

1942: STALINGRAD AND THE RUSSIAN CAMPAIGN IN THE ITALIAN PUBLIC OPINION AND POLITICAL WORLD

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We think that Italian participation in the aggression to Soviet Union was one of the main political and military miscalculations made by Fascism. This consideration sets aside any moral judgment about both the large number of crimes committed by Italian soldiers in Russia (ignored for a too much long time), and the criminal global alliance with Nazi Reich. The aggression was a mistake for a lot of reasons: because it took away men and means from North Africa, the most important war front for Italy; because it developed further divisions between militant Fascists and no Fascist people; because it revived internationalist feelings in the factories and in the working class neighbourhoods; because it was founded on the difficult and uncertain hope to receive from Germany an area of exclusive exploitation in the conquered territories. In this paper, we shall try to prove that Mussolini's choice to attack USSR received less popular support in comparison with other military campaigns. It happened in spite of the great propagandistic efforts.

Italy joined to Germany in the W.W.II with nine months of delay, on 10 June 1940. During that period, Fascism tried to prepare the country to the war, both in the military aspects and in the field of the public opinion's moral preparation. However, when the war was declared Police, Prefects and informers' reports recorded less enthusiasm than Mussolini would like.

Also, one year later, the majority of the people did not welcome the news of the participation to the Russian campaign. They were dismayed because a further campaign in a new and very far front, in an unknown environment, and against an enormous Army, would have inevitably caused the delay of the end of the war. During the first year of war, Italian Army fought some very bloody and unsatisfactory campaigns – Albania, Greece, and North Africa. These failures disappointed public opinion's hopes of a *Blitz Krieg*.

Therefore, the majority of the people face up the new expedition with deep concern and with few hope, but this attitude was not enough to develop a strong political and social opposition. However, Police authorities were more worried than the previous year about public opinion's attitude. Some of them warned against the possibility of heavy consequences for the Regime in case of unsatisfactory results.

Then, in comparison with 1940, a new fact influenced public opinion and tormented authorities: USSR still enjoyed support in some workers' circles, particularly in the great factories

of the main industrial cities. Therefore, the expressions of support to Moscow increased after the attack against Soviet Union, and the shadows linked with the Ribbentrop – Molotov Pact quickly disappeared. For instance, in Genoa on 20 June 1941 in the Ansaldo Elettrotecnico plant were discovered the graffito “Up with Lenin, down with Hitler” and, on 27 June, “Down with Mussolini, up with Stalin”. After 20 days in the city appeared printed leaflets with the words “Long live to Communist Russia”, and others with hammer and sickle and the sentence “Up with peace, up with Communism, down with the war”.

During all the second half of 1941 appeared handwritten and printed leaflets inciting to rebellion, extolling the Soviet Union, attacking Germany and ridiculing Mussolini and Hitler. They were found everywhere: in the factories, on the wall of the streets, in the countryside, on the trains, and in the public toilets.

Nevertheless, Italian participation in the invasion received a strong support by the majority of Fascist Party and by the Catholic conservative milieu. They considered the Russian campaign a “crusade”, a sort of European mobilization against the “monstrous Soviet collectivism”. This was clearly a minority attitude among the people, and the same happened for the anti Fascist option. However, the pro war attitude had many supporters among the young from the middle and the lower middle classes, and some supporters also among the young workers organized by youth Fascist organizations. Many letters sent by the soldiers to the families, friends, colleagues, Dopolavoro and Catholic circles, and to the parish priests, confirm these feelings. The senders recorded their wonder at the new and unusual landscapes and habitats; they also wrote about their proud to be members of a community of conquerors. Moreover, they often spoke in an arrogant way about the Soviet people, writing about the “mission of civilization performed by the Latin race”. They often described the shooting or hanging of Communists, partisans and Jews, killed either by the Germans or by the Italians.

We think that the Russian campaign dug a gulf in the public opinion from its very beginning, and the division was deeper than one year before. This time the supporters of the invasion had fanatic, but deep-rooted and genuine feelings. At the same time, the opponents of the invasion did not restrict themselves to criticize the war; they questioned their own national belonging in name of broader and general internationalist class solidarity.

Fascist machine of organization of consent used every available means to obtain popular support for the Russian campaign: from films to theatre and songs; from novels to comic strips.

Nevertheless, Fascism mainly used daily and magazine. It spread Agenzia Stefani (the Italian news agency) and German press's reports, articles, and news to the Italian press. War news, both from Russia and from other fronts, took up front pages, everyday. Also the radio devoted a lot of time to the war, broadcasting news, special programs (for instance "Fighter's hour"), and radio novels with subjects linked with the Russian campaign. Anyway, it's astonishing that the press gave the same emphasis to the Russian and to the North African campaign during summer and autumn 1942. You have to take in mind that Libya was much more important than USSR for Italy both on the military and on the geo-political aspect.

This time Fascist propaganda machine had a powerful ally: Catholic Church. It openly blessed the war against "atheistic Communism", and indicated to the Italian armies a very ambitious aim: to regain Russia to the Christian faith.

Moreover, during the first months some facts helped to appease people's fears about Mussolini's decision to take part to the invasion. These facts were the impressive speed of the German troops advance; Red Army's apparent incapacity to stop Germans; the possibility to take away raw materials and agricultural products from the occupied territories.

Italian Army Corp had 62.000 men and it arrived at the front line between July and August 1941, having its baptism of fire during the forcing of Dnepr, on 10 August. There was a widespread illusion to end the war before Christmas, but Mussolini decided to dispatch more Divisions already during summer of 1941. One year after seven other Divisions arrived in Russia, transforming the XXXV Army Corps in the 230.000 men strong Eight Army, called ARMIR.

German summer offensive begun at the end of June 1942, and the Italian press immediately described its fabulous development. Dailies wrote about a very fast war, and the deployment of great masses of tanks and planes marked it out. At the end of July, the first news about the engagement of Italian detachments appeared on the press. They took part in the Krasnij Lutch coal area conquer, and then they begun the 500 kilometers long transfer to the bight of the Don.

Today, one cannot avoid to be greatly surprised by the deep imbalance between the impressive deployment of modern weapons and means put into the field by the Germans, and the modesty of the Italian ones. We are sure that also some contemporary readers had the same feelings. The dailies portrayed on one side the violent fights between Soviet and German armoured divisions, groups of artillery, and flight formations. On the other side, they immortalized Italian infantrymen's bayonet charges, with hand grenades launches and cavalry charges.

Everybody who was reading the news about the German summer offensive could easily develop a clear and simple idea: the invasion of Soviet Union is a German war, and Italians can only participate with an auxiliary role.

Now, we can begin to examine the Stalingrad battle. Italian soldiers were finishing to draw up on the northern part of the Don bight when the German troops began to lay siege to the city. They remained there during all the Stalingrad battle and they didn't take part to the fighting around the so-called "Volga capital" (except some motorized units that transported supplies and men to the Germans detachments. Seventy-seven soldiers were trapped in the city in November, and only two of them survived).

The Stalingrad battle was quickly proposed to the public opinion as the critical moment of the summer offensive and of the same Russian campaign. Propaganda and newspapers affirmed that the capture of the city would have permitted to the Axis armies to separate Caucasus and Central Russian fronts, and to block definitively Volga River. It was the main road to Central Russia for petrol from Caucasus and Anglo-American supplies from Iran. For these reasons, the news of the battle was in the front page for all the time. However, Italian press devoted a very great attention to all the Russian campaign: Moscow front, Leningrad siege, Caucasus.

Nevertheless, Italian Eight Army didn't participate to this epochal battle, and it was a great problem for Fascist Regime. In the Italian public opinion was beginning to spread the perception of the complete Italian subalternation towards Germany, and this feeling could diminish Fascism's international prestige. The press offered the following interpretation: our troops have the goal to garrison the left side of the Don bight, securing the side and the rear of the Armies engaged in the siege. This interpretation had a military foundation, but it clearly confirmed the subsidiary function of the Italian Army.

Therefore, propaganda concentrate on the exploits of Italian soldiers on the bank of the Don. The press frequently wrote that they were well valued by Germans because they often repelled Soviet attempts to cross the river. Press exalted the role of Italian soldier because: "also if he will not take part in the parade in the streets of Stalingrad, he will be able to look proudly at the Allies".

Notwithstanding, the description of the terrible fights inside and around the city was incomparably more impressive. During the first days of September, the great offensive from Don to Volga became an enormous siege. Dailies gave every day descriptions of the clashes of tanks,

duels of artillery, coupes de main, and air battles. From the middle of September, the papers announced the impending and unavoidable fall of the city. They described the hecatomb of men and weapons suffered by Soviet Army, and they always assured the forthcoming Soviet collapse. Italian and German leaderships weren't able to understand the enormous sizes of the Soviet productive effort and patriotic mobilization, and it also happened for racial and political prejudices.

Now, we can speak about the two last months of fights in the besieged city. From the beginning of September all the Italian journalists had written that the fall of the city were very close, writing: "Only a crazy man can think that Stalingrad will continue to withstand". After a month, on 10 October they began to understand that the situation could have a different development. They were very impressed by Hitler's speech during the opening ceremony for the *Winter Hilfe* campaign. They began to write that Stalingrad had become a mere pretence, without any strategic significance, because Axis troops were in control of the Volga and the road to Caucasus. Heavy artilleries would have decided the siege, or the besiegers would have to wait until spring, at the latest.

Then, after ten days, everything changed again. German troops went on to the offensive again and occupied "Red October" factory. Germans were exhausted and the offensive ended, and after twenty days, Red Army launched "Uranus" offensive and Soviets were able to surround and to cut Stalingrad besiegers off. Uranus didn't touch Italian ARMIR, but four weeks later, these troops were hit hard by the operation "Little Saturn". Six Italian Infantry Divisions, except Vicenza Division, fought hard and suffered heavy losses. At the end, they had to retreat, partly in disorder. Some of them had to be dispatched in the rear lines to be re-formed.

Then, after one more months, Mussolini's army went in its conclusive catastrophe. On 13 January 1943, Soviet Army sprang ahead on the Voronezh front. It developed an offensive to west and in four days overwhelmed firstly the Second Hungarian Army, then the Twenty-Fourth German Army Corp and, at the end, the Italian Alpine Army Corp. This last withstood heavy fights, and began to withdraw on 17 January night. The retreat was a real disaster because happened during snowstorms, with very low temperatures, without any air and radio communication supports. The troops had few food and transportation, and suffered partisans and Red Army's frequent attacks. Infantry Division Vicenza and Alpine Division Cuneense were wiped out. Only some detachments of the Alpine Division Julia survived. After ten days, only the Alpine Division Tridentina was successful to come out from the pocket of resistance at Nikolajevska, with heavy

losses but with a bit of military efficiency. The outcome of the winter fights in the Don area was of 27.000 injured and frozen men, and 85.000 prisoner and missing soldiers. Only 10.030 of them came back home after the war. On the Don front line, Italy marshaled 150.000 soldiers at the beginning of 1943, and more than 50% of them died. They almost were the 20% of the total Italian fallen during all the II W.W.

What kind of echo had these facts in Italy? Reviews of censored mail and of Chief of Police and Prefects' reports show that public opinion seemed to have heavy dreads about the development of the war already before the winter crisis. People felt that the end of the campaign became even more difficult because Soviet Union bore evidence of an almost endless capacity to regenerate its resources after every defeat. Stalingrad resistance had been declared near to the end for some months, but it seemed the embodiment of an endless war. At the end of 1942 summer, Italian and German press tried to face these popular feelings beginning to write that Russian supplies of men and weapons couldn't be endless, and they must be surely close to an end.

Obviously, the press depicted a perfect organization and logistic. They didn't write about the inadequacy of the winter equipment and lodgment. They also passed over the un-concealable lacks (for instance: trucks, airplanes, tanks, artillery), as if the striking difference with Soviet and German deployments was unimportant.

The chameleonic attitude of the press reached its climax when the final crisis begun. In few days, propaganda changed the interpretation of Axis troops' strategic goals. They declared that Stalingrad conquer never was the main aim. The real mission had been to engage some Soviet Armies while the Axis Armies moved towards the Caucasus. This unbiased attitude reached its acme with the following statement: "Anyway, when two almost equal Powers fight, the winner and the looser cannot be every time the same".

Italian machine of consent reached the worst and most cynical level when it wrote about the Alpine Divisions rout. To be clear, nobody spoke about the rout. The agony of the Paulus's Armies was described with bombastic but fundamentally truthful style. On the contrary, the press continued to write about impregnable strongholds and air fights, whereas the Alpine troops wondered blindly on around the steppe.

The ruinous rout was depicted as a "shortening of the front", and every time it was performed carefully following clear, but unfortunately inexistent, instructions. Obviously, the retreat was every time followed by mysterious "efficient countermeasures performed by the German and allied troops". The most cynical sentences were written on 13 February 1943 by the titled

“Corriere della Sera”: “The retreat is always the crucial test for an Army, and this test had been overcome in a wonderful way by Italians. Soviets never were able to transform a well performed, orderly, and well-disciplined retreat into a chaotic flight”.

Only antifascist underground propaganda was able to leak out some truthful news about the Russian campaign. For instance, on 29 June 1942, some leaflets were found in San Remo, a town near the French border; they instigated the soldiers to desert to avoid to be dispatched to Russia. On 31 December a fifteen years old boy was arrested in Genoa because he had written on the walls: “Up with Ivan Petrovich. Down with the Duce. Up with Stalin. People surrender!” On 3 February, in Genoa was found a poster with these periods: “Fascists, the time has come. Russia is gaining the war. Up with Bolshevism”, and in the same day Germans surrendered at Stalingrad.

Police was very worried and it could mean that these petty acts of disobedience were widespread and welcomed, especially in the working class neighbourhoods and in the factories. Notwithstanding, citizens only knew the true dimension of the Russian disaster when the first survivors came back home. Soldiers’ families surely had understood that something was going wrong, because the postal courier and the soldiers in leave didn’t arrive from the Russian front since the end of 1942, but propaganda and censorship were able to keep people in the ignorance. Only the survivors disclosed the dimension of the disaster, the inefficiency of the Italian headquarters, and Germans’ indifference for their allies’ destiny during the rout. Moreover, Soviets dropped propaganda materials over Italian detachments to invite them to surrender and to revolt against Fascist Regime. Sometime, soldiers took at home these leaflets and showed them to relatives and friends. Police and Fascist authorities (for instance Genoa Head of Police on 20 March 1943) were worried about it and frequently denounced this danger.

The comprehension of the Russian disaster by the people was vague, slow and fragmentary. However, it surely marked the turning point of the relationship between Fascism and the Italians. Dissidence against Regime and war became even more widespread; it was no more bounded at the anti Fascist militants. On 5 March, the most powerful strike in the last twenty years broke out in the Turin factories, and Milan workers begun to strike during the second half of the month. These strikes mainly had wage claims but they were led by anti Fascists, and there also were slogans against war and the alliance with Nazi Germany. Surely, Axis military crisis in the far Russian steppe had a leading role to promote a mass adhesion to the strikes, weakening Fascist authoritativeness.

To conclude, we want to state that the majority of Italian people surely had the heavy responsibility to have accepted and supported Fascist belligerent attitude for many years. At the same time, many soldiers were responsible of a large number of war crimes, in Balkan, Eastern and Northern Africa, and in Soviet Union. Only military defeats unmasked propaganda lies, and they resulted in the lost of the most important Fascism's political capital: public opinion's consent.

After twenty years of Fascism, heedless militarism, and war crimes, only Resistance and the epic deeds of Italian Military Internees in Germany during 1943-45 were able to give back to Italy its honour.

Already during the previous years, there were fearless persons. They wanted and were able to unmask the lies of the propaganda and tried to stir up their compatriots' conscience. This happened while mass media, intellectuals, and Catholic Church only spoke of victory, and kept silence about the horrors of Nazi-Fascist war and our soldiers' sufferings. We are thinking to the manual worker Giacomo Pastorino, who was arrested on 9 September 1941 because he had written on the back of a lorry: "Who follows me, he will get lost" to ridicule famous Mussolini's sentence: "Who is stopping, he will get lost". Or at the steelworker Ettore Trevisan, who was arrested on 2 April 1943 because he had handwritten some posters to praise Soviet Russia. And to the two anonymous which wrote on the wall of two important Genoese arms factories, respectively "S. Giorgio" on 10 April 1942 and "Ansaldo Meccanico" on 21 February 1943, "Down with Fascism because it makes die us of hunger and false hopes" and "We are sick to death of victories. We want peace".

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