

The Spanish Civil War through Italian military censorship

La Guerra Civil Española a través de la censura militar

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Abstract: The Spanish Civil War was the most ideologically charged war that Italians fought in the decade of 1935-1945. This paper focuses on the censorship of the volunteers' correspondence coordinated by the Army. It aims to give some insight into the war experience of the Italian military, with particular regard to the archetypes and stereotypes used by soldiers and officers to transmit these experience to their friends and families in Italy. Censored letters may suggest the degree to which the fascist discourse of legitimisation was internalised by the volunteers, and whether it entered in conflict with the Army's own ways of legitimising an ideological intervention in a foreign civil war.

The main source of this paper is the reduced amount of transcribed letters preserved in a censorship folder held by the Italian Army's *Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito*. Censors either entirely transcribed representative letters or wrote summarised reports containing short and stereotyped judgements about the troops morale and fighting spirit. This source is thus very different from that of other cases of military censorship carried out during the Spanish Civil War, as well as from the censorship later organised by Italian authorities during the Second World War.

This article aims to offer further insight into the rare ego-writings written during the Spanish Civil War, analysing Italians' letters written in the Italian "decade of war" of 1935-1945 and thus coordinating these two intermingling frameworks. In this way, the similarities between military mentality and fascist (para-military) ideology, as well as their irreducible differences, will be highlighted. These differences shaped the way in which Italian political and military institutions dialogued and were reciprocally influenced by their respective cultures and agendas, whereas the politicisation of the Italian Royal Army was carried out thanks to the political war fought in Spain. Even if the Italian Army was not strictly fascist, it was responsible for fighting fascism's wars, in that it enforced fascism's as well as its own policies. Therefore, this article will argue that, as in other politicised armies, the borders separating fascist ideology and

military mentality were progressively blurred, and ultimately overshadowed by Mussolini's charisma.

Keywords: Italian Army, Spanish Civil War, Censorship, Fascism, War Experience.

Resumen: La Guerra Civil Española fue la guerra más ideologizada de todas en las que combatieron los italianos durante la década de 1935-1945. Este artículo se centra en la censura militar de la correspondencia de los voluntarios, con el objetivo de arrojar algo de luz a la experiencia bélica de los militares italianos, con particular interés en los arquetipos y estereotipos que soldados y oficiales usaron para transmitir dicha experiencia a sus familias y en Italia. Las cartas censuradas pueden sugerir el grado en el que el discurso fascista de legitimación fue interiorizado por los combatientes, y si entraba en conflicto con las propias vías castrenses de justificar la intervención, ideológica, en una guerra civil extranjera.

La principal fuente utilizada es el reducido número de cartas transcritas preservadas en un archivo de censura por el *Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito* del ejército italiano. Los censores o bien transcribieron las misivas relevantes o elaboraron informes resumidos que contenían juicios cortos y estereotipados sobre la moral de las tropas y su espíritu combativo. Esa fuente, por ende, es netamente diferente de otros casos de censura militar durante la Guerra Civil, así como de la posterior censura organizada durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial por las autoridades italianas.

El artículo busca profundizar en estos ego-documentos escritos durante la contienda, analizando las cartas que los italianos escribieron durante la “década de la guerra” italiana de 1935-1945, coordinando así estos dos marcos. En este sentido, se subrayarán las similitudes entre la mentalidad military y la ideología (paramilitary) fascista, así como sus diferencias irreconciliables. Estas diferencias modelaron el modo en que se estableció el diálogo entre la política italiana y las instituciones militares, estando recíprocamente influidas por sus respectivas culturas y agendas, al tiempo que la politización del Ejército Real Italiano fue llevada a cabo gracias a la guerra librada en España. Incluso si el ejército italiano no puede considerarse como estrictamente fascista, fue responsable de librar las guerras del fascismo, reforzando el propio fascismo y sus políticas. Por ende, el artículo sostendrá que, como en el caso de otros ejércitos politizados, las fronteras que separaban la ideología fascista y la mentalidad military fueron progresivamente desapareciendo, siendo en último término eclipsadas por el carisma de Mussolini.

Palabras clave: ejército italiano, Guerra Civil Española, censura, fascismo, experiencia bélica.

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On to fascism's war

War had a central role in defining fascism, its objectives, and the way in which Italians were to be educated in order for Italy to grasp the rank it should have conquered among the most powerful Western nations. The process of fascistisation of Italian society accelerated in the 1930s, when the global geopolitical scenario changed. Hitler's rise to German Chancellery and Presidency, Japan's attack against China and the consequent agglutination of fascist powers in the Anti-Comintern Pact led to the creation of the Axis. In this time frame, Italy was involved in what Mussolini defined a «first period» (“primo tempo”) of local wars, while Italy and Italians were to get ready for the «third period» (“terzo tempo”) in which all-out war would have destroyed the geopolitical equilibrium emerged at the Versailles peace conference of 1919.¹ In 1935 Italy began a decade of war in which the qualitative differences between each campaign can not deny their ultimate goal of creating a new Mediterranean Order parallel to the Nazi New Order of Europe.

The Spanish Civil War was fought in this political frame, but despite the huge geopolitical potential that a Francoist Spain would have had in the Mediterranean strategic equilibrium,² Italians fought a limited war, while both the Republic and the Rebels were fighting a civil war in which revolution and terror intermingled, with dire effects for the population living in the respective zones.³

Italy fought its wars according to the tenets of Fascist Warfare, with the ultimate goal of constructing a «fascist empire».⁴ Fascist warfare has been defined as a kind of warfare based on *guerra integrale* theories: a war fought to assert the racial superiority of the Italian forces by inflicting the maximum possible damage to the enemy, regardless of international laws.⁵ The Second Italo-Ethiopian war was the first major military test passed by Fascist Italy. Italy conquered Ethiopia and affirmed its renewed martial prowess just a few months before the

¹ Benito MUSSOLINI: *Opera Omnia*, vol. 29, Milan, La Fenice, 1972, p. 164, Mussolini spoke at a gathering in Verona the 26th of September 1938.

² John F. COVERDALE: *I fascisti italiani alla guerra di Spagna*, Rome, Laterza, 1975, pp. 145-147.

³ Stanley G. PAYNE: *The Spanish Civil War*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2012.

⁴ Benito MUSSOLINI: *Opera Omnia*, vol. 27, Milan, La Fenice, 1972, p. 268.

⁵ Alan KRAMER: *Dynamic of Destruction. Culture and Mass Killing in the First World War*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 329.

Military coup failed to topple the Second Spanish Republic. The war against Ethiopia was a modern war, for which Italian society was largely mobilised in order to fight a “European-like” Colonial war in which almost half a million Italian soldiers were involved.⁶

The Italian intervention in the Spanish Civil War was different. In comparison to the Italo-Ethiopian war, the effort put by Mussolini in the Spanish Civil War was much more limited. The fascist regime mustered about 78.000 men to fight in Spain between 1936 and 1939, and while the Italian expedition costed as much as a yearly Armed Forces budget⁷, the smaller number of men involved, as well as the blatant ideological nature of the conflict, effected the way in which the war was seen by the Italian public.

Nonetheless, considering the relatively small size of the opposing Republican and rebel armies of 1936,⁸ the 48.000 men sent during that winter were extremely influential on the field of battle. Therefore, external intervention was one of the reasons why the Spanish failed military coup could be transformed in a civil war lasting almost three years.⁹ The presence of a whole expeditionary corps was one of the most visible and politically binding forms of intervention, and one in which Italy chose to excel. Even when the opposing Spanish armies conscripted more than a million men, the war was still a relatively low-intensity conflict in which the quality of the Italian troops could still weight in in the military equilibrium.¹⁰ But did the Italians involved in the Spanish Civil War fight what Mussolini defined as «the fascist battle»?¹¹

The question is significant if one takes into consideration the composition of the *Corpo Truppe Volontarie*. The Italian forces sent in Spain were not only relatively small, but were extremely heterogeneous. While fascist *Milizia Volontaria per la Sicurezza Nazionale* troops made up about 60% of the Italian troops sent up to the first months of 1937,¹² as the war dragged on, regular *Regio Esercito* troops became predominant.¹³ A disproportionally high percentage of volunteers was made up of southerners of older and unfit classes. On the other hand, it appears that volunteers from Lombardy and Emilia – two areas where the Fascist Party was particularly present – were well represented in Militia units.¹⁴ This data unsurprisingly suggests a higher degree of politicisation in Militia units than in regular Army units.

⁶ Nicola LABANCA: *Una guerra per l'impero. Memorie della campagna d'Etiopia. 1935-36*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2005, pp. 16-42.

⁷ Brian SULLIVAN: “Fascist Italy’s Involvement in the Spanish Civil War” in *Journal of Military History*, 59 (1995).

⁸ Michael ALPERT: *El Ejército Popular de la República. 1936-1939*, Barcelona, Crítica, 2007, pp. 359-362.

⁹ Carmen GONZÁLEZ MARTÍNEZ, Sandra SOUTO KUSTRÍN: “La guerra civil española: nuevas miradas, perspectivas y líneas de investigación”, *Contenciosa*, 7 (2017), p. 9.

¹⁰ Stanley G. PAYNE: op. cit., pp. 183-188, 234; Javier RODRIGO: *La guerra fascista. Italia en la Guerra Civil española, 1936-1939*, Madrid, Alianza Editorial, 2016, p. 299.

¹¹ Davide LAJOLO: *Bocche di donne e di fucili*, Osimo, Barulli, 1939, p. 232.

¹² John F. COVERDALE: op. cit., pp. 159-163.

¹³ Javier RODRIGO: op. cit., p. 278.

¹⁴ John F. COVERDALE: op. cit., pp. 169-171.

In light of these elements, both historians and contemporary observers argued that the main reasons to volunteer were social marginality and economic necessity:¹⁵ a conclusion confirmed by local studies,¹⁶ but that can not exclude a certain degree of politicisation among the volunteers. Often there were many different reasons to enlist, or «as many reasons as fighters»,¹⁷ and while not every and each man volunteered because of his political identity, the poor could indeed be fascists.

Censorship can provide us with more data about the volunteers, their self-perception and the way in which they saw their military and political role in the Spanish Civil War, especially if this quantitative analysis is compared to military justice statistics.

Censorship was organised according to two letters of the War Ministry that set up *Uffici provinciali di censura postale* within the territorial defence commands. The provincial censorship commissions, subordinated to the *Ministero dell'Interno* (Home office) were not organised until the summer of 1940. Censorship during the Spanish Civil War was concentrated in the Neapolitan *Ufficio concentramento posta militare* and censored by the local military censorship office, while air mail was processed in the *Ufficio concentramento posta aerea* based in Rome. Censorship was supposed to be comprehensive, but all the letters sent through non-military means could not be controlled.¹⁸

According to military trials statistical data, discipline worsened as the war dragged on. An analysis of the sentences pronounced by the CTV's Military Court shows that 30% of the men brought in front of a military court were condemned for desertion, 20% were punished for crimes against military authority like disobedience and insubordination, and 11% were accused of cowardice. All in all, crimes against discipline amounted to 60%. As a comparison, during the Great War 40% of judgements were against desertions, while insubordination and disobedience amounted to 8%¹⁹. During the Second World War desertions amounted for 28% of all

¹⁵ Alberto ROVIGHI, Filippo STEFANI: *La partecipazione italiana alla guerra civile spagnola (1936-1939)*, vol. I, tomo 1, *Dal luglio 1936 alla fine del 1937*, Rome, Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito – Ufficio Storico, 1992, pp. 166-173; Giulia MEDAS: *¿Quiénes fueron los voluntarios? Identità, motivazioni, linguaggi e vissuto quotidiano dei volontari italiani nella guerra civile spagnola*, PhD diss., Università degli studi di Cagliari and Universitat de València, 2014, pp. 82-87; Silvano BERNARDIS: *Fino a Madrid. Note di guerra*, Gorizia, Libreria G. Carducci, 1941, pp. 9-10.

¹⁶ Gabriele RANZATO, Camillo ZADRA, Davide ZENDRI: *"In Spagna per l'idea fascista". Legionari trentini nella guerra civile spagnola 1936-1939*, Trento, Museo Storico Italiano della Guerra, 2008, pp. 41-42.

¹⁷ Javier RODRIGO, op. cit., p. 223.

¹⁸ Archivio dell'Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito (AUSSME), F18, b. 35, f. 14, N. 5378/369, 23 febbraio 1937. In this respect, Italian censorship during the Spanish Civil War was different from contemporary Spanish censorship and Italian censorship of the Second World War, James MATTHEWS: *Voces de la Trincheras. Cartas de combatientes republicanos en la Guerra Civil Española*, Madrid, Alianza Editorial, 2015, pp. 43-45; Mario AVAGLIANO, Marco PALMIERI: *Vincere e vinceremo! Gli italiani al fronte, 1940-1943*, Bologna, Il Mulino 2014; Íd. e Íd.: *L'Italia di Salò. 1943-1945*, Bologna, Il Mulino 2017.

¹⁹ Sergio DINI: "La giustizia militare italiana durante la guerra civile spagnola", *Italia Contemporanea*, 249 (2007), pp. 620-622. Dini's thesis that most misdemeanours were due to the volunteer character of CTV seems partially confirmed at least by a censored letter. A *capomanipolo* refused ordinary discipline, and

judgements, 44% were judgements against thefts and violent behaviour, 20% were judgments concerning crimes against military hierarchy, while the remaining judgements punished illicit surrender and disbanding.²⁰ Therefore, the legionnaires seemed to commit the same kind of crimes that would have been committed in later wars by Royal Army conscripts.

A report written by the Censorship Office in Naples, that sums up the situation in February 1937, recalls how a total of 11,504 letters, 40 cards and 55 insured letters were examined (from a total of 11,599). Of these, 15 were taken out of circulation and 2,708 were partially censored (respectively the 0.12% and 23.36% of total letters). It is also worth noting that the censorship service could not cover all the possible postal communications, as soldiers sought and easily found other postal services to avoid censorship,²¹ while the fact that many knew about the censorship service could have influenced the tone of the letters.²² As a comparison, between 1940 and 1943 Alessandria's military censorship stopped 0,3% of the letters, but 77% of that 0,3% was taken out of circulation as it involved an "immoral" correspondence between soldiers and their *madrine di guerra* (war godmother).²³ In 1942 Rome's censorship commission stopped 3,3% of the checked correspondence.²⁴ Military justice and censorship data suggest that, even in the first stages of the campaign, Italian legionnaires showed the same degree of frustration suffered by regular troops conscripted during the Second World War, despite the fact that legionnaires were supposedly volunteers driven by their fascist ideology.

Mail censorship had two distinct and contradictory objectives. It was supposed to impose the fascist regime's and the Army's own vision of the Spanish Civil War, and it was to inform both political and military leaders about the individual opinions expressed by volunteers and their correspondents about the war.

Censor officers informed opinions can help us understand why the volunteers chose to enlist to fight in Spain, and if there were any discrepancies between the different ways through which the legionnaires made sense of their war experience. In broader terms, epistolaries can help us understand if the reasons behind the initial drive to volunteer were the same that sustained morale and combat motivation,²⁵ and to what extent these reasons were political in nature.

Initial motivation showed by the score of volunteer mustered in Army and Militia barracks was a reason of concern for fascist authorities. Censorship reports describe with a measure of worry the «precarious economic conditions in which many volunteers have left the family»,

sought to take revenge on a Carabinieri captain who reproached him for his behaviour, AUSSME, F18, b. 35, f. 15, Solinas Antonio a Salvatore Solinas, Zaragoza, 9 dicembre 1938.

²⁰ Giorgio ROCHAT: *Duecento sentenze nel bene e nel male. I tribunali militari nella Guerra 1940-43*, Udine, Gaspari, 2002, pp. 30, 35. See also Sergio DINI: *La bilancia e il moschetto. I Tribunali militari nella Seconda guerra mondiale*, Milan, Mursia, 2016.

²¹ AUSSME, F18, b. 35, f. 14, "Carlo" ad Anna Maria Fedi, 20-3-1937.

²² AUSSME, F18, b. 35, f. 14, Relazione settimanale (dal 12 al 18 febbraio 1937), Doc.to A.

²³ Daniele BORIOLI, Roberto BOTTA: "Civili, militari e fascisti di fronte al conflitto negli atti della Commissione censura postale di Alessandria", in *Quaderno di storia contemporanea*, 17-18 (1995).

²⁴ Cesare AMÈ: *Guerra segreta in Italia 1940-1943*, Rome, Casini, 1954, p. 55.

²⁵ John A. LYNN: *The bayonets of the Republic. Motivation and Tactics in the Army of Revolutionary France. 1791-94*, Boulder CO, Westview Press, 1996, p. 55

while many veterans of the Ethiopian war were actively interested in knowing the salary offered to the volunteers for Spain.²⁶ Censored letters confirm the generally depressing tone of enlistment. A legionnaire defines his comrades as a «rag tag of unemployed»,²⁷ while in his diary another soldier recalls having been one of the few to enlist «for two or three months» out of a unit of six hundred men, because «there were few starving poor like me».²⁸ Civilian workers and military men coming from the newly conquered *Africa Orientale Italiana* were particularly interested in the «volunteer affair and about the treatment reserved to them especially in the field of pay», while volunteers' families were worried by the slow pace with which subsidies were paid.²⁹ Many chose to enlist hoping that the *federali* would have been committed to immediately finding a job for the family members of the departing volunteers.³⁰ Commanding officers found out that soldiers were particularly interested in their wages,³¹ or were «looking for a solution to their poor life».³² Some “volunteers” did not hesitate to desert once they found out their final destination,³³ confirming how some were enlisted in all but clear terms³⁴ by an institution coping with organisational difficulties.³⁵

Nonetheless, among this very same social group there were many who actively professed their fascist faith. Volunteers were sure of the rebels' final victory and «enthusiasm was strong».³⁶ As rumours surfaced that enlistment was soon to be closed, many aspiring legionnaires were disappointed, but, according to the censorship offices, those who were already in Spain

«are proud of having been called to assure the triumph of God and of Fascism, and express impatience to contact the enemy in order to let the valour of the Italian fighter shine.»³⁷

²⁶ AUSSME, F18, b. 35, f. 14, Revisione corrispondenze, 3 marzo 1937-XV. O.M.S. is the acronym for *Operazione Militare Spagna*, Military Operation Spain.

²⁷ AUSSME, F18, b. 35, f. 14, "Carlo" ad Anna Maria Fedi, 20-3-1937.

²⁸ Archivio Diaristico Nazionale (ADN), Caseri Giovanni, "Il mio diario".

²⁹ AUSSME, F18, b. 35, f. 14, Revisione corrispondenze, 3 marzo 1937-XV.

³⁰ *Federali* were local Party representatives, AUSSME, F18, b. 35, f. 15, Promemoria O.M.S. [transmitted the 15th of October 1937].

³¹ Davide LAJOLO: op. cit., p. 8.

³² Silvano BERNARDIS: op. cit., p. 11.

³³ Some 70 men deserted as they arrived in Genoa, Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ACS), Segreteria Particolare del Duce (SPD), Carteggio Riservato (CR), b. 71, f. 463, N. 963, Genova 26 giugno 1938.

³⁴ The writer didn't want to go to Spain, unless forced to, AUSSME, F18, b. 35, f. 15, Caringi Domenico a Caringi Luigi, 27 novembre 1936.

³⁵ A group of Black Shirts moving through Leghorn train station protested as they were left without pay and food, ACS, SPD, CR, b. 71, f. 463, Intercett.telef.n.0786, 22 gennaio 1937. Arriving in Castellammare di Stabia, some 1,200 Black Shirts didn't receive their equipment. Blankets were particularly needed, in *Ibidem*, Intercett.telef. n. 0775, 22 gennaio 1937.

³⁶ *Ibidem*.

³⁷ AUSSME, F18, b. 35, f. 14, Relazione settimanale (dal 12 al 18 febbraio 1937), Doc.to A.

As we have seen, poverty seemed to play a significant role in driving both conscript soldiers and civilians to volunteer for Spain. Nonetheless, economic needs and political sympathies and goals were not mutually exclusive. For instance, a German-speaking legionnaire from the Italian Tirol volunteered because of his economic difficulties, but also to be finally included in the Italian community.³⁸ At least a Sardinian officer who had lived all his life in Argentina chose to fight in Spain out of his Italian heritage.³⁹ Others volunteers were former *irredenti*, Great War veterans of the Trentine Legion.⁴⁰

These urges are not easily ascribed just to an ideologically pure fascism, nonetheless they show a certain degree of internalisation of the most elementary nationalistic claims made by a regime that prided itself on having resurrected the Italian military spirit. Volunteering in a fascist war could be coherently perceived as a way to continue the traditional volunteering ethos with which Italian patriotism was imbued. The Garibaldi's red shirt was to be replaced by its latest incarnation: Mussolini's black shirt.⁴¹

Ideological motivation was present among many volunteers, but even those more committed to the fascist cause could hardly explain their choice to their kin.⁴² Even more interestingly, it seems that religion was far more efficient in motivating the volunteers than fascism, as it was easier to profess one's urge to defend Christianity against Bolshevism, rather than owing up to the desire to fight purely for "fascist spirit". Nonetheless, these legionnaires showed their determination to resist the pressure coming from their families, as parents, brothers and sisters voiced their concerns about any involvement in a war abroad. As one legionnaire wrote to his mother, volunteers didn't go to Spain to «have a holiday [but] they brought us here to fight and defend [...] the cause of our Lord Jesus and [...] the Christian faith».⁴³

Leaving the track of censored letters, some chose to fight despite an anti-fascist family tradition. Edgardo Sogno was driven to Spain because his anti-communist conservatism made him fear that «communism in Spain mean[s] Europe held in Stalin's pincer». A supposedly distant stance to the regime propaganda⁴⁴ but factually coherent with the rebels' discourse of

³⁸ Andrea DI MICHELE: *Un legionario con la macchina fotografica*, in *Legionari. Un sudtirolese alla guerra di Spagna. Ein Südtiroler im Spanischen Bürgerkrieg. (1936-1939)*, Rovereto (TN), Nicolodi, 2007, pp. 13-17.

³⁹ Silvano BERNARDIS: op. cit., p. 33.

⁴⁰ See Paolo Lorenzoni's Diary in Gabriele RANZATO, Camillo ZADRA, Davide ZENDRI: op. cit.

⁴¹ Francesco ODETTI DI MARCORENGO: *Trenta mesi nel Tercio*, Rome, M. Carra, 1940; John F. COVERDALE: op. cit., p. 149; Mario ISNENGI: "Usi politici di Garibaldi dall'interventismo al fascismo" in Filippo MAZZONIS (ed.), *Garibaldi condottiero. Storia, teoria, prassi*, Milan, Franco Angeli, 1982; Elena PALLA: *Garibaldi in camicia nera. Il mito dell'eroe dei due mondi nella Repubblica di Salò. 1943-1945*, Milan, Mursia, 2011.

⁴² AUSSME, L10, b. 31, f. 1, Relazione settimanale (dal 17 al 24 giugno 1938 XVI). A legionnaire recalled how he lied to his mother and his friends, pretending that he was forced to go to Spain, Silvio ASTOLFI: *Da Malaga a Guadalajara. Appunti di un legionario*, Bologna, Edizioni SIA, 1940, p. 7.

⁴³ AUSSME, F18, b. 35, f. 15, Augusteo Rossi a Carmela Pestilla, 28 agosto 1937.

⁴⁴ Edgardo SOGNO: "Per la Spagna, contro i comunisti", in Nino ISAIA and Edgardo SOGNO: *Due fronti. La grande polemica sulla guerra di Spagna*, Florence, Le Lettere, 2007 (1st ed. 1998), pp. 66-72.

legitimation.⁴⁵ Sogno was a drafted officer, and described his fellow career officers as more interested in the professional aspect of the war. Lieutenant Enrico Reisoli, the son of general Gustavo Reisoli, was «neither fascist nor anti-fascist, he was simply pro-government». Another officer, Renato Predome, was described as a «liberal temperament tending to anarchy».⁴⁶ Nonetheless, even the most “neutral” regular officers organised political seminars for their subordinates,⁴⁷ highlighting how a pro-government attitude inevitably meant actively promoting the soldiers’ fascistisation.

Opinions concerning the Italian intervention in the Spanish Civil War differed within the different Italian military institutions. As commanding officers were tasked to find volunteers within their units it became clear that, while the political objectives of the intervention were not criticised, the volunteering ethos asked by the regime and the method with which the volunteers would have been sent abroad were scorned by many regular army officers. Black shirt militiamen could hardly flee the Party’s pressure for enrolment⁴⁸, but regular soldiers and officers were often discouraged from volunteering. The commanding colonel of the 19th *Cavalleggeri Guide* Regiment, informing his drafted subordinates of the possibility of opting for a longer term in Spain, underlined that anyone who accepted «would have shown himself not as a good soldier but as a mercenary».⁴⁹ Captain Bernardis recalls a colonel lamenting that «too many are those who advise against» volunteering.⁵⁰ Lieutenant Renzo Lodoli recalls that as he enlisted, his major called for officers willing to fight for «the Idea without [Savoy’s] stars, without flag»⁵¹. With these short sentences, Lodoli and Bernardis managed to slip an open critique to the regular officers’ nonfascist conservatism into the very first pages of their triumphant memories of the Spanish war.

As demonstrated by the analysis of the Trentine volunteers, fascism was capable of a political acculturation among people of different social and cultural backgrounds,⁵² thus found sympathizers and volunteers even among people who did not identify with the regime. Nonetheless, many volunteers were firmly convinced of their choice, and could easily find supporters among fellow soldiers. A professional sergeant writing to his major in Italy used *captatio benevolentiae* with clearly fascist lemmas. If this habit does not necessarily prove a definite fascist ideology, it at least demonstrates how subordinates were persuaded that their superiors would have appreciated writings imbued with the regime’s own language. On the other hand the NCO described the volunteers around him as decisively willing to expel «Bolshevism in

⁴⁵ Javier RODRIGO: op. cit., p. 38.

⁴⁶ He would finally find an occasion to prove his military valour fighting in the royalist ranks of the *Corpo Italiano di Liberazione*, when between 1943 and 1945 the post-armistice Royal government mustered a co-belligerent force to fight alongside the Allies, Edgardo SOGNO: op. cit., pp. 81-82.

⁴⁷ Silvano BERNARDIS: op. cit., p. 208.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem.*, p. 40.

⁴⁹ ACS, SPD, CR, b. 71, f. Spagna, sf. 4, Torino, 24 dicembre 1936.

⁵⁰ Silvano BERNARDIS: op. cit., p. 11.

⁵¹ Renzo LODOLI: *Domani posso morire. Storie di arditi e fanti legionari*, Rome, Edizioni di “Roma Fascista”, 1939, p. 4

⁵² Gabriele RANZATO, Camillo ZADRA, Davide ZENDRI: op. cit., pp. 49-50.

Spain». ⁵³ Scaling up the ranks, and moving to a junior officer, these very words can easily be found again in the letters sent from lieutenant Devoto Nanni to his illustrious uncle, general Ubaldo Soddu. To Devoto the Spanish war was fought against «foul bolsheviks», «fiends» and «reptiles». Most of all, the war was an opportunity to reinforce his own spirit and body in a confrontation to affirm his political ideals. Battle was what he «dreamt of during the monotony of garrison life», and in war he found a challenge that «every young man of the new Italy should experience». ⁵⁴

The collection of letters of *capomanipolo* (Militia lieutenant) Giacomo Fiori is a useful example of the many motivations that could have led a party member of the Roman bourgeoisie to take up arms. ⁵⁵ Fiori thought he was defending Christian civilisation from the dominant materialism, either in its capitalistic or communist form. He figured himself as a champion of «justice», who was defending «Latin civilisation» and affirming «Divine will». When the defeat of Guadalajara damaged the image of fascist military might, he reassured himself and his wife that «Fascists and those of Mussolini are no cowards, but are the same fighters of Vittorio Veneto and the *squadristi* of the March on Rome». ⁵⁶

Lieutenant Salvatore Bruno expressed very similar considerations. Interestingly, his whole family championed Italian nationalism and civilising mission. Salvatore was a regular Army officer, his brother was an ascending figure within the Fascist Party, another relative was serving in Ethiopia and a fourth family member was a regular officer within the CTV. Fascism's imperialism seemed to have been adopted as a sort of family strategy by the whole Bruno family. Unsurprisingly, to Salvatore the Spanish Civil War was «a war of redemption» that would have ended with «the victory of universal fascism», to «set free and civilise» foreign peoples and to oppose the «barbarity of freemasonry and communism». ⁵⁷

It is clear that Fiori and Bruno fought an ideological war. Fiori in particular interpreted the Spanish Civil War with fascist eyes and described it with fascism's words, but his letters show his frustrated sense of isolation from Italian society, while he also criticises the disorganisation of the armed forces and the cowardice of some militiamen. ⁵⁸ These considerations, slipped through a sound ideological construction, show signs of material disillusion among the

⁵³ Letter by Giuseppe Reghenspurgher to Major Carlo Argan Chiesa, Fronte di Guadalaiara [sic] 10.4.37 XV, Gabriele RANZATO, Camillo ZADRA, Davide ZENDRI: op. cit., p. 82.

⁵⁴ ACS, SPD, CR, b. 71, f. Spagna, sf. 5-6, inserto E. Tenente Nanni al gen. Soddu, Roa de Luero, 31-3-37 XV.

⁵⁵ Paul CORNER: *Italia fascista. Politica e opinione popolare sotto la dittatura*, Rome, Carocci, 2015, p. 132.

⁵⁶ Giacomo FIORI: *Cuore di Legionario. Lettere di Giacomo Fiori caduto in Spagna*, Rome, Editore Vittorio Ferri, 1939, pp. 19-21, 47, 51.

⁵⁷ Giuseppe BRUNO: *Il legionario Bruno Salvatore. Raccolta di lettere scritte dal ten. Bruno Salvatore alla famiglia durante due anni di guerra vissuta in terra di Spagna e dove colpito da mitraglia nemica trovò morte eroica*, Messina, Tipografia ditta d'Amico, 1939, pp 25-35.

⁵⁸ Giacomo FIORI: op. cit., pp. 17, 51. About 300 men were missing the day in which Fiori's legion set sails to Spain. Fiori's opinions were relatively common, at least according to a censorship report, AUSSME, F18, b. 35, f. 1, Relazione settimanale (dal 2 al 18 febbraio 1937-XV).

Italian ranks. A distance hardly quantifiable, nonetheless confirmed also by lieutenant Devoto Nanni, who wrote to his uncle that he «will never bless enough this war that everyone else curses».⁵⁹ These opinions can be found even in legionnaires' memories edited between 1939 and 1943. Bernardis delusions as a professional officer led him to lament that he was among the very few who «wanted the war of faith, the war of enthusiasm, the war of volunteers».⁶⁰

Most legionnaires described and explained the shortcomings of the Italian military machine using fascist stereotypes. Commands were hampered by a «freemasonry clique».⁶¹ Only the politically sound *Frecce* units, made up of both Italian and Spanish personnel, fought with the sufficient «rage» that «held high the name of Italy».⁶² Officers were most commonly accused of venality, «glittered mediocrity» and «highest ambition», while their interest in the troops' welfare amounted to «empty words».⁶³ The quality of the officers and troops was deemed abysmal. One officer thought that his colleagues were

«good-for-nothing personnel from the technical and moral point of view. Spain is regurgitating with *imboscati* [shirkers] officers and offices created to hide people whose soul does not go beyond the small necessity of pay.»⁶⁴

These officers were accused of lacking fascist spirit and a self-sacrificing attitude. Corruption was well present and sometimes checked by censors, as exemplified when a Militia *capomanipolo* asked a counsellor of the future Italian Exposition “E42” the price of a promotion to *console* (Militia colonel), of a silver medal and of a tranquil rear area office. After all, he had already spent his money to buy a promotion that was still out of sight, so asked for a reparation.⁶⁵ Therefore, the Spanish Civil War could be the right terrain to press one's own political or professional ambitions. *Arrivismo* was so widespread that whom blatantly confessed his careerism to «build a political future» was at least respected for his sincerity.⁶⁶

⁵⁹ ACS, SPD, CR, b. 71, f. Spagna, sf. 5-6, insert E. Tenente Nanni al gen. Soddu, Roa de Luero, 31-3-37 XV.

⁶⁰ Silvano BERNARDIS: op. cit., p. 24.

⁶¹ AUSSME, F18, b. 35, f. 15 Marino De Lieto ad Anna De Lieto, 2-8-37.

⁶² Note that *Frecce* were the only Italian troops employed in battle at the time, when they were deployed on the Bilbao front, AUSSME, F18, b. 35, f. 15 Marino De Lieto ad Anna De Lieto, 2-8-37. A *bandera* officer considered Royal Army units unwilling to fight, Lettera di Vincenzo Morelli all'on. Mario Muzzzarini, 17 marzo 1937. See also the letter of 20 marzo 1937. A frustration coherent to the one shown by Roatta about his officers and soldiers, Ta. 752/3238 C, Ismael SAZ, Javier TUSELL (eds.): *Fascistas en España. La intervención italiana en la Guerra Civil a través de los telegramas de la "Misión Militar Italiana en España" (15 diciembre 1936-31 marzo 1937)*, Madrid, Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas. Escuela Española de Historia y Arqueología en Roma, 1982.

⁶³ AUSSME, F18, b. 35, f. 15 Maggiore Ratti a Maria Antonietta Ratti, Pina, 20 agosto 1938.

⁶⁴ AUSSME, F18, b. 35, f. 15, Lettera di Marino De Lieto ad Anna De Lieto, 2-8-37.

⁶⁵ AUSSME, F18, b. 35, f. 15, Santini Ferruccio al Comm. Guido Calderini, Torrijio del Campo, 22 agosto 1938.

⁶⁶ Silvano BERNARDIS: op. cit., p. 70.

It is hard to demonstrate any “political dichotomy” separating politicised and regular personnel, but the friction between two distinct ways of interpreting the role of military men within the Army of a fascist power is easily confirmed by the sharp censure that was imposed on even technical analyses sent by Militia officers to Party members concerning the Italian equipment. The Army censor considered these relatively neutral writings as «considerations» that «do not seem appropriate».⁶⁷ Fascist politicians were deemed alien to the Military institution, thus informed opinions expressed by Militia officers were censored because broke the traditional stern silence demanded to regular officers, whom were accustomed to discuss military business within the Army. But even to those lamenting the deficiencies of the Italian intervention in Spain, the issue was not fascism, but the lacking fascistisation of the Italian society as a whole and of its old institutions, especially the Royal Army, still imbued in its Piedmontese «don't move [on your own initiative]» attitude.⁶⁸ A Militia officer commenting on the poor quality of his replacements wondered if it was «possible that in Italy we still act in this way these days», but confirmed his «great faith [...] in the *Duce* [and] the creed in the ideal», finding anew the energy to cope with the «betrayal of the *Duce*, [and of] the Idea» at the hand of the remnants of old pre-fascist Italy.⁶⁹

Disillusion: violence, theft and greed

Fascism tried to build a war pedagogy that would have allowed the Italian people to conquer its position among the most powerful nations. In order to do so, Italians had to become the fascist “new men”, mingling political fury and military self-control. The stern and obedient military culture that permeated the Royal Army was considered insufficient in creating the new Italians, but the Royal Army was still the most important Italian military institution, tasked with the military education and training of all Italian male citizens. Because of this, a more politicised military education, thoroughly organised by fascist institutions, was to properly educate Italian youths before and after their service in the Royal Army.⁷⁰ Anyhow, the apparent aporia between military ethos and political ethos was reinforced by censorship officers whom persecuted any excess deviating too much from the aristocratic warrior archetype, while ignoring those deviations from military discipline that could be considered coherent with fascism’s own views on military ethos.

As we have seen, there were people who found their own realisation in war, but sometimes this war-driven exaltation went well beyond what should have been the warrior pedagogy proposed by fascism. A censor blocked a letter that described vividly not only the brutali-

⁶⁷ AUSSME, F18, b. 35, f. 15, Lettere censurate, 30 marzo 1937 – XV.

⁶⁸ In pedemontese, “*bongia ner*”, in this case intended as a proof of the Army's lack of initiative, AUSSME, F18, b. 35, f. 15, Maggiore Ratti a Maria Antonietta Ratti, Pina, 20 agosto 1938.

⁶⁹ AUSSME, F18, b. 35, f. 15, 1° Seniore Calzolari Bruno, Fronte, 6-8-XVI.

⁷⁰ Giorgio ROCHAT: *Le guerre italiane. 1935-1943. Dall'impero d'Etiopia alla disfatta*, Turin, Einaudi, 2008, p. 192.

ty of war, but the violent excitement that gave way to forms of sadism. Satisfied with the «butchering we have done» when shooting a village at point blank range, an artilleryman recalled how:

now seeing the dead to me is like seeing a carcass or a dog and moreover after they die I shoot them with my pistol because the rage I have, in this way I have fun and I get distracted, I pass close to them and if one is wounded I help him to die well. All the dead remain naked because where our infantrymen pass they take everything from them leaving them naked. One here gets marked a bright lad if he takes care of himself by stealing every single cent off the dead. Think what an ugly death these sods suffer here. I live tranquil and happy [I] always sing and laugh because in these moments I don't even think of you dear and I only care to look for my own.⁷¹

General Mario Roatta's frustrated comments about his soldiers lacking the hatred necessary to fight an ideological enemy are contradicted by this letter. To some volunteers ordinary social norms no longer represented an obstacle. Some legionnaires thought that the new warlike mood, imbued with fascist warfare, allowed them to pride themselves on such a degree of violence.⁷²

On the other hand, descriptions of thefts did not attract the censor's attention. As the letters followed their ordinary circulation, censorship officers limited themselves to informing the parent unit of the writers' acts as a means to suggest disciplinary action.⁷³ Only the letters that described pillaging were taken out of circulation, because such vivid representations of the Italians' own violent attitudes were deemed damaging to the war's image at home. Coherently, the censor stopped a letter because its author described how he built up a relationship with a number of prisoners, driven by a form of piety hardly acceptable for a war-like people.⁷⁴ On the contrary, anybody who described beatings of the unenthusiastic population did not face disciplinary consequences, nor did anyone who wrote satisfied descriptions of hungry women forced

⁷¹ AUSSME, F18, b. 35, f. 15, Guido Lamporelli a Felicetta Lamporelli, Fronte di Santander, 22-8-1937. Bernardis allusively described similar scenes in his memoirs, Silvano BERNARDIS: op. cit., p. 124.

⁷² Nonetheless, some volunteers were horrified by the violent behaviour of their comrades, see ACS, Ministero dell'Interno (MI), Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza (DGPS), Divisione Affari Generali Riservati (DAGR), Categorie Annuali (CA) 1936, b. 16, f. Notizie sul conto dei volontari, Lettera di Andrea Hofer 1 aprile 1937, in Edoardo MASTORILLI: "L'intervento dell'Italia fascista nella guerra civile spagnola e la questione della violenza", paper for the 20th edition of the *Workshop Nazionale Dottorandi Sissco 2016*, p. 3.

⁷³ AUSSME, F18, b. 35, f. 15, Costa Orlando a Costa Bettina, Vitoria, 9 settembre 1937; *ibid*, Antonio a Valenti Caterina, Los Santos de Mainona, 22 agosto 1937; *Ibidem*, Augusteo Rossi a Carmela Pestilla, 28 agosto 1937; *Ibidem*, Landosi Gabriele a Landosi Luisa, Brivisca, 12 settembre 1937; *Ibidem*, Lettere revisionate, 1/4259, 29 settembre 1937-XV.

⁷⁴ AUSSME, F18, b. 35, f. 15 Catenacci Luigi a Ardigò Luigina, 11 settembre 1937.

into prostitution.⁷⁵ Therefore, even regular officers were «exalted» at the idea of repeating in Spain the deeds of the *squadristi* of old,⁷⁶ while hunger prostitution was flaunted to exhibit Italian manliness.⁷⁷

Volunteers of all social strata seemed to identify as champions of fascism-imbued manliness as well as *brava gente* (good-hearted), as highlighted by many a legionnaire's memoir.⁷⁸ But as time went by, violence against the civil population or against Spanish rebel soldiers was not limited to ordinary frictions between civilians, military branches or foreigners.⁷⁹ Some legionnaires deliberately attacked civilians or Franco's soldiers as a way to be sent home.⁸⁰ These letters were censored because the authors described violent acts that were not committed to discipline a politically mild population—such behaviour was not condemned—, but were the last resorts of exhausted troops who sought repatriation.

While censors chose to control the way in which the Military Operation Spain was described by legionnaires, they explicitly defined the “fascist” and “military” warrior model. The “Fascist new man” was not supposed to act sadistically against its enemies or political opponents, but nonetheless was eager to act violently in order to affirm a political hierarchy in which fascism was the apex of European values, Christianity and Modernity. As Bernardis recalled when he was told that Franco's troops shot war prisoners, «I am horrified. I, I will never do that, I swear. And I mean it».⁸¹ The matter of dissent was not political violence against antifascists or afascists, but the supposed legitimate limit within which political violence was committed.

⁷⁵ AUSSME, F18, b. 35, f. 15, Parizzi Giuseppe a Sogliani Ruio, Haro, 8 settembre 1932 [1937]. Nonetheless, Roatta condemned the prisoners' beatings carried out by Italian troops and officers, F7, b. 1, Contegno verso i prigionieri, 17 marzo 1937.

⁷⁶ Silvano BERNARDIS: op. cit., p. 17.

⁷⁷ Davide LAJOLO: op. cit., p. 108.

⁷⁸ Silvano BERNARDIS: op. cit., p. 215; Davide LAJOLO: op. cit., pp. 61, 74, 108.

⁷⁹ AUSSME, F18, b. 35, f. 15, Corrispondenza per O.M.S., probably autumn of 1937. A legionnaire denounced in 1938 the rising frequency with which Italians and Spaniards squabbled in rear areas (Rodrigo 2016, 253).

⁸⁰ AUSSME, F18, b. 35, f. 15, Ugo Podestà a Carlo Alberto Biggini, Saragozza, 9 maggio 1938. Sometimes disciplinary reasons were sufficient to repatriate the most uncontrollable legionnaires. The procedure with which undesired legionnaires were repatriated was quite slow, and more so for militiamen, *Ibidem*, F7, Elementi indesiderabili, 2 marzo 1937. One of many examples in ACS, MI, DGPS, DAGR, 1939, b. 38a, f. Rimpatrio per motivi vari, Volontari rimpatriati dalla Spagna, 10 gennaio 1938. Some 600 of these undisciplined soldiers, who lacked «fascist spirit» were mustered in a battalion set up to furnish them a military and fascist «re-education». The first batch of these former legionnaires was found in possession of republican propaganda material, *Ibidem*, Servizi riservati politici, 19 aprile 1937. Hospital ship Helouan's listed among its passengers a number of soldiers repatriated for disciplinary reasons: 7 officers out of 14, 1 NCO out of 29 while another 1 was repatriated for “various reasons”, 7 soldiers repatriated for disciplinary reasons and 2 for “various reasons” out of 492, 1 driver repatriated for “moral reasons” and 6 for “various reasons” out of 9, *Ibidem*, N. 1372-7.8, 1 luglio 1937.

⁸¹ Silvano BERNARDIS: op. cit., p. 28.

Fatigue and dissent

The distance between fascist rhetoric and the soldiers' experience became broader as the war dragged on much longer than expected. It is evident that the initial motivation for enlistment was no longer capable of sustaining the troops' morale, as many asked to be sent back home because of health or family issues.⁸² Giacomo Fiori, facing disillusion with the slow progress of the war, hoped for a rapid victory, not so much out of his fascist faith, but because «the sooner our quest ends the sooner we will return to our homes, to our loved ones».⁸³

The criteria with which people were repatriated were barely understood by the troops in the field,⁸⁴ and this had a deleterious effect on the morale of even the most motivated fighters, especially as large batches of volunteers were sent back to Italy in the autumn of 1938.⁸⁵ As there were «daily protests by people who want to go home»,⁸⁶ an infantryman recalled how in his company 34 out of 104 men went missing, while «our superiors can no longer stop this avalanche of the poor disillusioned» trying to desert their units every day, nor can «Carabinieri in service on the railways stop them, [nor] send them back to their units».⁸⁷ While many commanders chose to press on every single repatriation request they received,⁸⁸ soldiers recalled how speeches by the officers were met with anger, especially when superiors tried to compare the Great War to the Spanish Civil War: legionnaires easily rebuffed that «the [Great] war was fought at the frontiers of the Motherland and for the Motherland, and that every soldier had his normal leave or maybe two in a year. So the present matter is different».⁸⁹ Such a statement underlines how volunteers were more than aware of the ideological nature of a war fought not for the country's immediate interests, but for fascism. To the legionnaires, such a difference – in itself, proof of a degree of distance from fascism's own objectives – meant that they had to be treated differently than conscripted soldiers. Because of this, an officer lamented that the «dishonest bluff» of promising repatriation had to stop, but he was «sure that Mussolini doesn't know our true conditions», nor he did know of the «dishonest freemasonry in the commands».⁹⁰ “Mussolinism” – a blind faith in Mussolini's political acumen and charisma – was the natural reaction also for a medical officer who reported how «General De Francisci [sic] was whistled by his soldiers», exasperated as the promised return home was delayed again despite the general's promises.⁹¹

⁸² AUSSME, L10, b. 31, f. 1, Relazione settimanale (dal 17 al 24 giugno 1938 XVI); see also Relazione settimanale (dal 1 al 8 luglio 1938 XVI).

⁸³ Giacomo FIORI: op. cit., pp. 37-42.

⁸⁴ Alberto ROVIGHI, Filippo STEFANI: op. cit., pp. 275-276.

⁸⁵ Giorgio ROCHAT: op. cit., p. 119.

⁸⁶ AUSSME, F18, b. 35, f. 15, Adriano X a Ugo Perugi, Miranda de Ebro, 13 novembre 1938.

⁸⁷ AUSSME, F18, b. 35, f. 15, Oscar Cesare a Famiglia Giovanni Pascoli, Miranda sull'Ebro, 16-10-38.

⁸⁸ Silvano BERNARDIS: op. cit., p. 51.

⁸⁹ AUSSME, F18, b. 35, f. 15 Servizio postale. Lettere censurate, Ministero dell'Interno. Direzione Generale della P.S., Divisione Affari Generali e Riservati. Sezione seconda, n° 442/18913, 15 settembre 1938

⁹⁰ AUSSME, F18, b. 35, f. 15, Lettera alla contessa Anna Antinori Bontombine, 14 giugno 1938.

⁹¹ AUSSME, F18, b. 35, f. 15, Conigioni Riccardo a Cappello Alfio, Zona di Luco, 1 agosto 1938.

While mussolinism was probably among the most important unifying factors in the mix of Militia and regular Army units that made up the *Corpo Truppe Volontarie*, brawls between the two arms were frequent. The commander of *23 Marzo* Militia Division threatened to dismiss all the Army officers, preferring the more politicised Militia officers. Regular officers were «ferocious and indignant» at the outburst of «this exhibitionist buffoon», nonetheless captain Valentini preferred to stay silent because «Army and Militia, in unfairness, dishonesty and *camorra*... engage in a noble race, and no one can tell who's winning».⁹²

Reciprocal diffidence between the two institutions was not limited to the higher echelons, but invested also the lower ranks. The turning point was the battle of Guadalajara, seen by the professional officers as proof of the Militia's inadequacy as a military instrument.⁹³ Diffidence turned to open criticism of the military qualities of fascism. As well as direct insults to the black shirts from captain Ronzoni, according to whom «it is easier to cure syphilis than militia», one can spot more “political” opinions. Captain Giuseppe Martini not only ridiculed militiamen beaten by a «thousand rag taggers», but did not hesitate to state his indifference to the regime's politics, reminding to the militiamen that «reds» were fighting for «their ideal» as much as fascists were fighting for their own political agenda, thus suggesting that the two ideologies were equal in the eyes of a man who swore allegiance only to his country and valued only military prowess. Others, like major Presutti, underlined their sense of pride in the Army saluting militarily when responding to fascist salutes, and reminding his subordinates the differences between Army and Militia.⁹⁴

On their part, soldiers were exasperated because the war took much longer than the few months they expected. While it was impossible to ease the legionnaires' stress allowing them to return with «the family [...] to find again the ardour, enthusiasm and dash of the very first days»,⁹⁵ many hoped that the quick pace of the Ethiopian war could be replicated with two more Army corps and «a “Graziani” [or a] “Badoglio”», but such bold decisions could be made only if the *Duce* was informed «of the hard reality of things here».⁹⁶

⁹² AUSSME, F18, b. 35, f. 15, Valentini di Laviano alla contessa Anna Antinori Bontombine, Teruel, 3 settembre 1938.

⁹³ The report was presented by the Militia's chief of staff, General Russo, to Mussolini in January 4th 1937, ACS, SPD, CR, b. 71, f. Spagna, sf. 4, insert F., Siviglia, Reclamo, Promemoria, 3 gennaio 1937.

⁹⁴ ACS, SPD, CR, b. 71, f. Spagna, sf. 4, insert F., Esposto al Generale Russo, Siviglia, 4 ottobre 1937. The tendency of avoiding fascist salutes was the subject of a note written by Roatta, AUSSME, F7, b. 1, Circolare Permanente n° 2, 4 marzo 1937.

⁹⁵ AUSSME, F18, b. 35, f. 15, Maggiore Ratti a Maria Antonietta Ratti, Pina, 20 agosto 1938. The same day, General Berti met Franco to discuss the proposals made by Mussolini concerning the CTV. In July Berti complained to Mussolini about the abysmal morale of the Italian troops in Spain, and later in September Mussolini chose to reduce the weight of the Italian troops in Spain after having temporarily considered their repatriation.

⁹⁶ AUSSME, F18, b. 35, f. 15, Conigliani Riccardo a Cappello Alfio, Zona di Luco, 1 agosto 1938. In the summer of 1938, the CTV was divided between the Ebro and Levant fronts, while National divisions asked for single Italian units to ease the pressure of Republican attacks, and later used Italian armour, artillery and air force during their counter-attack on the Ebro.

Many men thought that their enlistment would have lasted only a few months, thus thought that they deserved a rapid repatriation as this time expired, despite the fact that the war was long to be won. Superior commands often encouraged the volunteers to hope that the sought-after return home would have come after one last brief operation. The prolonged discomfort suffered by the legionnaires, who were disillusioned by these many broken promises, was the object of a report to Mussolini, especially when the Militia in Italy was mobilised and many volunteers' families began a bureaucratic quest to have their kin back home.⁹⁷ As noted by some officers, often the heat of battle was sufficient to quell the militiamen's animosity,⁹⁸ nonetheless legionnaires felt isolated as they perceived that no one at home cared about the war.⁹⁹

Another proof of the fascistisation of the troops can be found in the way in which CTV's officers and soldiers perceived the Spanish political equilibrium. Although Italians went to Spain to defend Europe from Bolshevism, they were also exporting fascism, but to many Italian troops the Nationalist side seemed too conservative to fully appreciate all the advantages of a true fascist revolution. Some officers thought Mussolini would have surely cured the Spaniards of their inability to understand the new European political reality, instead of allowing them to indulge «in the same state as before».¹⁰⁰ After all, it was Franco's army that was «impotent and unable to do anything good and quick as we did on the Santander and Tortosa fronts». Spanish propaganda was accused of overestimating the defeat of Guadalajara in order to «obfuscate and destroy» Italian military prowess, while the legionnaires claimed that it was the CTV that played a major role in the rebels' advances,¹⁰¹ or saved the day regularly.¹⁰² As time went by, «Latin fraternity» became «a bit cheap», as Italian officers, exasperated by the fact that Italians were «considered as Moroccans and treated worse», reproached their Spanish colleagues recalling:

«everything that has been conquered as territory: from Malaga to Bilbao; from Santander to Tortosa, was [conquered] by us and only us. All that was lost: from Belchite to Brunete; from Teruel to Ebro; was [lost] because of their sloth, because of their recklessness and, maybe, because of their betrayal.»¹⁰³

⁹⁷ AUSSME, F18, b. 35, f. 15, Corrispondenza per O.M.S., undated but probably autumn of 1937.

⁹⁸ AUSSME, F18, b. 35, f. 15, Franco Bonaccorso a Giacomo Suardo, 20 settembre 1938.

⁹⁹ AUSSME, F18, b. 35, f. 14, "Carlo" ad Anna Maria Fedi, 20-3-1937. See also Davide LAJOLO: op. cit., p. 149.

¹⁰⁰ AUSSME, F18, b. 35, f. 15, Giannini Giulio a Giannini Domenico, Fronte dell'Ebro, 22 settembre 1938.

¹⁰¹ AUSSME, F18, b. 35, f. 15, Ugo Podestà a Carlo Alberto Biggini, Saragozza, 9 maggio 1938.

¹⁰² AUSSME, F18, b. 35, f. 15, Franco Bonaccorso a Giacomo Suardo, 20 settembre 1938.

¹⁰³ AUSSME, F18, b. 35, f. 15, Valentini di Laviano a Anna Antinori Bontombine, Teruel 6 settembre 1938. Judgements that were shared in at least an edited diary, among descriptions of squabbles with some Spaniards, Silvano BERNARDIS: op. cit., pp. 25-29.

While humble Spaniards were seen as capable of «radical decisions and stern», the leaders were deemed «another thing». Pervaded by a «a spirit of independence that no one is challenging», and out of jealousy, the very friendship between Italy and Spain seemed at risk, especially after Franco made a «declaration of neutrality» in the event of a European war. To major Ratti both the Spanish people and the leaders who rebelled against the Second Republic seemed incapable of any broad political vision, while Italians found themselves in a situation that had no way out. Only Germany and, again, Great Britain would have gained any advantage. The situation was even harder because of the «absence of any will of the people», who lived detached in «arab-like fatalism» after «centuries [...] of banditry and rebellion». ¹⁰⁴ The only ones who gained any advantages out of the war were the Germans, while the Italians' economic future in Spain seemed worse even if compared with what have been achieved by the United Kingdom. Unless the *Duce* decided to intervene directly, of course. ¹⁰⁵ As another officer recalled, while Italians shed blood, the Germans furnished «aspirin», meaning that they took over the whole Spanish market while comfortably seated in the best places. ¹⁰⁶ Such harsh were extended to the Spanish people as a whole, and found their way in post-war memoirs. ¹⁰⁷ The war was not considered a legitimate effort only in the light of a political crusade to implant fascism in a fellow “Latin” country, it was also judged according to more traditional and “neutral” geopolitical considerations. Nonetheless, many officers shared the most disillusioned opinions of their political leaders. ¹⁰⁸

Conclusion

The sources analysed in this paper suggest that among those who volunteered to fight in the Spanish Civil War, there was a certain degree of distance from Fascist propaganda and from the Armed Forces. Nonetheless among the censored letters there is only a single one that shows signs of detachment from fascism itself, ¹⁰⁹ but no broader political opposition to fascism, nor any attempt to share one's doubts with loved ones. Protests concerned mostly the slowness of the war, the lack of leave, the disorganisation of the military machine. Despite all the difficulties, most volunteers found in their faith in Mussolini a way to sublimate their waning faith in fascist institutions, all the while accusing the “old Italy” of having survived within fascism and, in fact, of having betrayed both the regime and the Motherland. Is otherwise interesting to highlight that the changes occurred in CTV's commands, even after the battle of Guadalajara, seem to have been completely ignored in the legionnaires' letters. On the other hand, the

¹⁰⁴ AUSSME, F18, b. 35, f. 15, Maggiore Ratti a Maria Antonietta Ratti, Pina, 20 agosto 1938.

¹⁰⁵ AUSSME, F18, b. 35, f. 15, Mario a Musso Salvatore, S. Sebastiano, 22 ottobre 1938.

¹⁰⁶ AUSSME, F18, b. 35, f. 15, Maggiore Ratti a Maria Antonietta Ratti, Pina, 20 agosto 1938.

¹⁰⁷ Silvano BERNARDIS: op. cit., p. 31.

¹⁰⁸ Javier RODRIGO: op. cit., pp. 181-191, 269.

¹⁰⁹ ACS, MI, DGPS, DAGR, 1939, b. 38a, f. 1°-M, Proposta di rimpatrio per indegnità della C.N. Cani Giuseppe.

only higher echelons' names mentioned in censored letters come from a Militia background, and were usually criticised for their lacking military ethos. Not that regular officers were praised for their professionalism either, as Army officers were generally seen as relics of liberal Italy or despised as alleged freemasons. Lastly, even battle was hardly a topic discussed with the family at home: with the exclusion of the graphic description of a firefight in a village, there are no other mentions of actual engagements in censored letters.

Drawing some conclusions, it is possible to say that even for those few who detached themselves from the most politically connoted behaviour we can at best suggest a form of "loyal reluctance" to carry on a war that, unlike the war in Ethiopia, proved to be long, hard and not directly connected to Italian interests. Only in a single case a legionnaire fraternised with some prisoners, and it is possible to interpret his actions as a form of "resistance".¹¹⁰ On the contrary, all those who could hardly explain their fascist ideals to their family gave a chance to the censorship service to accomplish its informative mission, as trench journals began to describe the *legionari's* experience precisely as a unique choice that could be understood only by those catechised in fascism.¹¹¹

Part of the behaviour described in these pages seems to point to the direction taken by historiography, according to which the very absence of any political alternative to fascism in the thirties allowed the regime to survive, while many Italians sought to identify with institutions or cultures outside fascism but within the borders of a broader patriotic socialisation.¹¹² Nonetheless, the Spanish Civil War was another step in the process of fascistisation of Italian society. A step that was relatively limited only because few Italians were directly involved in the war.

Censored letters confirm a relative dissonance between fascism's political goals and the Royal Army's institutional goals. The most coherent political analyses can be found in officers letters. Some of these men chose to fight in the Military Operation Spain because of their political ideals, as exemplified by Marino de Lieto's frustration in finding out that his comrades' fas-

¹¹⁰ I borrow the concepts of resistance (*resistenz*) and of loyal reluctance (*loyale Widerwilligkeit*), that comprise a wide pattern of unaligned and conflicting behaviour within the exceptional nature of the Nazi dictatorship, Martin BROZAT: "Resistenz und Widerstand. Eine Zwischenbilanz des Forschungsprojekts", in Martin BROZAT, Elke FRÖLICH, Falk WIESEMANN (eds.): *Bayern in der NS-Zeit*, vol. IV, *Herrschaft und Gesellschaft im Konflikt*, München, R. Oldenbourg, 1981, pp. 691-709; Klaus Michael MALLMANN, Gerhard PAUL: "Resistenz oder loyale Widerwilligkeit? Anmerkungen zu einem umstrittenen Begriff", *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, 2 (1993), pp. 99-116. A synthesis in Christoph KLEßMANN: "Resistenza e renitenza durante il nazionalsocialismo. Un dibattito storiografico", in Lutz KLINKHAMMER, Claudio NATOLI, Leonardo RAPONE (eds.): *Dittature, opposizioni, resistenze. Italia fascista, Germania nazionalsocialista, Spagna franchista: storiografie a confronto*, Milan, Unicopli, 2005, pp. 69-83. See also Enzo COLLOTTI: *Fascismo, fascismi*, Florence, Sansoni editore, 1989, p. 53; Paul CORNER: op. cit., p. 185-186.

¹¹¹ See as an example Formisano G., "La fede del legionario", in *Il Legionario*, 354, 28 giugno 1938, a. II, in Paola CORTI, Alejandro PIZARRÓSO QUINTÉRO: *Giornali contro. "Il Legionario" e "Il Garibaldino". La propaganda degli italiani nella guerra di Spagna*, Alessandria, Edizioni dell'Orso, 1993, pp. 108, 185.

¹¹² Simona COLARIZI: *L'opinione degli italiani sotto il regime 1929-1943*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 2009 (1st ed. 1991), p. 240.

cist faith was lacking. But while Marino de Lieto would eventually join the *Repubblica Sociale Italiana* after Mussolini's demise and Italian surrender of 1943, to many other career officers the Spanish Civil War was no more than one of the many wars Italy fought at the time. Major Presutti and captain Martini, whom expressed their frustration with the Militia's lacking military spirit, demonstrate how within the Army the professional and "apolitical" military ethos was still strong, and was probably stronger than any "political-warrior" ethos encouraged by fascism. Officers like major Presutti and captain Martini saw in the Spanish Civil War an occasion to accelerate their careers, as well as an opportunity to test their own "technical" capabilities as war technocrats tasked to fight a political war whose broader goals they did not understand. Presutti and Martini in fact acted much in the same way as most of their colleagues reacted to the regimes' boasted propaganda advocating an imminent global war between fascism and anti-fascisms.¹¹³ Presutti and Martini were not the only officers who perceived themselves as apolitical military professionals. Much like Edgardo Sogno's comrades, Giacomo Zanussi (Roatta's deputy chief of staff) and Giuseppe Pièche (commander of the *Carabinieri* assigned to CTV) would have had a role in the co-belligerent Italian Royal Army of 1943 and 1945. These officers were imbued with a military ethos tracing its origins in 19th century bourgeoisie good mannerism, according to which elegance and gentlemanly manners were to control any violent excess¹¹⁴. This ethos represented the "old Italy" despised by the most politicised volunteers independently of their social strata, as violent excesses were to lay the foundations of the fascist new man, but political violence could be considered legitimate by regular army officers if it seemed to fall within the behavioural borders set by military ethos, as exemplified by captain Silvano Bernardis' experience.

The regime's inability to mobilise Italian society and the economy during the Second World War had dire consequences for the population, and led to Mussolini's downfall and ultimately to a civil war. Nonetheless, those who took part in the Spanish Civil War could not foresee such an outcome. While fascism was probably the most prominent initial motivation to volunteer to fight in the Spanish Civil War, as the war continued mussolinism became the only reason strong enough to sustain the Italian troops' morale. Censorship factually shows how the Spanish Civil War was a step in the process of fascistisation of a conservative and anticommunist political space that sought a solution to the crisis of liberalism, while some of those who took up arms regularly prided themselves on the violence they were exercising and suffering. It could also be argued that, as much as Italian citizens distinguished between their loyalty to the Italian institutions and that towards the Motherland,¹¹⁵ fascist volunteers fighting in the Span-

¹¹³ AUSSME, H3, b.82, f. 3, Promemoria [march 1930].

¹¹⁴ Davide RODOGNO: *Il nuovo ordine mediterraneo. Le politiche di occupazione dell'Italia fascista in Europa. 1940-1943*, Turin, Bollati Boringhieri, 2003, p. 191; Fortunato MINNITI: "Gli ufficiali di carriera dell'esercito nella crisi del regime", in Angelo VENTURA (ed.): *Sulla crisi del regime fascista. 1938-1943. La società italiana dal "consenso" alla Resistenza*, Venice, Marsilio, 1996; Lorenzo BENADUSI: *Ufficiale e gentiluomo. Virtù civili e valori militari in Italia. 1896-1918*, Milan, Feltrinelli 2015.

¹¹⁵ Giorgio FIACCA: "Viva la patria, abbasso lo Stato! Le molteplici appartenenze delle classi dirigenti", *Passato e Presente*, 43 (1998).

ish Civil War could differentiate between their loyalty towards the “fascist” institutions and Fascisms as a broader political notion. As we have seen, the latter was hardly discussed, but legionnaires’ loyalty towards the State or Party institutions depended on the amount of sacrifices they were asked for. It is also evident that small but vocal groups within the legionnaires found hard to use the “fascist” adjective to define a less ideological notion of Motherland, and preferred to identify themselves in what their more politicised colleagues would have called “old Italy”. Nonetheless, these “old Italians” eagerly fought Fascism’s war without protesting, as did those fascists who were less than enthusiasts at the prospect of fighting for Franco’s perceived conservatism.

All in all, most volunteers fell into a vicious cycle of fascistisation and brutalisation because of their unique war experience, as the reasons to fight or the consequences of war were not shared by the rest of the Italian population. Detached from Italian society, the volunteers could do little but stick with their faith in fascism and Mussolini. Both fascists and military men could find a common wisdom opposing progressive politics,¹¹⁶ as well as any vestiges of “old Italy”. In this process a central position was taken not by fascist officers, but by those reluctant or disillusioned men who, despite all the limitations of the Italian war machine and their disappointment towards its institutions, found in mussolinism an anchor for their drifting political sympathies. Ultimately, Mussolini himself, man, dictator and almost demigod, became the reason why they were killing and dying.

¹¹⁶ Amedeo OSTI GUERRAZZI: *Noi non sappiamo odiare. L'esercito italiano tra fascismo e democrazia*, Turin, UTET 2010, p. 63. See also Francisco J. LEIRA CASTIÑERA: *La consolidación social del franquismo. La influencia de la guerra en los “soldados de Franco”*, Santiago de Compostela, Servizo de Publicacións de la Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, 2013, pp. 125-127