsible for conspicuous failures such as Guadalajara, which has become symbolic of the memory associated with the CTV and Italian fascism. It would be absurd to reduce the diverse and complex factors that precipitated their defeat to a simplistic explanation of the cowardly and confused behaviour of Italian fascists. Though few armies have experienced such a

campaign of humiliation, mockery and sarcasm as the Italians in Spain, the *Guadalajara syndrome* cannot easily be extended to all Italian participation in the Civil War.

To overcome that syndrome, they carried an image of bravery, daring and violence to the extreme and were essential to the Rebel victory. The Italians sent troops and supplies during the coup phase; fascist armed forces participated outright in the territorial conquests of a total war; they bombed military and civilian objectives and waged a naval offensive that influenced the outcome of the Civil War, from both the Spanish and Italian perspectives. The wartime experience opened a new chapter in the use of diplomacy and propaganda for the fascistization of Europe and its intensification through total war. The war in Spain best defined Italian fascist ambitions with regard to Europe, the Mediterranean, Spain and foreign policy with surrounding countries, at least prior to the Second World War. It also definitively framed the inseparable relationship between fascism and war, between expansion, penetration and violence, between combat and belief. Bombings and the intensive use of the aerial warfare connected with the fascist idea of war, but if there was a fascistization experience above any other, it was the experience of total war. The Civil War was the context for fascistization in Spain, and Mussolini's political, military, social and cultural impulse was of fundamental importance, despite having being neglected by historians<sup>80</sup>. However, more

---

<sup>80</sup>On fascistization, Italy and Spain, see Heiberg, *Emperadores*, pp. 149-169. Ismael Saz, 'El fascismo y la

than the *Duce*, it was the combatants – their motivation, their faith in fascism or lack thereof, their combat experiences in the rearguard and their violence – who helped make the Spanish Civil War the epitome of what we understand as a fascist war. What Nuto Revelli referred to as the ‘Littorio generation’ by nature took symbols, slogans and national mythology seriously, and defended them to the death.<sup>81</sup>

---

Guerra Civil española”, in *Las caras del franquismo* (Granada, Comares, 2013) and above all, Ferran Gallego. *El evangelio fascista. La formación de la cultura política del franquismo (1930-1950)* (Barcelona, Crítica, 2014).

<sup>81</sup> Nuto Revelli, *La strada del davai* (Turin, Einaudi, 2010 , or. 1966).