



# WER IST WALTER?

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Resistance in Europe during  
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# Yugoslav Prisoners of War from Camp No. 43 in Northwestern Italy: Civil Solidarity, Armed Resistance and Post-war Legacies

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## **Yugoslavs in Italy during World War II: Prisoners, escapers, partisans**

The presence of Yugoslavs in Italy as either civilian internees or prisoners of war (POWs) during World War II was on such a scale that it warrants focused attention. This influx of Yugoslavs into Italy was among the most tragic consequences of the April 1941 invasion of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia by the Axis forces of Germany, Italy, and Hungary. The Yugoslav prisoners in Italy were diverse. One group of prisoners were civilians detained as Partisans, or suspected Partisans, or Partisan supporters. This sometimes led to large scale internment of civilians in order to cleanse populations from entire areas, particularly in the part of Slovenia annexed by Italy.<sup>1</sup> Another such group was interned Jews hailing from Italian-occupied areas, coming from there or as refugees from German-occupied areas and the Independent State of Croatia;<sup>2</sup> and prisoners of war (POWs) from the Yugoslav Royal Army (*Jugoslovenska Vojska*) who were captured in the early stages of the invasion in April 1941. The detention conditions varied based on the categories above, the types of camps and the periods. Recent literature approximates

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- 1 Carlo Spartaco Capogreco, *Mussolini's camps. Civilian internment in Fascist Italy (1940-1943)* (London: Routledge, 2019), 53-54. First Italian edition 2004; Andrea Martocchia, *I partigiani jugoslavi nella resistenza italiana* (Rome: Odrarek, 2011), 25. A parallel internment also affected the Slovene and Croat minorities who resided in the pre-1941 borders of the Italian Kingdom; fascist authorities defined them with the derogatory term *allogeni* ("allogeneic", "different from the others"). Capogreco, *Mussolini's camps*, 59, 65.
  - 2 Capogreco, *Mussolini's camps*, 77; Barbara Costamagna, "I profughi ebrei jugoslavi in Piemonte e Valle d'Aosta", *Quaderni* no. 16 (2004): 373-374.

the number of Yugoslav civilian internees to be around 100.000,<sup>3</sup> while Yugoslav POWs are estimated between 6.500 and 7.500.<sup>4</sup>

These issues have been, and continue to be, absent from Italy's collective memory. This is in line with the general omission of almost every aspect related to the invasion of Yugoslavia.<sup>5</sup> Despite historical research debunking it, the collective and stereotypical representation of the "good Italian" versus the "bad German" persists in popular opinion.<sup>6</sup> This amnesia also has implications for the former detention camps for Yugoslavs. The vast majority of them, including POW Camp No. 43 in northwestern Italy – the case study of this article – are mostly devoid of any memorialisation action or process.

In the past two decades, while numerous works have specifically addressed the mass detention of civilians,<sup>7</sup> certain aspects about Yugoslavs detained in the Italian fascist concentration system remain underexplored. Notably, the imprisonment of Yugoslav POWs and their fate during the war has been the subject of valuable but isolated case studies.<sup>8</sup> By contrast, the

3 Carlo Spartaco Capogreco, *Mussolini's camps*, 59; Alessandra Kersevan, *Lager italiani. Pulizia etnica e campi di concentramento fascisti per civili jugoslavi 1941-1943* (Rome: Nutrimenti, 2008), 8; Eric Gobetti, *Alleati del nemico. L'occupazione italiana in Jugoslavia (1941-1943)* (Bari: Laterza, 2013), 86. In 1946, the Yugoslav Commission for the investigation of crimes of occupiers reported the figure of 109.437 civilian internees. Đuro Đurašković and Nikola Živković, *Jugoslavenški zatočnici u Italiji 1941-1945* (Belgrade: ISI, 2001), 311.

4 The abovementioned commission reported the figure of 7.450 Yugoslav POWs. Official Italian data ranges between 6.569 (May 1942) and 5.760 (March 1943). Costantino Di Sante, "L'organizzazione dei campi di concentramento fascisti per prigionieri nemici", in *Prigionieri in Italia. Militari alleati e campi di prigionia (1940-1945)*, ed. Marco Minardi (Parma: MUP, 2021), 18.

5 In April 2021, on the 80th anniversary of the invasion of Yugoslavia, the National Network of Institutes for History of Resistance in Italy issued an appeal, signed by about 130 scholars, experts and entities. The document called for Italian institutions to acknowledge the army's responsibilities in the invasion, noting the lack of public awareness about those events. There has been no official response nor statement on the appeal, which can be found at <https://www.reteparri.it/comunicati/6605-6605/>. All internet sources were last accessed on 30 March 2024).

6 Filippo Focardi, *The bad German and the good Italian. Removing the guilt of the Second World War* (Manchester: M.U. Press, 2023). First Italian edition 2013.

7 The main ones are: Capogreco, *Mussolini's camps*; Kersevan, *Lager italiani*; ed. Costantino di Sante, *I campi di concentramento in Italia. Dall'internamento alla deportazione (1940-1945)* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2001).

8 Some examples: Mauro Gelfi et.al, *The tower of silence. Storie di un campo di prigionia. Bergamo 1941 - 1945* (Sestante: Bergamo, 2010) on Camp no. 62 in Grumello (Lombardy); Claretta Coda, "Serbo-slavi in Canavese", cnj.it, [http://www.cnj.it/PARTIGIANI/JUGOSLAVI\\_IN\\_ITALIA/NOVO/testi\\_Coda\\_Canavese.pdf](http://www.cnj.it/PARTIGIANI/JUGOSLAVI_IN_ITALIA/NOVO/testi_Coda_Canavese.pdf), 2021, on Camp no. 127 in Locana (Piedmont); Mario Giulio Salzano, "Qui anche i sogni sono morti", in *Prigionieri in Italia. Militari alleati e campi di prigionia (1940-1945)*, ed. Marco Minardi (Parma: MUP editore, 2021), 179-223, on Camp no. 78 in Sulmona (Abruzzo).

experiences of Allied countries' POWs in Italy have been more thoroughly documented through abundant memoirs and recent systematic research, especially about the over 70.000 British POWs.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, the role of combatants from the dissolved Kingdom of Yugoslavia occupied an uneasy position in socialist Yugoslavia, in which the Partisan movement was the fundamental pillar of national liberation and social revolution. Conversely, royal institutions were generally associated with class despotism, failure to prevent the Axis invasion, and collaborationism.<sup>10</sup>

8 September 1943 was a watershed moment in Italy's 20th century history. After Mussolini was overthrown and arrested on 25 July, the armistice signed in Cassibile (Sicily) on 3 September – and made public five days later – between the Italian and the Allies' military commanders was followed by the disastrous collapse of the country's military and civil institutions, which were left without clear instructions. Less than two weeks later, Italy, which had joined the conflict alongside Nazi Germany in June 1940, now saw most of its territory occupied by the Wehrmacht, with a puppet Nazi regime – the Italian Social Republic (*Repubblica Sociale Italiana* – RSI) – installed in the northern and central half under Mussolini's lead.

In the same period, the Allied forces that had landed in Sicily in July seized control of the southern territory, where the Kingdom of Italy's government had fled. The Allied forces prepared their further advance to the centre-north, where they would act in variable cooperation with the Committee of National Liberation (*Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale* – CLN), which was formed on the day after the armistice was announced. The CLN, a multifaceted umbrella organisation of antifascist parties ranging from liberal-conservatives to communists, then began organising and coordinating the Partisan movement (termed in Italian historiography and public memory as *Resistenza* – the Resistance) which surfaced throughout

9 Isabella Insolubile, *La prigionia alleata in Italia, 1940-1943* (Rome: Viella, 2023). The 70.000 British POWs included those from Britain proper and from British colonies (Indians, South Africans, etc.). Estimates of the total number of POWs in Italy at the time of the armistice are generally around 80.000.

10 Various studies on POWs date back to the final period of Socialist Yugoslavia or after its dissolution, e.g. the aforementioned *Jugoslovenski zatočeni u Italiji* by Đuro Đurašković and Nikola Živković or Slobodan D. Milošević, "Zarobljavanje vojnika Kraljevine Jugoslavije u Aprilskom ratu 1941", *Vojnoistorijski glasnik* 1 (1991): 159-176. In the late 1990s, some studies were carried out in the context of the intentions of the new Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (composed of Serbia and Montenegro) to demand war compensations from Germany: ed. Božidar Lazić, *Zapisi o ratnoj šteti i obeštećenju ratnih vojnih zarobljenika 1941-1945* (Beograd: Survjz, 1999).

the Nazi-fascist-controlled centre-north. The first armed resistance groups concentrated in the mountainous and semi-mountainous territories. This area between southern Piedmont and western Liguria is where the events covered by this study occurred.

The sheer magnitude of implications from the state's changing sides and its sudden collapse opened a wide range of hope and opportunities and simultaneously disoriented and frustrated the Italian population.<sup>11</sup> This was also a seminal point for the foreign prisoners. Besides their own choices and actions, their fate depended, once again, on the type of internment, on the specific camp situations and, above all, on their commanders' attitudes. While some of the Yugoslav internees and POWs in northern and central Italy were handed over to the German occupying forces for re-deportation, most managed to escape. Historian Roger Absalom referred to a "strange alliance" when describing the relationship between the British and American ex-prisoners and the Italian peasants who rescued, hid and nourished their former enemies.<sup>12</sup> This assistance enabled thousands of fugitives to avoid potential recapture by Nazi-fascists and offered the Italian population in the countryside an opportunity to emancipate themselves from the conformism of a two-decade-long authoritarian regime. These acts represented the first spontaneous, "instinctive and pre-political" forms of post-fascist solidarity that would eventually evolve into widespread unarmed resistance and, at times, cooperation with nascent partisan groups.<sup>13</sup>

Against this backdrop, it is essential to consider the Yugoslav POWs, noting both their similarities and unique characteristics in comparison to the other POWs. As will be shown in the context of Camp No. 43, they were also a part of the "strange alliance". What differs is that the ex-POWs from Allied countries maintained institutional structures with hierarchies and orders from their respective armies and governments, thus ensuring continued loyalty and obtaining protection; special search and assistance missions were deployed for them. By contrast, the Yugoslav POWs, who had been captured two and a half years earlier as soldiers or officers of an army that had since dissolved, were in limbo.

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11 Claudio Pavone, *A civil war. A history of the Italian Resistance* (London: Verso, 2013). First Italian edition 1991.

12 Roger Absalom, *A Strange Alliance. Aspects of escape and survival in Italy 1943-45* (Florence: Olschki, 1991).

13 Marcello Flores and Mimmo Franzinelli, *Storia della Resistenza* (Bari: Laterza, 2019), 145.

Despite being politically delegitimised and institutionally weakened,<sup>14</sup> the Kingdom of Yugoslavia's government-in-exile in London still operated a diplomatic network in autumn 1943. Various Yugoslav embassies, especially the one at the Holy See, actively provided aid and contacts to interned Yugoslav citizens.<sup>15</sup> However, no structured operation emerged after the September 1943 armistice. To a large extent, the Yugoslav escapees had to independently recreate social order, either as individuals or in affinity groups. The way they renegotiated and rebuilt it after 8 September, together with Italian civilians, demands particular attention.

Hundreds of these Yugoslav escapees, both former civilian internees and POWs, joined the Italian resistance.<sup>16</sup> Prominent authors in *Resistenza* memoirs and historiography have emphasised the Yugoslav antifascist struggle's practical and ideological inspiration for the Italian Partisan movement and how it became a key component of the Italian movement's imagery.<sup>17</sup> This influence has been commonly linked to the impressions of former Italian soldiers who, after coming back from fighting in Yugoslavia during the invasion, later joined the Partisan movement in Italy. The enlistment of Yugoslavs in the Italian resistance adds a more direct aspect to this idealistic connection. However, compared with the more common case of Yugoslav civilian and political internees, who contributed their ideological background and guerrilla experience to the Italian resistance,<sup>18</sup> the POWs (many of whom were officers and career soldiers) present an additional layer of complexity that merits detailed examination.

### Camp No. 43 “Miramonti” in Garessio

On 6 October 1942, Second Lieutenant Spasoje Radovanović was transferred from POW Camp No. 78 in Sulmona (Abruzzo, central-southern

14 Stevan K. Pavlowitch, *Hitler's New Disorder: The Second World War In Yugoslavia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

15 Đurašković and Živković, *Jugoslovenski zatočnici*, 243-250.

16 The definitive reference on this subject is the aforementioned work by Andrea Martocchia. It is the only work that offers a systematic analysis on a national scale, although it primarily focuses on central and southern Italy.

17 Ada Gobetti, *Diario Partigiano* (Torino: Einaudi, 1956), 31; Pietro Chiodi, *Banditi* (Torino: Einaudi, 1975), 13; Claudio Pavone, *A civil war*, 106.

18 Martocchia, *I partigiani jugoslavi*, 17.



Map 1: Northern Italy in the summer of 1942 (including the annexed parts of Slovenia and Croatia), with the town of Garesio, where Camp No. 43 was located in 1942-43. (Map designed by Iris Buljević for this publication.)

Italy) to the newly established Camp No. 43<sup>19</sup> in Garesio, situated in the Tanaro Valley, a mountainous region of the Maritime Alps bordering Piedmont and Liguria. Camp No. 43 was one of more than 70 POW camps in Italy; at least 15 of them contained Yugoslav POWs.<sup>20</sup> It eventually housed about 400 detainees, all POWs from the *Jugoslovenska Vojska* who had been captured at the start of the invasion.<sup>21</sup> Most of them were officers, including

19 The POW camps' numeration does not seem to correspond to the order of establishment or to alphabetical, geographical or other discernible criteria. As Di Sante explains, the Italian Army General Staff (*Stato maggiore Regio Esercito* – SMRE) introduced this numeration in early 1942 to keep the sites' place hidden in order to limit the chance that, through POWs' correspondence, the Allies could locate relevant military targets. Di Sante, "L'organizzazione dei campi", 16.

20 According to a SMRE document from 30 June 1943, at that date there were 10 "concentration camps" and 5 "working camps" in Italy with Yugoslav POWs. The camps were located throughout Italy. In that moment, Camp No. 43 was the third largest "concentration camp" with Yugoslav POWs, with 381 prisoners, behind Camp No. 62 in Grumello in Piano (near Bergamo, in the north, with 1.672 Yugoslav POWs) and No. 71 in Aversa (near Napoli, in the south, with 442) and the sixth overall, also behind the "working camps" No. 110 in Carbonia (in the island of Sardinia, with 1.554) and No. 115 in Morgnano (in Umbria, in the centre, with 436). Some camps that housed Yugoslav POWs before June 1943 do not appear in this document: they either had them relocated elsewhere and replaced by POWs from other nationalities or had been dismantled. SMRE, "Situazione Prigionieri di Guerra nemici al 30 Giugno 1943/XXI", Campifascisti.it, [https://campifascisti.it/documento\\_doc.php?n=4366](https://campifascisti.it/documento_doc.php?n=4366).

21 According to documents of the SMRE, the number of prisoners in Camp No. 43 ranged between 381 and 389 (campifascisti.it, [https://campifascisti.it/elenco\\_documenti.php](https://campifascisti.it/elenco_documenti.php)). After the war, Spasoje Radovanović compiled a list of 481 former camp prisoners, specifying that about 80 had been freed or transferred before 8 September. Historical Archive of Città di Garesio/*Archivio Storico Città di Garesio* – ASCG, XLVII-S, 1, 1-9.

professionals and reservists, along with a few dozen conscripts – predominantly Serbs, Slovenes and Montenegrins, but also Croats and Bosnian Muslims.

Radovanović welcomed the transfer in his diary, writing: “Yes, the ‘Miramonti’ will embrace us, unite us and give us a well-deserved break after so much suffering in Germany and other concentration camps in Italy.”<sup>22</sup>

This passage marks a shift: the preceding entries in the diary describe a tumultuous journey of captivity, similar to that of many fellow prisoners, in Nuremberg (April-October 1941), Rijeka/Fiume (October 1941-July 1942) and Sulmona (July-October 1942). Widespread mistreatment, cruelty and punishment are reported, particularly during the first and third stages.<sup>23</sup> Radovanović’s entries regarding Garessio, like those from other diaries and letters, depict more tolerable imprisonment and fair treatment.<sup>24</sup>

Beyond subjective appraisals, two contingent factors likely contributed to this perceived difference. The first is the relatively good material condition of the internment site, the Hotel Miramonti, which was located in the centre of the small town and had been abandoned shortly before being converted into a military site. It was a stark contrast to the overcrowded camp in Nuremberg and the dilapidated barracks in Sulmona. The second is the non-hostile behaviour of the camp command, which avoided punitive attitudes and allowed decent treatment in terms of food and recreation. The camp’s military chaplain also played a role, often interceding with the command itself on behalf of the prisoners.<sup>25</sup>

These factors were byproducts of the urgency with which Italian fascist camps were set up, as well as the discretion afforded to individual commanders. In the case of Camp No. 43, this situation incidentally led to a positive outcome; in the rest of the country, however, the improvised and inadequate management of the whole camp system and the arbitrary nature of command generally resulted in ill-treatment and torture.<sup>26</sup> Already at

22 Spasojne Radovanović, “Diario”, *Il presente e la storia* no. 60 (2001): 124.

23 For more on camp no. 78 in Sulmona: Salzano, “Qui anche i sogni sono morti”.

24 Radovanović, “Diario”, 124-126; Lazar Jovančić and Milan Milutinović, “La vita degli ufficiali jugoslavi al Campo del Miramonti”, 8 July 1964, in ASCG, XLVII-S, 6, 1; “Intervento dell’Avv. Svetoraz [sic] Maksimovic”, 6 September 1970, ASCG, XLVII-S, 4; “Intervento del sig. Alexander [sic] Tamindzic”, 6 September 1970, ASCG, XLVII-S, 4, 12.

25 Radovanović, “Diario”, 124-126; Jovančić, “La vita degli ufficiali”, 1.

26 Isabella Insolubile, “Prigionieri nel paese del sole”, in *Prigionieri in Italia. Militari alleati e campi di prigionia (1940-1945)*, ed. Marco Minardi (Parma: MUP, 2021), 47. The Yugoslav POWs in Italy suffered worse treatment than the already harsh and systematically degrading conditions faced by



this stage, cooperation began forming between prisoners and the population of Garessio, as some inhabitants helped prisoners covertly exchange correspondence with the outside world, and several women expressed concern for the prisoners' condition.<sup>27</sup>

### **“Towards the same destiny”: Escapers and helpers**

On 9 September 1943, the day after the armistice was announced, the prisoners in Camp No. 43 asked the command to be released before the expected arrival of Nazi German troops, who were swiftly occupying northern Italy. After some hesitation, which incited fierce protests from the prisoners, Commandant Vincenzo Ardu ultimately ordered the gates to be opened on 10 September.<sup>28</sup> Hundreds of prisoners began escaping, heading in the direction opposite the valley floor, where the Germans were to arrive. They dispersed through the woods of the semi-mountainous territory between southern Piedmont and western Liguria, covering a range of tens of kilometres. Lazar Jovančić and Milan Milutinović recall how also Italian prison guards escaped with them: “We were surprised and delighted to see next to us some of the officers from the camp, some of them already in civilian clothes; like us, they wanted to save themselves from the Germans. We now became a kind of ‘allies’ in the common danger, but with one big difference: they were at their home, and we were far from ours.”<sup>29</sup>

Radovanović echoed this, writing: “Together with us, arm in arm, escaped Commander Ardu, officials, sub-officers and sentries, all united towards the same destiny. We were true brothers, as if we’d always lived together and no one thought of what we had been considered until 10 September 1943.”<sup>30</sup>

Shortly thereafter, in early October 1943, Ardu joined the first Partisan groups forming in the Tanaro Valley area, the same groups later joined by some ex-POWs. The importance of Ardu’s choices becomes evident when considering what happened at the various camps that the commanders

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American or British POWs. However, their treatment was generally less severe than that of Yugoslav civilian internees, who lacked formal protection under international conventions.

27 Radovanović, “Diario”, 125; Jovančić, “La vita degli ufficiali”, 1.

28 Vasa Dolinka, “All’Ill.mo Signor prefetto della provincia di Cuneo”; ASCG, XLVII-P, 59, 1, 10 July 1945; Jovančić, “La vita degli ufficiali”, 1.

29 Jovančić, “La vita degli ufficiali”, 1.

30 Radovanović, “Diario”, 126-127.

retained control of and handed over to the Nazis, who then re-deported the prisoners to Germany.<sup>31</sup>

Then, the escapers encountered local civilians. All testimonies show how the population of the Tanaro Valley and its surroundings spontaneously provided the escapees with essential survival resources for weeks, months and, in some cases, the entire duration of the war: shelters in houses, farm-houses and drying sheds; food; clothing; guidance and orientation in places unknown to them; alerts about Nazi-fascist patrols; and other crucial measures to ensure the escapers' safety.<sup>32</sup> These actions, which the civilians took at high risk of retaliation by the Nazi-fascists, combined with the prisoners' ability to self-mobilise for survival, proved decisive.<sup>33</sup> Cross-referencing available sources and testimonies reveals that none of the prisoners from Camp No. 43 were captured or deported in the initial weeks following the escape; even in the months that followed, captures and subsequent deportations were relatively limited.<sup>34</sup>

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- 31 For example, almost 1.000 prisoners were re-deported from the concentration camp for Slovene and Croat civilians in Cairo Montenotte, located a few kilometres from Garesio, to Mauthausen. Milovan Pisarri, "Cairo Montenotte – Campo di concentramento, campifascisti.it. [https://campifascisti.it/scheda\\_campo.php?id\\_campo=179](https://campifascisti.it/scheda_campo.php?id_campo=179). Thousands of British POWs were re-deported, either immediately or after their escape and subsequent recapture. Janet Dethick and Andrea Giuseppe, "British Prisoners of War ceded to Germany", <https://lavoro forzato.topografiaperlastoria.org/temi.html?id=23&cap=30&l=en>.
- 32 Among others: Desimir Cvetković et. al., "Al signor sindaco di Garesio"; ASCG, XLVII-P, 46, 1, 15 May 1945; Vasa Dolinka, "All'ill.mo Signor prefetto", 1-5, 10 July 1945; Aleksandar Tamindžić, "Diario di un prigioniero di guerra", *Il presente e la storia*, no. 60 (2001): 102-117; Radovanović, "Diario", 126-129; Jovančić, "La vita degli ufficiali", 1-3; Maksimović, "Intervento".
- 33 The ongoing data collection on the helpers of Camp No. 43 POW's helpers, compiled by the author for the scope of this research, currently includes around seventy names of individuals and families, as identified across various sources. Researchers in the field suggest that each escaper received assistance from at least two or three different families: Claretta Coda, *A strange alliance. L'inattesa alleanza della gente di Castiglione Torinese con 126 prigionieri di guerra inglesi del Campo PG 112/4 di Gassino* (Torino: Città metropolitana di Torino, 2021), 19.
- 34 Tamindžić reports a few captures at the end of October 1943 and another four in January 1944. See "Diario", 112-113. One confirmed case is that of Captain Vasa Dolinka, born in 1882 and the oldest prisoner in Camp No. 43, who was captured in June 1944 and subsequently deported to Germany with three compatriots. Dolinka explained this in a report he wrote in July 1945 in Garesio, where he briefly returned before going back to Yugoslavia. See: Dolinka, "All'ill.mo", 3. Among former Camp 43 POWs, there were two confirmed deaths in Garesio: one due to illness (Adolf Menčak, on 17 January 1944) and one from capture and execution by the Nazis (Miodrag Aleksić, on 20 November 1944). While some sources hint at the death of a third ex-prisoner, Miloš Nikolić, there is no conclusive evidence at this point.



Map 2: Localities nearby Garesio where escapers from Camp No. 43 have been hiding and receiving support in the aftermath of the 1943 armistice. Elaboration from the author's data collection. (Map designed by Iris Buljević for this publication.)

Research on the aid provided by Italian civilians to Allied prisoners typically highlights peasants' significant role.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, many people from the countryside offered solidarity and local knowledge, driven by a traditional mistrust towards state actors and state intrusion ranging from requisitions to forced recruitment. The Camp No. 43 area, in which many of the helpers were peasants, was no exception. However, it is important not to overlook the contribution of social sectors of small town centres. In a territory as semi-mountainous but moderately industrialised as Garesio and the entire Tanaro Valley were at the time, industrial workers, shopkeepers and small professionals played a key role in providing material and monetary resources. These helpers did not see the ex-prisoners as strangers, seeing them instead as somehow familiar figures because of their everyday presence in the recent human landscape of the town and valley, which was now ravaged by post-armistice turmoil.

35 Absalom, *A Strange Alliance*; Eugenia Corbino, "Contadini brava gente", in *Prigionieri in Italia militari alleati e campi di prigionia (1940-1945)*, ed. Marco Minardi (Parma: MUP, 2021), 66-98.

Many helpers offered aid that was unrelated to the ensuing Partisan struggle, but others would later become supporters or members of the resistance. A crucial figure in the link between civil solidarity and armed resistance was Roberto Lepetit, the owner of a small pharmaceutical company in Garesio. Lepetit's anti-fascist orientation initially led him to coordinate and participate in aiding the Yugoslav POWs. Later, he offered substantial resources and funding to the first local Partisan groups.<sup>36</sup>

The roles of two social categories are particularly noteworthy. The first is that of women, who assumed significant responsibilities, often defying authority. On 20 October 1943, a German patrol searching for Yugoslav fugitives raided the Hotel Paradiso, which was owned by Flora Corradi. With a rifle to her back and the patrol about to discover the seven Slovenian officers she was hiding, Corradi distracted the soldiers with a pretext, thus allowing the fugitives to escape.<sup>37</sup> This and other behaviours exemplify what historian Anna Bravo has termed "mass mothering" in post-8 September Italy, describing the role of women not as sources of undifferentiated pity, but rather as specifically protective figures for vulnerable males. If taking responsibility for the lives of strangers' endangered by the Nazi-fascist occupation is acknowledged as a practice of civil resistance, then the "mass mothering" represents its distinctly female form.<sup>38</sup>

The second notable category is local clergy. In the post-armistice turmoil, parishes offered protection and the tools of a social organisation. The first to contribute in the Camp's area was the former military chaplain, Don Giuseppe Divina, a figure the prisoners recognised and deeply appreciated.<sup>39</sup> Later, priests from different towns and villages coordinated aid centres through the territory; most of them would eventually cooperate with Partisan formations. This approach highlights the Italian Catholic Church's contradictions in confronting the war. On the one hand, the church sought to maintain social order and diplomatic equidistance between fascists and anti-fascists, mainly (but not exceptionally) expressed by the high clergy; on the other hand, it had the duty of solidarity and the urge to take sides against perceived injustice, mostly manifested by the lower clergy.<sup>40</sup>

36 Susanna Sala Massari, *Roberto Lepetit. Un industriale nella Resistenza* (Milano: Archinto, 2015), 60-74; Dolinka, "All'ill.mo", 3.

37 Dolinka, "All'ill.mo", 2.

38 Anna Bravo and Annamaria Bruzzone, *In guerra senz'armi* (Bari: Laterza 2000).

39 Dolinka, "All'ill.mo", 2.

40 Pavone, *A civil war*, 338-341.

The account of Bogomil Lilija, who hid for five months in the town of Lisio together with three comrades of Slovenian origin, illustrates the construction of a shared aversion to fascism through his sharing of mutual backgrounds, living experiences and worldviews with parish priest Don Antonio Ansaldi:

Every evening we would visit the parish priest to listen and discuss events at home and in the world. He was very interested in what life was like in Slovenia, and what our nation and culture were like. We told him everything: how we [there] had rebelled against the regime at the time, and how the people here [in Italy] had also rebelled against the fascists and other criminal occupiers. We also listened to bulletins from London, from where Slovenian journalists and others described the situation on the frontline.<sup>41</sup>

Solidarity was widespread, but not universal. While many testimonies are filled with expressions of support and gratitude, there was also at least one significant episode of the opposite behaviour. In June 1944, following a tip-off from a young man from Garessio, militiamen of the Italian Social Republic arrested several escapees. Among them was Captain Vasa Dolinka, who, along with three fellow PoWs, would later be deported to Germany. They also arrested typographer Luigi Odda, who had been producing identity cards and passes that enabled many escapers to travel to Yugoslavia or Switzerland.<sup>42</sup> Odda was subsequently deported to Mauthausen, where he died on 28 April 1945.<sup>43</sup>

### **“What should we do now?”: Partisans in Italy**

Like thousands of escapees across Europe, the ex-prisoners of Camp No. 43 were confronted with decisions that carried uncertain prospects. The prisoners' first priority was pure survival, and material, idealistic and existential choices followed: whether to stay, what to do and with whom, or

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41 Bogomil Lilija's letter to the Lisio parish bulletin, 15 September 1977, reported in *L'Unione Monregalese*, no. 1, 5 January 1978, 3. Don Ansaldi actively cooperated with the Partisans.

42 Dolinka, "All'ill.mo", 4; Tamindžić, "Intervento", 13.

43 Renzo Amedeo, *Storia partigiana di Garessio e della prima Valcasotto* (Torino: AVL, 1982), 112.

to set out and where to go. The range of possibilities is vividly illustrated in Aleksandar Tamindžić's diary entry from 26 September 1943, which he wrote while in hiding in the woods above Garesio:

Now that we have regained our freedom, we often ask ourselves: 'What should we do now?' There were many possibilities and [...] the idea of potentially heading south to meet the Allies, but also of a departure for Yugoslavia and a passage to Switzerland, has become topical. Even the possibility of staying where we were now, waiting for the Allies to land on the Côte d'Azur, was not ruled out. But all departures come with a risk. [...] Staying where we are, waiting for the Allies to land near Genoa, seemed less risky and would offer us the opportunity, in the event of them landing, to participate honourably in the struggle against our common enemy. So, if we stayed in place, waiting for the Allies to arrive, we would have to organise ourselves: to collect weapons, make contact with the Italian fighters in the surrounding area and help each other.<sup>44</sup>

Tamindžić's reflections align with his background as a career officer. Despite everything he experienced, he still retained a degree of loyalty to his former institutional affiliation. He also took a leading role in a group of ex-prisoners who were hiding together or nearby, and he maintained contact with other small groups or individual POWs. Their connections with the local Partisans, who were setting up a formation later known as Valcasotto, were facilitated through ex-commander Ardu and other members of the former Camp 43 command who had joined the Partisans by then. Once again, this connection between those who were previously prisoners and guards proved to be essential.

In his diary entry on 4 November 1943, Don Emidio Ferraris, a parish priest close to the Valcasotto Partisans, notes the following: "This group of partisans [Valcasotto] is joined by some Serbian officers, formerly prisoners at the Miramonti Hotel in Garesio, [...] they are gentlemen and, like [all] the partisans, enjoy the sympathy of the population."<sup>45</sup>

44 Tamindžić, "Diario", 103.

45 Don Emidio Ferraris, *Valcasotto nella vita partigiana* (Mondovi: Avagnina, 1947), 12. This excerpt is followed by a list of eleven names.

This small cell likely disbanded soon afterwards, but at least a couple of sub-groups of Yugoslavs re-emerged later on, participating in several combats in the valleys of southern Piedmont. Notably absent among these names is Tamindžić. In his diary, again with the typical mindset of a career officer, he expresses frustration over some misunderstanding with the Partisans, whom he criticises for lack of preparation. These circumstances probably contributed to his decision to head to Switzerland in early 1944, via the Allies' escape lines. Dozens of his fellow Camp No. 43 POWs also took this path, supported in their movements and logistics by local citizens.<sup>46</sup>

After the war, about thirty Yugoslav ex-POWs from Camp No. 43 would be officially recognised by Italy's Ministry of Post-War Assistance of the Italian government as "combatant partisans" in the 4th Alps Division, the Partisan unit that included the Valcasotto group.<sup>47</sup> The 4th Division, part of the "autonomous" (*Autonomi*) Partisans, was formally apolitical and drew from a diverse social base. However, its leadership generally came from the Royal Italian Army, and it had a classically hierarchical conception, leaning towards liberal-conservative ideals. One can assume an affinity in military approaches and, perhaps, in political ideals, between this formation and the Yugoslav ex-POWs. Nonetheless, few traces remain of this experience. The *Autonomi's* organisation and narrative was imbued with a traditional national patriotism that often persisted in their commanders' memoirs; this approach might contribute to explain why, in the war and post-war documentation about the 4th Division, little attention was devoted to the presence of foreign Partisans in its lines.<sup>48</sup>

While some acted in groups, others followed individual paths. Krešimir Stojanović, one of the few simple soldiers in Camp 43, was detained there with his father Aleksandar. Together, they escaped and took refuge in Gressio for five months. In February 1944, when his father left for Switzerland, Krešimir opted to stay. He initially wandered among different Partisan

46 Tamindžić, "Diario", 112-117.

47 The author's data collection on Yugoslav Partisans in the resistance movement in Piedmont and Liguria is based on the Ricompart Archive (Archive of the Italian Partisans' Service for recognition and rewards) <https://partigianiditalia.cultura.gov.it/>.

48 A similar but distinct case, also from southern Piedmont, is that of ISLAFRAN (an acronym for "Italians, Slavs, French", where "Slavs" covered Yugoslavs, Soviets and Czechoslovaks). This battalion, integrated into the *Garibaldini*, was characterised by a clear and explicitly internationalist ideological stance. The Yugoslav members of ISLAFRAN were former political prisoners who had escaped from the prison in the town of Fossano. Ezio Zubini, *Islafran. Storia di una formazione partigiana nelle langhe* (Alba: Ilmiolibro, 2015).

groups before joining the Val Tanaro Brigade as “Cresci”, his battle name. In this *Autonomi*’s formation, part of the 4th Division, he rose to the position of vice-commander of the assault squad. Stojanović’s participation later gained major recognition in the collective memory of local resistance.<sup>49</sup> One account describes his struggle as being motivated by the Nazi-fascist persecutions in Yugoslavia. He talked about these events to civilians and fellow Partisans, who were still largely uninformed about events in occupied Europe and found his stories of “unimaginable cruelties” hard to believe.<sup>50</sup>

Another distinct individual journey is that of Mihailo Palević, whose battle name was “Micio”. He fled from Camp No. 43 to the southern slopes of the Maritime Alps, on the Ligurian side, an area where local Partisan formations were mostly “*Garibaldini*” aligned with the Communist Party.<sup>51</sup> Palević initially served as political commissar and later became commander of the 3rd Garibaldi Brigade. His path, along with the following recollections of a brigade comrade, indicates that he had robust political beliefs, leaving a lasting impression on his fellow Partisans. This suggests that he might have had a prior affiliation with the Yugoslav communists:

The Yugoslav Micio, a man of solid culture and a communist, proved to be an exceptional political commissar. With him, the discussion was always open, ready, and rich in teachings [...] He explained to us the significance of concepts like “democracy”, “popular power”, “freedom”, “social justice”, and so on. “Ideas are as important as weapons”, he used to tell us.<sup>52</sup>

[...] Our commissar, Micio, had told us many times during the evening meetings: “The reasons why we engage in the partisan struggle are not only to fight against the fascists. Yes, first of all we must confront Nazi-fascism and fight it. But with the same resolve, we

49 Renzo Amedeo, *Storia partigiana della 13° Brigata Val Tanaro* (Cuneo: Istituto Storico della Resistenza di Cuneo, 2009).

50 Bruno Catella, *I suoni dell'incudine* (Garessio: self-published, 2017), 144. Catella’s uncle, Alfredo Bernasconi, hid Krešimir and Lazar Stojanović in his house for five months, as stated in the original statement written and signed by Krešimir and Lazar Stojanović. This statement, in both Serbo-Croatian and Italian, is reproduced in the book.

51 Seven ex-POWs from Camp 43, including Palević, joined the Garibaldi brigades in Liguria (Author’s data collection).

52 Enrico De Vincenzi, *O Bella Ciao. Il distacco Torcello* (Milano: La Pietra, 1975), 45. I am grateful to Anna Traverso of ISREC Savona for providing me with this source.



must also oppose the return of those conservative ideas and forces that want to restore the old bourgeois society of exploitation and privilege. Otherwise, what will the Resistance have been for?”<sup>53</sup>

## The post-war legacy: Returnees and emigrants

In a letter dated 15 May 1945, seven former prisoners from Camp No. 43, all of whom had been combatants in Italian Partisan forces, expressed their gratitude to the mayor and the people of Garessio for the various kinds of assistance they had received during their stay. The letter recalled “the long and hard months of struggle against the enemy, the cold, and difficulties of all kinds when, united by a common ideal with the best Italians, we fought relentlessly against the hated oppressor.”<sup>54</sup> The letter concluded with wishes that “cordial and friendly relations will unite the two nations that border the same sea and are joined together in the Alps.”<sup>55</sup>

However, it was the turbulent course of Italian-Yugoslav relations since the war’s immediate aftermath, influenced by the territorial claims and border disputes over Trieste, as well as the severing of relations between the respective communist parties after the Tito-Stalin split in 1948 that initially influenced the reception of the events related to Camp No. 43.

There were also specific consequences regarding the status and the choices of former POWs. Most available evidence suggests that the majority came back to Yugoslavia. However, dozens of former prisoners, including many who had participated in the Italian resistance, chose not to return. In the Arolsen Archives, one can find the applications that many of them submitted to the International Refugee Organization (IRO) for care, maintenance, and resettlement. Some of them found a home in Switzerland (where many had fled in the winter 1943-44), in North and South America, and in Australia.<sup>56</sup>

In these applications, many former POWs cited idealistic motives, sometimes along with safety concerns, arguing that as former soldiers of the Yugoslav Royal Army they would suffer systematic reprisals in Socialist

53 De Vincenzi, *O Bella Ciao*, 136.

54 Cvetković et.al., “Al signor sindaco”, ASCG, XLVII-P, 46,1.

55 Ibid., 1.

56 Online Archive of the Arolsen Archives International Center on Nazi Persecution: <https://collections.arolsen-archives.org/en/archive/3-2-1-2>.

Yugoslavia. It might be assumed that, in some cases, emphasising ideological reasons was intended to enhance their resettlement applications, although these concerns were often aligned with socio-economic or self-realisation motives. In any case, many continued to identify as political exiles in later decades. This geographic dispersion did not contribute positively to preserving the memory of the events at the camp.

The re-establishment of contacts between former Yugoslav prisoners and their Italian helpers began spontaneously. Since the mid-1950s, there have been reports of visits by former prisoners to the camp's surroundings and renewed correspondence between them, their helpers, families, groups and Partisan associations.<sup>57</sup> These connections were maintained for years, in some cases until the early 1990s. A pivotal event took place in 1970, when Garessio's mayor, Renzo Amedeo,<sup>58</sup> aided by ex-prisoner Spasoje Radovanović who had settled in Liguria, organised an "Italian-Yugoslav meeting" inviting the ex-POWs that they could locate to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the liberation of Italy. More than 30 of them, mainly from Yugoslavia and Switzerland, attended the event on 6 September 1970, along with local and national authorities, including the Yugoslav consul in Milan.<sup>59</sup>

Letters and messages surrounding the meeting, as well as the speeches of former prisoners – which were carefully distributed to "returnees" and emigrants – describe an overall serene atmosphere filled with mutual gratitude. There was also an opportunity for more openly internationalist expressions. Ex-POW Muharem Paripović connected civil solidarity with armed resistance, highlighting them as inseparable parts of the struggle for a "progressive and democratic Europe" against oppression. For Paripović, the Italian-Yugoslav cooperation that began in 1943 continued into the present, providing a safe basis for exchanges that, he noted, made the border between

57 Some examples: Boris Sančin, "12 let pozneje", *Demokracija*, 27 January, 1956, 3; N.N., "Ritorno in Val Mongia", *L'Unione Monregalese*, 19 September, 1964, 2.

58 Renzo Amedeo played a crucial role in preserving the memories and networks related to the events at Camp No. 43 events. He contributed in various capacities: as an institutional representative, as a partisan veteran (as a former member of the Val Tanaro Brigade) and as a prolific author on resistance in southern Piedmont.

59 ASCG, XLVII-S, "Incontro Italo-jugoslavo – documenti", 6 September 1970; Archives of Yugoslavia/*Arhiv Jugoslavije* – AJ, Fond SUBNOR-a – Savezni odbor, Fasc. 50, Milan Milutinović and Muharem Paripović, "Izveštaj povodom proslave 100. godišnjice proglašenja Garessia za grad i 25. godišnjice pobeđe pokreta otpora u Italiji", 6 October 1970, 1-11.



Fig. 1: Panel displayed at the Italian-Yugoslav meeting, 6 September 1970.  
(Source: Archivio Storico della Città di Garesio (ASCG), XLVII-S, 5,  
“Album fotografico sull’incontro italo-jugoslavo”)

the two countries “one of the most open in Europe”.<sup>60</sup> While the conflicts of the “old” war seemed to have been resolved, the tensions of the “new”, Cold War came to the fore on that occasion. One testimony recounts protests by

<sup>60</sup> ASCG, XLVII-S “Incontro Italo-jugoslavo – documenti”.

right-wing, nationalist-oriented individuals against the Garessio council for inviting “communist Slavs”.<sup>61</sup> Another account recalls moments of discomfort during the 6 September official ceremony, with some Yugoslav emigres complaining about the display of Socialist Yugoslavia’s flag and symbols.<sup>62</sup>

Despite these episodes, the event’s overall optimism remained unaffected, in line with the state-level Yugoslav-Italian rapprochement that culminated in the Treaty of Osimo in 1975, which finally settled the border issue between the two countries. The period between late 1960s and early 1980s saw the establishment of several monuments, memorials and commemorations on both sides of the Adriatic, held on the initiative of municipalities and local organisations.<sup>63</sup> Many of these events, however, were still framed in a national-institutional context and focused more on the armed Partisan struggle. The peculiarity of initiatives related to Camp No. 43 events lies in their local spontaneity, political plurality and explicit reference to the link between civil solidarity and partisan resistance. The significance of these exchanges is also highlighted by their occurrence in the Piedmontese-Ligurian Maritime Alps, a region peripheral to the traditional geographical, cultural and economic links between the two countries.

The last institutional event related to Camp No. 43 events took place in May 1983. During the awarding of the Italian state bronze medal to the municipality of Garessio for its contribution to the resistance (which explicitly mentioned the aid provided to Yugoslav escapers), the town also received a medal from the Yugoslav SUBNOR (Association of Fighters in the Yugoslav War of Liberation).<sup>64</sup> A few months later, during one of his frequent visits to Liguria, “Micio” Palević was honoured by the City of Savona for his role as a Partisan commander in the liberation of the city.<sup>65</sup>

61 Author’s interview with Sisto Bisio, then town council member in Garessio; Garessio, 26 January 2019.

62 Author’s interview with Adelmo Odello, then town council member in Garessio; Ormea, 26 January 2019.

63 On municipal co-operation between Italy and Yugoslavia and its connection with historical memory and bilateral relations, see: Borut Klabjan, “Twinning across the Adriatic: history, memory and municipal co-operation between Italy and Yugoslavia during the Cold War”, *Urban History* (2023): 1-14; Eloisa Betti and Vladimir Unkovski-Korica, “Town twinning in the Cold War: Zagreb and Bologna as ‘détente from below?’” (Conference paper, ECPR Conference, Prague, Czechia, 10 September 2016), 1-6.

64 “Decorato il gonfalone comunale di Garessio”, *Rivista Autonomi* 28, no. 3 (1983), 20-22.

65 “Così Savona non s’arrese ai tedeschi”, *La Stampa – Ed. Savona e Provincia*, 8 September 1983, 17; Emira Karabeg, “Podvizi partizana Miće”, *Politika*, 4 August, 1984, 8. Karabeg’s article explains that Palević returned to Yugoslavia in May 1945 and had lived in Belgrade for decades.

## Conclusion

The mutual trust that developed between Yugoslav POWs and Italian civilians near Camp No. 43 was formed despite the asymmetrical relationship between the two sides, as the Yugoslavs POWs were dependent on the help of the Italian civilians after their escape. The cooperation was built after the armistice as a response to the breakdown of institutional and social order. The Yugoslav prisoners had encountered this collapse in April 1941, while the Italian civilians faced it in September 1943. This dual capitulation led to a shared construction of meanings and survival tools. Many of the former POWs' testimonies are conciliatory and, implicitly or literally, adopt the stereotype of the "good Italian", or the notion of good "mountain" or "Alpine" people. However, it is important to consider both the structural and the material factors in these events by distinguishing between their ordinary and extraordinary elements. The latter might include the camp command's active cooperation, a network of local people supporting both escapers and partisans, and the positive social acceptance of POWs among the population, possibly influenced by the predominance of officers, some of them with relatively mature age and middle-class backgrounds.

In every case, this story aligns with a broader pattern of solidarity throughout Italy towards POWs of various nationalities. The episodes of civil resistance that have been documented are, most probably, less than those that actually occurred. However, instances of denied aid and denunciations (like the Odda and Dolinka case) might have been underreported as well. It is always essential to consider what the existing testimonies might not have known, or chose not to reveal.

The Miramonti's post-war legacy illustrates a complex and multifaceted interaction between institutional and informal, local and (trans)-national, as well as political and pre-political elements. The connection between civil and armed resistance which vitalised the post-war ties and formed the basis of their common language was central to this interaction. Grassroots relationships motivated events, communications and friendships over several decades. However, these did not outlast the disappearance of the generation of direct protagonists, nor the direct and indirect consequences of the dissolution of the Yugoslav state in the 1990s.<sup>66</sup>

66 The building that hosted Camp No. 43, the Hotel Miramonti, was completely destroyed by fire in 1986 and has been in ruins since then. There are no monuments or plaques in its vicinity. There



Fig. 2: The metal plaque as in January 2019. (Photo: Alfredo Sasso)

The only lasting “monument” to the story of Camp 43 that is still visible today reflects the spirit of initiative and the profound significance of human values it conveyed to those involved, while also highlighting its transient legacy: a simple, small metal plaque with an inscription. It was crafted during a break in the September 1970 Italian-Yugoslav meeting by four ex-prisoners, and placed on the door of the Ghiglia family’s drying shed, located in the woods above the Miramonti. The plaque reads:

After escaping from the Miramonti on 10 September 1943, we found refuge in this drying shed. Thanks to the spontaneous and great help, here we experienced the greatness and generosity of all the people of Garessio, Eternally grateful, Yugoslav officers Alexandro / Lazaro / Giovanni / Vasco. Garessio 6 September 1970.<sup>67</sup>

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were no official commemorations regarding Camp No. 43 and following events until 2021. To celebrate 25 April (Liberation Day) that year, the Garessio library and municipality released a short documentary titled “Garessini e jugoslavi, testimonianze di solidarietà”, authored by Pierandrea Camelia, Giuliano Molineri and Alfredo Sasso. Comune di Garessio, Youtube, 27 April 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=djuoy4-6Xrc>.

<sup>67</sup> The original names, presented in their Italianized forms on the plaque, are: Aleksandar Tamindžić, Lazar Cenić, Jovan Pejanović and Vasilije Ivanišević.

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# WER IST WALTER?

Resistance against Nazism, fascism, occupation and collaboration occurred throughout Europe during World War II. But how much do we know about this history in other European countries? Gathering 32 contributions and case studies on the history of this resistance, as well as on its transmission after 1945, especially in museums, the present book is an invitation to look at resistance in Europe in an interdisciplinary, international, transnational and comparative perspective. It is the result of the international research project “Wer ist Walter? Resistance against Nazism in Europe” which gathered historians, curators and other researchers mainly from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, France and Germany.



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