

Myth and Reality in the Fascist War: The Ministry of Popular Culture and Italian Propaganda on the Bombing of Civilians, 1938-1943

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Abstract

New studies that focus on the air bombardment of civilians in Italy during the Second World War regard the Italian home front as a privileged ‘observation post’ from which to study the relationship between Fascism and society during the years of the collapse of Mussolini’s regime. Yet the role of propaganda, on the specific aspect of people vulnerability to total war, in influencing that relationship, has received little attention.

The main aim of this work is to reconstruct the narrative of bombing and of civilians’ life in Italy during the first phase of the war (1940-1943) as it emerges from reports, stories and works of invention in the Italian media. These have been compared with both the public reaction and the regime propaganda that had constructed some of the most powerful ideological tenets of the Italian Fascism during the 1930s, first of all the myth of air power and the creation of a ‘new man’.

Investigating specific sections of the home front and situating the breakup of the Italian morale at the time of the first serious setbacks of Mussolini’s armies at the end of 1940, this research focuses in particular on the effectiveness - or otherwise - of government policies in steering the media and cultural activities that reflected life in wartime Italy.

Drawing mostly on primary sources such as government papers, personal memoirs, censored letters and confidential reports, the study argues that propaganda’s failure to continue to bolster Fascist myths was due both to the catastrophic impact of war on civilians’ life and to institutional and political flaws. Uneven and inconsistent directives from propaganda controllers reflected similar attitudes and policy failures within the regime as a whole, whereas the enemy proved increasingly more effective in conveying the message that there was no aggression against Italy and that Italians were paying a high price for Mussolini’s mistakes.

Contents

List of Abbreviations

p. III

Introduction

p. 1

Chapter 1

Towards the Air War: Propaganda, the Media and Public Opinion, 1938-1939

p. 17

Chapter 2

From Non-Belligerence to the First Air Raids

p. 43

Chapter 3

Adjusting to Reality: Home Front and Air War

p. 71

Chapter 4

Cracking Italian Morale

p. 99

Chapter 5

Area Bombing and the Definitive Breakup of the Home Front

p. 151

Conclusion

p. 193

Appendix on the Italian press

p. 201

Bibliography

p. 207

List of abbreviations

ACS	Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Rome
ARP	Air Raid Precautions
b.	Busta
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CAB	Cabinet
CBS	Columbia Broadcasting System
DAGR	Direzione Affari Generali e Riservati
DGPS	Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza
DICAT	Difesa Contraerea Territoriale
EIAR	Ente Italiano Audizioni Radiofoniche
fasc.	Fascicolo
FO	Foreign Office
GAB	Gabinetto
GIL	Gioventù Italiana del Littorio
GUF	Gruppi Universitari Fascisti
HC	House of Commons
LUCE	Unione Cinematografica Educativa
MCP	Ministero della Cultura Popolare
MI	Ministero dell'Interno
OVRA	Organizzazione di Vigilanza e Repressione dell'Antifascismo
PCM	Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri
PNF	Partito Nazionale Fascista
RAF	Royal Air Force
RAI	Radio Audizioni Italiane
SCP	Segreteria del Capo della Polizia
SD	Sicherheitsdienst
SPD	Segreteria Particolare del Duce
TNA	The National Archives, Kew, London
TSDS	Tribunale Speciale per la Difesa dello Stato
UNPA	Unione Nazionale Protezione Antiaerea

Introduction

Benito Mussolini, rather paradoxically for a dictator whose rule was marked by his mission to imprint onto modern Italians the martial spirit of a glorious past, took the unusual part of peace broker and procrastinator in the looming European crisis of the late 1930s. Returning to Italy from Munich in September 1938, he was greeted as the man who had forced Germany, Britain and France into a peaceful solution to the Czech crisis. Nearly one year later, when Hitler's invasion of Poland led the British and French to declare war, the Duce kept his country out of the war as a result of military unpreparedness and reports of widespread anti-war and anti-German feeling among the Italian people. For almost 20 years, Fascism had boasted of its fighting credentials and, since 1922 when Mussolini had come to power, the regime had sought military confrontation with the democratic European powers – emerging almost unscathed from the aggression of Ethiopia in 1935 and from backing Franco's rebel troops against Spain's legitimate government in 1936-1939. Yet, when he finally decided to join Hitler in June 1940 – betting on the swift Axis submission of Allied forces – Mussolini took the nation into the first real 'total war' of its history. Like defenceless Ethiopians killed by the mustard gas bombs dropped by Italian aircraft in 1936 or the people slaughtered in the Basque town of Guernica by a Nazi-Fascist air raid on 26 April 1937, civilians in Italy suddenly came within the range of Allied bombers. The home front was no longer a place where fear and death rebounded only on bereaved soldiers' families, as had happened in the Great War. Vulnerability, insecurity and a sense of impending danger came to homes and factories, unsettling everyday life.

A war that involved civilians on a previously unknown scale was the litmus test for Fascism's 'public ethic', described by Emilio Gentile as a compound of discipline, virility, comradeship, 'warrior spirit' and 'total

dedication to the national community'.¹ For 15 years Italians had been swamped by a colossal drill of collective self-deception that camouflaged with myths and parades the lack of real organisation and technical progress. Indeed, when Italy entered the war almost nothing that both civilian and military authorities had discussed over previous decades in terms of infrastructure and anti-aircraft and civil defence measures had been accomplished. The fact that the government and the party had orchestrated wide-ranging campaigns to alert the public to the danger of air war through meetings, courses in schools, pamphlets and posters, led many Italians to a realisation that the tests and experiments in which they had taken part since 1935 were ineffective, ostentatious and ritualistic. Besides, propaganda work was constrained by two conflicting needs – to mobilise citizens without arousing widespread panic.² However, the novel aspects of modern war and their daunting implications for civilians were clearly perceived as early as September 1939, when confidential reports from party informers described widespread anxiety about the likely employment of air forces against Italy.³

Knowing his compatriots were lukewarm about the prospect of war, Mussolini committed Fascist propaganda 'to raise by degrees the temperature of the Italian people'.⁴ The MCP translated the Duce's will in directives to the media that, despite a formal posture of neutrality, aimed at acclimatising the public to wartime precautions and restrictions and, crucially, to the struggle alongside Nazi Germany against the European democracies. The dictator's resolution to enter the war did not imply that Italians had suddenly become a nation of warriors, and the need to influence the population through an uninterrupted fictional account remained. While the role of propaganda and the media in Fascist Italy has been

¹ Emilio Gentile, 'Fascism, Totalitarianism and Political Religion: Definitions and Critical Reflections on Criticism of an Interpretation' *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 3 (2004), p. 343.

² Claudia Baldoli, 'Il regime e la minaccia dall'aria', in *I bombardamenti aerei sull'Italia: politica, stato e società (1939-1945)*, ed. Nicola Labanca (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2012), pp. 102; 114-115.

³ Nicola Gallerano, 'Gli italiani in guerra 1940-1943. Appunti per una ricerca', in *L'Italia nella seconda guerra mondiale e nella Resistenza*, ed. Francesca Ferratini Tosi, Gaetano Grassi and Massimo Legnani (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 1988), p. 309.

⁴ *Opera Omnia di Benito Mussolini*, vol. 29, *Dal viaggio in Germania all'intervento dell'Italia nella seconda guerra mondiale (1 ottobre 1937-10 giugno 1940)*, ed. Edoardo and Duilio Susmel (Florence: La Fenice, 1959), pp. 374-375.

carefully studied, less attention has been focused on its impact during the years in which the regime was most significantly tested, and even less on the representation of the home front and civilians as victims of total war.⁵ The gap between what the media reported and the facts has been recorded in scholarly studies that have over the last decade taken the impact of bombing in the Second World War, and specifically the bombing of Italy, beyond the boundaries of military history to disentangle its political, social and cultural facets.⁶ This work details how such a gap developed and widened, despite the regime professing frankness in its communication policies since 1940.

In particular, the aim of this research is to consider the Italian media representation of the home front under enemy bombing and of Italian air force activity during the Second World War until Mussolini's fall in 1943 against the propaganda that had, since Mussolini's ascent to power, been orchestrated to strengthen the founding ideological tenets of Fascism – first of all the theory of the 'new man', and Italy's primacy in the 'domain of the air'. When the regime faced the test of total war, both of these tenets turned out to be groundless myths. In order to provide a wide spectrum of that representation, the analysis of the 'media' in this research has included not only the press, radio, newsreels and documentaries, but also the most widespread forms of popular culture, such as cinema, theatre and songs. Control over all media was centralised under the MCP which grew increasingly into a vast and complex bureaucracy drawn mostly from the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Interior. Any kind of material intended for

⁵ See Pierluigi Allotti, *Giornalisti di regime. La stampa italiana tra fascismo e antifascismo 1922-1948* (Rome: Carocci, 2012); Franco Contorbia (ed.), *Giornalismo italiano*, voll. 2 and 3, (Milan: Mondadori, 2007-2009); Nicola Labanca and Camillo Zadra (eds), *Costruire un nemico. Studi di storia della propaganda di guerra* (Milan: Unicopli, 2011); Mauro Forno, *La stampa del Ventennio. Strutture e trasformazioni nello Stato totalitario* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2005); Mario Isnenghi, *L'Italia del Fascio* (Florence: Giunti, 1996); Paolo Murialdi, *La stampa del regime fascista* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 2008, first publ. 1980); Philip V. Cannistraro, *La fabbrica del consenso. Fascismo e mass media* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1975).

⁶ See Richard Overy, *The Bombing War. Europe 1939-1945* (London: Penguin, 2014); Baldoli and Andrew Knapp, *Forgotten Blitzes. France and Italy under Allied Air Attack 1940-1945* (London: Continuum, 2012); Labanca (ed.), *I bombardamenti aerei sull'Italia: politica, stato e società*; Baldoli, Knapp and Overy, (eds), *Bombing, States and Peoples in Western Europe 1940-1945* (London: Continuum, 2011); Marco Gioannini and Giulio Massobrio, *Bombardate l'Italia. Storia della guerra di distruzione aerea 1940-1945* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2007); Gabriella Gribaudi, *Guerra totale. Tra bombe alleate e violenze naziste: Napoli e il fronte meridionale 1940-1944* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2005).

information or propaganda purposes - articles in the press, photographs, films, documentaries, posters, leaflets, booklets, songs, shows, plays - came within its reach.

By the end of the 1930s in Italy the process of full control over the media was complete. In 1926 a law had ended the freedom of the press and from 1927 it was forbidden to establish new titles. The Fascist Party directly controlled many newspapers. The Duce or his hierarchs owned other dailies, for example *Il Popolo d'Italia* in Milan (Mussolini), *Il Regime Fascista* in Cremona (Roberto Farinacci), *Il Resto del Carlino* in Bologna (Dino Grandi) and *Il Telegrafo* in Livorno (Costanzo and Galeazzo Ciano). As for the nominally independent press, Mussolini arranged for publishers, industrialists or financiers close to the regime to acquire or maintain ownership, as in the case of the two major newspapers of pre-Fascist Italy, *Corriere della Sera* and *La Stampa*. Also, the Duce had the last say when a new editor was to be appointed. As a consequence of this process, the distinction between information and propaganda, which had been extremely thin since the second half of the 1920s, became almost invisible in wartime Italy.⁷

Periodic meetings (usually weekly) of the MCP or its chief of staff with representatives of the press emphasised topics to be dealt with and events which were not to be reported.⁸ These instructions were summarised, updated and disseminated every day to newsrooms and to prefects in the Italian provinces.⁹ This thesis shows how the inner workings of the MCP during the Second World War were affected by the coexistence of a high level of personalization (the Duce and his Minister made all important decisions, even on trivial details) with an hypertrophic bureaucracy staffed mostly by civil servants coming from other departments and journalists who could not find a job in the press. A continuous flow of detailed instructions, more than general directives based on a firm policy, inundated prefects and editors in chiefs, who had in turn to instruct their

⁷ Murialdi, 'Giornali', in *Il Mondo Contemporaneo. Storia d'Italia*, 2, ed. Fabio Levi, Umberto Levra and Nicola Tranfaglia (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1978), p. 522.

⁸ Nicola Tranfaglia (ed.), *Ministri e giornalisti. La guerra e il Minculpop 1939-43* (Turin: Einaudi, 2005).

⁹ Nicola Tranfaglia with Bruno Maida (eds), *La stampa del regime 1932-1943. Le veline del Minculpop per orientare l'informazione* (Milan: Bompiani, 2005).

subordinates. Orders often did not arrive on time or lost their original intent. From the end of 1942 only self-censorship prevented newsrooms from divulging information about military defeats and the disastrous state of the home front. Moreover, forms of centralized and empirical (almost case-by-case) screening - as was the case with the theatrical censorship exercised by Leopoldo Zurlo examined in chapter 4 - seemed to produce a better outcome than a professed ideological control.

Fascist authorities boasted that the press - unlike cinema, theatre and books - was not subject to preventive censorship but, as a matter of fact, newspapers had to comply scrupulously with the MCP's orders on pain of suspension from publication for one or more days. The directives were often meticulous, repetitive and prone to campaigns in which serious issues –for example the prohibition of mentioning Jewish or American authors and film directors in newspapers – mixed with erratic fixations like the obsession with the proper pronoun for addressing strangers. Although it is mostly from this angle that MCP orders have been anthologised and looked at in studies of the media under Italian fascism, these do convey an idea of the censors' working style and procedures.¹⁰ Yet, it is the less folkloric and picturesque stream of instructions coming from the MCP which show how the regime became estranged from its people in its last years.

The instructions of the MCP, as Mario Isnenghi has observed, did not just contain lies, but entailed a constant work of rewriting facts, transforming them into a 'surreal world' that aimed at forcibly replacing people's everyday lived experience.¹¹ Gaetano Silvano Spinetti, a young MCP press officer at the time, wrote in his diaries that the atmosphere during the conferences at the Ministry was like a classroom, as journalists showed 'no critical thinking', were quarrelsome with each other and always nodded when taking instructions. 'I was appalled', he

¹⁰ Francesco Flora, *Stampa dell'era fascista. Le note di servizio* (Rome: Mondadori, 1945); Claudio Matteini, *Ordini alla stampa* (Rome: Edizioni Poligrafiche, 1945); Federico Coen, *Tre anni di bugie: 328 ordini alla stampa del Minculpop negli anni della guerra* (Milan: Pan, 1977); Giancarlo Ottaviani, *Le veline del Minculpop. Aspetti della propaganda fascista* (Milan: Todariana, 1999).

¹¹ Mario Isnenghi, *Intelletuali militanti e intelletuali funzionari. Appunti sulla cultura fascista* (Turin: Einaudi, 1979), p. 43.

recalled, ‘that men who had been active in democratic journalism were so tame at receiving such meticulous orders’.¹² Editors seldom voiced disagreements with the Ministry’s instructions. On 30 October 1942, for example, the editor of *Corriere della Sera*, Aldo Borelli, wrote to Alessandro Pavolini, Minister of propaganda from 1939 to 1943, to protest that the censors had vetoed five articles in a row, despite the fact that ‘they did not report anything dangerous’.¹³

War propaganda had only one chief – the Duce himself, who frequently summoned the Minister of Popular Culture. The actual work of control and censorship was rarely negotiated with other centres of power – mostly with those essential in wartime, like the military authorities, whose approval was requested before journalistic material was published from the fronts, or the Fascist Party, which supervised the work of civilian assistance. The fact that there was no institutional check from outside appeared to be an advantage over the enemy, whose propaganda policies had to endure a more complex route from government to parliament, from media to its audiences: the British prime minister and his government had to answer questions in parliament while newspapers and the BBC had to balance the imperatives of a country at war with the freedom of the press to which Britons had been long accustomed. Therefore, Italian propaganda appeared to have an organisational advantage, as its *modus operandi* seemed swift and undiscussed, but the enemy’s output was unburdened by the most invasive government pressures.

Some aspects of Fascist activities from the Ethiopian campaign onwards borrowed from techniques adopted in Liberal Italy during the Great War when, for the first time, cinema, theatre, sports events, exhibitions and conferences of intellectuals and journalists became the vehicles of mass propaganda, and when secret funds managed by the Ministry of Interior were employed to pay collaborators, informers and journalists. These techniques were perfected during the Second World War by the MCP, which in 1943 alone spent 200 million lire on

¹² G. Silvano Spinetti, *Difesa di una generazione. Tutti fascisti, antifascisti, traditori, traditi* (Rome: Edizioni Polilibrarie, 1948), pp. 43-50.

¹³ Cited in Allotti, *Giornalisti di regime*, p. 137 (letter of 31 October 1942).

press contributors and conference speakers.¹⁴ During the Ethiopian war the press had learned how to get information from the official bulletins that, suitably doctored, served to conceal inconvenient facts whilst reporting a ‘heroic and transformed war’.¹⁵ In addition the activity of the Istituto LUCE, which produced photographic and filmed material mostly focusing on the battlefield, was based on the same organisational experiences from the Ethiopian and Spanish campaigns.¹⁶ What Italian propaganda had to learn from scratch in the Second World War was how to deal with a domestic front that had been sheltered until then – except for a few areas in the North targeted by enemy air raids in the First World War – by direct blows from the enemy.

The MCP’s organisational model followed the pattern of German propaganda and its master, Joseph Goebbels. Pavolini, the most ‘political’ and long-lasting of the Fascist ministers of propaganda, imitated his Nazi opposite number in institutionalising a personal and regular contact with newspaper editors.¹⁷ A secret protocol of the Pact of Steel signed on 23 May 1939 decreed a permanent collaboration between Italy and Germany in the fields of press, propaganda and information, whereas the Istituto LUCE and *Universal Film Aktiengesellschaft* (Germany’s largest film company, under government control from 1933) had an agreement over the exchange of newsreels and documentaries as early as 1929.¹⁸ Yet, cooperation between the two was no idyll. The Germans, for example, could not stand the way that, in spite of rigid controls, the Italian press leaked news that Berlin treated as military secrets. Goebbels’ people rechristened the Italian bulletins *spaghetti-Berichten* because they were, according

¹⁴ Patrizia Ferrara, ‘Dalla Grande Guerra al fascismo: l’evoluzione degli apparati di propaganda in Italia’, in *Costruire un nemico. Studi di storia della propaganda di guerra*, ed. Labanca and Zadra, pp. 152-159.

¹⁵ Enrica Bricchetto, ‘Voci di regime’, in *Gli italiani in guerra. Conflitti, identità, memoria dal Risorgimento ai nostri giorni*, Vol. 4.2, *Il Ventennio Fascista: la seconda guerra mondiale*, ed. Isnenghi and Giulia Albanese (turin: Utet, 2008), pp. 131-133.

¹⁶ Liliana Ellena, ‘Atlante visivo dell’Italia fascista: l’Istituto Luce’, in *Gli italiani in guerra*, Vol. 4.1, *Il Ventennio fascista. Dall’impresa di Fiume alla Seconda guerra mondiale (1919-1940)* ed. Isnenghi and Albanese, pp. 692.

¹⁷ *The Secret Conferences of Dr Goebbels. October 1939-March 1943*, ed. Willi A. Boelcke (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1967).

¹⁸ Jens Petersen, ‘L’organizzazione della propaganda tedesca in Italia 1939-1943’, in *L’Italia in guerra 1940-43*, ed. Bruna Micheletti and Pier Paolo Poggio (Brescia: Fondazione Micheletti, 1992), pp. 686-687.

to them, long and unsubstantial. As for Pavolini, he tried to preserve Italian press correspondents in Berlin from bribery and pressures granting them a higher salary than their colleagues at home.¹⁹ Also, the Italian minister of propaganda made an effort to impose more discipline on the machine, which was particularly prone to rumours and leaks. In November 1941, for example, when he realised that secret instructions from the Ministry to the media were being leaked to foreign embassies in Rome, he ordered an enquiry and set out new rules to achieve greater confidentiality.²⁰

Beneath the surface, comparing the minutes of Goebbels' conferences to Pavolini's, it is possible to find – alongside a few things in common, such as a tendency to patronise audiences with long monologues regarding their close relationships to their respective bosses – many differences in terms of effectiveness and the power of persuasion towards the public.²¹ Also, the disparity in the available technology and propaganda means was huge. Germany, for example, had a much larger film industry and a far broader radio network than its ally. The cost of receivers and widespread poverty limited the impact of state-controlled radio in Italy, where in 1939 there were 1.2 million subscriptions in comparison with 13 million in Germany. Fragmentation and rival power centres were also a constraint on Italian propaganda in comparison with Germany.²² Unlike the Nazi machine and Goebbels' unrestrained hegemony, which was only partially undermined by his personal rivalry with the Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop, in Italy the relationship between the media and its controllers faced behind-the-scenes interference. In theory, the Ministry had concentrated extensive powers, stretching across all forms of propaganda, but in practice it had to maintain good terms with government members, the Party, Fascist hardliners and other bodies such as the office for press and propaganda established by the military supreme command. As a central institution, the MCP was also obliged to

¹⁹ Malte König, 'Censura, controllo e notizie a valanga. La collaborazione tra Italia e Germania nella stampa e nella radio 1940-1941', *Italia Contemporanea* 2 (2013), pp. 244-247.

²⁰ ACS, MCP, GAB, b. 19, Instructions of 17 November 1941.

²¹ See *The Secret Conferences of Dr Goebbels*, ed. Boelcke, and *Ministri e giornalisti*, ed. Tranfaglia.

²² Alexander J. De Grand, *Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany: The Fascist 'Style' of Rule* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 95-96.

rely on local bureaucracies. Instructions to the press were sent by telegraph twice a day in code to the provincial prefects where the newspapers were published.²³ Those were typical processes in Fascist institutions, where a nominal concentration of powers did not prevent the multiplication and overlap of competences.²⁴ From the first year of the war, for example, tensions had mounted between the MCP and the military, as the latter wanted exclusive power to authorise or censor anything to be published in Italy about the war. A compromise was only reached in May 1942, when Pavolini and General Ugo Cavallero agreed that the supreme command could approve any material concerning the military aspects of war.²⁵

The BBC Italian service and the messages disseminated in Italian cities by Allied aircraft were powerful counterweights to Fascist propaganda on the home front. The intensive use of air-borne leaflets and radio counter-information – two new elements which had been absent in the Great War – overcame physical distance and allowed for the targeting of civilians in enemy countries.²⁶ Leaflets quickly proved effective. As early as August 1940, police informants suggested that these reflected the true feelings of Italian people toward the war and Germany much better than did ‘articles in our newspapers’.²⁷ The increasing numbers of people who listened to *Radio Londra*, as the BBC Italian service was popularly called in Italy, knew (and circulated among relations, neighbours and friends, which the regime was most concerned about) what Italian media distorted or did not report at all. On the eve of Mussolini’s decision to enter war Italian authorities attempted to jam the BBC bulletins, as Colonel Stevens, a former British military attaché to Rome, had begun his news commentaries to Italy on 22 December

²³ ACS, MCP, GAB, b. 19, Note by Celso Luciano, MCP’s head of staff, on 9 March 1941.

²⁴ Giovanni Belardelli, ‘Il fascismo e l’organizzazione della cultura’ in *Storia d’Italia*, Vol. 4, *Guerra e fascismo*, ed. Giovanni Sabbatucci and Vittorio Vidotto (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1997), p. 477-478.

²⁵ Cannistraro, *La fabbrica del consenso*, p. 190.

²⁶ Marco Fincardi, ‘Gli italiani nella seconda guerra mondiale. La battaglia della propaganda aerea’, in *Costruire un nemico. Studi di storia della propaganda di guerra*, p. 180.

²⁷ Renzo Martinelli, *Il fronte interno a Firenze 1940-1943. Lo spirito pubblico nelle ‘informazioni fiduciarie’ della polizia politica* (Florence: Dipartimento di storia, 1989), p. 94.

1939. For a little while in April 1940, *Radio Londra* employed Carlo Maria Franzero, an Italian writer who worked in Britain as a journalist.²⁸

Italy tried to react by organising counter-propaganda broadcasts. In June 1940, the MCP decision to reduce airtime for cultural and entertainment programmes in order to grant more time to those with an accentuated propagandistic content was criticised even within the Party. For example, *Critica Fascista*, the journal of the Minister of National Education Giuseppe Bottai, observed that Italian radio was not doing enough for the ‘education of the citizen at war’.²⁹ Italian authorities countered the influence of *Radio Londra* with a repressive approach (listeners to foreign radio stations were threatened with prosecution and imprisonment) combined with the characterisation of Italian counter-propaganda on the radio as mainly one-man shows performed by controversial figures like Mario Appelius, whose vehement and viscerally anti-British tirades in the crucial phase of 1942-1943 gave rise to criticism within the regime itself and finally persuaded Mussolini to dismiss him. Control over radio information was total, stronger than that exercised over newspapers. The news could be compiled only by assembling reports from *Stefani*, the Italian official press agency, or picking material from the dailies. Journalists working for radio were not on the same level as their colleagues employed by the printed press, as they were not allowed membership of the professional register established by Fascism. Authorities were particularly careful with the new medium because of its power to reach huge audiences, much wider than that of the papers.³⁰

In wartime, censorship kept a more careful eye on newsreels too. They had been shown in the Italian cinemas since 1927, making a critical contribution to the construction of the Duce’s popular image and the circulation of the Fascist myths.

²⁸ Asa Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom*, Vol. 3, *The War of Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, first publ. 1970), p. 167. On the eve of the Second World War Franzero published a book in which a certain degree of respect and admiration for Britain was not hidden: Carlo Maria Franzero, *L’Inghilterra e gli Inglesi* (Milan: Treves, 1939).

²⁹ Franco Monteleone, *Storia della radio e della televisione in Italia. Società, politica, strategia, programmi 1922-1992* (Venice: Marsilio, 1992), pp. 126-127.

³⁰ Murialdi, ‘Il mondo in ogni casa: un nuovo genere di giornalismo’, in *La Radio. Storia di sessant’anni 1924/1984*, ed. Franco Monteleone and Peppino Ortoleva (Turin: Eri Edizioni Rai, 1984), p. 156.

The LUCE institute, which had been founded and placed under government control in 1925, was the efficient organisation that presided over the regime's photographic and cinematographic propaganda. Following a decree issued in 1926, all cinemas in the country had to screen the LUCE films. One year later newscast made its debut: a ten-minute *Giornale Cinematografico* kept Italians abreast of all the latest deeds of Mussolini and his hierarchs. In the first ten years of activity the work of LUCE was mostly focused on domestic issues, stressing Italy's advances in agriculture, industrial output, public works and architecture. From the Ethiopian campaign of 1935 more effort was put in increasing popular consensus towards Mussolini's imperial ambition, and emphasising the ever closer relationship with Hitler as well as Italy's growing estrangement from the democratic powers. In the Second World War, as the next chapters will show, the LUCE material became increasingly reticent both about military operations and life on the home front, as people had to face a reality that was less and less feasible for authorities to disguise.³¹

Overseeing the press, radio, cinema, theatre and the whole publishing industry, the propaganda machine aimed at contributing to the regime's effort to counter civilian demoralisation during the Fascist war, since this was a critical factor for both the outcome of conflict and the persistence of Mussolini's popular support. The usual caveats of studying authoritarian and totalitarian societies apply to the sources employed in this work for the reconstruction of the popular reaction to war propaganda, such as confidential reports.³² Those sources have been used while mindful of the reservations expressed about their reliability in the literature on Fascism.³³ Yet, as Philip Morgan has argued, although official

³¹ Gabriele D'Autilia (ed.), *Luce: l'immaginario italiano* (Rome: ERI, 2014); Federico Caprotti, 'Information Management and Fascist Identity: Newsreels in Fascist Italy', *Media History* 3(2005), pp. 177-191.

³² For an up-to-date summary of the debate on public opinion in Fascist Italy, see Emilio Gentile, Paul Corner and Christopher Duggan, 'Two New Books on Fascism. A Review, the Authors' Responses and the Reviewer's Comments', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 5 (2014), pp. 665-683.

³³ According to Luigi Ganapini, confidential reports are not only 'partial', but also 'suspect sources' for the history of Fascist Italy, because they contain information and opinions influenced by 'an often unintelligible' human, social and political situation. Their authors, Ganapini argued, were 'anonymous individuals stringing together rumours, gossip instrumental in party feuds,

records from police or party sources might ‘convey a perspective on people and events peculiar to the role of the organisation reporting on them’ and obstruct historians from distancing themselves from a ‘top-down perspective’ of popular behaviour, the evidence of informant material is ‘sometimes so cumulative as to be compelling’. In particular, it is difficult ‘to doubt their accuracy, in the late 1930s’, when confidential reports detailed discontent about rising prices, shortages and war.³⁴ The same careful attention in reconstructing popular attitudes is given to sources like personal diaries and memoirs, in particular those not coeval with the war years. The spontaneity of censored letters, another valuable resource, allow researchers to grasp how news and rumours were received and circulated, and how they affected morale. In 1942, some 9 million letters were posted every day. The 60 percent involving soldiers were all censored, whereas only 30 percent of those sent between civilians were opened. Mussolini himself received a summary of the censored correspondence.³⁵ These letters show that, in comparison with the Great War, from 1939 onward there was no longer an antithesis between ‘the hell of the trenches and the oasis of peace that was home’: even soldiers felt the breath of air power on their houses and their families.³⁶

Besides official sources in the Italian and British archives, in order to form a reliable framework for the propaganda output in 1938-1943, a wide section of national and local daily newspapers, illustrated magazines, newsreels, documentaries, feature films, broadcast summaries, songs and scripts have been examined, alongside directives from the Duce, instructions from the MCP and interventions by other authorities in the regime. Analysis of British media and institutional activities aimed at the Italian public has helped with a focus on the effectiveness – or otherwise – of Mussolini’s apparatus in this area, while

superficial and trivial impressions, pretentious political comments’. See Luigi Ganapini, *Una città, la guerra. Milano 1939-1951* (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 1988), pp. 13-14.

³⁴ Philip Morgan, ‘The Years of Consent? Popular Attitudes and Resistance to Fascism in Italy, 1925-1940’, in *Opposing Fascism. Community, Authority and Resistance in Europe*, ed. Tim Kirk and Anthony McElligott (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 169-173.

³⁵ Loris Rizzi, ‘Il morale dei militari e dei civili nelle lettere censurate’, in *L’Italia nella seconda guerra mondiale e nella Resistenza*, p. 371-372.

³⁶ Antonio Gibelli, ‘L’epistologia popolare fra I e II guerra mondiale’, in *Italia 1939-1945. Storia e memoria*, ed. Anna Lisa Carlotti (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 1996), p. 17-18.

reference to German sources has been useful in comparing the working styles, campaigns and topics of the Nazi and Fascist media machines. These sources have been explored together with the memoirs, diaries and correspondence of those involved in the propaganda organisations and of ordinary Italians. It is important to understand that censors and journalists left little testimony of their experience at the time – both professions tending to obliterate their cooperation with the regime and contribute to the huge effort of self-acquittal in which Italians engaged after 1945, rather than examining their roles and assessing their support of Mussolini's construction of consensus. Although in Fascist Italy there was no form of systematic and transparent gathering of popular attitudes other than information coming from police and PNF sources, many more documents are available that can reconstruct the Italian people's perception of propaganda material since the regime's hierarchies, from Mussolini downwards, heavily utilised confidential reports and thus were committed in keeping a functional network of informers.

The material analysed shows that there was no clear-cut development or distinction in chronological or logical phases in war propaganda. This work argues that Fascist authorities, Mussolini included, muddled along because they were unused to making plans and did not modulate their activities according to popular feeling or reaction. The first chapter shows, for example, that preaching of hatred against the enemy and framing of the British air raids as barbarous was not confined, as Renzo De Felice among others has argued, to the last part of the Fascist war, but were stereotypes in the regime's propaganda as early as the nine months of non-belligerence.³⁷ Indeed, the four priorities that Eric Lehman has set apart in the Italian framing of enemy air raids (illustrating the terrorist use of bombing; documenting the destruction of civilian buildings to show that the enemy and not the regime was to blame for the deterioration of quality of life;

³⁷ Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini l'alleato*, Vol. 1, *L'Italia in guerra 1940-1943, 1, Dalla guerra "breve" alla guerra lunga* (Turin: Einaudi, 1990), pp. 170-172. See also Daniela Stefanutto, 'La morte celata. Miti e immagini della morte in guerra', in *L'Italia in guerra 1940-43*, ed. Micheletti and Poggio, p. 929-945.

emphasising the damage to monuments; highlighting acts of heroism to boost morale) could be found from 1940, as this work will explain.³⁸

The first chapter, in particular, compares Fascist Italy's construction of the myth of air power to the condition on the home front in the second half of the 1930s, and shows that Italy was in fact lacking the means and morale to fight when war approached its shores. Chapter 2 deals with the mistakes the regime persisted in making during the difficult transition from non-belligerence to war and how these were translated in propaganda material. Civil defence and evacuation, in particular, have been analysed as policy failures and emblematic factors of weakness exposed by the first enemy air raids and influenced by popular attitude in subsequent years. The idealised media representation of key figures charged with responsibilities on the home front, compared with their actual standing in the community or their effective place in wartime Italy, made clear Fascism's inability to exploit its organisations to establish a functional and credible machine for civil defence.

The third chapter presents attempts by Fascist propaganda as early as the first year of hostilities to deny that war was a disruptive break with the deeply-rooted rhythms and habits of Italy, while at same time it was describing in the crudest terms the terrible consequences of German air raids over English cities. Blows to Italian morale came from the ruinous participation of the *Regia Aeronautica* in the Battle of Britain and the successful British attack on the fleet at Taranto, despite media efforts to divert attention from the doubts and fears that were gradually spreading among the population. Chapter 4 highlights the increasing inability of Fascist propaganda to deliver a consistent message when new military setbacks in 1941 widened the breach in people's morale. Trumpeted by the media in the first year of war as examples of the inexorable discipline imposed by the regime, trials of crimes during blackout were increasingly under-reported, as the authorities feared the implicit message of subversion conveyed by the hyperactivity of the special tribunal charged with judging such crimes.

³⁸ Eric Lehmann, 'Il fallimento dell'aeronautica italiana', in *I bombardamenti aerei sull'Italia*, ed. Labanca, p. 170-173.

Sources show that feelings of insecurity and mistrust towards the Fascist hierarchy did not translate into forms of public dissent. Nevertheless they undermined morale as they were increased by conjecture and rumour that media distortion and lies generated among the population. The work of censors was more effective in keeping under control written material for feature films, shows and entertainment in general – all forms of popular culture that met with great success during the first years of war.

Chapter 5, investigating the MCP's activity, the work of the media and the public reaction in the final phase of Mussolini's war, shows that with the worsening situation on the home front in 1942 owing to enemy air raids, the weakness of Italian propaganda appeared increasingly part of the broader failure of Fascism. In 1943 the MCP inflated the routine of messages criminalising the enemy and made intensive use of fabricated stories. Failing to present a plausible and coherent narrative for the suffering of civilians, it was unable to stir waves of hatred against the enemy, producing instead material which aroused disillusion and anger against the Duce and the regime.

Chapter 1. Towards the Air War: Propaganda, the Media and Public Opinion, 1938-1939

Italians who went to the cinema in the spring of 1938 to see the British film *Things to Come*, based on a script by H. G. Wells and set in a fictional city hit by a sudden air raid, knew that thousands of their compatriots were fighting in Spain to help Francisco Franco overthrow the Republican government and that a few years earlier Italian soldiers had fought in Africa to conquer Ethiopia and bestow on King Vittorio Emanuele III the title of Emperor. They probably were not aware – since the Italian media were prone to portray troops and airmen as chivalrous – that in both wars the Italian army had employed powerful tools of destruction to curb the enemy's resistance: during that spring Mussolini's and Hitler's aircraft were bombing Spanish cities in order to terrorise civilian populations and subdue their confidence and morale. A number of Italians also remembered that enemy aircraft had bombed northern Italian cities during the Great War.¹ What most Italians did not imagine was that such weapons would be used against them in their own country and on an unprecedented scale within a few months; they were led to view the catastrophic air raids portrayed in the British movie as pure science fiction. Comments in the press considered *Things to Come* as being completely out of touch with reality. 'If such a script', one anonymous reviewer wrote in May 1938,

¹ Prominent Fascists who took part in the Ethiopian campaign recounted their experiences and the Italian air force raids in books that aimed at building or enhancing their reputations as valiant fighters. All very close to the Duce, they influenced the regime's propaganda policies during the 1940-1943 war: Alessandro Pavolini, *Disperata* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1937) pp. 72-73; Vittorio Mussolini, *Voli sulle ambe* (Florence: Sansoni, 1937) pp. 20-21; Giuseppe Bottai, *Quaderno africano* (Florence: Sansoni, 1939) p. 50. Pavolini, the officer charged with bombing in the squadron led by Galeazzo Ciano, composed the verses of their battle hymn, which said: 'By dropping bombs we shall impose civilisation' (Isnenghi, *L'Italia del Fascio*, pp. 37-39). The Italian Defence Ministry only admitted to the use of mustard-gas bombs and arsine-filled ammunition during the Ethiopian campaign in 1996 (see Angelo Del Boca, *Italiani, brava gente? Un mito duro a morire* (Milan: Beat, 2014, first publ. 2005), p. 206. For the deeds of the *Aviazione legionaria* in Spain, see Alberto Rovighi and Filippo Stefani, *La partecipazione italiana alla guerra civile spagnola (1936-1939)*, Vol. 2, *Dall'autunno 1937 all'estate del 1939* (Rome: Stato maggiore dell'esercito-Ufficio storico, 1993), pp. 484-488; Gerald Howson, *Arms for Spain: The Untold Story of the Spanish Civil War* (London: John Murray, 1998) pp. 16-20; Gabriele Ranzato, *L'eclissi della democrazia. La guerra civile spagnola e le sue origini 1931-1939* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2004) pp. 374-375.

had been chosen for a Mickey Mouse story, it would probably have been delightful ... Starring Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy, it would have been an excellent comic movie. Instead, the comedy, which develops against the author's will, has that taste of parody which always accompanies works of imagination lacking in imagination ... Imagine that, in 1940 – touch wood – war breaks out.²

At the end of September 1938 the start of a new European war seemed to have been avoided and the Fascist regime used fictitious diplomatic success to disguise Italy's inadequate preparation for war. Returning to Italy from Munich, where he had taken part in the meeting between Hitler and the British and French prime ministers Chamberlain and Daladier, Mussolini was greeted as the arbiter of the agreement which ended the Czech crisis.³ As most Italians celebrated a short-lived peace, the subject of the 'future war' was confined to military and intellectual circles, seldom attracting the attention of a wider public.⁴ In the summer of 1938 the Turin daily newspaper *La Stampa* made an attempt at popularising the subject of the air war by serialising a biography of Giulio Douhet, the precursor of modern studies on the topic and a forceful advocate for an autonomous air force in the Italian military, and whom Mussolini and Balbo adopted as an inspirational figure without carrying out his ideas in practice.⁵

The aim of this chapter is to compare the propagandistic constructions of the myth of war, primarily the myth of air war, in Fascist Italy to the real conditions and actual preparations on the home front in the years preceding June 1940. A country ideologically conditioned for war was in fact lacking in the means and morale to

² 'Filtro giallo (I film nuovi). La vita futura', *Cinema illustrazione*, 18 May 1938, n. 20, p. 4.

³ Galeazzo Ciano, *Diario 1937-1943*, ed. Renzo De Felice (Milan: Rizzoli, 2000, first publ. 1980), p. 189 (entry for 29-30 September); Giuseppe Bottai, *Diario 1935-1944*, ed. Giordano Bruno Guerri (Milan: Rizzoli, 2001, first publ. 1982), pp. 135-136 (entry for 30 September 1938).

⁴ Well before the Ethiopian campaign, Antonio Gramsci was thinking in his prison cell over the concepts of 'future' and 'total' war. Emphasizing the importance of the air-forces, he noticed that 'all these disputes about a future, hypothetical war' were the field where an actual war was fought between the conservative-reactionary policies of the old military structures and the new air force (Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, Vol. 3, *Quaderni 12-29 (1932-1935)*, ed. Valentino Gerratana (Turin: Einaudi, 2001, first publ. 1975), p. 1916.

⁵ The articles were written by Maurizio Claremoris, an officer, journalist and writer who worked under the pen name of Emilio Canevari: 'Vita e idee del generale Douhet', *La Stampa*, 17 July 1938; 'Spuntano le ali', *La Stampa*, 20 July 1938; 'L'aviazione al principio della guerra', *La Stampa*, 24 July 1938; 'Come un romanzo', *La Stampa*, 29 July 1938; 'Dal forte di Fenestrelle alla lotta del dopoguerra', *La Stampa*, 2 August 1938; 'Due libri che fecero chiasso', *La Stampa*, 4 August 1938; 'Le prime esperienze dopo l'avvento del Fascismo', *La Stampa*, 9 August 1938; 'Il dominio dell'aria', *La Stampa*, 12 August 1938.

fight. Under cover of turning out for meetings, parades and exercises, people harboured an opposition to war which the regime did not manage to overcome but which also did not evolve into organised and effective opposition or dissent.

1.1 Civil Defence in Pre-War Italy

During the 1930s the Italian authorities had striven to establish an apparatus charged with the organisation of air raid protection and specific training for civilians in case of incursions and gas attacks. Mussolini had personally warned his compatriots against such dangers, adopting a clear stance which should have alerted Italians to probable future government policies on civil defence and the domestic front in the event of war. The Duce had extolled the importance of air war and praised Italian aviation in a speech to the Senate on 30 March 1938 that focused on the Italian military situation and was amplified by the media (all the EIAR stations, the State broadcaster, transmitted it live), but he had also warned that,

as far as passive defence is concerned, the best option consists in evacuating from the centres of population all those who, and they are a great many, are not obliged to live there. From now on I say that all those who can organise their life in smaller cities, in villages, in the countryside, would do the right thing not waiting for the eleventh hour. Tomorrow, everything that is going to hold up the traffic could be forbidden. So much the worse for the improvident and the latecomer.⁶

Italy's campaign for the Ethiopian conquest and its support for the rebels in the Spanish Civil War had had the effect of alienating the country from France and Britain and making the relationship with Nazi Germany closer and more demanding.⁷ From October 1936 a Berlin-Rome Axis had ratified increasing cooperation between the two regimes. A full military and political alliance, the Pact of Steel, followed on 22 May 1939. A month earlier the Duce, prompted by Hitler's annexationist policies and reassured by the immobility of the other

⁶ *Opera Omnia di Benito Mussolini*, Vol. 29, p. 81.

⁷ Manfred Messerschmidt, 'The Road to War, 1936-1938', in *Germany and the Second World War*, Vol. 1, *The Build-Up of German Aggression*, ed. Wilhelm Deist, Manfred Messerschmidt, Hans-Erich Volkmann and Wolfram Wette (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), pp. 632-635.

European powers, had invaded and taken Albania.⁸ Italy's aggressive nationalism was reflected in the regime's martial rhetoric and in propaganda efforts to construct and make credible the image of a strong nation under the Duce's command,⁹ but preparation for an efficient system of civil defence seemed even more faltering and belated than the attempt to adapt the outdated Italian military to the needs of total war.

The UNPA (National Union of Anti-aircraft Protection) had been legally established in 1934 as a public body entrusted with the task of supplementing the activities of the military authorities in charge of anti-aircraft protection, disseminating information about the true dangers of air war, and cooperating in implementing protection measures under the supervision of the Ministry of War. Two years later new regulations stated that planned urban tunnels had to be used as permanent anti-aircraft shelters and that new residential buildings must be provided with shelters – although it was not long before the public bodies entrusted with the task of building council houses obtained an exemption from that obligation. It was only in 1938 that a regulation governing the construction of public shelters was enacted. In 1939 the fire brigades, traditionally organised on a local basis, were nationalised and placed under the control of the Ministry of Interior. Comprehensive rules on the war duties of the *capifabbricato* (wardens of apartment blocks who were Fascist party members) and on anti-aircraft protection for industrial plants were issued only in November 1940, when Italy had been at war for five months. This sequence of regulations did not appear to be matched by tangible improvements in practice and, according to Amedeo Giannini, the jurist entrusted in 1938 with the task of teaching a course on the legal system of anti-aircraft protection at the University of Rome (in 1938 the Ministry of National

⁸ MacGregor Knox, *Common Destiny. Dictatorship, Foreign Policy, and War in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 97.

⁹ In November 1937 Mussolini told Ciano that, 'the character of the Italians' had to be forged 'through combat'. For that reason, he said, 'When we are finished in Spain, I will invent something else'. See Ciano, *Diario 1937-1943*, p. 56 (entry for 13 November 1937).

Education enjoined every Italian university to give lectures on anti-aircraft protection), should have been ‘more organised and systematic’.¹⁰

In 1939 evacuation plans for the largest cities were drawn up, stipulating that only selected groups of people should remain in urban centres (soldiers; workers assigned to war production, utilities, public transport, fuel deposits and pumps; anti-aircraft protection personnel; government employees). But these plans were not publicised and were executed slowly, thwarted by politicians and civil servants worried that they might reveal the regime’s weakness and cause public concern. In addition, ministers in the central government and prefects at provincial level issued decrees stating that the eventuality of the plans being used ‘must be excluded’, as a ritual to ward off of bad luck.¹¹ These delays and organisational hold-ups were a significant aspect of the overall inefficiency which, despite the passage of new laws and the institution of appropriate bodies, marked the Italian people’s preparation for civil mobilisation in case of war. An inter-ministerial Supreme Defence Commission set up in 1923-1925 met annually under Mussolini’s supervision and on several occasions dealt with the problem of the protection of infrastructures and civilians from air raids. However, in the field of civil mobilisation it exercised ‘no appreciable executive functions, which remained vested in the armed forces and in their rivals for influence and authority, the key civilian ministries’.¹²

Most Italians were well aware of this situation and regarded the prospect of Italy entering war with growing concern. On 2 March 1939, in Milan, a police informant reported on people remarking that, ‘instructions have not yet been given to build proper shelters in case of air raids’, and that, ‘the overwhelming majority of citizens have not been provided with gas masks’. Giovanni Battista Marziali, a committed Fascist who came from the party ranks and took office as prefect of Milan on 22 August 1939, confirmed these judgements a few days after his

¹⁰ Amedeo Giannini, *Gli ordinamenti della protezione antiaerea* (Milan: Giuffrè, 1941), p.23; Nicola Della Volpe, *Difesa del territorio e protezione antiaerea (1915-1943). Storia, documenti, immagini* (Rome: Stato Maggiore dell’Esercito-Ufficio Storico, 1986), p. 46.

¹¹ Giannini and Massobrio, *Bombardate l’Italia*, p. 95.

¹² Knox, *Hitler’s Italian Allies: Royal Armed Forces, Fascist Regime, and The War of 1940-43* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 36.

arrival, writing in a report to the head of police, Arturo Bocchini, that, ‘most people do not have enthusiasm for war’ and that citizens had noticed ‘the inadequate preparations for passive defence’ in a city ‘nearly entirely lacking in anti-aircraft shelters’.¹³

1.2 Keeping Up Appearances: Anti-Aircraft Experiments and Media Reports

On the eve of the Second World War the Italian press had been under the strong hand of Fascist control for at least 15 years. A specialised division of the MCP – the powerful government agency which oversaw the media, cinema, theatre, arts, and publishing, with a staff of nearly 1,600 people – supervised the newspapers and sent them daily detailed instructions on how to deal with current affairs and other regime-sensitive topics. Once a week, or whenever it was deemed necessary to discuss urgent matters, either the minister (who was in constant and direct contact with Mussolini) or his chief of staff would meet editors and the most influential commentators to discuss the political situation and convey the Duce’s will.¹⁴

In 1939 there were no longer significant differences between the Fascist press (owned by the party or by prominent party figures) and the independent newspapers of pre-Fascist Italy which had been brought into the regime’s orbit either through intimidation or through the forced transfer of property to more complaisant owners: only small nuances differentiated them, such as the degree of warmth shown in their propagandising of the alliance with Hitler. The overall circulation of Italian dailies at this time was 4,500,000 copies. *Il Popolo d’Italia*, the newspaper founded and owned by Mussolini, had a readership of around 230,000, boosted by compulsory and deferential subscriptions. The *Corriere della Sera*, based in Milan but with a national readership, averaged a daily circulation of 597,000. The Turin-based *La Stampa* distributed 300,000. *Il Messaggero* sold 200,000 copies, mostly in the capital. All newspapers, in chronic financial trouble

¹³ Piero Melograni, *Rapporti segreti della polizia fascista* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1979), pp. 30; 42.

¹⁴ Patrizia Ferrara, ‘L’apparato della propaganda fascista’, in *Lo stato negli anni Trenta. Istituzioni e regimi fascisti in Europa*, ed. Guido Melis (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2008), p. 238; Cannistraro, *La fabbrica del consenso*, pp. 193-197.

and affected by paper shortages, received funds from the government. In the same year, Italian radio had 1,200,000 subscribers (the equivalent of 6 million listeners) – a small number in comparison with the 13 million in Germany and the 9 million in Britain that is partly explicable by the prohibitive costs of subscriptions and wireless sets.¹⁵

Media appeal was undermined by illiteracy levels (21 percent of Italians could not read).¹⁶ Yet the main reason for the comparatively low newspaper circulation and radio audiences was credibility. In May 1939 an informer from Forlì reported hearing influential people buying a newspaper and saying, ‘give me six lire of gossip’ or ‘give me six lire of lies’.¹⁷ A contemporary foreign observer, a correspondent for the *Christian Science Monitor* in Italy, wrote that, ‘people of all classes laughed at the newspapers’ and ‘the attitude of the average Italian toward the press was one either of contempt or of indifference’. People with a command of French or German read Swiss newspapers, while *L’Osservatore Romano*, organ of the Vatican, ‘was the most popular newspaper in Italy until the Fascist strong-arm squads drove it off the streets shortly before Italy entered the war and compelled a strict neutrality thereafter in its columns’.¹⁸ A similar view was expressed shortly before Italy entered the war by a police informant in Milan who, on 18 April 1940, reported that, ‘almost all those who want to substantiate their aversion to Germany with facts and reasons refer to news and comments which they read every day in *L’Osservatore Romano* and listen to the four daily Radio Londra broadcasts’.¹⁹ In the year preceding Italy’s entry into war, police and party reports from Rome recorded that newspapers’ exaggerations made

¹⁵ Murialdi, *La stampa del regime fascista*, pp. 175-176; 179-180; Monteleone, *Storia della radio e della televisione in Italia*, p. 124.

¹⁶ Istituto centrale di statistica del Regno d’Italia, *VII Censimento generale della popolazione, 21 aprile 1931, IX*, Vol. 4, Relazione generale, parte prima (Rome: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1935), p. 96.

¹⁷ Paul Corner, *The Fascist Party and Popular Opinion in Mussolini’s Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 233 (report of 29 May 1939).

¹⁸ Saville R. Davis, ‘Morale in Fascist Italy in Wartime’, *The American Journal of Sociology* 3 (1941), p. 435.

¹⁹ ACS, MI, DGPS, Divisione polizia politica, fascicolo per materie, b. 235, cited in Melograni, *Rapporti segreti della polizia fascista*, p. 59 (report of 18 April 1940).

readers wary even of genuine news, a disaffection with the press that also extended to the radio.²⁰

Under the eye of Fascist censorship, newspapers, radio and Istituto LUCE covered UNPA and other anti-aircraft activities, such as experiments and tests, with ambivalence: deployment exercises and resources were talked up to illustrate Fascism's ability to guarantee discipline and organisation in this as in any other aspect of public and private life; at the same time Italians were induced to think that the whole mechanism was destined to stay unused because potential enemies were aware of the extent of Italian power. In comparison with the activities carried out in the first two decades after the First World War, anti-aircraft experiments and demonstrations involving civilian populations in the 1930s were more regular and systematic. Sometimes they fell under the remit of services such as the fire brigades which were routinely praised in official propaganda, for example in a newsreel which documented preventive measures against air chemical attacks trialled in the port of Trieste. More often, particularly for the young, such exercises were occasions for generational integration and 'political socialisation', such as the tests organised in the winter of 1938 in the Roman area of Monte Mario, a frequently chosen location for political and paramilitary demonstrations, to train *balilla* and *avanguardisti* against air and gas attacks. However, such events soon began to attract the attention of a larger circle of Fascist leaders and consequently of the media.²¹

The 'propaganda of agitation', successfully implemented during the Ethiopian war, focused on the political and diplomatic factors arising from the situation in Europe after the Munich agreement. It was carried out following a pattern which had been adopted in the past whenever the media was requested to publicise Mussolini's important choices, and which usually consisted of three

²⁰ Ugo Mancini, *1939-1940. La vigilia della seconda guerra mondiale e la crisi del fascismo a Roma e nei castelli romani* (Rome: Armando, 2004), p. 66; Maura Piccialuti Caprioli (ed.), *Radio Londra 1940/1945. Inventario delle trasmissioni per l'Italia*, Vol. 1 (Rome: Ministero per i beni culturali ed ambientali, 1976), p. LX.

²¹ 'Esercitazioni dei Vigili del Fuoco', *Giornale LUCE B0736*, 21 August 1935; Tracy H. Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight: Political Socialization of Youth in Fascist Italy 1922-1943* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), p. 90; 'Esercitazioni militari e difesa contro attacchi aereo-chimici', *Giornale LUCE B1244*, 2 February 1938.

elements: justifying the regime's decisions or policies, stirring up popular enthusiasm and exciting public morale.²² This propaganda pattern was repeated during the months following the German invasion of Poland. Redundancy, iteration, and schematisation were the most recurrent stylistic devices used in the Italian propaganda narrative in the months before Mussolini's decision to enter the war.²³ Recurrent clichés – such as the myth of the masses perpetually ready for action – were obsessively repeated in the usual magniloquent style, framing a fictional world in which the merits of the Fascist people and nations were set against the failings of democracies. In 1939 the perception the public would have had was of relentless activity in the field of anti-aircraft defence. Newsreels liberally showed images of zealous organisers, functioning equipment and cooperative crowds under the contented gaze of the district authorities. According to the press, for example, in March the densely-populated Turin district of San Salvario, which was to be heavily bombed later in the war, performed an 'entirely successful evacuation exercise'. Not long after, in the Colosseum square, Mussolini and Fascist party secretary Achille Starace inspected personnel who had been engaged in a two-day test of anti-aircraft defence. Again, a month later, the Duce arrived without notice at a Breda factory near Rome which produced automatic guns, to inspect in person how the defence system worked. In July, in Naples, crown prince Umberto was present at a review of the local anti-aircraft detachments made up of 12,000 men and women who paraded with firefighters' trucks and Red Cross ambulances.²⁴

Keeping up appearances was imperative when foreign observers or dignitaries were around. In mid-April 1939, for instance, the German air force commander-in-chief Hermann Goering was in Rome to discuss with Mussolini and Ciano the situation created by the occupations of Albania and Bohemia, while the city was engaged in a showy anti-aircraft exercise and inspection by the Duce.

²² Cannistraro, *La fabbrica del consenso*, p. 123.

²³ Isnenghi, *Intellettuali militanti e intellettuali funzionari*, p. 175.

²⁴ 'La prova di sfollamento della zona popolosa di San Salvario', *Giornale LUCE B1480*, 22 March 1939; 'Esercitazioni di protezione antiaerea', *Giornale LUCE B1498*, 19 April 1939; 'La distilleria di Maccarese e il villaggio Breda', *Giornale LUCE B1523*, 31 May 1939; 'Il raduno delle squadre di protezione antiaerea', *Giornale LUCE B1544*, 12 July 1939.

While newspapers reported in the usual assured tone that, ‘the deployment of the anti-aircraft militia went off with chronometric regularity and matchless speed’, the presence in the capital of the prestigious guest caused anxiety; the organisers borrowed exercise personnel and equipment from outside UNPA in an attempt to impress. But the sham did not pass unnoticed by the German military attaché in Rome, who observed that the anti-aircraft batteries were insufficient and that field batteries had to be added ‘to give the impression of a mighty defence’.²⁵

Confidential reports also pointed to a reality that diverged from the edifying scene depicted in the media. On 13 and 15 April 1939, the *questore* of Rome drew up a list of flaws in the anti-aircraft experiments and sent it to the chief of police: 906 individuals had been fined for infringing exercise regulations; the emergency signal had been almost inaudible and mistaken for ambulance and fire engine sirens; at the popular market in Campo de’ Fiori traders did not want to leave their stalls unattended fearing theft; public employees had come out onto their office balconies to enjoy the show.²⁶

Not only did spectacular displays of men and means not deceive sympathetic insiders such as von Rintelen, but they also made little impression on Italian public opinion. In 1939 Fascist informants frequently reported that many of their compatriots appeared to be afraid of war, mostly on account of their country’s vulnerability. In July people in Genoa were reported as predicting that their city would ‘suffer the heaviest damages, incalculable damages, in that it is infinitely more exposed than other Italian cities to air and maritime attacks’. This kind of concern was also noted in the Veneto region where, in April, it was reported that women especially feared ‘the air offensive, mindful of the sorrowful events in Padua in the other war’.²⁷

²⁵ ‘L’elogio del Duce ai reparti che hanno partecipato alle esercitazioni di difesa aerea’, *Il Messaggero*, 16 April 1939; ‘I risultati raggiunti dalle difese e dalla protezione’, *Il Messaggero*, 18 April 1939; Enno von Rintelen, *Mussolini als Bundesgenosse. Erinnerungen des Deutschen Militärattachés in Rom 1936-1943* (Tubingen und Stuttgart: Rainer Wunderlich Verlag Hermann Leins, 1951), p. 61.

²⁶ ACS, MI, DGPS, DAGR, 1939, b. 7/J (reports of 13 and 15 April 1939).

²⁷ ACS, PNF, Situazione politica delle province, b. Genova, report of 1st July 1939, and b. Padova, report of 3 April 1939, cited in Alberto Aquarone, ‘Lo spirito pubblico in Italia alla vigilia della seconda guerra mondiale’, *Nord e Sud* 49 (1964), p. 121-122. From 1915 to 1918 the Austrian and German air forces carried out 343 bombing raids, mostly over northern Italian cities though they

1.3 Italy and the European Crisis of Summer 1939

The months between the outbreak of armed conflict in Europe and Italy's entry into the war were a challenging test for key sectors of the regime. The propaganda machine, along with diplomacy, party and State bureaucracy, had to adapt to the political oscillations of the Fascist leadership, in which even the Duce's inner circle was beginning to raise doubts about the feasibility of war plans with Hitler. The authorities' attitude to civil defence and the preparation of the home front mirrored the pessimistic assessment of military capability, wavering between exaltation of an unproven readiness and incautious underestimation of the needs of total war. Wartime propaganda campaigns were often improvised, following changing ideological positions or policies that randomly issued from the regime. War propaganda should therefore be weighed against the aptitude and coherence of the whole Fascist apparatus. This factor has been largely neglected in the literature, even in the most detailed and accurate accounts.²⁸

During the confused days of late August-early September 1939 the Italian media began a propaganda campaign against urbanisation (a constant theme of Mussolini's demographic and social views) as an argument about the necessity of staying away from large cities. Newspapers pointed to a recent law which forbade migration to industrial areas and large cities to anyone who did not have a job or a specific reason to live there. The law was intended to reduce urban unemployment and counter the depopulation of the countryside. Moreover, anti-urbanism – conceived by the Duce as a restraint on large and potentially revolutionary urban masses and consistent, as Carl Ipsen has observed, with Mussolini's 'general revolt against urban culture' – served an unintended political purpose in 1939, giving authorities and especially propaganda organisers a new tool with which to

also hit Bari and Naples, causing the death of 984 people. See Alan Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction: Culture and Mass Killing in the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 55-58.

²⁸ See, for example, W. Vincent Arnold, *The Illusion of Victory: Fascist Propaganda and the Second World War* (New York: Peter Lang, 1998).

justify the necessity of emptying the cities and overcrowded areas as a precaution against the potential danger of air war.²⁹

When the international situation became tenser and the German-Polish crisis seemed to foreshadow dramatic developments, the MCP sought to adopt a more systematic approach, passing instructions to newspapers on how to present the precautionary measures the authorities had adopted as soon as circumstances worsened. On 29 August editors were told that newspapers were allowed, ‘also in front-page headlines’, to record the measures regarding road traffic, one-course meals and evacuation. The censor underlined that, as no bulletin had been issued about evacuation, ‘short articles’ should explain ‘how, after general reflection and in line with provisions that have been taken everywhere, it is a good idea for those who are able to leave built-up areas, especially women, the elderly and children’. The directive suggested that government measures should be highlighted, and said, ‘the Nation, even though it retains calm and discipline, is preparing itself for the developing situation’. Editors and journalists were advised not to emphasise headlines and comments, and to handle the issue as routine business: ‘No alarmism’.³⁰

The media complied with this order even when a personal message from Franklin Delano Roosevelt to the leaders of the five European countries involved in the international crisis openly evoked the spectre of the consequences of air war. On 1 September 1939, the day of the German attack on Poland, the US president addressed an urgent appeal, requesting an immediate reply,

to every government which may be engaged in hostilities publicly to affirm its determination that its armed forces shall in no event, and under no circumstances, undertake the bombardment from

²⁹ ‘Contro l’urbanesimo’, *Corriere della Sera*, 27 August 1939; Law of 6 July 1939 n. 1092 (Provvedimenti contro l’urbanesimo), *Gazzetta Ufficiale del Regno d’Italia*, 9 August 1939 n. 185; Carl Ipsen, *Dictating Demography: the Problem of Population in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 119. Felice Guarneri, Minister of Foreign Exchange from 1937 to 1939, confirmed after the war this side effect of the law, recalling in his memoirs that ‘almost no importance is attributable, within the economic policy of the regime, to the law of July 1939, which, intending to stem the flow to big cities of destitute and jobless people, basically echoed the dramatic appeal Mussolini had made to inhabitants to evacuate without waiting for the eleventh hour’. See Felice Guarneri, *Battaglie economiche fra le due guerre*, ed. Luciano Zani (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1988), p. 887-888.

³⁰ *La stampa del regime 1932-1943*, ed. Tranfaglia with Maida, pp. 388-399 (instructions of 29 August 1939).

the air of civilian populations or of unfortified cities, upon the understanding that these same rules of warfare will be scrupulously observed by all of their opponents.³¹

While the appeal was widely reported abroad, together with the response of concerned governments, Italian newspapers were forced to disregard it, limiting themselves to short (and even inaccurate) news pieces, without referring explicitly to the message in headlines and without hinting at the official Italian answer to the American president's letter.³² A few days later, a vague allusion to the American appeal was a pretext to repeat that, 'the official declarations made to ban any military action against civilian population do not mean that the necessity to evacuate urban centres has lessened'. The article pointed out that evacuation 'must continue without waiting for extreme urgency', given that, 'air bombing can sometimes achieve different targets from those intended and can endanger civilians', women's, and children's lives'.³³ Discrediting Roosevelt had been a constant fixation of Fascist propaganda even before the war. In 1938 and 1939 the MCP circulated several instructions with this aim, laconically summarised in one sent to editors and journalists on 17 April 1939: 'Attack Roosevelt'.³⁴

Despite all efforts at censorship, in the days before the outbreak of war the message the Italian authorities conveyed through newspapers and other media remained confused and worrisome for the public. On the eve of Mussolini's 'non-belligerence' decision, Italians felt frightened and vulnerable. At the end of August, readers were informed that the Vatican had distributed gas masks among

³¹ *Documents on American Foreign Relations, July 1939-June 1940*, Vol. 2, ed. S. Shepard Jones and Denis P. Myers (Boston: World Peace Foundation, 1940), p. 352.

³² 'Le Président Roosevelt demande que la population des villes ne soit pas bombardée', *Le Figaro*, 2 September 1939; 'Air bombing of civilians. US President's appeal to five nations', *The Times*, 2 September 1939; 'Roosevelt pleads for bombing curb', *The New York Times*, 2 September 1939; 'Gli Stati Uniti devono rimanere neutrali', *Corriere della Sera*, 2 September 1939; 'Roosevelt riafferma la neutralità americana', *La Stampa*, 2 September 1939 (owing perhaps to a flaw in the channel of information from government offices to newsrooms, the Turin-based newspaper stated that Roosevelt's appeal included a request that open cities be spared). In an oral statement from the Foreign Ministry to the American ambassador to Rome on 1 September, the Italian government replied that, 'since the Fascist Government after today's meeting of the Council of Ministers has officially declared and announced, "that Italy will not take any initiative in military operations"', the possibility which formed the object of the message from the President of the United States dated September 1 is therefore to be excluded as far as concerns Italy' (*Documents on American Foreign Relations, July 1939-June 1940*, Vol. 2, p. 354).

³³ 'Lo sfollamento delle città deve essere continuato', *Corriere della Sera*, 4 September 1939.

³⁴ Flora, *Stampa dell'era fascista: le note di servizio*, p. 60.

the Swiss Guards.³⁵ On 27 August, Richard G. Massock, head of the Rome bureau of the Associated Press, on his way to the censor's headquarters at the MCP saw signs of war everywhere: 'In the streets one might have thought that Italy was going to war. The city was darkened in an all-night blackout experiment'.³⁶ Two days later, Galeazzo Ciano noted in his diary that the Duce was setting out 'a series of military and civilian measures of warlike nature, which, in my opinion, need not be taken at this time'.³⁷

Official instructions were deliberately not clearly defined, with newspapers reporting a dispatch from Stefani (the news agency which acted as the official voice of the Fascist regime) encouraging people living in large cities in Piedmont, Lombardy, Liguria, Tuscany, Latium, Campania, Sicily and Sardinia 'who are in condition to do it' to move to the country or to small towns. An anonymous *Corriere della Sera* columnist pointed out that, 'the quiet behaviour and serene calm of the Italian people in these heated days of European life' did not disguise 'the gravity of the situation' and 'the risk of war' – an ambiguous message which tried to balance the necessity of early warning with an image of a resolute and fearless country.³⁸ Government instructions were scarce and vague and caused discontent even among the most committed Fascist and pro-Fascist figures. The uncertainty and hesitation of censors and journalists mirrored the disorientation and division noticeable within the Fascist leadership. Giovanni Ansaldo, editor of the Livorno-based daily *Il Telegrafo* and a close friend of Ciano, recorded this sentiment at the end of August in his diary:

We are sailing more than ever out to sea. To understand as much, it would suffice to read the instructions received by the press, which contradict one another daily. The day before yesterday, for instance, the order was: 'Do not stress the solidarity within the Axis'. This evening: 'Do stress the solidarity within the Axis'. Verbatim.³⁹

³⁵ 'Misure precauzionali di protezione antiaerea', *Il Messaggero*, 31 August 1939.

³⁶ Richard G. Massock, *Italy from Within* (London: Macmillan, 1943) pp. 156-157.

³⁷ *The Ciano Diaries 1939-1943*, ed. H. Gibson (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1946), p. 132.

³⁸ 'Invito alla popolazione ad abbandonare i grandi centri', *Corriere della Sera*, 29 August 1939.

³⁹ Giovanni Ansaldo, *Il giornalista di Ciano. Diari 1932-1943* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2000) pp. 193-194 (entry for 30 August 1939). On Ansaldo's role in Fascist journalism during the war, see Mario Isnenghi, *Storia d'Italia. I fatti e le percezioni dal Risorgimento alla società dello spettacolo* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 2014, first publ. 2011), p. 523.

On 31 August and 1 September Giorgio Pini, the editor-in-chief of *Il Popolo d'Italia* who was in constant contact with Mussolini, reassured the Duce that, 'in a recent unforeseen exercise the whole of Milan was totally blacked out at night, with a good demonstration of readiness and discipline'. However, Pini could not help complaining that, 'perhaps clearer directions to the press would be appropriate, because strange attitudes are being noticed'. Nevertheless Mussolini – who had prevented newspapers from being hawked in the streets because 'boys have a bad habit of shouting false headlines and crackbrained sentences that they invent in order to attract people's attention' – was convinced that government instructions were sufficient and clear.⁴⁰

1.4 Beyond the Authorised Version: Life in a 'Non-Belligerent' Country

On 1 September the council of ministers opted for non-belligerence, the formula Mussolini devised to give diplomatic plausibility to the choice of 'neither peace nor war' and to disguise both the unreadiness of the military and the aversion of the Italian people to entering conflict. The following day, newspapers reported that Rome 'will take no initiative in military operations' and that 'the adopted measures are and will remain simply precautionary'.⁴¹ The authorities persisted in underlining the precautionary nature of such measures in the attempt to avoid the alarming confusion of the preceding days; total blackout measures in large cities from 31 August with neon signs switched off, car lights dimmed and shopping hours reduced all spread anxiety and fear among the civilian population. Therefore precautionary measures were reassuringly described as 'exercises' and newspapers articles praised the perfect discipline and cooperation of civilians: in Rome, traffic conditions were improved and the blackout was working perfectly. At the same time, authorities insisted that families with no reason to stay should leave the largest cities. Again, these were unplanned directives circulated locally

⁴⁰ Giorgio Pini, *Filo diretto con Palazzo Venezia* (Bologna: Cappelli, 1950), pp. 196-197.

⁴¹ Harry Cliadakis, 'Neutrality and War in Italian Policy 1939-40', *Journal of Contemporary History* 3 (1974), p. 190; 'L'Italia non prenderà iniziativa alcuna di operazioni militari', *Il Messaggero*, 2 September 1939.

through official announcements and posters which stressed the voluntary nature of evacuation:

Voluntary evacuation means you can choose where to go Voluntary evacuation means not waiting until the last minute, but to give oneself in time while transport is still fully available Voluntary evacuation is not a privilege reserved in practice only for the wealthy, but a provision that affects all social classes. Voluntary evacuation is a real necessity that every family must consider.⁴²

Yet, in practice, only the rich could leave urban areas by their own means. In the last days of August 1939 the families of senior officials, landowners, industrialists and traders left Rome for the Castelli Romani area, Abruzzo, Umbria or other nearby smaller places.⁴³ Guido Gonella, who wrote frequent anti-German columns as foreign affairs commentator for *L'Osservatore Romano*, was an eye-witness to the first evacuation on the day of the Anglo-French declaration of war, after a police officer had picked him up from his country house to take him to the *questura* in Rome in line with an arrest order personally issued by Mussolini:

We set out immediately along the Cassia Road, and looking out of the window I could see an appalling scene: very long queues of cars were leaving Rome carrying on their roofs mattresses, family objects and other useful things for those who had to abandon their homes. It was a sort of evacuation from Rome, since it was feared that Germany would go to war at once and that Italy would join at the same time.⁴⁴

Further south, in Campania, Enrico Rocca, a Jewish writer and journalist who could not work as a result of the 1938 racial laws, recorded a similar scene: 'Some cars go past with blue-screened lights and roofs full of chairs and bags recognisable under tarpaulin. Families evacuate the city'.⁴⁵ In the north in Venice the last holiday-makers of the 1939 season suddenly left hotels and holiday

⁴² 'Le disposizioni prefettizie per l'oscuramento della città', *Il Messaggero*, 1 September 1939.

⁴³ ACS, PNF, Situazione politica per provincia, b. 19, fasc. Roma, cited in Simona Colarizi, *La seconda guerra mondiale e la Repubblica* (Turin: Utet, 1984), p. 72 (report of 5 September 1939).

⁴⁴ De Felice, *Mussolini il duce. II. Lo stato totalitario 1936-1940* (Turin: Einaudi, 1981), p. 689. Guido Gonella, *Con De Gasperi nella fondazione della D.C. 1930-1940* (Rome: Edizioni Cinque Lune, 1978), p. 124. Gonella played a prominent part in postwar Italian politics, as leader of the Christian Democrats from 1950 to 1953 and cabinet minister in several governments from 1946 to 1962.

⁴⁵ Enrico Rocca, *Diario degli anni bui*, ed. Sergio Raffaelli (Udine: Gaspari, 2005), p. 248 (entry for 7 September 1939).

homes. The Seventh Film Festival – which had been running for 24 days without interruption even when a blackout experiment darkened *calli* and canals – ended abruptly on 31 August. Foreign guests fled and the international jury vanished. In the days to follow, news from the German-Polish border forced organisers and the authorities to cancel the award ceremony.⁴⁶ The writer Ugo Ojetti, who was in Venice at the time, recorded in his diary:

The porter on my floor, Puppini, tells me that in two or three days more than 300 guests out of 600 had left. War, war, war, requisitions, one course meals, the elderly, women and children requested to leave the city and to go to the countryside. Some think that it is a game of bluff. But the majority is frightened.⁴⁷

People who left urban areas to find a place in the countryside or in small villages often fell victim to profiteers who offered evacuees any form of rented accommodation at exorbitant prices. The authorities soon became aware of this and, on 6 September, Mussolini personally cabled all prefects that it was necessary to quickly crush ‘deplorable and dangerous phenomena’ such as ‘the rent profiteering in small centres’.⁴⁸ Newspaper reports blamed profiteers not for breaking the bond of solidarity in a troubled community, but for unfairly competing and breaking rules that had been adopted to carry out the Duce’s will. In the Rome area, the Fascist Union of Landlords reminded its members of their duty to comply with rules on controlled rent. Infringement and abuses ‘would demonstrate, especially at the moment, the lack of a basic sense of moral, political and union-minded discipline’.⁴⁹ In the north, *La Stampa* pointed to ‘the provident and well-timed instructions’ sent out to put an end to activities that ‘in the Fascist climate cannot and must not exist’, whereas the prefect of Milan issued a decree on the matter, praised in the *Corriere della Sera* for its ‘ethical significance’: the greedy exploitation of a situation in which people were confronted with circumstances beyond their control was politically and economically inappropriate.

⁴⁶ Ernesto G. Laura, ‘1939: l’ultima mostra di pace’, *Bianco e Nero*, fascicolo 563, LXX, gennaio-aprile 2009, pp. 27-28.

⁴⁷ Ugo Ojetti, *I taccuini 1914-1943* (Florence: Sansoni, 1954), p. 524 (entry for 30 August 1939).

⁴⁸ *Opera Omnia di Benito Mussolini*, Vol. 43, *Appendice VII, Carteggio VI, 1938-1945*, p. 18.

⁴⁹ ‘Il prezzo dei fitti nei centri minori e in campagna’, *Il Messaggero*, 7 September 1939.

The evacuation of the large cities, urged by the Regime as a precautionary measure in the general interest, cannot turn into an occasion of exaggerated profit without becoming an outrageous abuse. It is not fair that city-dwellers should suffer the disadvantages of a provision essential to the peaceful life of the Nation, while the inhabitants of small villages benefit from it.⁵⁰

Profiteering and other unlawful practices such as hiding foodstuff or goods beyond normal business needs, infringements of blackout rules or more imaginative expedients like the unauthorised selling of gas masks (UNPA had a legal monopoly on their sale) were seen as an inconceivable crack in the wall of discipline and commitment that the official propaganda regularly described in reporting people's attitudes to war restrictions. Newspaper stories about the infringement of rules and non-compliance with precautionary measures stigmatised them as rare, disgraceful and swiftly punished with exemplary sanctions. In Somma Vesuviana, in the countryside near Naples, the *federale* (provincial party secretary) withdrew the party membership card of a man held by police after having asked an inflated rent from families fleeing the city. In Bazzano, near Bologna, a landlord was arrested for renting two rooms and kitchen at 450 lire per month.⁵¹

People who stayed in cities and urban areas did not suffer this kind of trouble, but were forced to live with partial and total blackout experiments and other restrictions. Citizens in Florence were described as adapting themselves to the new rules 'with a genuine sense of discipline' and the city, 'covered with soft clear blue lights, follows the rhythm of its normal life as if using a mute'. In Bologna, 'the faint and veiled lights give roads and squares an aspect of quiet mobilisation. Citizens have conformed dutifully to directives'.⁵² In Turin the 26,000 lamps illuminating the city 'change colour, go blue'. Homeowners and

⁵⁰ 'Disposizioni del prefetto contro le illecite speculazioni in danno degli sfollandi', *La Stampa*, 6 September 1939; 'Le case nei comuni minori. Un decreto del prefetto disciplina il mercato degli affitti e stronca le esosità', *Corriere della Sera*, 8 September 1939.

⁵¹ *Corriere della Sera*, 13 September 1939; 'Lo sfollamento delle grandi città e la disciplina dei fitti nei centri di trasferimento', *Corriere della Sera*, 7 September 1939; 'Proprietario di casa esoso tratto in arresto', *La Stampa*, 9 September 1939.

⁵² 'Esperimenti di oscuramento', *La Stampa*, 1 September 1939.

capifabbricato were mobilised to prevent tenants from opening windows.⁵³ All city dwellers had another duty: ‘Not to wait for the eleventh hour’ but to immediately ‘provide themselves with gas masks’.⁵⁴ According to the press, therefore, discipline and order reigned in Italy, but in fact evidence of scepticism, resistance in adhering to emergency regulations, and profiteering, underlined Mussolini’s failure in attaining one of his most valued goals – building what Pierre Milza has described as, ‘that belligerent and fanatic race he dreamed of’.⁵⁵

1.6 A Temporary Relief

The choice of non-belligerence was a temporary relief for Italians, as even the police and party information had to record. The chief of police, Arturo Bocchini, reported to Mussolini and Ciano that the country was and remained ‘fundamentally anti-German’.⁵⁶ ‘The word “neutrality” has not been spoken’, the French ambassador to Rome François Poncet wrote to Foreign Minister Georges Bonnet on the night of 1 September, ‘but it is in precisely this way that people have interpreted the decision not to take any military initiative’. The diplomat observed that the council of ministers’ decision, ‘has marked at once a feeling of pleasure and comfort which changed almost immediately the dismayed face the capital offered this morning’.⁵⁷ The authorities insisted on strict observance of the precautions but, as another privileged observer pointed out in a memoir written a few years after the end of war,

The country was pleased and reassured and nerves were soothed, after some enormously tense weeks, during which Mussolini had enjoyed creating an atmosphere of war and unnecessary alarm among the public: ordering blackouts, troop displacement, requisitioning and so forth there

⁵³ ‘Torino con serena tranquillità completa l’attrezzatura di protezione antiaerea’, *La Stampa*, 1 September 1939.

⁵⁴ ‘Provvedete subito per la maschera antigas’, *La Stampa*, 1 September 1939.

⁵⁵ Pierre Milza, *Les fascismes* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2001) p. 443.

⁵⁶ *Ciano’s Diary 1939-1943*, pp. 151-152 (entry for 13 September 1939). For a survey of Italians’ feelings during the non-belligerence period as expressed in private memories, see Duggan, *Fascist Voices: An Intimate History of Mussolini’s Italy* (London: Vintage, 2013, first publ. 2012), pp. 324-341.

⁵⁷ Ministère des Relations Extérieures. Commission de publication des documents relatifs aux origines de la guerre 1939-1945, *Documents diplomatiques français 1932-1939, 2e série (1936-1939), Tome XIX (26 août-3 septembre 1939)* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1986), pp. 342-343.

was also an order that by midnight on 3 September, no private cars were to circulate without special permission.⁵⁸

On 7 September MCP instructions to newspaper editors explained that, ‘Italy’s line of conduct has been clearly marked out in the council of ministers’ statement, and it is solely necessary to refer to this, without pointless and detrimental signs of impatience and without hysterical conjecture’. The censor stated that Italians knew they were ‘so prodigiously protected by the Duce in peace and war’.⁵⁹ Two days later more bombastic and historically contextualised instructions came through:

Today’s Italy is not that of 1914: seventeen years of the Regime have made it powerful, respected and feared. The Ethiopian conquest, the victorious Spanish campaign, the swift occupation of Albania have proved Italy’s great military abilities, our prestige, and our might. The Italian people can therefore return to work and live in the usual atmosphere of calm and discipline, while of course being ready for any necessity that may be imposed by developing events.⁶⁰

Newspapers sought to conform to the rules. They continued their pedagogic function, instructing people on how to behave and comply with the precautionary measures, but adopted a less urgent, less martial tone. The *Corriere della Sera*, for instance, made practical proposals to readers, advising them on how to clear attics of rubbish and how to prepare an underground shelter. Around the middle of September an exercise at Lovere, a village on the shores of Lake Iseo, in which 13 female volunteers assigned to an UNPA squad succeeded in clearing the Museum of the Accademia Tadini in 45 minutes, was an occasion to praise ‘the technical and spiritual preparation of women in the mobilisation of the civilian population’ and to publicise that performance in a newsreel promoted by the Ministry of National Education and screened all over the country. Ingenious systems for

⁵⁸ Aldo Valori, *Il fascista che non amava il regime* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 2003), p. 286. During the regime Valori was an influential journalist, chief of *Corriere della Sera*’s Rome bureau, wartime radio commentator and an expert in military affairs.

⁵⁹ *Ministri e giornalisti*, ed. Tranfaglia, pp. 6-7 (directives of 7 September 1939).

⁶⁰ *La stampa del regime 1932-1943*, ed. Tranfaglia with Maida, p. 325 (instructions of 9 September 1939).

protecting paintings, sculptures and tapestries were shown to Minister Giuseppe Bottai, among a cheering party of *balilla* and *piccole italiane*.⁶¹

Editors and journalists thus had a new opportunity to epitomise ‘the thematic and linguistic conformism’ typical, according to Mario Isnenghi, of the press in Fascist Italy, squandering in the service of Mussolini’s propaganda the lexical heritage built during their professional experience under dictatorship. This new language was crowded with awkward oxymorons (‘the orderly alert’ or ‘the quiet mobilisation’), redundant adjectives and reassuring metaphors.⁶² Writers and artists were also enlisted to depict life and restrictions during alarms and blackouts as a sort of aesthetic and romantic experience. ‘When the lights go off’, Anselmo Bucci (a painter and engraver who had volunteered in the Great War) speculated in a long article on the literary page of *Corriere della Sera*, ‘the city turns into a work of art I bless the faint lighting. At last we can move around. In fact it seems that we live again In normal times we never see the night’.⁶³ At the end of the month lighter, sometimes frivolous, news also began to appear, such as the caption to a photograph portraying a woman dressed in a checked patterned outfit: ‘Fashion does not abdicate in wartime: here is a dress that elegant ladies should wear during night warnings’.⁶⁴

Barely a week after Mussolini’s decision of non-belligerence, the foreign press noticed that Italy was easing its precautions and Italian propaganda hastened

⁶¹ ‘Togliere il ciarpame dai solai e allestire ricoveri sotterranei’, *Corriere della Sera*, 13 September 1939; ‘Tredici donne sgomberano un Museo in quarantacinque minuti’, *Corriere della Sera*, 11 September 1939; ‘Esperimenti di protezione antiaerea al Museo di Lovere’, *Istituto Nazionale LUCE, Documentario*, 1939; ‘Esperimento per il salvataggio di opere d’arte’, *Giornale LUCE B1583*, 13 October 1939.

⁶² Isnenghi, *Intellettuali militanti e intellettuali funzionari*, p. 176; Ilaria Bonomi, ‘La lingua dei giornali italiani del Novecento’, in *Storia della lingua italiana*, Vol. 2, *Scritto e parlato*, ed. Luca Serianni and Piero Trifone (Turin: Einaudi, 1994), pp. 682-690.

⁶³ Anselmo Bucci, ‘Illuminazione ridotta’, *Corriere della Sera*, 6 September 1939 (See Giuseppe Marchiori, ‘Bucci, Anselmo’, in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, Vol. 14 (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1972), pp. 762-763.

⁶⁴ *Corriere della Sera*, 26 September 1939. In January 1940, a Foreign Office memorandum noticed that after four months of non-belligerence there was in the Italian press ‘a tendency to more impartial news presentation and an improvement in the variety and quality of articles’. According to the optimistic compiler of the report, ‘with the exception of the headlines, which are still inclined to show a pro-German bias, most of the important dailies give as much space to news from Allied sources as from German’ (TNA, FO 371/24960, Political, Southern, Italy, 1940, Memorandum Respecting the Italian Press, 17 January 1940).

to rejoice, underlining that from abroad the media ‘continues to point out the admirable tranquillity which reigns everywhere in our Country’.⁶⁵ On 12 September, during the regular meeting at the MCP, journalists were told in self-congratulatory tones that, ‘we receive from several sources, Palazzo Venezia included, signals that public opinion is calm’ and that credit for this should go to ‘the well-balanced stance of the official Agency and newspapers’.⁶⁶ The press reported that sleeping-car trains from Rome to Paris had restarted, international shipping had resumed, wooden air-raid shelters had been dismantled, and the closing times of places of entertainment had been extended to midnight. Italian newspapers tried to stem popular feelings of uncertainty and restlessness. As *The Times* Rome correspondent pointed out,

it is being emphasised that this is not the moment for marking time. The whole Press has been mobilised to preach the necessity of Italy’s carrying on and even increasing her normal commercial and industrial activities, which must become ever more important as war causes devastation in Europe.⁶⁷

On 16 September Mussolini cabled King Vittorio Emanuele to reassure him on improved public morale:

From the reports of prefects, police, Carabinieri, *federali* and so forth it appears that the Italian people, after the emotion of the first days, are recovering their usual equilibrium. Small episodes of confusion were due to the evacuation from cities, the total blackout, the recall to arms, the hoarding of food. All that resulted in a lot of rumours that, like all rumours in extraordinary times, rise, spread and die away and are trusted only by that proportion of half-wits which exists in every nation. The resumption of ocean navigation, the end of the blackout, the sanctions against profiteers and other measures have restored the calm that was only disturbed by the nervous crowds of the big cities.⁶⁸

Therefore, according to the Duce, it was not reticent and confusing official directions, but anxiety in overcrowded urban areas that was to blame for the

⁶⁵ ‘Italy relaxes precautions’, *The Times*, 8 September 1939; ‘Lavorare serenamente’, *La Stampa*, 9 September 1939.

⁶⁶ *La stampa del regime*, ed. Tranfaglia with Maida, p. 325 (instructions of 11 September 1939).

⁶⁷ ‘Italy Not To Mark Time’, *The Times*, 11 September 1939.

⁶⁸ *Opera Omnia di Benito Mussolini*, Vol. 43, p. 19. On rare occasions reports from prefects, who were in charge of the exercises in their provinces recorded episodes of malfunctioning or misbehaviour: in autumn 1939, for example, minor faults were only reported from Bologna and Aosta (ACS, MI, DGPS, DAGR, 1939, b. 7/J, reports of May-December 1939).

previous days' excited climate. In fact, even once alarm was no longer so immediate after the government had declared non-belligerence, Italians were not truly relieved and remained pessimistic about their chances of receiving clear directions from above. Among those who had agreed to leave their cities, there were many who were particularly disgruntled when, in the second half of September 1939, propaganda described the situation as quiet or less alarming. Mussolini insisted, in a speech given on 23 September to Fascist party leaders in Bologna, on the necessity of mobilisation and military preparation, but people in Genoa were reported as criticising 'the chaos' of 'orders and counter-orders' in Rome. Many evacuees returned to the city, complaining about 'the rash alarmism created by the government itself in the first days of September that induced them to leave facing huge damage and expenses'.⁶⁹

The Italian people kept living through restrictions and precautions with anxiety and concern. Family life, hours and habits were unsettled. The peremptory tone of official instructions, even more than their unruly and confused practical execution, echoed in the recollection of a child who lived in central Italy. As an adult, he recalled those months clearly:

Danger was declared for civilians and cities. 'Silent zones' were established against rare car horns, imposed by large signs of black lettering on squares of white lime painted on walls at the entrance from lower to upper Perugia. I can still vividly remember the total blackout 'dress rehearsal', probably a few months after the war had begun: it was already dark before dinner ... The total blackout exercise, which at the start had been received almost cheerfully with a thrill at the novelty, left all of us a bit upset: and mummy made us recite aloud together three Hail Marys and one Glory Be. In the evening, when dad came back home, the disquieting event was talked about again.⁷⁰

1.7 New Men for Irrevocable Choices

Recalling the atmosphere in Italy during the months of non-belligerence, the Italian ambassador to France, Raffaele Guariglia, observed that, 'the less [Italians] were prepared for war, the more [they] wanted to put on a fierce look'.⁷¹ During

⁶⁹ ACS, MI, DGPS, Divisione polizia politica, categ. I, b. 224, cited in De Felice, *Mussolini il duce. II. Lo stato totalitario 1936-1940*, p. 693-694 (report of 28 September 1939). For Mussolini's speech, see *Opera Omnia di Benito Mussolini*, Vol. 29, pp. 311-313.

⁷⁰ Ugo Baduel, *L'elmetto inglese* (Palermo: Sellerio, 1992), pp. 37-38.

⁷¹ Raffaele Guariglia, *Ricordi 1922-1946* (Napoli: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1950) p. 408.

the nine months preceding entry into war, the Duce had in mind a scenario in which at least two outcomes were possible, both of which required a wise deployment of propaganda to steer Italian public opinion at home and to send clear signals abroad. Since Mussolini did not exclude entering the war at some point, he considered it necessary not only to test the reactivity of the military but also to put pressure on the domestic front in order to verify the resistance and morale of his compatriots. In addition, the Duce wanted to keep the only promise he had made to Hitler when he confessed that Italy could not directly take part in the war – committing himself to support Germany and showing the world that even a ‘non-belligerent’ country could act as a disciplined and steadfast nation. At the end of August 1939, indeed, the Führer had been relieved at Mussolini’s decision of neutrality, but had asked him to intensify preparations for war in order to deceive the enemy.⁷² The German military attaché in Rome noted in his memoir that, seeing the movement of military transport and increasing imports and preparations of material for anti-aircraft protection set in motion by Mussolini, the other European powers did not know what to think of the Italian attitude and could not predict what Mussolini would actually do.⁷³ ‘Not being able to wage war’, Ciano maliciously hinted, ‘he makes all the necessary preparations so that in case of a peaceful solution, he would be able to say that he would have waged it’.⁷⁴

With those aims in mind in October 1939 Mussolini, unsatisfied with the conduct of several civilian and military figures during the previous difficult months, decided on a change of guard in key party and government positions to adjust the regime to the new international situation, replacing the most controversial or worn-out men with more trusted and younger politicians. Ciano, who had a decisive say in the reshuffle thanks to his familiar and political bonds with the Duce, seized the opportunity to promote his most trustworthy associates, who shared the foreign minister’s mistrust of Hitler and his will to avoid a war alliance with the Germans. Among other changes Achille Starace, the party

⁷² De Felice, *Mussolini il duce. II. Lo stato totalitario 1936-1940*, p. 664.

⁷³ von Rintelen, *Mussolini als Bundesgenosse*, pp. 71-72.

⁷⁴ *The Ciano Diaries 1939-1943*, p. 133 (entry of 30 August 1939).

secretary who had devised the most choreographed Fascist rituals that showed Mussolini deceptive images of a country enthusiastically ready for war, was replaced by Ettore Muti, who had served as an airman under Ciano in the Ethiopian campaign and had fought in the Spanish war. The undersecretary of Foreign Affairs, Giuseppe Bastianini, was sent to London to replace the ambassador Dino Grandi. Alessandro Pavolini took over from Dino Alfieri at the MCP. Both Muti and Pavolini were very close to Ciano. Alfieri had been deputy minister for press and propaganda and had handled the campaign in 1935-1936 preparing Italians for the conquest of the Empire, for which service he had been put at the head of the new MCP in 1937, holding the office for two years. Mussolini made him Italian ambassador to the Holy See to make room for Pavolini at the ministry.⁷⁵ Alfieri's successor, an early member of Florence action squads and a journalist turned politician, continued the propaganda of non-belligerence and devoted himself to the task of interpreting Mussolini's wishes. Since he had not risen to prominent roles in the Party or in the press beforehand, Pavolini's promotion to ministerial rank was mostly attributed to his closeness to the foreign minister. According to Giovanni Ansaldo – himself a leading member of Ciano's clique, and therefore open to suspicion of jealousy, yet a shrewd observer of the Italian journalistic milieu – Pavolini was

a kind of young literary arriviste, a man who started his career organising ... the *Balilla* in Florence. More intelligent, more well read and more informed than Alfieri, yet he is less frank, less loyal and less gentlemanly. He will be not an easy minister for the press, because he certainly has friends to 'place' as editors.⁷⁶

Under Pavolini's guidance, without sacrificing its highly centralised bureaucratic model, the Ministry assumed a more aggressive image and a more combative stance, mainly due to the character and temperament of the new minister.⁷⁷ From the very beginning of his tenure, Pavolini aimed at making clear one fundamental directive: to contain and fight, mostly on the domestic front, the 'oscillations' and

⁷⁵ De Felice, *Mussolini il duce. II. Lo stato totalitario 1936-1940*, pp. 701-705; Giuseppe Bastianini, *Volevo fermare Mussolini. Memorie di un diplomatico fascista* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2005, first publ. 1959), p. 79.

⁷⁶ Ansaldo, *Il giornalista di Ciano*, p. 207.

⁷⁷ Cannistraro, *La fabbrica del consenso*, p. 162.

‘disbanding’ that occurred between the end of August and the first two weeks of September, and ‘to raise the temperature’ of the Italian people.⁷⁸ In the last month of 1939, the appointment of a new chief of Italian propaganda who was rumoured to be closer to Ciano than to Mussolini could signify that censorship and media control were to be adapted to the foreign minister’s priorities. Yet future events would show that, although most government ministers were not inclined to war, the Duce was the figure in the regime who made the final decisions.

Conclusion

With Europe on the brink of a new war in September 1939, most Italians were still under the influence of the jingoistic complacency that followed the Ethiopian and Spanish campaigns. The spectre of a future, total, war was still confined to fiction or to initiatives in the military or academia. Yet beyond the propagandistic curtain, people feared Hitler and did not want alliance with Germany. Open dissent did not exist, but Mussolini was constantly informed in police and party reports that his country, which since coming to power he had been seeking to transform into a nation of ‘citizen soldiers’, was not ready for war, and neither was the military machine. ‘The Italian race’, he told Ciano in January 1940, ‘is a race of sheep. Eighteen years are not enough to change it’.⁷⁹

Yet Mussolini was adamant in supporting Hitler and in giving both the Germans and the democratic powers the impression that Italy could join the fight at any moment. To achieve this aim, he needed a propaganda and media narrative that could compensate for what the country lacked in substance. Hence the frequent press and radio reports on successful exercises and displays of discipline among civilians. The MCP, under the Duce’s supervision, was in charge of the construction of that narrative, maintaining control over not only the press, but also cinema, theatre, the arts and all forms of popular culture. The promotion of Alessandro Pavolini in autumn 1939 to the head of the Ministry was instrumental in that project.

⁷⁸ De Felice, *Mussolini il duce. II. Lo stato totalitario 1936-1940*, p. 710.

⁷⁹ *Ciano’s Diary 1939-1943*, p. 203 (entry for 29 January 1940).

Chapter 2. From Non-Belligerence to the First Air Raids

The mission the Duce assigned Pavolini in autumn 1939 was not an easy one. Italians were to be prepared for the gamble that the regime was increasingly more determined to take – entering the war alongside Hitler to claim a share of the booty. Military chiefs had made clear that the country was unprepared and that civilians did not have sufficient protection from the hazards of total war, but the expectation of a swift victory and the intention of containing operations within a small theatre inclined Mussolini to take the risk. In the transition from non-belligerence to war, Italian propaganda was mostly engaged in highlighting the German military effort; the mainstream media did not expound on details that might give the public an idea of how remote Italy's abilities were from the might of Hitler's machine.

When war was declared on Britain and France on 10 June 1940, Pavolini issued a few general instructions on war reporting, the most important being that underestimating enemy military power would be 'politically foolish'. Aware of how zealous newsrooms could be in this respect, he wanted to give a pre-emptive warning. In addition, he ordered that Italian military operations be reported with 'sober headlines' avoiding 'lyricism'. Journalists were allowed to use news from British and French official sources only 'if they confirmed or amplified' German and Italian bulletins. They were told neither to hint at peace prospects nor to comment on the speeches of US President Roosevelt. Any mention of new 'offensive or defensive devices' was prohibited.¹ However, whereas skilful choreography in newspaper pages could invent battlefield successes – though the increasing number of listeners to the BBC's Italian service soon allowed the public an alternative to Fascism's lies – it was difficult to escape reality when the enemy attacked Italian cities. Experiencing their own vulnerability, people realised that the dictatorship's pose as an effective and war-like regime was a pretence.

This chapter examines the policies the regime adopted (or failed to adopt) in the delicate passage from non-belligerence to war and how they were translated

¹ ACS, MCP, GAB, Ordini alla stampa, b. 52, fasc. 316 (instructions of 10, 11 and 15 June 1940).

in the propaganda material. The focus will be mostly on civil defence and evacuation, which had been a critical faultline in Italy since September 1939 which the first air raids exposed. An analysis of the impact and representation of some key figures charged with responsibilities on the home front aims to show the frailty of Fascism's ability to establish a working and credible hierarchical apparatus.

2.1 The Truth about Civil Defence

Despite the optimistic and self-congratulatory tone of press reports during the first months of non-belligerence, at the end of 1939 Italy had a poor system of active and passive defence. The anti-aircraft apparatus was suffering from serious shortages and was absolutely unprepared for war. There were few fighters to intercept enemy aircraft and responsibility for civil defence was shared between the army, navy, air force and the Fascist militia.² Only 225 outdated batteries were available in the country, and even fewer in the overseas territories (13 in Libya, 14 in the Aegean and three in Albania). There were no uniforms for soldiers who served in the DICAT, the branch of the army charged with intercepting enemy planes. Military facilities, although better equipped than the structures devoted to civil defence, lacked effective means of protection: 40 new batteries were deemed necessary to protect ports and navy bases. Airfields and air force stations were exposed to enemy air raids. The military forecast that those requirements would not be met until summer 1942.³ On 18 November 1939 chief of staff Pietro Badoglio, chairing a meeting of the supreme command, raised the issue of anti-aircraft protection with a scathing preamble:

It is a painful subject. There has been a great deal of scepticism about this: it always happens in peacetime, but no longer in wartime. Other nations have prepared their anti-aircraft defence according to extensive criteria, giving it the importance that it deserves. For the time being we

² Giuseppe Santoro, *L'aeronautica italiana nella seconda guerra mondiale* (Milan-Rome: Edizioni Esse, 1957), p. 463.

³ *Diario storico del comando supremo*, Vol. 1.2 (11.6.1940-31.8.1940), Appendice numero 13, *Situazione delle forze armate alla data del 1° novembre 1939*, ed. Antonello Biagini and Fernando Frattolillo (Rome: Stato maggiore dell'esercito-Ufficio storico, 1986), pp. 157-158.

have only decommissioned, unsuitable material, made good as best we can. When we have a 90 mm gun, we can begin to say that we have an anti-aircraft gun.⁴

The conference minutes offer an extraordinary insight into the deficiencies of anti-aircraft defence on the eve of Italy's intervention into the Second World War. Badoglio claimed he had in vain told the government since the early 1930s that factories should be forced to provide themselves with the means of air raid protection but was persuaded that an acceptable level of preparation could not be achieved until 1942; he therefore invited the chiefs of the three branches (army, air force and navy) to adopt a united front with the political authorities in order to channel funds towards the updating of material and equipment.⁵

At the beginning of 1940 the situation had not improved and the government failed to acknowledge that the problem was one of resources. In February the issue of anti-aircraft protection was put on the agenda at the 17th session of the supreme defence commission, a body where both civilian authorities and military chiefs met. The anti-aircraft services were badly trained and short by 50,000 men. They lacked 30,000 uniforms, 30,000 overcoats and 10,000 pairs of shoes. Raw material was needed to provide the civilian population with seven million new gas-masks. The failure to address such problems is epitomised by Mussolini's appalling comment on the issue of inadequate air raid alarms. When the meeting dealt with a request to install alarms inside blocks of flats because the sirens were barely audible in buildings when the windows were closed and people were asleep, Mussolini said that, 'in wartime the sensitivity of human hearing sharpens and therefore it is foreseeable that, in any residential building, hypersensitive people will raise the alarm and sometimes false alarms as well. The ruckus they make will be enough to warn the building, the road and the whole neighbourhood'. According to the Duce, the problem could be solved 'by

⁴ *Diario storico del comando supremo*, Vol. 1.2, Appendix n. 14/bis, *Verbale della seduta del 18 novembre 1939 presieduta da Badoglio, Capo di Stato Maggiore Generale*, ed. Biagini and Frattolillo, p. 167.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 168-171.

itself, through that permanent state of excitement which people are in when an air raid occurs'.⁶

In public, Mussolini made every effort to hide the widespread unpreparedness for war and to present his compatriots with his usual image of confident and pugnacious leader – an image which press, newsreels and radio reports were ready to circulate among the public. On official occasions, words and tones were carefully chosen to convey confidence, as during an inspection of the central artillery school for anti-aircraft troops in Nettuno, near Rome on 6 April 1940, when the Duce gave a short speech aiming at boosting morale. Newspapers reported that Mussolini 'had expressed his deepest satisfaction at the perfect training of the troops'.⁷ Obviously the media could not reflect the military's widely held worries because their mission was to set a fictitious scene, for both internal and international audiences.

2.2 Preparing Civilians for War

Besides bragging and issuing reassuring reports, censorship authorities were interested in giving the public clear instructions, anxious not to repeat the lack of unequivocal direction lamented during the days preceding Mussolini's decision to opt for non-belligerence. Editors and journalists were also briefed on the best way of presenting news from belligerent countries and were explicitly requested to describe, when reporting air raids, the exact nature of the objectives. For instance, it was stipulated that, 'when it comes to reporting the bombing of ports, it is necessary to specify that military structures have been hit and not merely to name the place'.⁸ The aim of such instructions at this stage was to present the war, and primarily the air war, as a fight that did not affect civilians. Besides, such a representation allowed German attacks on enemy territories to be framed through a narrative in which honourable combatants did not involve innocent civilians in their action.

⁶ Della Volpe, *Difesa del territorio e protezione antiaerea*, p. 39-40 (conference of 8-14 February 1940).

⁷ *Opera Omnia di Benito Mussolini*, Vol. 29, p. 372; *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 7 April 1940.

⁸ ACS, MCP, GAB, b. 49, Rapporto giornalisti, Instructions of 11 May 1940.

In the autumn of 1939 the Italian media had reported on the consequences of the initial phase of war in the European countries involved without any sense of hostility. Civilian life in those countries had been depicted without mockery or the air of superiority. The Istituto LUCE's newsreels accurately reflected the efforts made to protect people from air attacks in France and Britain, sometimes in almost emotional tones. For example, a short film recounted the departure of children from Paris and the sadness of their mothers 'bravely facing the painful parting, certain of the loving assistance their sons will receive' far from the city, 'safe from the air dangers'.⁹ Three weeks later the anti-aircraft measures adopted in London had also been accurately and almost dispassionately described: the increasing number of signs showing the closest shelter, people carrying gas masks, small crowds commenting on the political and military situation in front of maps. 'Curiosity was aroused', the announcer said, 'by female volunteers in fire-fighting squads', adding that, 'it is not unusual these days to see King George inspecting anti-aircraft shelters in London boroughs'.¹⁰

In that autumn the MCP promoted *Cronache della guerra*, a new weekly publication with a wide circulation that specialised in reporting on war operations and in the analysis of military topics. Although biased in favour of Italy's German allies, the magazine tried to maintain an informed and technical tone with commissioned articles by expert writers put together in a style that managed to combine specialisation with popularisation.¹¹ From 1940, material for publication was also provided by the press office of the supreme command and in February a new column began to appear devoted to analysing the home front in the belligerent countries. In the first months of war, even before Italy's entry, *Cronache della guerra* dedicated great attention to air war and its repercussions on civilian life. The newspaper popularised the idea that in modern wars a clear distinction between fronts and safe areas could no longer be drawn. Because of the newly available military technology, civilians were exposed to the same

⁹ *Giornale LUCE B1595*, 4 October 1939, 'A Parigi misure di protezione della popolazione civile per la minaccia di bombardamenti aerei'.

¹⁰ *Giornale LUCE B1608*, 25 October 1939, 'L'incubo delle incursioni aeree ha tappezzato Londra di cartelli indicatori dei più vicini rifugi ... la gente gira con la maschera antigas a tracolla'.

¹¹ Isnenghi, *L'Italia del fascio*, p. 325.

dangers and subject to the same restrictions as soldiers. Remote villages that at other times had been the ideal hideouts for evacuees could be suddenly transformed into war zones: ‘The important thing is for civilians to be permanently mobilised. For them the state of readiness is in force. The whole country is a “war zone” and there are no longer people exposed to danger and privileged citizens’.¹²

The organisation and functioning of anti-aircraft protection was described at length and illustrated with drawings and detailed captions.¹³ Specialist articles focused on the most modern technology such as the listening devices invented to locate enemy aircraft or the newest kinds of bombs.¹⁴ This attention to technical and often esoteric aspects of war – from the media of a country that lacked the most important instruments in the field of air war – focused on the German, French and British forces. Mostly such articles appeared between September 1939 and June 1940, since later the press could not even hint at delicate areas like the Italian (lack of) preparation for war in industrial output, availability of raw materials and fuel, and troop training. Indeed, Italian fighters and anti-aircraft batteries did not have until 1943 the capacity for detection and communication (based on radio and radar) that had been available to the Germans and the British since 1940. No modern instrument was available to provide early warning and continuous observation. In the 1950s, for example, on the Gran Guglia, a Piedmontese mountain not far from the French border, it was still possible to see the bell that in June 1940 still had to be rung to signal the presence of French aircraft to the barracks, 3,280 feet below, where there was a telephone to alert anti-aircraft batteries in Turin.¹⁵

¹² R.C. ‘Scomparsa della “zona di guerra”, *Cronache della guerra*, 18 May 1940, n. 20.

¹³ ‘Mezzi semplici di protezione’, *Cronache della guerra*, 16 March 1940, n. 11; ‘L’organizzazione e il funzionamento della difesa contraerea passiva in un agglomerato urbano’, *Cronache della guerra*, 30 March 1940, n. 13.

¹⁴ ‘Apparecchi d’ascolto per la ricerca degli aeroplani’, *Cronache della guerra*, 13 April 1940, n. 15; ‘Bombe multiple a doppio effetto per bombardamento di obiettivi sparsi su vaste zone di terreno’, *Cronache della guerra*, 20 April 1940, n. 16.

¹⁵ Giorgio Rochat, *Le guerre italiane 1935-1943. Dall’impero d’Etiopia alla disfatta* (Turin: Einaudi, 2008, first publ. 2005), pp. 248-249 and p. 342.

The last months of non-belligerence were therefore also devoted to preparing the Italian media for the task of reporting war at home. In March the MCP, without the Ministry of War's permission, banned the publication of panoramic photographs of military and industrial areas which could be of interest for Italian defence. The same instruction urged the provision of 'lots of space to photographs regarding civilian life', not only to divert attention from the preparations for war but also to project the image of a country carrying on as normal.¹⁶ Yet, in spite of all the Fascist propaganda efforts, even on the eve of Mussolini's decision to enter the war, during the chaotic and confused days of September 1939 before the Italian position of non-belligerence became clear, concern about the efficiency of anti-aircraft protection was widespread among Italians. 'The paramount concern of the wealthy Genoese', a party informant reported to Rome, 'is finding good, quiet accommodation in case they are requested, as happened last September, to leave the city'.¹⁷ As a matter of fact, in Genoa ordinary people pointed at rich families leaving for their country houses and commented that, 'those who want the war are the first to flee from the city'. In Naples the authorities were being blamed for the lack of measures to protect civilians, and police information referred to growing scepticism among ordinary people who were reportedly criticising the inefficiency of protection. At this stage the figure of the Duce seemed immune from criticism: for instance, civilians were reported as commenting that it was the military which was not equal to the challenge issued by Mussolini or that the bombs dropped on Italian cities were guided by spies who were betraying their country. On 24 June, the *questore* of Milan wrote to the chief of police saying that the air force was being harshly criticised, that citizens complained about the lack of shelters and that most people could not understand how it was possible that the defence of such important cities as Milan and Turin was entrusted to unprepared men struggling with obsolete material. In Milan tenants protested against landlords who used cellars as improvised shelters, while factory workers in Sesto San Giovanni lamented that

¹⁶ ACS, MCP, GAB, b. 52, fasc. 316, Ordini alla stampa, Instructions of 5 March 1940.

¹⁷ ACS, PNF, Situazione politica ed economica delle province, b. 1, fasc. situazione Genova, Report of 29 May 1940.

they had no shelter at all.¹⁸ Reports of improvised and unsafe shelters became more numerous as the weeks went by, whereas the local *Fasci di combattimento* weekly paper published accounts describing the incessant activity of the *federale* to persuade landlords to comply with anti-aircraft protection rules.¹⁹ In Turin, where the city council had drawn up plans to build 23,000 metres of shelters under public parks and squares with space for 76,000 people, works did not begin until 10 June 1940, the day of Italy's war declaration, and were stopped soon thereafter.²⁰ Mussolini himself, recalling the first days of war and the preparation of protection measures at his house in Rome, wrote in 1943 that, 'in June 1940, after the outbreak of war, the first anti-aircraft shelter at Villa Torlonia was built in some caves'. The Duce remembered that, 'it was deemed absolutely safe. But, after an inspection, the competent authority stated that it was a death-trap'.²¹

Aware of Italy's unpreparedness, the British were puzzled by the contrast between reports indicating Mussolini's ambitious offensive intentions in the Mediterranean, the Balkans and the Aegean, and the persistent absence of defence measures in urban areas. On 17 May the War Cabinet noticed the 'present strength of the metropolitan army (over 1,400,000), the concentrations on the French and Yugoslav frontiers (23 and 14 divisions respectively), a concentration at Bari', and 'eastward movements of troops in Libya'. But alongside those indications, they remarked, 'may be placed a number of independent reports of lack of military activity in centres such as Rome, Naples, Ancona, Bari and Brindisi, the number of untrained recruits now serving and the seeming lack of A.R.P. measures'.²²

2.3 Evacuation: a Policy Bound to Fail

Transport requirements for the mobilisation of troops and armaments on a limited railway network was one of the main obstacles to civilian evacuation. Two weeks

¹⁸ Aurelio Lepre, *Le illusioni, la paura, la rabbia: il fronte interno italiano 1940-1943* (Naples: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1989), pp. 21-25 and 58-70.

¹⁹ Ganapini, *Una città, la guerra*, p. 17.

²⁰ Gioannini and Massobrio, *Bombardate l'Italia*, pp. 92-93.

²¹ *Pensieri pontini e sardi*, in *Opera Omnia di Benito Mussolini*, Vol. 34, p. 34.

²² TNA, CAB/66/7/38, War Cabinet, 'Weekly Résumé of the Naval, Military and Air Situation from 12 noon May 9th to 12 noon May 16th 1940 n. 37', p. 10.

before Italy entered the war, the media was instructed not to discuss the compulsory evacuation of cities and was ordered to confine itself to the communiqués issued by the MCP, ignoring any initiative adopted by prefects in the provinces. As a consequence, even provincial newspapers were instructed not to publish bulletins issued at a local level. Such news, censors explained, ‘often give rise to a mood of distrust and fear which leads to the same hurried decisions and unruly exodus we were witness to last September’.²³ The directive reflected Mussolini’s growing scepticism about a policy that both authorities and the media still largely championed at the end of 1939, echoing the Fascist ‘struggle against urbanisation’, but which was deemed not to have produced valuable results. ‘Italy is small’, the Duce told government colleagues and military chiefs in February 1940, ‘and evacuation of cities does nothing but cause overcrowding elsewhere’.²⁴

However, despite Mussolini’s opinions on the subject and the subsequent directives from senior propaganda figures, the authorities’ stance on clearance of largely populated areas remained contradictory and ambivalent both at central and local levels, disguising the incapacity to prepare in advance a functional machinery for doing so under the new refrain of ‘voluntary evacuation’. On 3 June 1940 secret instructions from the Ministry of War confirmed that the evacuation of civilians from large cities was ‘absolutely voluntary’ and drew up two lists of cities from where departure ‘will take place according to two levels of urgency’. On 8 June, only two days before Italy entered the war, the same Ministry ordered compulsory evacuation in Aosta, Turin, Cuneo and Imperia provinces from villages on the frontier with France: paradoxically, 9,000 people living in Ventimiglia and 2,628 residents in the small village of Pigna were told to move to Genoa and Savona respectively, two of the few Italian localities targeted by the first French and British attacks.²⁵

The media did not manage to adapt to the lack of a uniform and coherent policy. In May, for instance, *Cronache della guerra* had run a long and detailed

²³ ACS, MCP, GAB, b. 49, Rapporto giornalisti, Instructions of 25 May 1940.

²⁴ Della Volpe, *Difesa del territorio e protezione antiaerea*, pp. 215-216.

²⁵ ACS, MCP, GAB, b. 117, *Diradamento delle popolazioni civili dai grandi centri ai fini della protezione antiaerea*, Instructions of 3 June 1940; ACS, MCP, GAB, b. 117, *Esodo popolazioni da determinate località*, Instructions of 8 June 1940.

analysis of the reasons supporting the necessity of drafting timely evacuation plans. The argument was that people who moved to the countryside were more difficult to target and easier to feed; in addition, services for those who stayed in the cities could be streamlined as provisions could be supplied and distributed more smoothly. The article drew on the German experience in 1937, when 105,000 people had moved from Berlin to the countryside, organising their lives according to the principle of autarchy: families that had ‘almost no need for others’. The author praised that experience because it benefited from early planning and preparation, unlike evacuation which, ‘as has happened elsewhere’, took place ‘out of fear or in a chaotic way’. The sudden inflow ‘of an enormous metropolitan crowd to some provincial places creates all kinds of serious troubles’. A hint, not so veiled, at the haphazard exodus from Italian cities in the late summer of 1939.²⁶

When the Italian war began, the press did not publish the instructions of the prefects which, tailored as they were to meet local contingencies, might stir up public confusion and alarm. Nevertheless, they went on reporting news and practical advice and, most of all, attesting that everything was taking place in absolute calm and discipline. For example, *Corriere della Sera* wrote about what was going on in Milan:

City dwellers accepted to a great extent the advice to leave and many citizens are now moving to the small villages which, for many, are the very places where they spend their summer holidays. Women, children, the elderly, in short all those who do not have to stay in Milan, are leaving without haste in an intense but peaceful exodus.²⁷

Two weeks later the same newspaper had to disavow its hasty analogy between evacuation and holidays, noticing that the departures were unlike the usual summer moves, for they were governed ‘by a conscious and quiet prudence, not by the annual hedonistic care of enjoying the good weather on the beach or at the mountains’. Destinations were chosen for their proximity to large cities (where most men continued to work, often commuting daily or weekly to join their

²⁶ R.C., ‘Abbandonare le città’, *Cronache della guerra*, 11 May 1940, n. 19, p. 732.

²⁷ ‘Giorni di partenza’, *Corriere della Sera*, 14 June 1940.

families) and for other practical reasons – certainly not for leisure.²⁸ The media directors were aware of police reports that since the first alert in September 1939 had been emphasising the anger of ordinary people at those who had the means to leave dangerous places and find comfortable accommodation elsewhere.

On 20 June the Ministry of Interior told prefects in the north-western Italian provinces that voluntary evacuation had reached ‘unjustified proportions’ and must be limited. Those who could not be persuaded to stay at home had to leave by their own means.²⁹ As a matter of fact, evacuees benefited only from subsidised railways ticket and exemption from the visitor’s tax (in spite of the aversion of some *podestà* to such allowances), but had to meet all other expenses. The authorities limited themselves to some measures to curb profiteering and abuses, for example imposing controlled prices on landlords and farmers in the countryside or organising at interchange train stations assemblies of party members cheering and refreshing passengers travelling to their new destinations. Some employers decided to help their staff by contributing towards moving expenses. The *Corriere della Sera* publishing company, for instance, proudly announced its decision to give their employees 250 *lire* for every child under 12 years sent away from Milan.³⁰ Newspapers began to praise employers that met the expenses of sending their employees’ children to places deemed safer than the densely populated industrial areas, but the authorities neither planned nor organised a systematic evacuation of children until November 1942, when the Ministry of Interior and the *Gioventù Italiana del Littorio* signed an agreement which defined the responsibilities of the Fascist Party’s youth organisation in organising the voluntary evacuation of children aged between 6 and 14 from poor families.³¹

²⁸ ‘I cittadini sciamati nei paesi del contado’, *Corriere della Sera*, 27 June 1940.

²⁹ Cited in Baldoli and Knapp, *Forgotten Blitzes*, p. 144 (reports of 20 June and 2 July 1940).

³⁰ ‘Provvidenze del Comune per le famiglie sfollate dalle zone di frontiera’, *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 22 June 1940; ‘Appunti’, *Corriere della Sera*, 28 June 1940; ‘Facilitazioni ai lavoratori del “Corriere” che allontanano i figli dalla città’, *Corriere della Sera*, 25 June 1940.

³¹ ‘I bimbi in zona sicura’, *Il Secolo XIX*, 19 June 1940; Elena Cortesi, ‘Evacuation in Italy during the Second World War: Evolution and Management’, in *Bombing, States and Peoples*, ed. Baldoli, Knapp and Overy, pp. 67-68.

2.4 The First Air Raids On Italy

On 14 June 1940 the press reported on the air raids carried out on Italian cities during the night of the 11th. The previous night, Aldo Valori had read the casualty list to EIAR listeners: 'They are all workers, family men, women'.³² For the first time in two years of war games, the danger was real and people could see the enemy over their heads. The MCP issued instructions not to report news of alarms, incursions or bombing attacks that had not been recorded in the general army headquarters bulletin.³³ Turin was the most affected area: Fiat factories at Mirafiori and a railway junction had been damaged, a gasometer gone up in flames, and a market hit in the densely populated area of Porta Palazzo. Fifteen people died and 30 were wounded. Air raids were also attempted on Milan and Piacenza but, according to the official report of the supreme command, anti-aircraft artillery managed to repel the attacks. The following morning British planes flew over Rome, Gaeta, Leghorn, La Spezia and Genoa without dropping bombs.³⁴ The press did not mention the air and naval attacks by the French on 13 and 14 June on Imperia, Savona and Genoa which killed ten people and injured 36 more.³⁵

Newspaper front pages were full of headlines about the exploits of Italian ships, planes and troops in the Mediterranean and on the North African and French fronts. *Il Regime Fascista*, Roberto Farinacci's Germanophile daily, published excited articles that praised the raids on Toulon and other places near Italian borders while the Germans had already brought France to its knees.³⁶ Yet, as far as enemy air attacks on home territory were concerned, editors were instructed to publish casualty lists 'with a two-column headline and without

³² 'Bombardieri britannici', in Aldo Valori, *Parole di fede* (Milan: Mondadori: 1942), p. 15-17 (broadcast of 13 June 1940).

³³ ACS, MCP, GAB, b. 52, fasc. 316, Instructions of 12 June 1940.

³⁴ *Diario storico del comando supremo*, Vol. 1.1, p. 7

³⁵ Marco Massa, *Vita da guerra. Genova, 1940-1945* (Genoa: Erga edizioni, 2010), pp. 15-16.

³⁶ 'L'offensiva dei nostri aerei', *La Stampa*, 17 June 1940; 'Basi nemiche bombardate a Malta Biserta e in Corsica', *Corriere della Sera*, 19 June 1940; Vittorio Beonio-Brocchieri, 'Imprese di piloti sulle opere fortificate di Malta e Biserta' *Corriere della Sera*, 23 June 1940; 'Le azioni belliche della nostra aeronautica', *Il Regime Fascista*, 15 June 1940; 'Le ardite incursioni dell'Arma azzurra in territorio nemico', *Il Regime Fascista*, 18 June 1940.

emphasis'.³⁷ The press complied, briefly describing the facts and praising the Fascist leadership on its decision to hide nothing from the Italian people: the regime 'can look the truth in the face and make it known in full, without feigning or distortion'. Comments on the front page of *La Stampa*, the Turin newspaper, were more wide-ranging than such concise reports, attacking 'the false champion of civilisation that bombed an open city, playing havoc with the the elderly and defenceless workers' and denouncing 'an abominable aggression, carried out against the law of nations'.³⁸ According to *Corriere della Sera*, 'Turin was bombed by planes that flew high and therefore hit only at built-up areas, since at that altitude they could not aim at specific targets'.³⁹

This kind of argument ignored the fact that British bombs hit populated areas only because precision bombing of industrial and military objectives was impossible on account of the short fuel distance, bad weather en route and air crews' limited experience in nocturnal navigation.⁴⁰ Italian press accusations against British pilots inaugurated a typical tool of Fascist war propaganda, along with the depiction of the enemy as a barbarous aggressor breaching international laws. Yet Turin was not an 'open town' according to the rules of warfare, since the city was not 'undefended', it contained military resource and had not been declared 'open' by the Italian government.⁴¹ Besides, the British government acted quickly to ascertain and acknowledge its air force's mistakes. For instance, the authorities in London investigated reports from Switzerland that bombs dropped on Geneva on 11 June, causing the death of five civilians, were British; and on 28 June recognised that 'the British machines operating in Northern Italy lost their way owing to unfavourable weather over the Alps and involuntarily flew over Swiss territory'. The British government accepted responsibility 'for the bombs dropped in the region of Lake Geneva', expressed 'their regret at the error

³⁷ ACS, MCP, GAB, b. 52, fasc. 316, Instructions of 13 June 1940.

³⁸ 'I morti e i feriti nell'incursione aerea dell'altra notte', *La Stampa*, 14 June 1940.

³⁹ 'Bombe britanniche su Torino città aperta', *Corriere della Sera*, 14 June 1940.

⁴⁰ Giovanni De Lorenzo, 'L'aeronautica in Guerra (Primo anno)', in *L'Italia in guerra: cinquant'anni dopo l'entrata dell'Italia nella 2a guerra mondiale: aspetti e problemi storici*, Vol. 1, *Il 1° anno*, ed. Roman H. Rainero and Antonello Biagini (Rome: Commissione italiana di storia militare, 1994), p. 91.

⁴¹ R.Y.J., 'Open towns', *The British Year Book of International Law*, 1945, pp. 258-264.

and its tragic consequences', and declared that they were 'ready to assure reparation for the damage inflicted'.⁴²

In his memoirs published after the war Alfredo Signoretti, editor of *La Stampa* from 1932 to 1943, wrote that the first attack on Turin inflicted 'insignificant damage' in comparison with the ravages of 1942-1943, but it had a huge impact on civilians because it showed how unprepared the country was for war. 'Most people', he recalled, 'thought they were in the middle of an exercise and looked with curiosity at the lights of rockets illuminating the bombers' targets'.⁴³ The air raids carried out on Turin were the first in which the Italian anti-aircraft batteries caused civilian casualties. A shell hit a building in via Tallone, wounding 11 people and killing a young clerk, Arnaldo Gandini.⁴⁴ In Rome, newspapers only reported the episode in which Italian artillery hit a building in via Varese wounding an old woman, Carlotta Bardo, although damage was inflicted on several areas: shells dropped on via Vespasiano, via Andrea Doria and the popular market of via Alessandria, near Porta Pia.⁴⁵ Such stories were relayed by the press mainly as a reminder of the dangers of contravening safety regulations by walking around the streets during alarms but the errors of anti-aircraft fire and the inadequate protection of houses and public places occasioned sarcastic remarks among citizens. A committed Fascist, Paolino Ferrari, noted in his diary that, 'damage and casualties in Rome have been caused by our anti-aircraft artillery' and 'bitterness and indignation crush any other feeling among Rome's population'.⁴⁶ In private conversations the UNPA was ironically renamed *Unico nostro pericolo aereo* (The only air danger is ours) while the DICAT, the anti-aircraft artillery, became *Distruzione integrale case Torino* (Total destruction of houses in Turin), *Distruzione integrale centro abitato*

⁴² 'Bombs on Geneva. British Government Investigation', *The Times*, 14 June 1940; 'British Reparations for Bombs on Geneva', *The Times*, 29 June 1940.

⁴³ Alfredo Signoretti, *La Stampa in camicia nera 1932-1943* (Rome: Giovanni Volpe Editore, 1968), p. 203.

⁴⁴ 'Le incursioni nemiche su Roma, Torino, Venezia e sui centri liguri', *La Stampa*, 15 June 1940.

⁴⁵ Rocca, *Diario degli anni bui*, p. 46 (entry for 14 June 1940).

⁴⁶ Lepre, *Le illusioni, la paura, la rabbia*, pp. 39-40.

Torino (Total destruction of built-up areas in Turin) or *Dormienti in cima ai tetti* (Sleepers on the rooftops).⁴⁷

Over the following days other attacks were carried out on northern Italian cities and the regions of Piedmont and Liguria were again the most affected areas. On 15 June bombs were dropped on Genoa, damaging a power plant, a police barracks and a Fiat factory. A local daily, *Il Secolo XIX*, while reporting that anti-aircraft defence had worked at its best and that citizens ‘were proud of their artillerymen’, also had to publish a communiqué from the Ministry of War instructing civilians to stay indoors during anti-aircraft fire and not in attics if possible.⁴⁸ People were startled to see how easily the French could hit the city from planes and ships.⁴⁹ Genoa’s vulnerability was to become a constant feature of the bombing war against Italy. When air attacks were carried out again on Milan, the press gave readers a rather unexpected genuine warning:

... although anti-aircraft artillery has made remarkable progress in recent years and sighting and hearing systems can give timely alarms to populations, it is very difficult to prevent a mass bombing from achieving its purpose, it may only be possible to impede the threat.⁵⁰

British planes were targeting the Caproni, Macchi and Savoia Marchetti aeronautical factories, but bombs fell on the inhabited areas of Milan and on Monza. After the first ten days, when attacks had been focused on Northern Italy, British planes moved towards the South and the islands targeting ports, airfields, railways, refineries and factories. Sirens sounded in Naples and Cagliari. Heavy attacks hit Sicily on 22 and 23 June: in Trapani 20 people died and 40 were wounded while in Palermo the following day bombs killed 25 people and injured 110.⁵¹ The OVRA inspector general Dino Fabris wrote from Cagliari to the chief of police that the alarm had not been given in time, most people did not know where

⁴⁷ Michele Sforza, *La città sotto il fuoco della guerra*, (Turin: Allemandi, 1998), p. 77; Oreste Del Buono (ed.), *Eia, eia, eia, alalà! La stampa italiana sotto il fascismo, 1919-1943* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1971), pp. 419-420.

⁴⁸ ‘Buona guardia!’, *Il Secolo XIX*, 18 June 1940; ‘Stare al coperto durante il tiro contraereo’, *Il Secolo XIX*, 24 June 1940.

⁴⁹ Leonida Balestreri, *Stampa e opinione pubblica a Genova tra il 1939 e il 1943* (Genoa: Istituto storico della Resistenza in Liguria, 1965), pp. 51-52.

⁵⁰ ‘La difesa antiaerea contro le incursioni notturne’, *Corriere della Sera*, 19 June 1940.

⁵¹ *Diario storico del comando supremo*, Vol. 1.1, ed. Biagini and Frattolillo, pp. 19-75.

to shelter, and the enemy aircraft had flown over the city unnoticed by Italian artillery.⁵²

In the Italian cities that were not yet in the sight of enemy bombers, people were described in the media as being quiet and confident, but police and PNF sources sent the regime alarming news. In Florence, for example, the local daily explained that after three days of partial blackout the city (which would not be bombed until September 1943) was demonstrating ‘calm, serenity and discipline’.⁵³ But confidential police information reported that the air raids on Turin had made an impression upon the population, which feared the next attacks could target central Italy and Florence. According to the OVRA informant, news broadcasts, far from improving morale, had depressed the public. In addition, increasing opposition to war was being recorded.⁵⁴ Alongside widespread fear and fatalism a new feeling began to gain ground in Northern Italy, as people were heard commenting loudly that Britain and France had ‘every reason’ to bomb, because ‘they were right’.⁵⁵ Such observations were not simply expressions of discontent and fear, but also denoted that the regime’s ideological justifications of the war against the European democracies were already not working, whereas the simple message that the Allies conveyed through leaflets was more reasonable and persuasive.⁵⁶

As the Fascist officials were aware of this danger, after the second wave of raids a vocal propaganda campaign was started against rumour-mongers (*vociferatori*). Reports from the authorities, and relevant sources in general, show that *vociferatori* were not dissenters or political opponents, but mostly ordinary people hostile to the danger and restrictions of war and prone to comment on the internal situation in shops or public places where Fascist spies or police informants were ready to record their words. Authorities tended to lump any form of popular reaction to war under the generic label of defeatism, and the media

⁵² Cited in Alberto Vacca, *La tela del ragno. L’OVRA in Sardegna 1937-1943* (Cagliari: Condaghes, 2011), p. 235 (report of 18 June 1940).

⁵³ ‘I primi due giorni di guerra’, *La Nazione*, 13 June 1940.

⁵⁴ Renzo Martinelli (ed.), *Il fronte interno a Firenze 1940-1943*, p. 74 (report of 15 June 1940).

⁵⁵ Maria Carazzolo, *Più forte della paura: diario di guerra e dopoguerra (1938-1947)*, ed. Francesco Selmin (Caselle di Sommacampagna: Cierre, 2007), entry of 14 June 1940 p. 49.

⁵⁶ See note 62.

acted accordingly. On 17 June, for example, *Il Secolo XIX* carried a harsh commentary on people spreading rumours about the outcome of the British air raids on Northern Italy, observing that shops were ‘the focus of the infection’, the places where

servants, masters, paunchy know-it-all gentlemen are transformed into so many well informed bulletins... It circulates in every stripe and colour. They talk of whole buildings sucked like fresh eggs, piles of dead, holes huge as Vesuvian craters everywhere, hundreds of enemy planes over the city and so on. Obviously there is always someone who believes the tall tales of these reckless people.⁵⁷

The new attacks in late June gave further occasion to the Italian press to extend the pattern of the comments printed after the first day of war, denouncing British unfairness at hitting non-military objectives and promising an inexorable, though undefined, retaliation. *Corriere della Sera* published a list of the dead and wrote: ‘The enemy, in accordance with his barbarous custom, dropped bombs on Palermo slaughtering peaceful residents. These crimes raise the price that such a disloyal enemy will soon have to pay’.⁵⁸ For their part, British authorities were determined to maintain bombing raids on Italy from their bases in North Africa, convinced it was more vulnerable than its German ally.⁵⁹ Reports showed that, ten days after the first raid, ‘Italian morale was low’. Italy was, the Foreign Secretary argued in a cabinet meeting, ‘a weak point in the Axis, and it would be wise to concentrate on her’. Therefore it was ‘very desirable to strike at Italy herself, as public opinion would not be much affected by air action on Libya’.⁶⁰ Italian people, meanwhile, read in the newspapers that the Mediterranean campaign was going well and knew almost nothing of the enemy’s air force capability until they had to confront it face to face.

⁵⁷ ‘Chiacchiere in bottega’, *Il Secolo XIX*, 16 June 1940.

⁵⁸ ‘La situazione’, *Corriere della Sera*, 24 June 1940.

⁵⁹ Overy, *The Bombing War*, p. 511.

⁶⁰ TNA, CAB/65/13/46, War Cabinet and Cabinet, WM Series, Confidential Annex, 21 June 1940, p. 323.

2.5 The Anti-British Propaganda Offensive

During the night of 14 June, French planes dropped leaflets on Rome in order to pit civilians against Mussolini and the Fascist authorities, explaining that Italian cities were targeted because of the irresponsible choice the Duce had made to consort with Hitler and entering the war against the European democracies. At dawn, teams of dustmen lead by UNPA officers feverishly swept away loads of sheets of paper.⁶¹ Nonetheless, the following day the Italian press reported the leaflets' content word for word, according to the regime's willingness to hide nothing from its citizens:

Did the Duce want the war? Here it is! France has nothing against you. Stop it. France will stop. Italian women, nobody attacked Italy! Your sons, your husbands, your boyfriends did not leave in order to defend their country. They are suffering and dying to satisfy the pride of one man. Victors or vanquished, you will have hunger, poverty and slavery'.⁶²

Corriere della Sera wrote that although the leaflets had fallen over a very small area of the city and only a few people had been aware of them, the authorities had decided to make them known so that everyone could consider their 'foolishness'. It was 'childish' to hope that 'the nonsense written in those slips of papers could have a hold on the Italian people's hearts': Italians 'are bound up with the Duce, and his will is the will of the united country'. The truth, *Il Popolo d'Italia* thundered, 'is the most effective weapon to crush the alarmist propagation of such irresponsible rumour-mongering', and the leaflets were 'a document of grotesque idiocy that reveals once more how persistent among democracies is an incomprehension of Mussolini's Italy'.⁶³

That night left a clear memory for Aldo Valori, who became host of the current affairs radio programme *Commento ai fatti del giorno* in June 1940. He described it in his autobiography:

⁶¹ Luca Canali, *Cronache di vita vissuta* (Milan: Ponte alle Grazie, 2000), p. 11.

⁶² 'Le incursioni nemiche su Roma, Torino, Venezia e sui centri liguri', *La Stampa*, 16 June 1940.

⁶³ *Diario storico del comando supremo*, Vol. 1.1, p. 16; 'Le incursioni nemiche su città aperte italiane', *Corriere della Sera*, 16 June 1940; 'Le vittime delle incursioni aeronavali nemiche', *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 16 June 1940.

An innocuous raid in every aspect, but it showed how easy it was to fly over the capital without being much bothered. In fact anti-aircraft defence in Rome was ridiculous. A few batteries behind Monte Mario, some machine guns scattered around on turrets and roofs, everything with very limited ammunition.⁶⁴

In the first phase of the conflict, enemy planes flew all across Italy and hit several cities, but the number of casualties, in comparison with later stages of war, was still limited (about 70 dead and 244 wounded in the period 11-30 June).⁶⁵

Nonetheless, the impact on civilian morale was significant and so was the reaction of Fascist propaganda in the media, aiming to depict a country that endured without sentimentality or weakness (on 26 June editors were instructed not to report the visits of prefects and members of the royal family to those injured in the air raids).⁶⁶ Magazines were employed as well as national and local newspapers, for example *L'Illustrazione Italiana*, a weekly that enhanced its popularity and communicative strength by paying particular attention to photographs and images: an entire page on the first attacks on Milan was illustrated with five pictures which showed two large holes in the grounds caused by the explosions, two wrecked houses and some nuns trying to retrieve objects and books in a courtyard. The caption made clear the message implicit in the photos:

For the benefit of all the ingenuous (so to speak) advocates of the British soldier's civility, we publish these pictures of the targets hit by English airmen during a raid on Milan. The building of the Catholic school run by the nuns of Santa Maria Ausiliatrice and some workers' homes: the heroic fighting spirit of Her Majesty's pilots has been ruthless against these "military works". Both school and houses were far from any military objective. It cannot therefore be considered a mistake. British bombs were dropped deliberately on unarmed people. Evidently only in this way can the democracies' soldiers get to the people.⁶⁷

In the days following the first raids against Northern Italy, the MCP organised a media offensive to disprove foreign news agencies and newspapers, primarily the British news agency *Reuters*, which had reported that enemy air attacks inflicted heavy damages on the Italian industrial and military infrastructure. *The Times* had published a British Air Ministry survey describing 'the heavy damage done to

⁶⁴ Valori, *Il fascista che non amava il regime*, p. 305.

⁶⁵ *Diario storico del comando supremo*, Vol. 1.1, pp. 3-82.

⁶⁶ ACS, MCP, GAB, b. 52, fasc. 316, Instructions of 26 June 1940.

⁶⁷ 'Lealtà della guerra inglese', *L'Illustrazione Italiana*, 23 June 1940 n. 25.

aircraft factories in Northern Italy during raids by the R.A.F' and 'the little opposition encountered from anti-aircraft batteries'. The British planes 'took the ground defences completely by surprise' and successfully bombed 'two of Italy's largest aircraft and aero-engine factories, the Ansaldo works at Genoa and the Fiat factory at Turin'. The British also claimed a positive outcome for raids on the Breda airframe factory at Sesto San Giovanni, the Caproni works in Turin and naval shipbuilding yards at Sestri Ponente.⁶⁸

The MCP invited a party of foreign correspondents (but not journalists from the enemy countries) on a short trip to Turin, Milan and Genoa so that they could personally ascertain the truth of the enemy's version of events. Instructions to newspapers and the Istituto LUCE on how to document the visit went as far as to dictate the exact wording of captions to the official photographs.⁶⁹ In Turin, the Piedmont journalists' union hosted and accompanied them to the most damaged areas, such as the city market and the workhouse. They went also to see the Fiat, Lancia and Snia factories. In Milan, escorted by the prefect, after a tour among the Falck, Breda and Pirelli factories, they visited a bombed nursery school. A delegation of foreign journalists also went to Genoa, touring at length the bombed areas with their hosts and pausing only at midday for a short lunch with the prefect.⁷⁰ The initiative was a success according to the Italian media, as the foreign journalists 'unanimously say that they could ascertain the enemy aviators' dexterity in not hitting military targets'. Reports published by the Swiss press (*Neue Zuercher Zeitung*, *Basler Nachrichten*) were quoted as saying that, 'no industrial plant in Turin and Milan was damaged' and that 'the news that the countries at war against Italy destroyed all the industrial areas in Turin and Milan thanks to British air force bombing proved totally untrue'. The Italian propaganda machine heavily exploited this episode, circulating a number of photographs and newsreels, as it was true that in their first raids British planes had inflicted no

⁶⁸ 'Vast explosion at Fiat works. R.A.F. cripple Italian factories', *The Times*, 22 June 1940.

⁶⁹ *La stampa del regime*, ed. Tranfaglia with Maida, p. 73 (instructions of 22 June 1940).

⁷⁰ 'Menzogne confutate sugli effetti delle incursioni aeree', *Corriere della Sera*, 22 June 1940; 'Stamane arrivano i giornalisti stranieri per controllare gli effetti delle bombe', *Il Secolo XIX*, 28 June 1940; 'Giornalisti esteri constatano nella zona di Genova la lieve entità dei danni causati dalla incursione aerea', *La Stampa*, 29 June 1940; 'La verità sugli effetti delle incursioni aeree', *Il Secolo XIX*, 29 June 1940.

relevant damage to military and industrial infrastructure, instead causing casualties among the civilian population.⁷¹ Yet the bombing of Fiat caused the company chief, Vittorio Valletta, to report to general Carlo Favagrossa, Under-Secretary for War Production, that the factories were experiencing cases of indiscipline among workers who wanted to get fired so as to find employment in less dangerous places.⁷²

Worried by the impact of air raids on Italian morale and conscious of the inadequacy of anti-aircraft defences, the MCP ordered the press to inform the Italian public of the devastating raids the British air force was conducting against German cities, stressing that even Italy's mighty ally could not prevent damage and civilian casualties. On 19 June, for instance, instructions were given to emphasise a Stefani dispatch about the previous night's attack on Cologne, remarking that 'even in Germany, which as everybody knows has a formidable anti-aircraft defence put to the test in several months of war, it is impossible to stop raids that, under cover of darkness, the enemy makes on open towns without targeting military objectives'. The next day newspapers diligently complied, reporting that British bombs had killed seven civilians and commenting on the news with the very words dictated in the official instructions.⁷³ Before the end of June news began to appear in the Italian media about German children killed by RAF bombs. On 29 June it was reported that three children had died while playing outdoors in Herme, a town in Westphalia where, reports asserted, there were neither military objectives nor factories producing for war.⁷⁴

2.6 Diversions and Discipline

Besides the obsessive insistence on the enemy's disloyalty and barbarity, in the first weeks of war the press mostly followed two lines: dwelling on the rules

⁷¹ 'I falsi dell'agenzia "Reuter" sui bombardamenti inglesi in Italia', *Il Messaggero*, 24 June 1940.

⁷² Piero Bairati, *Valletta* (Turin: Utet, 1983), pp. 84-85. On March 1941 senator Giovanni Agnelli, owner of FIAT, was still reporting to the government the same account of the first raids on Turin, stressing that the anti-aircraft batteries placed around the plants had been useless. See Valerio Castronovo, *Giovanni Agnelli* (Turin: Utet, 1971), p. 596.

⁷³ ACS, MCP, GAB, b. 52, fasc. 316, Instructions of 19 June 1940; 'Vittime civili a Colonia per un'incursione aerea', *Corriere della Sera*, 20 June 1940.

⁷⁴ 'Tre bimbi tedeschi uccisi dalle bombe della R.A.F.', *Il Secolo XIX*, 29 June 1940.

enacted by the authorities to limit the damage to the civilian population and emphasising the role of key figures in the everyday life of bombed towns. Official regulations alternated in newspapers with a great many practical suggestions, so that the prescriptive layout - which culminated in reporting exemplary cases of sanctions inflicted upon transgressors - was lightened by a paternalistic concern for the safety of ordinary citizens. The media reiterated warnings and recommendations, stressing the efforts the authorities were making to alleviate the discomfort of workers and evacuees. The union agreement that regulated the recovery of working hours lost in case of air raid alarms was abundantly trumpeted, together with instructions from the Ministry of Finance which aimed at preventing local authorities from imposing the visitor's tax on people seeking refuge from urban areas. More news followed on the sudden allocation of funds by the Ministry of Public Works for the repair of damaged buildings.⁷⁵ Encouraging messages were conveyed, highlighting exemplary cases of resourcefulness and efficiency, such as the preparation of a model shelter in Florence or the highly symbolic measures adopted to safeguard artworks and museums. The gold statue on Milan Cathedral was covered with a special grey-green paint. In Rome, a columnist solemnly wrote, 'Monuments, churches, sacred places for the cult of the Country have a new appearance. Only a poet could express what everyone feels when they see the illustrious arches of the Colosseo in their military uniform'.⁷⁶

Attempts were also made at easing the atmosphere of tense mobilisation through diversions or jokes. News of children born in shelters during alarms became frequent, always enlivened with picturesque, sometimes surreal, details. *La Stampa* recounted that in Turin, on the night of 15 June, 'A lovely little boy, who was named Sergio, had the rare privilege of seeing the light in the shelter,

⁷⁵ 'La sospensione del lavoro per gli allarmi aerei', *La Stampa*, 20 June 1940; 'Lo sfollamento delle città e l'imposta di soggiorno', *Il Messaggero*, 25 June 1940; 'Gli edifici colpiti riparati a spese dello Stato', *La Stampa*, 23 June 1940.

⁷⁶ 'Un rifugio modello in Piazza Madonna', *La Nazione*, 23-24 June 1940; 'La Madonnina in assetto di guerra', *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 19 June 1940; Guglielmo Ceroni, 'Monumenti in tenuta di guerra', *Il Messaggero*, 22 June 1940. See Marta Nezzo, 'The Defence of Works of Art from Bombing in Italy During the Second World War', in *Bombing, States and Peoples*, ed. Baldoli, Knapp and Overy, pp. 101-120.

and he is in very good health, as the mother is. That child will be able to boast of being the first, maybe the only, newborn baby in such a place'. But Sergio's extraordinary experience was not unique, as six other children were born during the first nights of war in the Turin maternity ward shelter.⁷⁷ Jokes about enemy pilots – not only in satirical papers but also in the mainstream press – became a variant of the anti-British arguments increasingly employed in Italian war propaganda. The censorship authorities, evidently convinced that laughing at the enemy did not contravene Pavolini's order not to underestimate it, encouraged this, even deploring 'the scarcity of anti-British cartoons in the Italian dailies'. But the outcome seldom lived up to expectations. On 18 June, for instance, answering a letter from a woman worried that wild animals could escape from Milan zoo during alarms, *Corriere della Sera* wrote: 'We rely on the beasts themselves, which are not so ferocious after all; less ferocious, undoubtedly, than those British airmen who bomb open towns'.⁷⁸

Yet the emphasis on the necessity for discipline remained the central theme – the resilience of the home front being a crucial test of the rules and rituals practiced over almost two decades of exercises, parades and rhetorical slogans:

Fervour, warlike enthusiasm, certainty of the forthcoming battle must not make us lose sight of the common and simple everyday duties, the small things that have to be done so that the life of the fighting Nation maintains its rhythm. When we fight there are no small things: everything has to be done. Enthusiasm must not damage discipline. And the certainty of victory must not relax our vigilance. More than ever it is necessary to follow the rules of defence. The orders are: discipline, discipline, and more discipline.⁷⁹

Freight agents accused of exacting excessive prices from evacuees were denounced to the police. As in September 1939, country landlords who extorted exorbitant rents from people fleeing cities were also blamed and punished. *Il Mattino* praised the decision of the prefect of Naples Francesco Benigni to arrest

⁷⁷ 'Un lieto evento in ricovero: la nascita di un maschietto', *La Stampa*, 17 June 1940; 'Sei bimbi nati a Torino durante l'incursione nemica', *Il Mattino*, 16 June 1940; 'Sei nati a Torino nel rifugio della maternità durante le incursioni aeree', *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 16 June 1940.

⁷⁸ ACS, MCP, GAB, b. 95, Direzione generale della propaganda, Relazioni sull'attività svolta negli anni 1941-42; 'Le serate senza luce. Quesiti, problemi e soluzioni', *Corriere della Sera*, 18 June 1940.

⁷⁹ Massimo Escard, 'Disciplina', *La Stampa*, 18 June 1940.

Arturo Russo Spena, guilty of renting out his rooms in Sant'Anastasia at a very high price, and warned that the regime would not tolerate actions which were deemed 'pure crimes' due to 'an inconceivable mentality, which lies outside Fascist law and ethics'. Against 'greedy landlords', summed up the Naples daily, 'we must hit hard, so that everybody can come to his senses'. At the same time it pointed out the unselfishness of a farmer who had offered his house free of charge to the family that had fallen into the profiteer's hands.⁸⁰ The press initially printed lists of blackout transgressors who had been brought to justice and exhortations to get the things necessary to black out windows in homes, offices and factories, but only four days after the declaration of war, the MCP ordered newspapers not to print the number of fines inflicted for breaking blackout regulations in case of alarm.⁸¹ Censors must have been worried that the long lists in newspapers might reveal a high level of non-compliance and indiscipline rather than act as a deterrent for unlawful behaviour.

2.7 Custodians of Order

A handful of key figures came to embody the imperative of order on the home front. Heads of apartment blocks (*capifabbricato*) were portrayed in newspaper articles as the guardians of compliance with safety measures and upholders of discipline. They were as much commended at public events and in media reports as they were blamed, ridiculed and even hated by their contemporaries and in memoirs and works of fiction published after the war. They were primarily charged with making ready private shelters, assuring compliance with blackout regulations and directing people during alarms. An official booklet that came out in 1939 spelled out the *capofabbricato*'s duties, stating that 'his mission must be

⁸⁰ 'Segnalazioni', *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 20 June 1940; 'Un ingordo proprietario di Sant'Anastasia arrestato', *Il Mattino*, 25 June 1940.

⁸¹ ACS, MCP, GAB, b. 52, fasc. 316, Instructions of 14 June 1940; *La Stampa*, 29 June 1940; 'Le norme per l'oscuramento. Oltre 800 contravvenzioni contestate a Roma', *La Nazione*, 14 June 1940.

accomplished with tact, firmness, a sense of responsibility; he must not frighten but has to reassure residents'.⁸²

In order to make them more credible and authoritative, tribunals started to punish people who infringed rules. For example, on 24 June in Piacenza a button-maker was sentenced to seven months in prison because he refused to obey the *capofabbricato* and assaulted him.⁸³ In some cases the authorities had to sanction irregularities and abuses by the *capifabbricato*, as in Milan, where the prefect ordered the arrest of some 'who not only failed in their duties, but even refused to take in passers-by caught in alarms'. Commenting on that episode Mussolini's paper, generally given to martial tones and violent invectives, curiously stressed that the act of leaving people exposed to danger was 'a sign of a lack of the most basic human solidarity'.⁸⁴ However, in general, Fascist hierarchies and local authorities could rely on the willingness of *capifabbricato* to exercise a sort of many-eyed and widespread social control, based on delation and spying on private lives. For those reasons, their role had been enhanced since the early days of war:

The great responsibility that weighs on the *capofabbricato* must induce in everyone a sense of great respect, discipline and prompt obedience. The best intentions in the world do not justify infringements of those three fundamental canons and nor should it be forgotten that the *capofabbricato* is entitled to interpret and implement the authorities' orders; others must obey and - if asked - co-operate.⁸⁵

As the alarms became frequent and increasingly disquieting as the war went on, caretakers (*portinai*) were called on to help the *capifabbricato* in their duties, although in some ways their importance in acting as the regime's antennae in the everyday life of Italians was well-established even in peacetime. An example of this was later provided by the fictional but mostly realistic character of a woman charged with the care of a huge building portrayed in an Italian film, *Una giornata particolare* (A Special Day), which recalled the atmosphere of thrilled

⁸² Unione Nazionale Protezione Antiaerea, *Norme per il capofabbricato* (Rome: Arti Grafiche Santa Barbara, 1939), p. 2

⁸³ 'Sette mesi di reclusione per violenza contro un capo-fabbricato', *Corriere della Sera*, 25 June 1940.

⁸⁴ 'Capi-fabbricato arrestati a Milano', *La Stampa*, 18 June 1940; 'Capifabbricato arrestati per incomprensione dei doveri inerenti alle loro funzioni', *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 18 June 1940.

⁸⁵ 'Il capofabbricato e i suoi doveri', *Corriere della Sera*, 20 June 1940.

mobilisation during Hitler's visit to Rome in May 1938. She spent the whole day looking suspiciously at Gabriele and Antonietta, the only two residents in the apartment block who did not go to cheer the Führer at a parade organised by the Party. The former, a prime target of mistrust and suspicion - being an antifascist (and homosexual) intellectual - was visited that same evening by Fascist police and punished with internment.⁸⁶

In wartime, caretakers were called upon to raise their efforts and, as a consequence, their function and status were enhanced. 'The completely new character of this war', a columnist observed in *Il Secolo XIX*, 'brings a new kind of civil soldier, as worthy of regard as he is unassuming: the caretaker'. While the *capofabbricato* was engaged in only one field of activity, the *portinaio* must perform several tasks, such as preventing thieves and looters from breaking into flats left empty during alarms: 'We have all seen him, in this week of air raids, always present day and night', forced to sleep 'with one eye open'.⁸⁷

Capifabbricato and *portinai* were helped by fire wardens (*guardiani del fuoco*), charged with the task of keeping watch, during alarms, on buildings and in particular on attics. Unlike the former, they were called out mostly in emergencies and usually did not meddle in other people's lives. Generally chosen from among strong and trained people, they had to rush to wherever incendiary bombs dropped, cover them in mud and put them in a safe place with a shovel. Firefighters could be called only if *guardiani del fuoco* did not manage to keep the flames under control.⁸⁸ Sometimes recruitment and promotion among civil defence personnel subverted the entrenched social hierarchies, as happened to the main character of a short story set in a poor Naples neighbourhood during the war – a lame dustman whom everyone laughed at and held in contempt. In June 1940 he was named UNPA squad leader and his life and status changed all of a sudden:

⁸⁶ *Una giornata particolare* (1977), directed by Ettore Scola; subject and screenplay by Ettore Scola, Ruggero Maccari and Maurizio Costanzo. See Millicent Marcus, 'Un'ora e mezzo particolare: Teaching Fascism with Ettore Scola', *Italica* 1 (2006), pp. 53-61.

⁸⁷ S., 'Saluto al portinaio', *Il Secolo XIX*, 24 June 1940.

⁸⁸ 'Il guardiano del fuoco', *Il Secolo XIX*, 28 June 1940.

He was supplied with a helmet, a hoe, two bags of sand, a fire extinguisher, a gas mask, and a motorised tricycle. At last he had the chance to take revenge for the humiliation he had suffered when he collected garbage from people's homes: now, at the slightest infringement, he fined those haughty caretakers who for many years had prevented him from taking the lift because of the stinking litter he carried. A stair window left open, a glass not well blackened were more than enough for them to be summoned by the police.⁸⁹

The members of UNPA and people who had responsibilities in apartment blocks were not remembered with affection in their contemporaries' memories and were to become the object of harsh or humorous treatment in Italian post-war fiction. They enforced an array of prohibitions and obligations that reproduced on a small scale the dynamics of Fascist power over 20 years. With very few exceptions, instead of acting as unselfish leaders of small communities engaged in self-defence efforts, they exercised their small prerogative to invade the privacy of people's homes, strutting about in their uniforms, shouting orders in courtyards or stairwells, making sure everyone wore the party pin and nobody listened to 'Radio Londra'.⁹⁰

Conclusion

Italy's entry into the war charged Pavolini and the MCP with the task of giving people the illusion of triumphal successes in the battlefield, but sources show that fear and insecurity spread among civilians from the first air raids on the Italian cities. The media did not manage to conquer those feelings. Even sensible general directives (for example those coming from Pavolini recommending to avoid 'lyricism' and emphatic headlines or not to underestimate the enemy) often produced opposite outcomes in the daily routine of newsrooms accustomed to work on the basis of established procedures of overzealous self-censorship. The irregular and sometimes inconsistent directives from propaganda controllers reflected similar attitudes within the regime and of Mussolini himself, while the enemy became gradually more effective in conveying, by means of leaflets and 'Radio Londra' broadcasting, a direct and simple message: that there was no

⁸⁹ Luciano De Crescenzo, 'La storta', in *Origine. Scritture in movimento*, 2 (2003).

⁹⁰ Sergio Lambiase and G. Battista Nazzaro, *Napoli 1940-1945* (Milan. Longanesi, 1978), pp. 67-70.

aggression against Italy and Italians were being forced to pay for a choice one man had made. The huge military setbacks of autumn 1940 would make that message even clearer.

Chapter 3. Adjusting to Reality: Home Front and Air War

In the first year of war, the organs of Fascist propaganda and the media cooperated in the attempt to make credible the image of a country determined to stay resolute and impassive in the struggle against the enemy. Their efforts aimed at refuting evidence that war was a disruptive break with deeply rooted rhythms and habits that both civilians and soldiers had experienced since the summer of 1940. For example, the emergency blackout measures were presented as an opportunity to lead a simpler life and to rediscover the lost beauty of cities and landscapes unspoiled by artificial lights. Moreover, faith and endurance on the home front were to be kept alive by stressing the valour of the Axis troops and the rightness of their cause. Papers, news films and radio bulletins reported the terrible consequences of the German air raids on English cities down to the smallest detail, delighting in describing Londoners under the Blitz as troglodytes.¹ Leading journalists were mobilised to exalt the Italian forces and vilify their enemies, often exploiting the commonest stereotypes of a declining military tradition, such as the myth of the *Regia Aeronautica*. Specifically, the almost symbolic participation of the latter in the German air raids on Britain in autumn 1940 was unfortunate, both in its military outcome and from a propaganda point of view. As will be shown in detail in Chapter 5, the Fascists' initial boastfulness of that participation was later in the war used by Britain as motivation to increase the pressure on Italy and even to threaten the bombardment of Rome.

Moreover, attempts to minimize the negative impact on morale of Italy's first great military setback turned out to be useless. In particular, failure in occupation of Greece loomed, and the British attack on the Italian fleet in Taranto made manifest the vulnerability of the Italian defence. In the Italian media there was no echo of the doubts and fears gradually spreading among the population –

¹ Enrico Massa, 'Londra città di trogloditi', *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 23 October 1940. Massa was rewarded for his service in the Great War. Before joining Mussolini's newspaper, he had worked for *Corriere della Sera* from 1914 to 1925, where he returned in 1946. See Glauco Licata, *Storia del Corriere della Sera* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1976), p. 608.

diligently recorded instead with increasing apprehension by the Fascist authorities and well known to the MCP, which insisted on its remit to galvanise the public. The lack of confidence and increasing mistrust in the Fascist leadership that followed the first enemy raids risked contaminating the troops. The army staff had to censor many letters written to soldiers from relatives who described the first air raids as a ‘nightmare’ and reported ‘great agitation’ in Milan and other cities in Northern Italy. A note sent by a police informant from Genoa on 18 November 1940 showed that a breach in Italian morale, and therefore in popular support for Fascism and Mussolini, was known to the the authorities in the first months of war:

If what has been taking place in London for two months happened in Genoa, even for a dozen days; if we were forced, for a dozen consecutive nights, to go down to basements or hastily to take cover in shelters, it is unquestionable that the political situation would be deemed really dangerous.²

3.1 Beyond the Blackout Experience: the Fascination of Darkness

Blackout and air-raid warnings compelled civilians, especially the urban population, to adjust suddenly to nights in complete darkness. When the first air raids consigned to the past the artificial excitement of the drills that had marked the nine months of non-belligerence, the Italian people had to change their habits completely, resigning themselves to spending much more time at home or in shelters. The authorities wavered between two conflicting needs: making sure that everyday life went on as normally as possible and preventing unnecessary crowding in streets and public places. Gossip columnists were ordered not to report news of parties attended by politicians, aristocrats and celebrities to show that on the home front everybody did their bit; ordinary people had to think that the whole nation was engaged in sharing the sacrifices the Fascist war required, the authoritarian version of the ‘we’re all in it’ feeling of 1940 that George Orwell described about war-time Britain.³ The media was mobilised to convey a

² Pietro Cavallo, *Italiani in guerra: sentimenti e immagini dal 1940 al 1943* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1997), pp. 60; 57.

³ *The Complete Works of George Orwell: Keeping our Little Corner Clean, 1942-1943*, ed. Ian Angus and Sheila Davison (London: Secker & Warburg, 1998), p. 292.

harmless, romantic and sometimes awkwardly poetic image of the total darkness which closed in on war nights. Writers and journalists were enlisted to fight fear and worries among their countrymen with the weapon of a rhetoric which was to appear, as the war became more difficult to endure, ever more absurd and surreal. The story the Italian media began to tell about the consequences of the war on the civilian population attempted to disguise the constraints created by the anti-aircraft measures and to hide the discrepancy between the propaganda's presentation of the facts and real life.⁴

That kind of propaganda had begun during the months of non-belligerence, describing in particular the everyday life of Germans under the first Allied air attacks and the disciplined reaction of Italians during the civil defence tests. In March 1939, *Corriere della Sera* had written that whoever witnessed Milan during the blackout experiments 'did not think of a dead city, but of a strong-willed one, which has heard and understood an order'.⁵ A year and half later Milan was still described as an orderly and well organised city, which 'firmly submitted to the rules of war, without giving a dramatic turn to it'.⁶ Mussolini had dragged Italian cities into the fight, but newspapers continued painting idyllic urban scenes: people going light-heartedly to theatres, placid policemen controlling the traffic, bicycles and trams contending for the road, civilians adequately protected by roomy shelters and powerful anti-aircraft guns.

This idealisation of blacked-out Italian cities persisted in the first months of war. When darkness closed in on Rome a few weeks after Mussolini's declaration of war, *Il Messaggero* wrote that the city had 'a grave fascination' that 'nothing can upset'.⁷ In Florence, 'the darkness became the limpid sheath of wonderful vibrations, the city acquired a profile, its ancient true profile, the night

⁴ Francesca Zanella, 'Luce guerra dominio: rappresentazioni urbane', *Ricerche di S/Confine* 1 (2010), p. 150.

⁵ 'La vita della città resa inerte da un allarme notturno di 50 minuti', *Corriere della Sera*, 29 March 1939.

⁶ Fernando Poch, 'Milano e la guerra', *Milano. Rivista mensile del Comune*, September-October 1940, pp. 9-17.

⁷ Guglielmo Ceroni, 'Cronaca e fascino di Roma al buio. Asterischi sull'oscurità', *Il Messaggero*, 30 June 1940.

was filled with life and ardour'.⁸ At times the coexistence in the same story of martial tones and intimate atmospheres produced a disorientating effect. In summer 1940, for instance, the journalist and writer Emilio Radius insisted that, "blackout is a war, a true war operation, in which civilians must take part with military discipline'. At the same time he noticed that in the evening "life is being led indoors and homes, by contrast, have become more comfortable and brighter".⁹ Blackout, the writer Corrado Alvaro observed, was bringing to the large cities inhabited by millions of Italians the sober life hitherto led only by the peasantry in the countryside or in the mountains – full of solidarity, community spirit and good feeling.¹⁰ Newspapers insisted on the socialising function of shelters and alarms: the sound of the sirens pushed people into cellars, where they got to know one another. 'We are almost sorry', Carlo Manzoni wrote, 'when the all clear advises us to go back to bed'.¹¹ The blackout experience, as depicted in the short stories disseminated in the press, hailed the example of generous and unselfish people, always willing to help the weak and unflappable in the face of danger.¹² As during the months of non-belligerence, the media also attempted to cheer up readers by focusing on frivolous topics in line with war needs. The weekly *Tempo*, for example, commissioned stylist Else-Ley Haertter to sketch a new collection for Italian women in wartime:

Men from all walks of life stay calm and vigilant, but women are proving themselves even calmer. So calm that they do not want to give up some charming mental occupations. On the contrary, the circumstances have stimulated their imagination and now we have an extraordinary surprise: fashion has been inspired by blackout, discovering for the incoming fall and winter seasons the purples, the pink-purples and the blues prompted by the dim lights, the amber and overcast colours of war nights. One of our most sensitive designers has added those colours to her palette and decided to launch them as the foundation of the next winter fashion, creating original patterns that bring out the harmony of blue, purple and pink in elegant dresses cut from the newly made Italian cloth. Once upon a time, in wars and revolutions, women used to dress in martial styles that gave

⁸ Paolo Nomade, 'A lumi spenti', *Corriere della Sera*, 20 September 1940.

⁹ Emilio Radius, 'Ritorno della notte', *La Lettura*, August 1940, n. 8, p. 624.

¹⁰ Corrado Alvaro, 'Sulle città al buio', *La Stampa*, 30 October 1940.

¹¹ Carlo Manzoni, 'Quando suona la sirena', *Stampa Sera*, 5 July 1940.

¹² Arturo Lanocita, 'Allarme di notte', *La Lettura*, November 1940 n. 11, p. 898-902. Lanocita was head of news for *Corriere della Sera*. In 1943 he repatriated to Switzerland, and in 1945 he returned to the Milan newspaper. See Licata, *Storia del Corriere della Sera*, p. 602.

civilian dress an *operetta*'s atmosphere: nowadays, the taste and intelligence of our fashion offer a good idea of the new, rapidly changing situation.¹³

It is hard to ascertain how many Italians might have taken comfort in those articles. But such entertaining exercises seemed so inconsistent with the content and timbre of almost two decades of bellicose pedagogy that open dissent emerged within Fascism itself. An unsigned comment in *Primato*, the cultural journal founded by Giuseppe Bottai, condemned 'the craving' for looking at everything through 'eyes veiled with lyricism and tears' and observed that 'poetry of logistics, poetry of the blackout, poetry of the anti-aircraft barrage' came alongside 'poetry of the advance and the attack'. But the war, the author warned, 'is a tremendously serious thing, which requires method, calculation, gravity, even when it is not made but is merely relayed'.¹⁴ Yet Bottai's criticism had no influence on the direction of Italian propaganda and the press continued to follow the path that *Primato* had exposed. As late as 1942, for example, *L'Illustrazione Italiana* carried an article written by Gio Ponti, an influential architect and designer, exalting the blackout because 'it gave us back the sky light'.¹⁵

3.2 'Them and Us': Heroes against Villains

Juxtaposing two antithetic styles of waging the air war was a permanent fixture in Fascist war propaganda: on the one hand, the cowardly and indiscriminate attacks of British pilots on innocent civilians; on the other the heroic and successful actions of Italian airmen against selected military targets. German forces too benefited from the exaltation of military virtues: the Italian newspapers had been praising the Luftwaffe raids on British cities since the beginning of the war and accusing the RAF of targeting homes, schools and hospitals.¹⁶ This rhetorical device was closely linked to the Fascist idealisation of Italian air power based on a

¹³ Bruno Siriani, 'Moda e oscuramento', *Tempo*, 19 September 1940, p. 24; *Viaggiare con la moda: i racconti itineranti di Elsa Haertter*, ed. Fiammetta Bernardinelli Roditi, Marco Turinetti and Armando Honegger (Mestrino: Walking Fashion, 2008).

¹⁴ 'Calendario', *Primato*, 1 December 1940, p. 14

¹⁵ Gio Ponti, 'Luci del cielo', *L'Illustrazione Italiana*, 12 July 1942 n. 28, p. 48.

¹⁶ 'Un altro ospedale germanico colpito dall'aviazione britannica', *Corriere della Sera*, 22 June 1940; 'Donne contadini e bambini massacrati dalle bombe inglesi', *Il Messaggero*, 23 June 1940; 'L'arma germanica batte implacabile la Gran Bretagna', *Corriere della Sera*, 27 June 1940.

handful of highly symbolic precedents, such as the proclamations of the ‘flying poet’ Gabriele d’Annunzio, the aeronautical records achieved by Francesco De Pinedo, the saga of the dirigible airship Norge of Umberto Nobile, the futuristic theories of Giulio Douhet, the feats of the ace Francesco Baracca in the Great War, and the mythical figure of Italo Balbo, whose legend among contemporaries was preserved while concealing from the public the fact that his death in June 1940 had been caused by Italian anti-aircraft gunfire on the North African front.¹⁷ Together with these historical landmarks, popular culture, literature and the arts had also contributed to the construction of the myth, mixing with political propaganda and building solid foundations among different layers of the Italian society: the romantic novels of Liala - such as the most popular *Brigata di ali*, which came out in 1937 - provided women with fascinating portraits of gallant pilots, while boys were attracted by comics featuring exemplary heroes in the most read youth magazines: ‘L’asso dell’aria’ in *L’Avventuroso*, ‘Il mistero dell’aeroporto Zeta’ in *Topolino*, ‘Aviazione e fascismo’ in *L’Audace*.¹⁸

Aeropittura and *aeropoesia* were branches of Futurism which had been exalting the ‘aesthetics of the flying machines’ respectively in paintings and poems since the Great War.¹⁹ In the 1930s they were part of the propagandistic campaigns supporting Fascist wars, first in Spain, then in Ethiopia and finally in the Second World War. Notwithstanding the cultural pedigree, those elements of the Futurist movement never attracted a huge popular following, compared with the influence cinema had in popularising stories of successful airmen. For example, the story of the two main characters in the film *Luciano Serra pilota* - a father who had fought in the Great War and his son who piloted a plane in the Ethiopian campaign - was a powerful synthesis of those streams of the air-power myth. The film, written by Roberto Rossellini and supervised by Vittorio Mussolini, the Duce’s son who acted as the regime’s voice in the world of

¹⁷ Eric Lehmann, *Le ali del potere. La propaganda aeronautica nell’Italia fascista* (Turin: Utet, 2010).

¹⁸ Robertino Ghiringhelli, ‘Introduzione’, in *Le ali del ventennio. L’aviazione italiana dal 1923 al 1945*, ed. Massimo Ferrari, (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2005), p. 8; Giuseppe Pazienti and Rinaldo Traini, *Fumetto alalà: i comics italiani d’avventura durante il fascismo* (Rome: Comic Art, 1986), p. 103.

¹⁹ Lehmann, *Le ali del potere*, pp. 196-204.

cinema, was awarded the Coppa Mussolini at the Festival of Venice in 1938 and Fascist propaganda continued to exploit its success for years to come.²⁰ In June 1940, when Mussolini joined Hitler in the war, the MCP showed the film in Berlin, where spectators were reported to have applauded ‘especially the scenes dealing with the development of Italian air force’.²¹

In war reporting, the ‘exceptionalism’ of the Italian air power was translated into stories whose style and language hinted at almost supernatural forces. The *Ala Fascista* was portrayed as ‘infallible’ and ‘inexorable’, and as being ‘everywhere’. The content of the *Corriere della Sera* on 24 June 1940 was an example of this kind of propaganda. Two days earlier a British air raid on the Sicilian city of Trapani had left 20 dead and 40 wounded, mostly civilians, besides ‘relevant damage’ to military targets, but the front page of the newspaper was monopolised by news of a ‘successful’ raid that Italian bombers had carried out on the British port in Alexandria in Egypt, ‘a magnificent action, which confirms the ubiquity of our air force, for which there are no such thing as unattainable enemy bases’. An anonymous commentator set the ‘magnificent deeds’ of the Italian pilots against the ‘criminal act of enemy aviation on the built-up area in Trapani’.²² Comments and reports amplified the facts related in the Italian war bulletins and insisted in singling out episodes which were deemed particularly emblematic of the enemy’s dishonourable conduct. Praising the actions of Fascist aviators in the Mediterranean at the beginning of September 1940, for instance, *La Stampa* remarked that an Italian rescue seaplane, ‘which bore the required red cross, had been attacked and machine-gunned while it was searching for planes lost at sea’. The Genoese newspaper *Il Secolo XIX* labelled the act as ‘wicked and infamous’:

²⁰ Claudio Carabba, *Il cinema del ventennio nero* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1974), pp. 71-72; Guido Aristarco, *Il cinema fascista: il prima e il dopo* (Bari, Dedalo, 1996), p. 78.

²¹ ‘Luciano Serra pilota proiettato a Berlino’, *Corriere della Sera*, 18 June 1940.

²² ‘La base di Alessandria d’Egitto bombardata con successo dai nostri aerei’, *Corriere della Sera*, 24 June 1940; *Ibid.*, ‘La situazione’; *Diario storico del comando supremo*, Vol. 1.1 (11.6.1940-31.8.1940), ed. Biagini and Frattolillo, p. 66.

In war, from 1914 onwards, airmen from all over the world have always restricted their actions and have always operated within the limits established by international law on air war. The British airmen were the first to break this chivalrous custom and put themselves outside the law.²³

Renowned journalists and writers were enlisted to provide vivid accounts of bravery and cowardice. ‘Our press, in the name of the Italian airmen’, Gastone Martini wrote in *L’Illustrazione Italiana*, ‘more than once dared the British to appear in our skies in the daylight, as our pilots do in their missions on Alexandria, Malta, Aden and so on, night and day’.²⁴ *Corriere della Sera* published Vittorio-Beonio Brocchieri, an historian at the University of Pavia and a committed aviator embedded with the Italian air force. From his earliest reports he played the card of comparison between Italian and British pilots. Writing about the battle over Malta, he set ‘our bold actions against the enemy bases’ against ‘the criminal English air raids on open cities’. Describing the Italian attack as a retaliation for the British raid on Trapani, he praised the conduct of the action ‘in perfect military style’, noting that the Italian planes ‘veer over the built-up area of Gozo, which is scrupulously respected’ and ‘point at the military bases in Malta’. In that article, the Italian reader could not see the enemy, impersonally described as a cold and defective military machine, but was encouraged to admire the Italian pilots standing against a background of clear skies, brought together in a comradesly spirit, with commanders personally taking part in the actions in order to convey confidence and assurance to their subordinates. In the same report, Beonio-Brocchieri described the effects of the British raid on Palermo on 23 June 1940 in which 25 people were killed and 110 wounded. He emphasised the atmosphere of tragedy – without hinting at the fact, duly registered in the supreme command’s diary, that the attack was an effective one, having hit some important military targets including a vehicle depot, a shipyard near the train station, and an airplane factory:

²³ ‘Una formazione di navi britanniche raggiunta e attaccata dalla nostra aviazione’, *La Stampa*, 3 September 1940; ‘Il vile attacco dei caccia inglesi contro un nostro aereo di soccorso’, *Il Secolo XIX*, 3 September 1940.

²⁴ Gastone Martini, ‘La guerra aerea (come la combattono gli inglesi e come la combattiamo noi)’, *L’Illustrazione Italiana*, 25 August 1940 n. 34, p. 294.

We were in town when ambulances and stretchers carried away the dead and wounded. Poor unarmed people, civilians, defenceless, hit by the stupidity of a disloyal and clumsy enemy who allows the aerial offensive fall upon mistaken targets. We conceive war in a very different way.²⁵

Readers of *Cronache della guerra*, who benefited from reports that looked deeply at the theoretical and technical aspects of war, were also provided with analysis of two opposing ways of conducting air operations. This task was entrusted to Ugo Rampelli, chief press officer at the Air Ministry and a regular attendee at the MCP press conferences.²⁶ ‘In the succession of enemy initiatives’, he wrote, ‘a logical connection, a concatenation which would demonstrate a line of conduct and therefore a clear and precise purpose is missing’. The author observed with a certain relief that the enemy had not conducted its night raids on Turin, Genoa, Trapani and Palermo with ‘a terroristic intent’, in pursuit of ‘Douhet’s theories of air war’. But he did not ascribe that behaviour so much to a deliberate decision by the British authorities, as to ‘a mean and cynical mentality of the people who order the air missions’ and to the ‘poor training and scanty professional values of the crews that must accomplish them’. Against such descriptions of the enemy, Rampelli sketched in a few lines a fanciful and idealised portrait of the Fascist air force: Italian air operations distinguished themselves in ‘their continuity of direction, organic complexity of actions, accuracy of fire, choice of targets, crews’ desire for combat, persistence of every unit in reaching targets in spite of enemy anti-aircraft fire, enemy fighters and adverse weather conditions’. The aim was to persuade readers to believe that there was an enormous gulf between the two sides in terms of fighting skills and military preparation:

In short, in our crews there is a style which you do not see in the enemy. Timely interventions, scrupulous observance of routine in flight, formations flying elegantly even in enemy skies, indeed especially in enemy skies, because those who see us can admire what discipline binds the units and what harmony there is among crews.²⁷

²⁵ Vittorio Beonio-Brocchieri, ‘Due opposti metodi di guerra aerea’, *Corriere della Sera*, 25 June 1940; *Diario storico del comando supremo*, Vol. 1.1 (11.6.1940-31.8.1940), p. 73.

²⁶ *Ministri e giornalisti*, p. XXI.

²⁷ Ugo Rampelli, ‘Noi e loro’, *Cronache della guerra*, 6 July 1940, n. 27, p. 19

The printed media ensured that it provided a visual representation of the contrast between the two different ways of conducting the air war, filling their pages with pictures showing civilian buildings wrecked by British bombs set against aerial photographs framing the military targets carefully selected by the German and Italian crews.²⁸ Cartoonists were also entrusted to disseminate such representations as widely as possible. The magazine *Tempo*, for example, published a drawing representing a group of British civilians surrounding an RAF plane asking the pilot whether the four crosses painted on the left wing represented the number of enemy aircraft he shot down. ‘No’, he replied, ‘They stand for the hospitals I bombed’.²⁹

This elementary schema based on the reiterated assertion of moral superiority over the enemy, despite proving rather ineffective in gaining popular support for war, according to confidential reports, was to remain a constant in subsequent years and extending, as chapter 4 will show, to other forms of propaganda supervised by the MCP.

3.3 Capitalising on Death: In the Footsteps of German Propaganda

During the first months of non-belligerence, Italian propaganda against the Allies had inclined towards ideological, political and economic issues, rather than questioning their war practices in detail or framing two divergent ways of waging war. At that stage the war was fought mostly at sea and civilians were not fully involved. In the last months of 1939, with the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact still in force, the war Russia waged against Finland to take over a territory deemed vital to protect Leningrad drew the attention of the Italian media. Readers and spectators were fed stories and images of Soviet aggression and encouraged to sympathise with the Finnish people. In December the bombing of Helsinki was widely reported, praising the courage of the ordinary Finns who stood firm against the invader: the first five air raids claimed hundreds of victims among civilians and several buildings and an hospital burned, yet ‘the population behaved with a

²⁸ *Oggi*, 28 September 1940.

²⁹ *Tempo*, 3 October 1940.

laudable calm, following with the utmost discipline the orders of the Defence Command, whose shelters worked perfectly well'.³⁰

On 10 May 1940 the western campaign began and German troops flooded into the Low Countries and France. Mussolini decided that his intervention could no longer be put off.³¹ It was at this point that war reports in the Italian media started to recount the fight between the Germans and the Allies adopting the framework of moral judgement regarding their military conduct. The bombing of Freiburg, in southern Germany, on 10 May 1940 offered German propaganda (and the Italian authorities, who uncritically echoed Berlin's arguments) occasion to blame its enemies for the first deliberate air attack against civilians and to try and influence public opinion in neutral countries. That evening an official communiqué reported that three enemy planes had dropped bombs on the open city of Freiburg killing 24 people and announced strong retaliation against French and British cities. The next day a second German bulletin reported that 13 of the dead were children who had been playing in a municipal playground when the bombs fell. The Italian press immediately echoed the thesis of an Allied massacre, indulging in macabre particulars of blood and bone fragments at the scene of the explosion and lingering over moving details like the discovery of broken toys belonging to the dead children.³²

Over successive days the Italian newspapers reported the British Air Ministry's strong denial, which stated on 11 May that the German communiqué was pure fabrication.³³ However, the papers did not follow the event's developments, which turned out to be a classic example of the skill of Goebbels'

³⁰ 'Finlandia: Helsinki', *Giornale LUCE B1641*, 20 December 1939. Indro Montanelli covered the war for *Corriere della Sera* and his articles were immediately collected as a book. See Indro Montanelli, *I cento giorni della Finlandia* (Milan: Garzanti, 1940) and also Sandro Gerbi and Raffaele Liucci, *Indro Montanelli: una biografia 1909-2001* (Milan: Hoepli, 2014). On the Winter War see Overy with Andrew Wheatcroft, *The Road to War* (London: Vintage Books, 2009, first publ. 1989), pp. 290-291.

³¹ Knox, *Common Destiny*, p. 145.

³² 'Il bombardamento di Friburgo da parte degli alleati', *Corriere della Sera*, 11 May 1940; '24 civili tedeschi uccisi da un bombardamento aereo', *La Stampa*, 11 May 1940; 'L'aviazione tedesca non bombarda centri civili', *Corriere della Sera*, 12 May 1940; Ralf Blank, 'Wartime Daily Life and the Air War on the Home Front', in *Germany and the Second World War*, Vol. 9/1, *German Wartime Society 1939-1945: Politicization, Disintegration, and the Struggle for Survival*, ed. Jörg Echternkamp, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2008), p. 378.

³³ 'Londra smentisce il bombardamento di Friburgo', *Il Messaggero*, 11 May 1940.

propagandists. The story was ineptly countered by their opposite numbers in London and Paris, as shown by the fact that as late as 16 May the French news agency Havas related Swiss information that Allied squadrons had attacked mechanised German troops travelling through Freiburg, during which action some civilians had been unintentionally hit.³⁴ It took the British Foreign Office until 20 May to issue an official communiqué asserting that, ‘statements to the effect that the RAF have deliberately bombed civilians or non-military objectives are completely untrue,’ and that, ‘His Majesty’s Government have made it clear that it is no part of their policy to bomb non-military objectives, no matter what the policy of the German government may be’.³⁵ William Shirer, the CBS radio’s Berlin correspondent, guessed at the truth. He noted in his diary on 11 May:

Goebbels’ propaganda machine, shifting into high gear, discovers today, twenty-four hours after the official announcement that twenty-four persons had been killed by the bombing of Freiburg, that thirteen of the twenty-four were children who were peacefully frolicking on the municipal playground. What were a lot of children doing on a playground in the midst of an air-raid? This particular Goebbels fake is probably produced to justify German killing of civilians on the other side’.³⁶

Shirer’s intuition was well founded, but it took decades for the myth that the Allied bombing of Freiburg had started the terroristic air war against civilians to be refuted. The German town had been accidentally hit by three *Luftwaffe* bombers lost on their way to Dijon in France.³⁷

Two months later, when Mussolini had been at war for just four weeks, the Italian authorities had to face the first real test of war propaganda about civilian casualties. On 2 July 1940 the German U-Boat U-47 torpedoed the British liner *The Arandora Star* which was heading to Canada carrying German prisoners of

³⁴ ‘Une mise au point au sujet du prétendu bombardement de Fribourg-en-Brigau’, *La Croix*, 16 May 1940.

³⁵ ‘No Bombs on Non-Military Objectives’, *The Times*, 20 May 1940.

³⁶ William L. Shirer, *Berlin Diary: The Journal of a Foreign Correspondent 1934-1941* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1943), p. 270.

³⁷ ‘Große Sache’, *Der Spiegel*, 26 April 1982, pp. 74-76; Horst Boog, ‘The Anglo-American Strategic Air-War over Europe and German Air Defence’, in *Germany and the Second World War. Widening of the Conflict Into a World War and the Shift of the Initiative 1941-1943*, Vol. 6, *The global war*, ed. Research Institute for Military History, Potsdam (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), p. 528; Hermann Knell, *To Destroy a City. Strategic Bombing and its Human Consequences in World War II* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2003), p. 180.

war, Jewish refugees, Italian civilian internees and British servicemen. The liner sank within 30 minutes and 700 people died, two thirds of whom were Italians. The Fascist press flew into a rage when British newspapers reported that Germans and Italians had panicked and started to fight on the *Arandora*'s decks over possession of the lifeboats, but it failed to exploit the disaster and capitalise on the sensation it caused among the British where members of Parliament raised questions in the House of Commons. Instead the Italian media focused on blaming the enemy for some crucial factors of the shipwreck that emerged from survivors' accounts: the ship had visible guns but was not escorted, nor did it display evident signs that civilians were aboard; there were only ten lifeboats; barbed wire hampered escape in some places; no planned emergency procedure was put in place. In fact, most of the Italian internees on *The Arandora Star* were neither Fascist sympathisers nor involved in politics. They had lived in Britain for decades as restaurant owners, caterers, shopkeepers and miners. Many were old. Nearly all were well integrated into British society. But the Fascist authorities – probably concerned that revealing the implications of that episode could cause trouble on the home front – did not denounce the method of their deportation or amplify the tragedy of *The Arandora Star*.³⁸

Censors were more resolute in exploiting episodes which did not involve Italians. As Antonio Gibelli noticed, an anti-Soviet campaign orchestrated in the Italian press at the beginning of 1940 had produced cartoons showing Stalin's bombers targeting innocent children.³⁹ On 10 September 1940 the MCP instructed newspapers to 'comment on the statistics of German children killed by British

³⁸ 'Internati italiani e tedeschi vittime della perfidia inglese', *La Stampa*, 6 July 1940; Paolo Monelli, 'Si racconta il naufragio dell'"Arandora star"', *La Nuova Stampa*, 23 October 1949; Terri Colpi, 'The Impact of the Second World War on the British Italian Community', in *The Internment of Aliens in Twentieth Century Britain*, ed. David Cesarani and Tony Kushner, (London: Frank Cass, 1993), pp. 177-183; Lucio Sponza, 'The Internment of Italians 1940-1945', in *Totally Un-English? Britain's Internment of 'Enemy Aliens in Two World Wars, The Yearbook of the Research Centre for German and Austrian Exile Studies*, ed. Richard Dove, Vol. 7 (Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi B.V., 2005); Maria Serena Balestracci, *Arandora Star: dall'oblio alla memoria* (Parma: MUP, 2008).

³⁹ Gibelli, *Il popolo bambino. Infanzia e nazione dalla Grande Guerra a Salò* (Turin: Einaudi, 2005), p. 344-345. The author points out that in post-war Italy anti-communist propaganda exploited the same stereotype.

bombs on Berlin'.⁴⁰ Accordingly, Mussolini's men followed with greater conviction in the footsteps of Nazi propaganda when an RAF raid on 18 September 1940 provided Goebbels with a golden opportunity to orchestrate another anti-British campaign, again charging the enemy with brutality against the German civilian population. The Italian media carried news, comment and pictures of the attack launched by British planes in north-west Germany. The bombers hit a children's hospital in Bethel, near Bielefeld, and killed 12 disabled children. The hospital had been in the sights of the Reich authorities charged with the eugenic T-4 programme which entailed the mass murder of mentally ill and physically handicapped people, but before the attack the perseverance of the hospital's director, Protestant pastor Friedrich von Bodelschwingh, had saved the little patients, whom the Nazi authorities had deemed 'unworthy of living', from euthanasia. The official version of the Nazi propaganda was questioned by many Germans: spectators of a newsreel about the Bethel tragedy were recorded by the *Sicherheitsdienst* (SD), the counter-intelligence of the Nazi party that compiled morale reports, commenting on how moving it was to see the authorities so concerned for the 'hereditary diseased'.⁴¹ The Italian media echoed the German propaganda machine, branding the British air raid as a 'revolting crime' against the very defenceless and sick children the Nazis had in fact planned to eliminate:

It is an exemplary event, without mitigating circumstances, not only because the surrounding area is a long way from any military objective which might attract the British bombers, but also on account of the huge extent of the hospital buildings, whose nature was instantly recognisable and clearly marked with the Red Cross symbol. Owing to all those factors, only one hypothesis is admissible: the attack was expressly and deliberately premeditated and implemented, which is therefore not only a measure of the vileness of those who carried it out and who marked themselves as unworthy of being called soldiers, but also seals the moral stature of the entire war's direction and of a whole people, which too evidently shows solidarity with this way of fighting.⁴²

'It is unquestionable', *Il Messaggero* said, 'that the dreadful deed has been perpetrated in total awareness'. *Corriere della Sera* tried to move its readers, who

⁴⁰ ACS, MCP, GAB, Ordini alla stampa, b. 52, fasc. 316, Instructions of 30 September 1940.

⁴¹ Ralf Blank, 'Wartime Daily Life and the Air War on the Home Front', p. 378; Shirer, *Berlin Diary*, pp. 406-408; 454-459; Jorg Friedrich, *The Bombing of Germany 1940-1945* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 181; Gerwin Strobl, *The Germanic Isle. Nazi Perception of Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 220.

⁴² G.P., 'Il delitto di Bethel', *La Stampa*, 20 September 1940.

obviously did not know about the T-4 programme, comparing Bethel with a similar institution in Turin, the very popular 'Beata Casa del Cottolengo'. In a break from its custom of not publishing shocking pictures of war casualties, the Italian press published photographs released by German propaganda showing the young victims of the Bethel bombing lying in a morgue. The caption in *L'Illustrazione Italiana* described 'the German children killed by British bombs during the attack on Bethel, the centre in Westphalia which is called "the city of the wretched" because it is inhabited by thousands of sick people who find assistance and rehabilitation there'. The same scenes were also screened in Italian cinemas by the Istituto LUCE.⁴³

Although it was always solicitous about the fate of civilians when the bombers were (or were reported to be) British, the Italian media failed to note that the *Arma Azzurra's* airmen did not show any humanitarian restraint in the Middle East. Since 15 July 1940 planes taking off from Rhodes had targeted oil installations, refineries, storage facilities and power stations in Palestine. The first raid against Haifa, on 15 July, was carried out by five aircraft under the command of secretary of the Fascist Party Ettore Muti in his capacity as air force major. In their deadliest attack, on the afternoon of 9 September, Italian planes dropped 4.5 tons of bombs on a residential area in the centre of Tel Aviv killing 117 Jews, seven Arabs and one Australian soldier. The city, unlike Haifa, did not host military or industrial targets and lacked anti-aircraft guns. Thousands of people attended the funerals of the victims, shocked by what they saw as a deliberate attack on civilians, and the mayor of Tel Aviv, Israel Rocach, wrote letters of protest about the Italian raid to Roosevelt.⁴⁴ Since the news did not exist for the Italian public, Fascist propaganda did not care to answer the British authorities

⁴³ 'Criminale impresa della RAF contro i sanatori tedeschi di Bethel', *Il Messaggero*, 20 September 1940; 'I delitti della RAF. Tre ospedali per bambini bombardati in Germania', *Corriere della Sera*, 20 September 1940; 'Gli obiettivi dei bombardieri inglesi', *L'Illustrazione Italiana*, 29 September 1940 n. 39; 'Effetti dei bombardamenti inglesi e tedeschi', *Giornale LUCE C0076*, 19 September 1940.

⁴⁴ Nir Arielli, "'Haifa is still Burning": Italian, German and French Air Raids on Palestine during the Second World War', *Middle Eastern Studies* 3 (2010), pp. 333-336; Daphna Sharfman, *Palestine in the Second World War: Strategic Plans and Political Dilemmas* (Eastbourne: Sussex University Press, 2014), pp. 15-16.

and the press which claimed the bombs had been dropped indiscriminately and far from any possible military objectives.⁴⁵ On 11 September 1940 *La Stampa* confined itself to reporting from the official bulletin which stated that the Italian air force had bombed the port of Haifa and the Alexandria-Marsha Matruh railway line in Egypt.⁴⁶

3.4 Italians in the Battle of Britain

The participation of an Italian air expeditionary force in German operations against the British Isles was a valuable opportunity for Fascist propaganda to write a new chapter in the epic of the *Arma Azzurra*. As a matter of fact it was an initiative with no relevant consequence on the course of the Battle of Britain (on the contrary, it ended up causing embarrassment between the Axis partners and huge resentment in Britain), but it was sold to the public as a bold enterprise and a military success. A poster designed by illustrator Gino Boccasile, showing a bombed-out London in flames below an overhanging hand with the Roman gesture of ‘thumbs down’, were to be found on Italy’s walls for the whole war.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ ‘Italian Resort to Air Murder’, *The Times*, 12 September 1940; ‘Italian Raiders Condemned by Arabs and Jews Alike’, *The Palestine Post*, 23 September 1940. *The Manchester Guardian* wrote that ‘there was no dive bombing’ and that ‘the Italian planes, as was their habit in the Spanish war, remained at a great height’ (‘Tel Aviv’s First Raid’, *The Manchester Guardian*, 12 September 1940). The historical diary of the Egeo command of the Italian air force recorded only that harbour facilities and stores in Tel Aviv had been targeted and hit (Archivio dello Stato Maggiore dell’Aeronautica Militare, Ufficio Storico, Diario Storico Comando Aeronautica dell’Egeo, Comando tattico, Ufficio Operazioni, Ordine di operazione n. 68, 9 September 1940). Receiving the news of the Italian bombardment on Tel Aviv as he was in London, the leader of the Jewish community in Palestine, David Ben Gurion, wrote in his diaries that what he had anticipated was happening: the Italians had begun a destructive activity against the national liberation movement aspiring to establish an independent Jewish political entity in Palestine. It is not probable that the attack on Tel Aviv was a deliberated aggression against Jews (there were also Arab casualties and it was not followed by similar missions), but it is true that in Mussolini’s Middle-East policy during the war anti-British and ideological motives mixed up, as the Duce himself explained when in October 1941 he met the Gran Mufti of Jerusalem, Mohamed Amin el Hussein, assuring him that the Jewish, who worked for Britain ‘as spies, agents and propagandists’, had ‘no historical or racial reason to establish a State in Palestine’. See Tuvia Friling, *Arrows in the Dark. David Ben-Gurion, the Yishuv Leadership, and Rescue Attempts during the Holocaust* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), p. 39; De Felice, *Mussolini l’alleato*, Vol. 1, *L’Italia in Guerra 1940-1943*, 2. *Crisi e agonia del regime*, p. 1429.

⁴⁶ ‘Il porto di Giaffa bombardato’, *La Stampa*, 11 September 1940.

⁴⁷ Boccasile was an illustrator for magazines and poster campaigns during the war. After the armistice he worked for the RSI, designing material intended to bolster the enlistment of youth in the Italian SS. In 1945 Boccasile escaped to France and in 1948 he returned to Italy, working again in advertising and political propaganda, contributing to the campaign of the neo-fascist

After France's surrender on 22 June 1940, Mussolini's belief strengthened that a successful German invasion of England would lead to a swift end to the war. On 26 June he sent a message to Hitler offering land forces and aircraft to assist in the planned operations on British soil.⁴⁸ Yet the propaganda authorities did not allow the media to speculate about this development ("Do not hint at Italian participation in the German attack against England", was the terse directive issued on 26 June), since it required careful assessment by Air Ministry officials and a cautious approach to the ally.⁴⁹

On 13 July Hitler answered Mussolini, half-heartedly accepting the cooperation of the Italian air force.⁵⁰ The following day the Italian ambassador in Berlin, Alfieri, conveyed to Ciano his information regarding the size of the German air force in view of the attack on England expected to start 18 days later: the *Luftwaffe* was lining up 1,400 fighters, 1,800 bombers and 1,300 transport planes.⁵¹ The huge divergence of commitment and preparation between the allies was therefore evident to Rome. But, notwithstanding the perplexity of the *Regia Aeronautica's* chiefs, Mussolini insisted and the military authorities agreed that some bombers and fighter squadrons should be sent to German bases in occupied Belgium. On 10 September the *Corpo Aereo Italiano* (CAI) was formally established. The Italian aircraft (75 bombers and 98 fighters) took six weeks to be relocated to the Flemish airfields. In spite of lengthy preparation for crews and support personnel, the transfer flights from Italian bases turned out to be particularly difficult: 17 planes were forced to make emergency landings and four were destroyed. Aircrew had not been adequately trained in blind and instrumental navigation and they realised from passing over the Alps that flying

Movimento Sociale Italiano and the Christian Democracy. See Daniela Vecchi, Matteo Mainardi and Pier Luigi Muggiati (eds), *L'invasore non deve passare. Manifesti di propaganda dalle collezioni civiche vigevanesi 1927-1945* (Vigevano: Comune di Vigevano, 2002). It is peculiar that in the entry devoted to Boccasile in Italy's most extensive biographic dictionary there is no hint at all to his work for Fascist and Nazi propaganda (Paola Pallottino, 'Boccasile, Luigi (Gino)', in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1988), pp. 458-459.

⁴⁸ *Documenti diplomatici italiani*, serie IX, Vol. 5, p. 100 (letter of 26 June 1940).

⁴⁹ ACS, MCP, GAB, Ordini alla stampa, b. 52, fasc. 316, Instructions of 26 June 1940.

⁵⁰ *Documenti diplomatici italiani*, serie IX, Vol. 5, p. 230 (letter of 13 July 1940).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, serie IX, Vol. 5, pp. 231-232.

conditions in Northern Europe might be different from those of the Mediterranean and North Africa.⁵² When, on 22 October, the assembly of squadrons and headquarters was complete, no hint at those technical setbacks was reported by the Italian newspapers, which instead printed word for word the ceremonious telegrams exchanged between Herman Goering and General Rino Corso Fougier, commander of the CAI.⁵³ Over the following days, the Fascist media described as incontrovertible successes a handful of actions that, in spite of the diligence and sometimes courage of the crews, did not inflict significant damage on enemy infrastructure and did not disguise the improvisation and inadequacy of Italian machinery.

The authorities were well aware of the meagreness of the Italian share in the battle over the Channel. They were conscious that inflating the contribution in the media might cause friction with Italy's allies and provoke forceful British reaction. On 29 October Pavolini told editors and journalists to report CAI operations only if they had been previously cited in German communiqués. Knowing the media's penchant for emphasis, he ordered that articles by special correspondents should be published sparingly: 'We cannot keep talking about that activity for obvious reasons of delicacy and proportion'.⁵⁴ The Istituto LUCE duly complied with the order and Italian spectators did not see much about their compatriots' actions against British cities; instead, they were shown scenes of military routine: a troop train ferrying airmen and materials, camouflaged planes, preparation of ammunition, the flight over the Channel and the targeting of enemy objectives.⁵⁵ The specialised press tried to dodge the snare literary accounts of pilots' deeds, instead stressing the technical, strategic and political aspects of Italian participation, which 'proved the complete solidarity within the Axis' and

⁵²Giuseppe Santoro, *L'aeronautica italiana nella seconda guerra mondiale* (Rome Danesi, 1957, first publ. 1950), p. 115-122; Corrado Ricci, *Il Corpo aereo italiano (CAI) sul fronte della Manica: 1940-1941* (Rome: Corporazione Arti Grafiche, 1980); De Lorenzo, 'L'aeronautica in Guerra (Primo anno)', pp. 43-96; Brian R. Sullivan, 'Downfall of the Regia Aeronautica, 1933-1943', in *Why Air Forces Fail: The Anatomy of Defeat*, ed. Robin Higham and Stephen J. Harris (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2006), p. 159; Rochat, *Le guerre italiane*, p.256.

⁵³'Scambio di telegrammi tra Goering e il gen. Fougier', *La Stampa*, 26 October 1940.

⁵⁴*Ministri e giornalisti*, ed. Tranfaglia, p. 91 (conference of 29 October 1940).

⁵⁵*Giornale LUCE C0100*, 'Ali fasciste sulla Manica. Il Corpo Aereo Italiano al Fronte occidentale', 11 December 1940

signalled the addition of a new front to the Fascist war, 'already tough and difficult because of its span of seven different sectors'.⁵⁶

Pavolini's directive on CAI coverage went fundamentally unheeded among newspapers, and probably not for political reasons. They vied to publish sensational reports about those missions, in fierce competition with each other, mostly because articles about aviation and pilots' exploits still attracted readers as a break from the boring routine of war reporting, which was constrained by military censorship and MCP supervision. Besides, Italian papers had always prominently featured stories of aeronautical adventures and their heroes. In the 1930s *La Stampa*, following the example of the French newspaper *Paris Soir*, began to use a plane to move its reporters around quickly and to take spectacular photographs, especially on occasions of popular sporting events. The journalist-pilot Maner Lualdi accomplished his first missions on such a plane, and a few years later he took part in the Ethiopian War and then the Battle of Britain, flying an Italian bomber as a reserve officer and sending a series of reports about the *Regia Aeronautica's* expeditionary force to the Turin daily.⁵⁷ In his time with the CAI crew, Lualdi, who remained a successful and popular journalist in post-war Italy, alternated between the usual martial rhetoric ('It rains bombs, targets appear shocked by the very precise firing. The first daytime victory in English skies has been won', he wrote on 14 November) and technical digressions aimed at elaborating the daring of Italian pilots. In his reportage, Britain's powerful anti-aircraft defence and its powerful fighters were not enough to stop the Italian attacks, while the skilful handling of the Italian planes counterbalanced the

⁵⁶ Vincenzo Liroy, 'Ali italiane nei cieli d'Inghilterra', *Cronache della guerra*, 2 November 1940, n. 44. Liroy, a general in the Italian air force who came from the army's ranks like Giulio Douhet, edited the magazine *Rivista Aeronautica* and was an historian and commentator on aeronautical affairs (Massimo Ferrari, 'La stampa aeronautica in epoca fascista', in *Le ali del ventennio*, p. 61).

⁵⁷ Signoretti, *La Stampa in camicia nera*, p. 59. The editor of *La Stampa* wrote in his memoirs that Lualdi flew over London, but all sources maintain that the Italian missions on the Channel Front were restricted to some targets in the South-East of England and did not reach the capital. After the war Lualdi worked for *Corriere della Sera*. See also *Giornalismo italiano*, Vol. 3, 1939-1968, ed. Contorbia, pp. 1829-1830; Licata, *Storia del Corriere della Sera*, p. 603; Ferrari, 'La stampa aeronautica in epoca fascista', p. 85.

undeniable speed of the Spitfires: 'The pilot's firm hand makes up for a contingent mechanical failure'.⁵⁸

By the time the press published the most sensational reports about the Italian raids on enemy targets (ports, military installations and factories in Harwich, Ipswich, Margate, Folkstone and Lowestoft), the commander-in-chief of the German Air Command, Wilhelm Keitel, had offered to release the CAI from the Channel Front, suggesting to Badoglio, in a meeting on 14 and 15 November, moving planes and crew to Egypt and Greece where the need was greater.⁵⁹ When the Italian military authorities yielded to German insistence and withdrew the CAI (taking two more weeks to start the operation, which was completed in the first week of 1941), newspapers scrupulously conformed to official instructions to emphasise 'the Axis' common action'.⁶⁰ Yet Italian readers did not receive the balance sheet of the expedition, which had cost the *Regia Aeronautica* 38 planes and 43 airmen, in comparison with nine RAF planes shot down.⁶¹ Nor did they hear about the civilian victims of the raids, such as the three British workers killed during an attack on the Co-operative Wholesale Society's canning factory at Waveny Drive, Lowestoft, on 29 November.⁶²

Even in 1942, Fascist propaganda was perpetuating the legend of an honourable Italian participation in the Battle of Britain, for example in a pamphlet commissioned by the MCP to praise the performance of the Italian armed forces during the first two years of war.⁶³ It took several decades for the voices of CAI veterans to be heard, and their accounts disproved the official version. One had jotted down his impressions in the aftermath of an action on 11 November: 'We bombers are badly led. Units are too far away from each other and fighters cannot

⁵⁸ Maner Lualdi, 'Il primo attacco aereo sull'Inghilterra nelle impressioni del nostro Lualdi', *La Stampa*, 4 November 1940; Lualdi, 'Come si scavalcano le difese di Londra', *La Stampa*, 23 November 1940.

⁵⁹ Sergio Pelagalli, *Il generale Efsio Marras addetto militare a Berlino (1936-1943)* (Rome: Stato maggiore dell'esercito-Ufficio storico, 1994), p. 109.

⁶⁰ *La stampa del regime*, p. 341 (instructions of 2 January 1941).

⁶¹ De Lorenzo, 'L'aeronautica in guerra (Primo anno)', p. 96.

⁶² Arnold D. Harvey, *Collision of Empires: Britain in Three World Wars, 1793-1945* (London: The Hambledon Press, 1992), p. 607.

⁶³ Orio Vergani, 'La guerra aerea', in *Due anni di guerra: 10 giugno 1940-1942* (Rome: MCP, 1942), pp. 248.

shield all the planes. We don't have armour-plating, but we do have on our heads beautiful steel helmets, the same the infantry's'. Another witness dismantled the notion that the German and Italian air forces were on the same level, retelling the reactions of Luftwaffe men when his battered plane returned from a mission with some wounded crew: the Germans 'press round us' and 'make me understand that we Italians are a little crazy in carrying out such dangerous missions, in broad daylight, with such a plane'. And a 20th Wing airman remembered that his inaugural flight on England 'was the first dispiriting contact with a reality very different from what we had imagined': both the ally and the enemy 'were very well organised, with functioning radar, practical and exceptional infrastructure on the ground, very efficient liaisons, remarkably trained pilots', while 'our pilots showed a magnificent spirit of self-sacrifice and enthusiasm and too many of them lay down their lives'.⁶⁴

3.5 A Blow to the Italian Fleet

On the night of 11 November 1940, twenty British planes - among them 11 Swordfish torpedo-bombers - that had taken off from the aircraft carrier *Illustrious*, carried out a plan devised in 1935 by the Fleet Air Arm, bombing the Italian fleet at its main base in Taranto harbour. Anti-aircraft defence was able to shoot down just two planes. The British fighters quickly intercepted the Italian seaplanes dispatched on a reconnaissance. Three battleships and two cruisers – half of Italian naval power – were rendered unserviceable for months. It was a severe blow, which boosted British morale and embarrassed Mussolini's military chiefs to such an extent that even the official records were drafted with reticence and inaccuracy, minimising the damage inflicted by the enemy, keeping silent about the death of 40 seamen, and inflating the strength of the anti-aircraft response to the attack.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Ricci, *Il Corpo aereo italiano (CAI) sul fronte della Manica: 1940-1941*, pp. 157-158; 167.

⁶⁵ Rochat, *Le guerre italiane 1935-1943*, p. 292; Angelo Iachino, *Tramonto di una grande marina* (Milan: Mondadori, 1966, first publ. 1959), pp. 224-229; Brian Betham Schofield, *La notte di Taranto*, pp. 15-16; 59-60; *Diario storico del comando supremo*, Novembre 1940-XVIII, ed. Biagini and Frattolillo, pp. 363-364.

On 12 November, at 7.30 in the evening, during the usual MCP press briefing, Pavolini made no reference to the disastrous raid and told journalists that, ‘on national territory the reaction to enemy air attacks is more and more lively and effective. Any time there is an incursion, a great many enemy planes are almost always shot down’. He also pointed to ‘the unceasing Italian participation in German air missions on the English island’ that had culminated, the day before, in ‘a violent and victorious combat of Fascist Wings on the mouth of the Thames’.⁶⁶ Newspapers followed the official version and reported the news about Taranto in a few lines quoting the official communiqué. Commentary ventured to invert reality, as in an article on 13 November by the editor of *La Stampa* Alfredo Signoretti, who shamelessly claimed (scrupulously observing Pavolini’s prescriptions) that ‘the metropolitan territory is preserved from any serious threat’ and the effectiveness of enemy raids ‘is absolutely limited’.⁶⁷

However, beyond propaganda tricks, the British raid on Taranto did cause considerable anxiety in Italy among politicians and journalists, as well as exacerbating concern among the military hierarchies, who had in vain warned the government about the inefficiency of the Italian war machine. The Italian fleet at Taranto had been so vulnerable to the Fleet Air Arm torpedo bombers partly because of the lack of timely air cover. An enemy aircraft carrier was able to approach the port without being intercepted. During the first 11 months of war there was no direct contact between the air force and the navy in the field and their actions at sea were co-ordinated through their headquarters in Rome. There were no liaison officers at intermediate levels. It was only in May 1941 that Ugo Cavallero, Badoglio’s successor as chief of the army general staff, charged an aviation general and an admiral with drawing up shared rules on the engagement of Italian planes in defence of the Italian fleet.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ ACS, MCP, GAB, b. n. 49, Rapporto Giornalisti, settembre 1939-dicembre 1940, Conference of 12 November 1940; ACS, MCP, GAB, Ordini alla stampa, b. 52, fasc. 316, Instructions of 12 November 1940.

⁶⁷ ‘Intensa attività su tutti i fronti’, *La Stampa*, 13 November 1940; Signoretti, ‘Panorama di guerra certezza di vittoria’, *La Stampa*, 13 November 1940

⁶⁸ Piero Pieri and Giorgio Rochat, *Badoglio* (Turin: Utet, 1974), pp. 755-756.

The Minister of National Education, Giuseppe Bottai, noted in his diary entry for 14 November that there was ‘depression going around over the situation in Greece and even more because of the attack against the fleet in Taranto’. The mistakes that had led to the events in Taranto, he added the next day, were not ‘unforeseen and unforeseeable’ but were ‘the logical consequence of a command and government system centralised to the extent that it abolishes any competence and responsibility’.⁶⁹ Also in media circles the event was privately recorded in quite a different tone from the official line of dissimulation dictated by the censorship authorities. ‘And to think that the torpedo bomber was originally an Italian invention. Cold comfort!’, the journalist and broadcaster Aldo Valori wrote in his memoirs. Another writer, Enrico Rocca, noted in his diaries that the Navy, in order to remedy the damage inflicted to the fleet, was forced to recall Umberto Pugliese, the Jewish general of the ‘Genio navale’ who had built the battleship *Littorio* and who had been discharged following the racial laws.⁷⁰

Scepticism and lack of confidence became widespread among ordinary people as well. On 15 November 1940, four days after the British attack against the Italian fleet, an informant of the OVRA secret police wrote from Genoa:

The news about the Taranto bombing spread immediately, first in naval and industrial circles and then throughout the city, causing the greatest emotion. It is common knowledge that the battleships *Littorio*, *Conte di Cavour*, and *Duilio*, besides various cruisers, were hit by bombs and torpedoes fired by British planes. People say that the *Conte di Cavour* sank, the other two battleships were seriously damaged and several bombed cruisers suffered substantial damage. Such news caused a feeling of consternation and anxiety. Criticism is being voiced about the alleged insufficiency of our anti-aircraft defence and the diminution of our naval power is gloomily expected. A great many listened to Radio Londra’s broadcast and every remark fits with what the British said about the events in Taranto. The news on the Taranto bombing caused deep and painful emotion also in La Spezia, where yesterday some friends told me that there is a great deal of worry in navy circles and morale is very low.⁷¹

The emphasis the British press gave to the Taranto events, echoing the satisfaction expressed in London military and political circles, forced Italian propaganda to

⁶⁹ Giuseppe Bottai, *Diario 1935-1944*, ed. Guerri (Milan: Rizzoli, 2001, first publ. 1982), pp. 230-231.

⁷⁰ Valori, *Il fascista che non amava il regime*, p. 320; Rocca, *Diario degli anni bui*, p. 86 (entry for 23 November 1940); De Felice, *Storia degli ebrei italiani sotto il fascismo* (Turin: Einaudi, 1993), p. 418.

⁷¹ Lepre, *Le illusioni, la paura, la rabbia*, p. 120.

construct a reaction which contradicted the initial nonchalance of the press and exposed the embarrassment of the Fascist authorities. Listeners to the Italian service of the BBC knew the truth about the Taranto attack from the familiar voice of Colonel Stevens, who announced on 13 November that it was unlikely that the Italian Navy could recover from ‘the hard blow’, while the First Lord of the Admiralty, Albert Victor Alexander, broadcast the news to his compatriots, saying that within ‘their inglorious shelter the Italian battle fleet had suffered a defeat which could only have been redeemed in the public mind had that fleet shown itself willing to accept battle at sea’. With those words the British Admiral underlined an aspect which hurt Italian pride and exposed the vacuity of boastful propaganda: the decision to spare a significant part of the fleet the hazards of fighting on open sea had not been enough to shelter Italian ships from the boldness of enemy planes.⁷²

‘I imagine the havoc created in Palazzo Venezia’, the speaker of *Radio Londra* remarked two days after the attack, emphasising that Taranto harbour had been left without air protection while the FIAT CR42 fighters and BR20 bombers were kept busy in England.⁷³ However, at first Mussolini did not seem to grasp the importance of the Taranto events, either in terms of military consequences or regarding public opinion. Ciano recounted that when he went to see his father-in-law on 12 November he believed he would find him ‘depressed’. Instead, ‘he took the blow quite well’ and did not seem ‘to have fully realised its gravity’.⁷⁴ In spite of the Duce’s initial reaction, the Germans did not underestimate the consequences of the British attack against the Italian fleet, particularly its unavoidable effect on morale among the troops and on the home fronts of both countries. ‘What a humiliation, and a disgrace!’, Goebbels observed in his diaries on 16 November, noting that, ‘the Taranto affair continues to loom large in the English victory bulletins’. Even in the German press, usually monolithic in

⁷² *Taranto blitzed*, Short Italian News Comment 115, H. Stevens, 13 November 1940, cited in *Radio Londra 1940-1945*, ed. Piccialuti Caprioli, Vol. 1, p. 55; ‘Black week for Italy’, *The Times*, 14 November 1940; ‘The Action at Taranto’, *The Manchester Guardian*, 14 November 1940

⁷³ *Taranto tantrums*, Short Italian News Comment 117, H. Stevens, 14 November 1940, 19,40, and *Comings and goings*, Short Italian News Comment 118, H. Stevens, 14 November 1940, 23,30, quoted in *Radio Londra 1940-1945*, ed. Piccialuti Caprioli, p. 55-56.

⁷⁴ *Ciano’s Diary 1939-1943*, p. 305 (entry for 12 November 1940).

backing the Italian version of war episodes, *The Times* was able to pick on a puzzled observation from *Frankfurter Zeitung*'s Rome correspondent who wrote: 'It is a fact that the true events at Taranto were sad enough' and 'the loss suffered will be felt for a long time'.⁷⁵

When Winston Churchill told the House of Commons that the Royal Navy had struck 'a crippling blow at the Italian fleet' and that the outcome of the attack had affected 'decisively the balance of naval power in the Mediterranean', the Italian media described the British Prime Minister's announcement as a 'shameless fraud' devised 'to give the illusion to those in England and elsewhere who are still ready to listen to such clap-trap that the bombing of Taranto during the night of November 10-11 had paralysed the Italian fleet'. A few days later Mussolini himself was forced to answer in a live broadcast address to the Fascist leadership gathered at Palazzo Venezia, resorting to irony ('Cries of joy arose in the House of Commons when Churchill was at long last able to give good news'), claiming that Italian bulletins always told the truth, denying that the fleet had suffered any irreparable damage, but also rectifying the initial Italian version with some partial admissions about the blow inflicted to the Italian fleet.⁷⁶ *Radio Londra* noted maliciously that, 'there must have been good reason' if the Duce 'had deemed it appropriate to take the floor, during the difficult digestion of the bitter pill he had to swallow in Greece and after Taranto'. The broadcast hinted at the alarm among the Italian people reported by the police chief to Mussolini.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, the Duce's speech did not completely convince his compatriots. A police informant from Genoa, for example, pointed out that Mussolini's words caused a stir by referring to the possibility that 'the hardship ensuing from the war

⁷⁵ *The Goebbels Diaries*, ed. Frederick Taylor (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1982), p.175 (entry for 16 November 1940); 'A German admission of Taranto success', *The Times*, 22 November 1940.

⁷⁶ 'A Glorious Episode', *The Times*, 14 November 1940; 'Rome furious with Mr Churchill', *The Times*, 14 November 1940; 'Softening the blow at Taranto', *The Times*, 19 November 1940; 'Admissions by the Duce', *The Times*, 19 November 1940; 'Falsità inglesi', *Corriere della Sera*, 19 November 1940; Virginio Gayda, 'Certezza di vittoria', *Il Giornale d'Italia*, 19 November 1940.

⁷⁷ *Bocchini Whispers and Musso Talks*, Short Italian News Comment 121, 18 November 1940, in *Radio Londra 1940-1945. Inventario delle trasmissioni per l'Italia*, ed. Piccialuti Caprioli, p. 57.

may become more severe'.⁷⁸ In addition, the military censors intercepted a telling letter sent on 22 November to an army captain from a relative commenting on the Duce's address after Taranto:

It was a speech full of confidence in victory, prescinding from the time needed to achieve it – two months or a year, it doesn't matter: 'You have to trust me that we shall give Greece a good trashing, as we did the Negus'. It is good to have such certainty but, alas, we would prefer if all ended in just two months so we could say, 'we shall meet soon'. Yet we trust in Divine Providence.⁷⁹

The battle of words between Churchill and Mussolini did not settle the matter. For a whole month the propaganda machines went on arguing about their respective symbolic utilisation of the Taranto affair. When *The Times* reported exultation in the United States over the British success, the Italian media polemicised also with the American press, accusing it of 'having outdone Churchill and his propaganda' in exaggerating the consequences of the British raid.⁸⁰ The publication of unequivocal pictures in British newspapers showing the condition of the fleet in the aftermath of the enemy attack was not enough to quieten Italian propaganda on Taranto.⁸¹ *Il Giornale d'Italia* went so far as to manipulate the brief description of the Taranto pictures released by the British authorities circulated by Reuters, in a clumsy attempt to deny the evidence.⁸² The newspaper's editor, Virginio Gayda, invited the British Prime Minister 'to moderate his inconsiderate fervour' because, 'as a whole the Italian navy maintains its tremendous efficiency' and the balance of power in the Mediterranean 'remains as it was at the beginning of the war, in fact has improved in favour of Italy'.⁸³ *Cronache della guerra* published a long and pedantic analysis to unmask 'boasting on Taranto' by means

⁷⁸ Angelo Michele Imbriani, *Gli italiani e il duce. Il mito e l'immagine di Mussolini negli ultimi anni del fascismo 1938-1943* (Naples: Liguori, 1992), p. 106.

⁷⁹ Loris Rizzi, *Lo sguardo del potere. La censura militare in Italia nella seconda guerra mondiale 1940-1945* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1984), p. 126.

⁸⁰ 'Spirit of Drake and Nelson', *The Times*, 15 November 1940; 'Verranno le precisazioni poi seguiranno i fatti', *La Stampa*, 17 November 1940; Virginio Gayda, 'Dedicato agli Stati Uniti', *Il Giornale d'Italia*, 17 November 1940.

⁸¹ 'At Taranto: the Damage to the Italian fleet', *The Times*, 26 November 1940; 'The Taranto photographs', *The Times*, 26 November 1940. 'Conclusive evidence', the newspaper called them in the detailed caption describing the remains of the Italian warships.

⁸² 'La "Reuter" smentisce Churchill', *Il Giornale d'Italia*, 27 November 1940.

⁸³ Gayda, 'Fatti e rumore', *Il Giornale d'Italia*, 27 November 1940.

of the peculiar argument that the amount of damage to Italian ships claimed by Churchill and the British Admiralty could not technically have been caused by the kind of torpedoes fired by the British planes.⁸⁴ Notwithstanding such rhetorical expedients, the Italians did not have the nerve to summon foreign journalists in Taranto and allow them to assess the official version in person, as they had on the occasion of the first British raids against northern cities in June and as they would do in December in the case of the ships that *Radio Londra* reported as hit during the sea battle at Capo Teulada on 27 November.⁸⁵ In 1942 Orio Vergani, one of *Corriere della sera*'s most well-known war correspondents, continued to deny the facts, writing in a propaganda pamphlet promoted by the MCP that the Italian fleet had recovered from the Taranto attack, regaining 'so much strength that it completely changed the situation in the Mediterranean'.⁸⁶

Conclusion

Few military setbacks were enough to show that, even before the end of 1940, Mussolini's hope of joining in a rapid Axis victory was fading, alongside any expectation of standing equal with Hitler. In particular, the ruinous participation of the *Regia Aeronautica* in the Blitz and the lack of defence to prevent the attack on Taranto that decimated the fleet made it clear that not only was the much-discussed Italian air power a myth ungrounded in fact but also that, as far as propaganda and war reporting were concerned, the regime's aspirations had to make way for German priorities. The MCP (and consequently the media) limited themselves to the menial task of manipulating the evidence the British provided in order to prove their deeds, and inconsistent, often surreal press campaigns, such as the one that recruited writers and artists charged with recasting wartime nights as occasions for enjoying aesthetic experiences, added to the dispiriting effect that lies and bombast had on people's feelings.

⁸⁴ Nautilus, 'Le vanterie di Taranto e la fuga da Capo Teulada', *Cronache delle guerra*, 7 December 1940, n. 49.

⁸⁵ 'Un vibrante messaggio al Duce', *Corriere della Sera*, 3 December 1940; 'Pietosi diversivi della stampa britannica per smascherare la verità', *Corriere della Sera*, 4 December 1940.

⁸⁶ Vergani, 'La guerra aerea', p. 246.

Chapter 4. Cracking Italian Morale

The aim of this chapter is to highlight the increasing difficulties the Fascist propaganda machine faced from 1941 in conveying a consistent, reassuring message to the Italian people about the regime's chances against the enemy. There is consensus among historians that the first substantial breach in people's morale was opened when the Allies changed their air war policy in 1942. However, documents show that discontent was widespread among civilians as early as Italy's first military defeats. Such sentiments were not yet a form of conscious dissent or of committed anti-Fascism, yet the military setbacks – along with the increasing menace at home – played a crucial role in dismantling several tenets of Fascist orthodoxy, as the previous chapter has argued in relation to the myth of Italian air power.

Reticence, distortion and media lies increased mistrust among Italians and led to the spread of conjecture and rumour. In targeting specific layers of society, as it did for example with women, the press was unable to refrain from stereotyping and patronising. Even when dealing with aspects traditionally suited to authoritarianism such as the wartime tightening of law and order measures, Fascist propagandists were unable to pursue a coherent argument, mostly because government policies were dithering. The centralisation of censorship over other vehicles of propaganda like theatre and popular music was based on a paternalist, albeit efficient, management that prioritised practical outcomes over the imperative of ideological control.

4.1 British Air Strategy: Unintended Consequences and the Attack on Morale

The Italian press often misreported Churchill's speeches in order to show that the British Prime Minister was the mastermind of an unfair war. For example, they summed up the 5 November 1940 House of Commons debate about the war situation and the Italian invasion of Greece by saying that London had announced that the bombardment of 'Italian cities' would continue on an ever increasing

scale.¹ Those reports alarmed even the Vatican, and the British ambassador to the Holy See, Sir D'Arcy Osborne, had to inform the Pope that Churchill had actually spoken of 'military objectives' in Italian cities and 'bases in the South of Italy'.² The Prime Minister had been in fact more moderate in his speech than the members of Parliament who asked for a harder stance against Mussolini. Hastings Lees-Smith, who led the Parliamentary Labour Party while Clement Attlee was in the coalition government, suggested that if Britain 'wished to assist those whom Italy had attacked, the most effective way of doing so would be to bomb Italy continuously on every possible flying night without intermission'. Uninterrupted bombing for six weeks or two months, he added, 'would have had such an effect on the Italian mind that it would have been very doubtful whether Mussolini would have undertaken an unpopular adventure like the attack on Greece'.³

During that phase, the British war leaders were aware that Italian civilians panicked when the alarms resounded in their cities, but they were more interested in maximising the damage that RAF raids on Italy could do to resources that were vital for Mussolini's war effort than in speculating on the potential effects on public morale. Oil stores, for example, were top of their priorities. They estimated that oil supplies to Italy for December 1940 would drop considerably lower than 30,000 tons, forcing Mussolini to import 80-90,000 tons from Rumania. Thus, they decided to target Leghorn, where crude oil was hydrogenated to make aviation fuel. Hitting that target, a Foreign Office report predicted, 'will be very rewarding both directly and indirectly, as stimulating friction between Italy and Germany'. The same line of reasoning was applied to Porto Marghera, where an air raid on 15 January 1941 damaged a petroleum reservoir at a cost of two million lire. Five days later the Foreign Office again requested reliable information about hydrogenation plants in Bari and Leghorn, and about Pirelli rubber production, ammunition plants and aircraft factories in Campania. At the end of January the British noted that 'the civilian population realised the extent of

¹ 'Churchill nell'imbarazzo', *La Stampa*, 6 November 1940.

² TNA, FO 371/24967, Political, Southern Italy, 1940, Bombing of Italian Cities, 11 November 1940.

³ Hansard, HC Deb. 5 November 1940, Vol. 365, cc1205-310; 'Mr Churchill's Speech. Resistance to Air Bombing', *The Times*, 6 November 1940.

Italian defeats and their morale was low' but they conceded that, 'there was nothing to show that the country was on the verge of an internal collapse'.⁴ A general statement of British bombing policy dated 31 May 1940 had declared the intentional bombardment of civilians illegal, establishing strict rules of engagement for attacks on military objectives.⁵ In the first year of the war against Mussolini, the Foreign Office received diplomatic and intelligence reports on increasing discontent in several quarters about the bombing policy towards Italy, which was deemed to be too indulgent. Such discontent was due more to the perceived need to retaliate for Italy's aggression against Greece and its misdeeds in the ongoing African campaign than to the urgency of targeting civilians to weaken morale. On 1 October 1940, for example, a telegram from Cairo recommended the 'renewal of air raids upon Italian towns on a large scale as a corrective to the facts of the Italians at Barrani'. A few days later, a British informer from Yugoslavia reported on continuous questioning, 'in all quarters including high official ones why we do not continue air bombing of Italy', and said that it was clear from all reports received from Italy that, 'if we could only do a tenth part of the bombing there we do in Germany the effect would be very serious on Italian morale'.⁶ Similar reports came from Athens, where the British press attaché received 'continual enquiries why we have stopped bombing Northern Italian objectives'. The Foreign Office replied to Athens that the reasons for the temporary cessation of bombing were partly political, due to Swiss complaints about British planes violating their neutrality, and partly strategic.⁷

⁴ According to a report from Berne, people in Rome were suffering badly from nerves as sirens were sounded each time there was a RAF raid on Naples (TNA, FO 371/29918, 1941, Italy, File n. 7, Air Ministry Intelligence Summary, 22 July 1941); TNA, FO 371/24967, Political, Southern, Italy, 1940, Italian oil position: proposed bombing of Livorno and Simplon Line, 20 December 1940; TNA, FO 371/33228, 1942, Italy, File n. 122, Royal Air Force raids over Italy, 28 February 1941; TNA, FO 371/29949, 1941, Italy, File n. 833, Cypher telegram to Mr. Kelly (Berne), 20 January 1941; TNA, CAB/65/57, Record of a meeting of Ministers, not of the War Cabinet, held at the Foreign Office on 28 January at 5 p.m., 28 January 1941.

⁵ Baldoli and Knapp, *Forgotten Blitzes*, pp. 32-33.

⁶ TNA, FO 371/24967, Italian War Policy in the Mediterranean, 1 October 1940 (Code 22, file 6849). The Italian press described the occupation on 18 September 1940 by Marshall Graziani's troops of Sidi el Barrani, an Egyptian village 100 kilometres from the Libyan border as a triumph. Less than two months later (9-11 December) the British defeated the Italian troops, who retreated in disorder across Cyrenaica (Rochat, *Le guerre italiane 1935-1943*, p. 296-297).

⁷ TNA, FO 371/24967, Bombing Northern Italian objectives, 18 October 1940.

The panic provoked by the RAF in Italian cities and the countryside since the first year of war may therefore be seen as an unintended consequence of the British bombing policy during that phase of the conflict. As a matter of fact, in August 1941 the Butt Report following an inquiry into the effectiveness and precision of bombing found that only 30 percent of British bombers came within five miles of their targets. Bomber command claimed that bombing was accurate, but in 1940, as Richard Overy has observed, only one bomber in four carried a camera and in many cases the cameras failed to record the lateral bombs hits.⁸ The Italian press, however, continued to exploit the situation, presenting the imprecision and mistakes of the enemy bombers as intent to terrify Italian civilians. In addition, they took advantage of an ongoing campaign in some British newspapers to press the political and military leadership to get tougher on Italy. The MCP ordered the press to publish and comment ‘with some emphasis’ British media reports about those appeals.⁹

Journalists duly complied. For example, condemning the editor of the *Sunday Express*, John Gordon, for having observed that it was more useful to target civilians in Italian cities than to kill Italian soldiers in battle: ‘All Italians, as their brothers are falling, both in the homeland and in the remote lands where our men fight, are unafraid’.¹⁰ The same attacks were levied against the *News Chronicle* for insisting on the need for immediate air raids on Italy.¹¹ *La Stampa* wrote that the British newspapers demanding ‘the bombing of our cities’ showed no concern ‘for the unavoidable casualties and the destruction of artistic and cultural treasures’.¹² *Corriere della Sera* lamented that the British press carried letters from readers calling for more decisive bombing of Italy and that *The Observer* and the *Sunday Times* had gone so far as to specify places in Italy where British bombers ‘should urgently go’.¹³

⁸ Overy, *The Air War* (London: Europa Publications, 1980), p. 110.

⁹ MCP, GAB, Ordini alla stampa, b. 52, fasc. 316, Instructions of 5 November 1940.

¹⁰ ‘Colpire l’Italia chiede il direttore del Sunday Express’, *Il Lavoro*, 6 December 1940; ‘Illusioni degli inglesi sulla resistenza morale e la forza militare dell’Italia’, *Il Mattino*, 6 December 1940; ‘Sempre gli stessi’, *Il Lavoro*, 7 December 1940.

¹¹ ‘Il News Chronicle vuole distruggere le città italiane’, *La Stampa*, 6 November 1940.

¹² ‘Le vittime della R.A.F.’, *La Stampa*, 10 November 1940.

¹³ ‘Criminali incitamenti della stampa inglese’, *Corriere della Sera*, 5 November 1940.

At the end of 1940, the British authorities' hope for a possible army coup to oust Mussolini with the king's approval, which would force Italy's defection from the Axis, was fading. The chiefs of staff (Admiral Dudley Pound, Marshal Charles Portal and General Robert Haining) recommended to the War Cabinet that, in case the objective of a separate peace became unrealisable, London ought to aim at Italy's complete military and political internal collapse before Germany could intervene. Accordingly, they suggested maximising military and economic pressure and trying, through propaganda and subversive activity, to detach the Italian public, the army and the colonies from Germany and bring about the overthrow of regime. Their advice was that British propaganda ought to be directed against the Germans and the Fascist administration and not against the Italian people or armed forces, explaining that Italian failures should be attributed 'to the inefficient corruption and duplicity of the Fascist government'.¹⁴ In a meeting of the War Cabinet on 30 December 1940, the Foreign Secretary reported a telegram from Berne recommending the adoption of 'a different technique' when bombing Italy, 'where, owing to the emotional temperament, pinprick raids on several towns simultaneously would have a greater moral effect, whereas raids of the Coventry type were needed in Germany'.¹⁵ A change of policy was also recommended by international observers. On 15 February 1941 Myron C. Taylor, the US president's personal envoy to the Pope, forwarded a letter to Roosevelt received from Count Wladimir d'Ormesson, former French Ambassador to the Vatican, stating that Britain should deliver 'a mortal blow to Italy as soon as possible, to eliminate it from the struggle'. According to Taylor, as long as the Italian population itself did not suffer 'severe air bombardments', serious trouble 'will not take place in Italy'. The Italians 'will grumble, as they have already grumbled, but they will remain passive'. The diplomat explained that he gathered from news from Italy that the population 'would not resist three weeks against the daily regime which the Germans have inflicted on the English

¹⁴ TNA, FO 371/24967, Italy, 1940, Propaganda policy in relation to an Italian collapse, 19 December 1940.

¹⁵ TNA, CAB/65/10/31, WAR Cabinet 311 (40), 30 December 1940.

for the past six months' and that there would be 'panic in Italy that it would sweep aside the present regime and would ask peace of the English'.¹⁶

Throughout 1941, the Foreign Office sent the Air Ministry information reports that a more systematic approach to air raids over Italy was needed, mostly regarding the choice of targets. In October, for example, it was reported that, 'occasional raid in Italy does produce the scenes of panic one expects from an Italian crowd, but it does not seriously affect the morale or war output'. If morale was the main objective, stations in Milan and Turin were 'ideal targets', and if an industrial plant was to be selected it was better to hit Caproni, crucial for aircraft production, than Isotta or Alfa Romeo. Naples harbour and station were highlighted as other important targets. Additionally, the report showed some insight into the enemy's internal situation, observing that, 'the significance of bombing persistently targets in areas where there are Germans in numbers would be quickly grasped by Italians generally'.¹⁷

In Autumn 1941 the discussion about the bombing policy against Italy was intertwined with the controversial subject of targeting Rome as an exceptional measure against the enemy. In principle the British, although they did not expect to embark on any indiscriminate bombing of Italian towns, made clear that they would not hesitate to attack any city, Rome included, if such actions were considered to be in the best interest of Britain's war effort. Churchill made this clear in a statement to the House of Commons on the war situation on 30 September 1941, saying that,

we have as much right to bomb Rome as the Italians had to bomb London last year, when they thought we were going to collapse, and we should not hesitate to bomb Rome to the best of our ability and as heavily as possible if the course of the war should render such action convenient and helpful.¹⁸

¹⁶ Franklin Delano Roosevelt Library, Vatican Diplomatic Files, Box 51, Letter of 15 February 1941, available online at <http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/archives/collections/franklin/index.php?p=collections/findingaid&id=502&q=vatican> (31 January 2015).

¹⁷ TNA, FO 371/29919, 1941, Italy, File n. 7, Air Raids on Italy, 8 October 1941.

¹⁸ Hansard, HC Deb. 30 September 1941, Vol. 374, c518.

The Foreign Office resented external pressure on the matter, especially the comments of United States diplomats in Italy regarding the possible bombing of Italian towns including Rome by the RAF. The US, concerned about the reaction of Catholics at home, insisted that morale in Italy was low and that a British attack on non-military objectives might raise it and reverse the favourable trend of opinion for Britain, while the change of policy would be exploited by the Fascist media for propaganda purposes. The British Foreign Office instructed its embassy in Washington to reply along the same lines as the Prime Minister's speech to the Commons: London kept its options open against Italy.¹⁹

During that phase of the war the military pointed out that, since the availability of aircraft was limited, targets should be selected for their strategic importance. For that reason, Charles Portal was against the idea of employing nuisance raids against Rome and favoured the course of striking Naples and Tripoli in order to cause disruption to the flow of enemy reinforcements to North Africa. The counter-rationale was that all the experience of the RAF in Britain and in Germany showed that fear of bombing was engendered by 'heavy and concentrated attacks'. Whereas Portal claimed that nuisance raids on Rome would give the city the opportunity to prepare itself for heavier raids and raise civilian morale, the British ambassador to the Vatican, Osborne, asserted that they would depress it. Although the debate had no practical military consequences until July 1943, the bombing of Rome was to become, as chapter 5 will show, a major theme in the propaganda fight between Italy and the Allies.²⁰

4.2. Air Raids, Media Attitudes and Civilian Reaction

Autumn 1940 was a turning point for civilians in most Italian cities. The frankness with which the press reported the enemy's intention to widen the air offensive did not contribute to loosen the psychological pressure on the home front. Realisation that the attack on Greece was not the swift triumph Mussolini boasted of, compounded by the disastrous setback for the fleet at Taranto, led to

¹⁹ TNA, FO 371/29919, 1941, Italy, File n. 7, Possible bombing of Italian towns, 14 October 1941.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, Bombing of Rome, 25 October 1941.

civilians across the country feeling vulnerable and unprotected. In the parts of Italy where military and industrial targets were concentrated, the war became more real than elsewhere. Alarm sirens sounded every night. Urban areas close to transport networks, infrastructure, ports, airfields and barracks were being hit more frequently than in previous months. Suburban and rural territories around the large cities paid the price for mistakes by British crews or for their need to unload bombs from their planes to get back to their bases safely.

Mussolini's gamble in joining Germany first revealed itself as a tragedy on the home front from autumn 1940, as Milan, Turin, Genoa and Porto Marghera in the north, Leghorn in the centre, Naples and some parts of Apulia in the south and the islands of Sicily and Sardinia suffered rising casualties and devastating effects on everyday life which added to the rigours of rationing and other war restrictions. Civil defence organisation continued to be inadequate: space in public shelters was insufficient so that people had to take refuge in cellars, basements and tunnels. Anti-aircraft batteries were ineffective – and sometimes dangerous, as when their fire missed RAF planes and caused both damage to buildings and civilian casualties. In addition, no effort was made to make schools and hospitals safer, despite their frequent proximity to enemy objectives. For example, 30 out of Italy's 69 mental hospitals were close to military objectives and 15 were in the vicinity of Fascist and Nazi headquarters, railways, airports, arms factories and anti-aircraft batteries.²¹ During the war, 30 asylums were hit, 18 of which suffered irreparable damage, with heavy casualties among patients and staff. Moreover, general hospitals were not moved from pre-war locations that were now dangerous. The hospital in Collegno, near Turin, for instance, had 2,272 patients in June 1940 and was situated between a power station, the railway and an airbase. When the local fire services ascertained that its fire prevention defences

²¹ Paolo Francesco Peloso, *La guerra dentro. La psichiatria italiana tra fascismo e resistenza 1922-1945* (Verona: Ombre Corte, 2008), p. 198; Valeria Paola Babini, *Liberi tutti. Manicomi e psichiatri in Italia: una storia del Novecento* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2009), p. 115.

were inadequate and recommended installation of a system of hydrants, the hospital's management board decided to buy a cheaper motor pump.²²

The Italian media only hinted at this lack of preparation in order to criticise those who had not complied with regulations requiring that owners of apartment blocks provide buildings with shelters, while overlooking faults in local and central government. The problem, according to this interpretation, was the non-compliance of individuals rather than a governmental failure to adopt timely and effective policies. A recurrent journalistic ploy was to blend that argument with the usual anti-British rhetoric, as Aldo Valori did in a particularly virulent radio broadcast during the summer of 1940, stating that:

Preparation, like discipline, is never enough; especially as we are facing an enemy so stupid, so ferocious, maddened by the feeling of imminent danger and impending punishment; and we know that we can expect anything from a raving madman. The concept of chivalrous war must lie outside our thoughts; we must conceive of the British as cruel enemies, equipped with all the means that civilisation has invented to harm; therefore we must be careful; without in the least being upset, but not forgetting that it is not a metaphor when we say that all the Country is mobilised.²³

Pavolini instructed newspaper editors in December 1940 that they must adapt to the transition from a phase characterised by a 'generically optimistic appraisal of war' to a 'realistic evaluation' of it. In fact, he had admonished journalists since the beginning of the war for depreciating the strength of British forces in their reports and comments, since belittlement of the enemy would rebound on the image of Italian soldiers.²⁴ Execution of the ministry's orders had thus far followed the usual course of blaming British wickedness and threatening apocalyptic reprisals against the enemy, but at the beginning of 1941 a more incisive approach was needed regarding events on the home front. An article by Alfredo Signoretti, editor of *La Stampa*, illustrated the beginning of a more systematic and vocal media campaign against British attempts to drive a wedge between Italians and the regime:

²² Anna Bravo and Anna Maria Bruzzone, *In guerra senz'armi. Storie di donne 1940-1945* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 2006), p. 167.

²³ 'Delusioni degli affamatori', August 1940-XVIII, in Valori, *Parole di fede*, p. 101.

²⁴ ACS, MCP, GAB, b. 49, Conference of 21 December 1940.

There is a front that the enemy looks on with a special curiosity, the domestic front. This is a sign that the British, with their fondness for traditionalist arbitrary schemes, do not know us. They like to refer to the legend of the slight, impressionable and nervy Italians. They do not know us: at the right time, we are the people with the coldest and implacable will, matched by the fastest and most daring reactions. And now is the right time.²⁵

The press was still mandated to minimise damage inflicted by raids in its reports or – when specifically requested – its comment on military bulletins, so the mistakes or inaccurate fire of RAF bombers were framed as the deliberate acts of a barbarous strategy. When the British again attacked Turin in November 1940, targeting major industrial plants converted for military production, the MCP instructed newspapers to emphasise, on the front pages, that ‘the victims are, without exception, workers, elderly, women and children,’ and that ‘Italian air reprisals against British positions and their allies is going to be most severe’.²⁶ The same line was adopted with regard to the attacks on Milan. Journalists were told to refute *Radio Londra* claims that British airmen had hit the Magneti Marelli plant, a company specialising in electronics. ‘It is odd that in Sesto San Giovanni and the area surrounding Milan nobody heard explosions. It is obvious that they are radio bombs’, *Corriere della Sera* observed. The Milan daily supported a similar interpretation when the British claimed to have hit Officine Pirelli, a factory making tyres for military vehicles. As a rule, the press was keen on denying damage to production or military installations, preferring to single out and amplify civilian casualties whenever war bulletins reported them.²⁷

The official line of minimising damage and the anti-British stance had a partial influence on Italian audiences, limited to areas not yet targeted by the enemy where official bulletins and rumours were the only sources of knowledge. Police reports from Mantua, for instance, showed that at the end of 1940 the alarms did not upset people, who stayed almost ‘apathetic’ and ‘in a state of great

²⁵ Signoretti, ‘Non ci conoscono’, *La Stampa*, 13 December 1940.

²⁶ ACS, MCP, GAB, Ordini alla stampa, b. 52, fasc. 316, Directives of 9 November 1940.

²⁷ ‘La menzogna inglese di oggi. Gli stabilimenti Marelli di Sesto bombardati colla fantasia’, *Corriere della Sera*, 10 November 1940; ‘Le menzogne di Radio Londra. Fantasiosa descrizione del bombardamento di Milano’, *Corriere della Sera*, 21 December 1940. The *Diario storico del comando supremo*, for example, recorded on 19 December 1940 that two bombs fell in a central area of Milan, hitting two buildings and killing two people; a farmhouse was destroyed in the local countryside.

tranquillity' – even in areas not far from bombed cities.²⁸ A resident of Florence, writing to relatives in New York in December, sent a reassuring message: 'In Florence we have never had air-raids, and in other cities there has been no important damage. God spares our Patria, which is fighting for good and justice with an indisputable civility'.²⁹ In targeted areas, the reaction was very different. People sought news from foreign media and were terrified by enemy raids, realising that there was no real defence against a power that appeared irresistible. Magda Ceccarelli De Grada, a writer living in Milan, noted in her war diaries on 7 November 1940 that an unpleasant sense of foreboding accompanied the sirens and bombs:

Last night a long alarm kept us awake from 11 to one. We cannot go down to the basement because it is uninhabitable; there is no proper shelter. Landlords, mean as they are, and not controlled by anyone, prepared ridiculous support. If there was really an intensification of the air campaign, we would all die like rats.³⁰

During the winter of 1940-41, civilians in targeted areas in the North foresaw that the situation could only worsen, well before the catastrophic raids of subsequent years. Recalling her experience as a child in Turin during the war, writer Virginia Galante Garrone remembered the deep impression made by an air raid early in December 1940 when a bomb destroyed a hospital pharmacy and caused a wave of terror in the surrounding area. The small house where she lived with her family,

shook to its foundations, as in an earthquake. When the dim lamp went out, we found ourselves close together, hugging each other, trembling in the dark, bent under the roar of ever closer bursts, feeling the throes of the end, voiceless, out of breath. The noise of torn up roof tiles and broken glass, unexpected pauses like eddies, the howl of sirens, wails, crashes, and finally stillness and silence. Was that the end? It was just the beginning.³¹

While civilians lived through such difficulties, newspapers continued to threaten vengeance against 'Churchill's savage bombers' and to quarrel with British media

²⁸ Luigi Cavazzoli, *Guerra e resistenza: Mantova 1940-1945* (Gazoldo degli Ippoliti: Postumia, 1995), p. 282.

²⁹ Cited in Cavallo, 'La rappresentazione della seconda guerra mondiale nell'immaginario collettivo 1940-1943', in *Italia 1939-1945*, p. 107.

³⁰ Magda Ceccarelli De Grada, *Giornale del tempo di guerra. 12 giugno 1940-7 maggio 1945* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2011), p. 52 (entry for 7 November 1940).

³¹ Virginia Galante Garrone, *Per una selva oscura* (Milan: Garzanti, 1991), pp.10-11; Sforza, *La città sotto il fuoco della guerra*, p. 81.

reports on air raids, trying to demonstrate that the enemy had not targeted crucial areas of military and industrial infrastructure.³² Although the ministry's orders were often obscure, extravagant and ill-timed, control over printed materials was meticulous, as the prefects' attention towards even the smallest publications in the provinces showed. As a matter of fact, glimpses of the truth were sometimes to be found in local papers or religious bulletins, but the reaction of the authorities was usually prompt. In January 1941, for example, Abbondio Montani, a parish priest in a small village in Lombardy, was sent to Calabria after the *carabinieri* reported that he had said during a sermon that, 'war news from the press and wireless reports are not truthful, because the casualties are much greater than they tell the public'. At the beginning of 1941 in Cremona, censors forbade the diffusion among church-goers of the newspaper *L'Angelo della Parrocchia*; and the paper was confiscated in September for mentioning the story of a child wounded and orphaned in a bombardment.³³ By autumn 1941 Catholic newspapers were routinely seized, as Fascist informants tended in their reports to consider parochial churches' attention to the most inhumane aspects of war as a sign of a widespread irresponsible – or even defeatist and pacifist – stance among civilians.³⁴

Yet facts were difficult to hide and people knew what was happening. In January 1941, for example, a deep sense of insecurity drove a woman in Turin, who had been asked for hospitality by some relatives, to reply that her city was dangerous day and night. People, she said, escaped to caves and basements not in order to be safe from the British raids, but to avoid anti-aircraft fire, which 'flies around and very often finds its way in through windows, smashing everything to pieces'. Not even the countryside was safe, she added, 'because when the enemy is being chased, it lets the bombs fall on open countryside. Several such episodes

³² 'Vendicare gli inermi', *Corriere della Sera*, 10 November 1940; 'Iperboliche "catture" di materiale e di uomini', *Corriere della Sera*, 26 November 1940; 'Le solite idiote fantasie della radio inglese sul bombardamento di Torino', *La Stampa*, 8 December 1940.

³³ Giorgio Vecchio, *Lombardia 1940-1945. Vescovi, preti e società alla prova della guerra* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2005), pp. 151-152; 156-157.

³⁴ Baldoli, 'Religion and Bombing in Italy, 1940-1845', in *Bombing, States and People*, ed. Baldoli, Knapp and Overy, pp. 139-140.

have happened'.³⁵ While British reports stated that the air raids on Turin, 'though spectacular had done little damage', the Italian authorities could not hide their impact on morale. In February, a police informant wrote that, 'depression in people's morale has started to be noticeable'. He reported rumours about an imminent evacuation of 300,000 people in March, warning his superiors in Rome that, 'the conviction that our Power is decreasing a bit and we will not reach the end victorious' was spreading.³⁶

In the poorer Southern regions, the increasing feeling of insecurity added to trouble provoked by food scarcity. Bombing had been intensifying since the beginning of the Greek campaign, with enemy planes able to fly from Greek bases and from airports in Marmarica and Cyrenaica that had fallen into British hands. Police informers reported that in Naples people linked the RAF raids with Mussolini's aggression against Greece.³⁷ In the three years from October 1940, Naples was hit by over 100 bombardments, with heavy human casualties and huge damage to homes, factories and port facilities. The same happened in Sicily, which suffered isolation and the cutting off of food supplies, with several cases of starvation.³⁸ In this first period, RAF bombers struck the towns and cities of the bay of Naples. The most affected area were the industrial districts and the old historic centre of Naples overlooking the sea and the port, which remained a key objective until the liberation of the city.³⁹ The local press exalted the role of the anti-aircraft guns, stating that their fire was 'an insurmountable barrier for the RAF'.⁴⁰ But since the very beginning of the war civilians had been aware of the inefficient defences, and the authorities ordered the media to minimise news about the raids. On 11 November 1940, for example, the prefect of Naples informed the

³⁵ Lepre, *L'occhio del duce: gli italiani e la censura di guerra, 1940-1943* (Milan: Mondadori, 1997, first publ. 1992) p. 42.

³⁶ TNA, FO 371/33228, Italy, File n. 122, Royal Air Force raids over Italy, 28 February 1941; ACS, MI, DGPS, DAGR, SCP, 1940-1943, b. 1, Turin, Report of 9 February 1941.

³⁷ Lepre, 'Per una storia della sensibilità a Napoli durante la seconda guerra mondiale' in *Storia d'Italia. Le regioni. La Campania*, ed. Paolo Macry and Pasquale Villani (Turin: Einaudi, 1990), p. 1011.

³⁸ Danilo Veneruso, *L'Italia fascista 1922-1945* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1996), p. 334-335.

³⁹ Gabriella Gribaudo, 'The True Cause of the "Moral Collapse": People, Fascists and Authorities under the Bombs. Naples and the Countryside, 1940-1944', in *Bombing, States and Peoples*, ed. Baldoli, Knapp and Overy, pp. 222-223.

⁴⁰ 'Elogio della contraerei', *Il Mattino*, 7 November 1940.

local press that the MCP had telephoned to order it to avoid headlines like ‘the bombardment of Naples’, instructing the press instead to lead the page on the most important news from the day’s bulletin.⁴¹ Mussolini, too, in a letter sent to Hitler on 22 November 1940 about the developments of the Greek campaign, sought to reassure him that there was ‘no reason to worry about the bombardments on Southern cities, as they do little damage’.⁴²

Nevertheless, the authorities found it necessary to rehearse the rules about shelters in private buildings and to remind newspapers to attack big landlords and companies that owned blocks of flats and did not want to meet the expense of building shelters in their properties.⁴³ *Il Mattino* warned residents in targeted towns about the new face of war:

The distinction between combatants and non-combatants, which was logical in other wars, is no longer valid these days. All citizens are combatants. They share with the combatant the discipline, the tenacity, the boldness and the faith.⁴⁴

Late in 1940, people in Naples realised that the obsolescence of that traditional distinction was one of the rare truths the press told them. In the night of 14-15 December, 50 bombs were dropped on the *Granili* area and the port. At the naval base, the RAF knocked out the cruiser *Pola*, the tanker *Laura Corrado* and the motorsailer *Immacolata III*, killing 22 seamen. A building was hit in Via Nuova Bagnoli and ten people died.⁴⁵ *Il Mattino* praised civilians for their attitude, stressing that they were ‘used to alarms, enemy bombs and anti-aircraft fire’ and that the fact that they stayed ‘serious, confident and quiet as never before’ was ‘one more disappointment for the British’.⁴⁶ All the local authorities, including the cardinal archbishop Alessio Ascalesi, attended the solemn funeral of the civilian

⁴¹ Gribaudo, ‘The True Cause of the “Moral Collapse”’, pp. 222-228; 236.

⁴² *Opera Omnia di Benito Mussolini*, Vol. 30, *Dall’intervento dell’Italia nella Seconda guerra mondiale al discorso al Direttorio nazionale del P.N.F. del 3 gennaio 1942 (11 giugno 1940-3 gennaio 1942)*, p. 176.

⁴³ ‘I ricoveri vanno fatti sul serio’, *Il Mattino*, 12 November 1940; ‘Un decreto del prefetto per l’obbligatorietà dei ricoveri’, *Il Mattino*, 17 November 1940.

⁴⁴ ‘Eroismo collettivo’, *Il Mattino*, 13 December 1940.

⁴⁵ *Diario storico del comando supremo*, 15 December 1940, p. 549.

⁴⁶ ‘Contegno esemplare’, *Il Mattino*, 17 December 1940.

victims paid for by the city council. At the end of the ceremony, the *federale* performed the Fascist rite of the roll call of the dead.⁴⁷

On 24 December 1940 at noon a four-engine British aircraft dropped leaflets on Naples.⁴⁸ The press reported the war bulletin without detailing the text of the leaflets, although it argued that the enemy attempt at differentiating between the Duce and the people, the nation and the regime was ‘silly’.⁴⁹ Yet police reports did not reflect the confidence that characterised the media narrative. The Naples chief of police, for example, wrote to Rome that the fact that, ‘this morning the alarm was given when an enemy plane was already flying very low dropping the well known leaflets has caused lively comment in all circles’.⁵⁰ Already at the beginning of 1941 the British were aware that their attack on the largest Southern city had shaken civilians’ morale: on 11 February the Foreign Office received a report from Naples stating that the damage caused to business and residential areas ‘could no longer be hidden’ and that the anti-aircraft defences were principally manned by German troops.⁵¹ The British leaflets made an impression in Sicily. A resident in Acitrezza, for example, in a letter written on 18 January 1941 in the wake of a raid on Catania airport, explained that the attack was due to the ‘betrayal’ of spies and that the enemy bombed Sicily because Italians did not take seriously the British warning not to let German troops stay on the island.⁵² Such documents show that the presence of German soldiers in Italy was perceived as a liability from the first weeks of war.

In July 1941, according to British intelligence sources, the attacks on Palermo were particularly successful, with several transport ships due to sail for Libya badly damaged and some of the quarters used by Italian reinforcements for Africa were hit. Other sources confirmed that raids on Messina, Palermo and Syracuse that summer forced the German air centres in Sicily to withdraw to the

⁴⁷ ‘Le commosse esequie delle vittime dell'incursione’, *Il Mattino*, 20 December 1940.

⁴⁸ *Diario storico del comando supremo*, 24 December 1940, p. 605.

⁴⁹ ‘Churchill insulta il patriottismo degli Italiani’, *Il Mattino*, 25 December 1940.

⁵⁰ ACS, MI, DGPS, DAGR, SCP, 1940-1943, Report of 24 December 1940.

⁵¹ TNA, FO 371/29949, 1941, Italy, File n. 833, Air-raid damage in Naples: movements of Italian and German troops, 11 February 1941.

⁵² Cited in Lepre, *L'occhio del duce*, pp. 40-41.

middle of the island.⁵³ Palermo was hit again on the night of 9 September, resulting in 27 dead and 58 wounded and causing the press to repeat that, ‘people’s demeanour was exemplary in its calm and discipline’ and that, ‘so much innocent blood shall not remain unavenged’.⁵⁴ Reports from police informants to the Italian authorities that summer again showed growing discontent in Naples about the inefficiency of defences. An informant described in detail the psychological effects on civilians of the air raids on the city in July 1941:

for an entire night the enemy had full control of the skies of Naples with the chance of striking and hitting the most inaccessible sites. The public is not informed about our defences. Nevertheless, they realise that the defences are almost non-existent and are anxious that this is happening in a city which has already been the target of enemy raids and is therefore deserving of greater and much more serious guarantees. Twenty-four hours after the first bombing it should have been possible to avoid the disaster at the refineries and the ammunition dumps.⁵⁵

Apulia was another Southern region heavily targeted by the enemy. In November 1940 the RAF hit the ANIC oil refinery plant and the piers operated by the military in Bari.⁵⁶ The following March the British Foreign Office learnt from the Yugoslav Consul at Bari that RAF bombs had damaged the water supply, which was cut off for nine days.⁵⁷ Autumn 1941 was a particularly difficult time in Bari and several other southern cities. In Naples on 21 October RAF planes attacked in seven waves lasting almost six hours: according to the British sources no warning was given, large fires destroyed entire streets of buildings, the electrical distribution was damaged and the train service paralysed. The population was angered by ‘Germans pre-emptying all air-raid shelters’ and coal was nearly exhausted.⁵⁸ The following month London was told by informers in Berne that the Italian military attaché to Switzerland had said that the RAF had carried out heavy attacks on Naples on the night of 27 November 1941, the ‘casualties and damage

⁵³ TNA, FO 371/29919, 141, Italy, File n. 7, Air Ministry Intelligence Summary, 22 July 1941; TNA, FO 371/29919, Italy, File n. 7, Royal Air Force Bombing of Italy, 31 July 1941.

⁵⁴ ‘La Raf su Palermo e sull’ospedale di Gondar’, *La Stampa*, 10 September 1941.

⁵⁵ Gribaudo, ‘The True Cause of the “Moral Collapse”’, p. 228.

⁵⁶ *Diario storico del comando supremo*, 13 November 1940, ed. Biagini and Frattolillo, p. 371; 15 November 1940, p. 382; 23 November 1940, p. 426.

⁵⁷ TNA, FO 371/29949, 1941, Italy, File n. 833, Royal Air Force of Bari, 10 March 1941.

⁵⁸ TNA, FO 371/29919, 1941, Italy, File n. 7, Air Raid on Naples, 29 October 1941.

to property being so far the heaviest experienced in that town'.⁵⁹ Also, the attack on Brindisi on the night of 7 November lasted for five hours and bombs fell on the historic centre causing 107 deaths, the highest casualty toll in an Italian city since the beginning of the war. In the face of such tragedies, the Italian media did nothing but pursue the same line: damning the enemy, playing down the damage and quarrelling with the British press about the accuracy of their reports.⁶⁰ In Sardinia the raids in summer 1941 led to increasing mistrust of official war reports among civilians. For example, when Cagliari was hit on 31 July and people read in the bulletin that anti-aircraft artillery and Italian fighters had quickly neutralised the British bombers, an OVRA informer wrote in his weekly report that,

everybody knows, having personally ascertained it, that six large British airplanes arrived undisturbed flying low over our docks, almost flew over the civilian airport without harming it and went, still at the same height and in Indian file, over the Elmas airfield, where they machine-gunned hangars and aircraft on the ground. Thereupon they left.⁶¹

Unconcerned with such reactions to developments, the MCP continued its routine. In October and November 1941 the radio programme *Commento ai fatti del giorno* often dealt with British air raids on Italy, but announcers did not go beyond the same old story. Enemy leaflets, according to Rino Alessi, were 'a pitiful document of a decadent spirituality', while Mario Appellius, a journalist who became both popular and controversial for the magniloquent invectives he directed against the enemy in a radio programme personally supervised by Pavolini, thundered against the British insistence on the 'most stupid stereotype' of the 'indolent' and 'impressionable' Italian. People in Southern Italy, Gherardo Casini assured his listeners, 'did not panic', but reacted 'with supreme steadiness to the enemy's stupid calculation'.⁶²

⁵⁹ Ibid., Royal Air Force bombing of Naples, 2 December 1941.

⁶⁰ *Diario storico del comando supremo*, 8 November 1941, ed. Biagini and Frattolillo, p. 340; 'Menzogne su tutti i fronti', *Corriere della Sera*, 9 November 1940; 'Anche Brindisi è stata ... distrutta dalle balle di Duff Cooper', *Il Mattino*, 9 November 1940; 'Le vittime di Brindisi e l'illusione del nemico', *La Stampa*, 13 November 1941.

⁶¹ Vacca, *La tela del ragno*, p. 267.

⁶² Rino Alessi, *La strada e la vita. Commento ai fatti del giorno* (Milan: Mondadori, 1942) p. 171; 'L'imbecillità del nemico', in Mario Appellius, *Parole dure e chiare* (Milan: Mondadori, 1942), pp.

4.3. The Naval Bombardment of Genoa

On 8 February 1941 the military authorities in Rome received warning about British moves on Italy from Gibraltar. Air force reconnaissance aircraft were sent to the west of Sardinia, where an incoming enemy action was thought to be more likely. Meanwhile, a British fleet was moving towards the Liguria coast. On 9 February, at 7.30am, the enemy shelled the port of Genoa from a distance of 22 kilometres for 30 minutes. The Italian communiqué stated that an enemy fleet had attacked Genoa, taking advantage of the fog, missing its military objectives and killing 72 civilians. A week later newspapers reported that the numbers of dead had increased to 141. The Italian press stressed that only ‘homes, schools, churches and hospitals’ had been shelled and that ‘the elderly, women and children have been slaughtered with conscious calculation and cold cynicism’. The Genoese church supported the regime’s line. Cardinal Pietro Boetto wrote an open letter to his fellow citizens, widely reported in the newspapers, which denounced ‘the inhuman act committed by the enemies of our Italy’ and predicting that ‘the Lord, in view of the innocent victims, lifting his merciful hand on us, will grant full triumph to our beloved Homeland’.⁶³

The line of command that presided over the propaganda organisation collapsed, as some papers printed news the censor deemed unfit to publish. Indeed, the MCP had to instruct newspapers not to reproduce what *Il Popolo di Roma* and *La Tribuna*, apparently escaping preventive control, had reported about the targets of the enemy battleships, the composition of the British fleet and the reaction of the Italian Navy. The Ministry also ordered the press not to publish casualty lists (which newspapers had previously been proud of doing as a sign of their trustworthiness) and not to report news about donations for the victims from

70-78 (reprinted in *Giornalismo italiano*, Vol. 3, 1939-1968, ed Contorbia, p. 1797); ‘Due ore e sei giorni’, 23 November 1941, in Gherardo Casini, *Una volontà, una fede* (Milan: Mondadori, 1942), p. 137-138.

⁶³ G. Santoro, *L’aeronautica italiana nella seconda guerra mondiale*, Vol. 1, p. 475; ‘Il comunicato n. 248’, *La Stampa*, 11 February 1941; ‘Nessun obiettivo militare colpito dagli inglesi a Genova’, *La Stampa*, 11 February 1941; ‘Nobile lettera del cardinale Boetto alla cittadinanza genovese’, *Corriere della Sera*, 13 February 1941; Nicola Buonasorte, *Siri. Tradizione e Novecento* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2006), p. 43; ‘Il numero delle vittime’, *La Stampa*, 17 February 1941.

Mussolini or other Fascist authorities.⁶⁴ Ugo Ojetti noticed in his diaries that on the night of 9 February 1941 the ‘people at *Corriere*’ were ‘overwhelmed by ambiguous bulletins’ and ‘tired of shamming every night and lying and repeating that we are the masters of the sea and the air, of the East and the West’.⁶⁵

When newspapers recovered from their bewilderment, commentators played their usual tune, stressing that the bombardment of Genoa was ‘in the tradition of English piracy’.⁶⁶ Reporting from the funeral of the victims, Marco Ramperti wrote a piece that stands out as an extraordinary combination of empty rhetoric and pseudo-intellectual anti-British arguments:

History repeats itself. The monsters who drank horses’ blood and decorated their shipping flags with skulls are still the same. They are all the same: the Morgans, the Churchills, the Rhodes and the Coopers, the Hastings and the Edens, the drunkard kings and the queens grown cruel, the drug dealers, the heroes of “the cat-o-nine-tails”, the cowards who deserted their wounded at Dunkirk and the terrible cowards who did not rescue the wrecked of the *Thétis*.⁶⁷

Mussolini also contributed to the propaganda effort. In a speech at the Adriano theatre in Rome on 23 February 1941, he addressed an enthusiastic audience and asserted that bombing Genoa ‘to weaken its morale is a childish illusion’.⁶⁸

However, the following day, the *carabinieri* in Sestri Levante sent a report to the prefect of Genoa saying that people there looked ‘at the facts more than the speeches, passionate and convincing as the Duce’s was’.⁶⁹ The naval bombardment of Genoa was the most shocking war episode to have taken place up to that point in the war within Italian borders, and the British were right in believing the effect on Italian morale was relevant, in spite of what the Italian press said about the ‘heroism’ and ‘self-denial’ of rescuers and about general morale, ‘always proud and very high’.⁷⁰ The enemy realised that it had landed a

⁶⁴ *La stampa del regime*, pp. 343-344 (instructions of 11 and 15 February 1941); ACS, MCP, GAB, b. 51, Rapporto giornalisti. Disposizioni telefoniche date ai giornali il 16 febbraio 1941, Instructions of 16 February 1941.

⁶⁵ Ojetti, *I taccuini*, pp. 550-551.

⁶⁶ Signoretti, ‘Tradizione piratesca’, *La Stampa*, 12 February 1941.

⁶⁷ Marco Ramperti, ‘Sotto gli archi d’oro della chiesa di San Siro’, *La Stampa*, 17 February 1941

⁶⁸ *Opera Omnia di Benito Mussolini*, Vol. 30, p. 56

⁶⁹ ASG, Prefettura di Genova, Relazioni politico economiche 1934-43, Cart. N. 168, Report n. 16 of 24 February 1941, cited in Sandro Antonini, *Sestri Levante 1940-1945: gli anni della guerra* (Genoa: De Ferrari, 1998) p. 58.

⁷⁰ ‘Dopo l’ignobile gesta contro l’abitato di Genova’, *La Stampa*, 13 February 1940.

blow on Mussolini and propaganda from London inflated the action's military achievements. *The Times* reported that during 'the highly successful operation' docks, harbour works, oil installations, supply ships, the Ansaldo electric works and the port's main power station had been hit. 'It is right', Churchill said in a broadcast on the evening of the raid, 'that the Italian people should be made to feel the sorry plight into which they have been dragged by the dictator Mussolini'. A special correspondent travelling with the fleet wrote enthusiastically that he had been witness 'to one of the most concentrated punishments of the war'.⁷¹

The British were also pleased that the United States ambassador to Rome had given 'a very favourable account of the damage done' in Genoa, but they soon realised that the real harm inflicted to physical infrastructure was not as heavy as first accounts had suggested. They received grotesquely exaggerated reports as well, such as the one stating that the Venezuelan Minister in Rome had said the bombardment of Genoa had killed 2,000 people. The British knew from sources based in the Italian capital that the greatest damage had been done to the Ansaldo works, while less harm was inflicted on the port and the electricity power station, which was repaired in two days. A witness remarked that the raid 'has not produced very lasting results' since the gasometer could be repaired soon, the bombs on the Ansaldo plants had destroyed the offices but not the factory halls, and none of the numerous warships and transport ships in the harbour had been destroyed.⁷²

Nevertheless, a report sent from Rome to the British Foreign Office a few days after the attack conveyed an eye witness account to the effect that, however limited the real outcome of the bombardment, 'the psychological and moral effects in Italy are enormous': Italians were shocked by the fact that their navy and airforce did not attempt to defend Genoa, and 'unanimously' accused Mussolini of sole responsibility for the war. It was an impressive echo of Churchill's radio pronouncement of 23 December 1940, when he had told Italians

⁷¹ 'Naval Bombardment of Genoa', *The Times*, 10 February 1941; 'Mister Churchill on Next Phase of the War', *The Times*, 10 February 1941; 'Battering of Genoa. With the Fleet in Action', *The Times*, 12 February 1941.

⁷² TNA, FO 371/29949, 1941, Italy, File n. 833, Bombing of Italian towns, 15 February 1941; *Ibid.*, Royal Air Force bombing in Italy, 24 February 1941.

that ‘one man, one man alone’ was to blame for their troubles.⁷³ People were reported as saying that something similar could happen anywhere and that the British by this time were able to approach any part of the coast and fire far into the country. There were also accounts of ‘rioting’ in Genoa and the ‘catastrophic’ effect of the news elsewhere in Italy. London summed up the received information by conceding that some descriptions were ‘somewhat sensational and, from our point of view, rather optimistic’, whereas ‘others and more balanced reports state that the damage to purely military objectives was not extremely extensive and by no means irreparable’.⁷⁴

Notwithstanding propaganda efforts, Italian reports from the bombed city were also alarming for the Fascist authorities, and not only because they revealed how ineffectual propaganda was in motivating the home front when enemy actions unsettled people’s lives. There was also serious concern about political discipline among civilians. On 18 February 1941 the *questore* of Genoa signalled to the chief of police in Rome that citizens there were ‘deeply indignant’ and depressed about the lack of adequate anti-aircraft batteries, reconnaissance ships, shelters and rescue efforts. He wrote that *Radio Londra* reports ‘were given huge credit’: according to that version of the attack, the British fleet arrived undisturbed and unnoticed at Genoa in the early hours of the morning, purposely not starting its action so as not to catch people sleeping. In the daylight it manoeuvred in order to be seen, and made sure by radio that the alarm had been given. Then, having let 40 minutes to pass to allow civilians to shelter, the fleet directed its shells against military objectives. Collateral damage had been an inevitable drawback of a brave and successful mission.

In the same account, the *questore* warned that, ‘individual episodes of anti-Fascism are surfacing more frequently’.⁷⁵ Witnesses were reported as having seen people in Genoa pouring out into the streets shouting ‘cowards, defend us!’ – not

⁷³ Baldoli and Knapp, *Forgotten Blitzes*, p. 132.

⁷⁴ TNA, FO 371/29949, 1941, Italy, File n. 833, Royal Air Force bombing of Genoa, 18 March 1941; TNA, FO 371/33228, 1942, Italy, File n. 122, Rome, 12 February 1941; TNA, FO 371/29949, 1941, Italy, File n. 833, Bombing by the Royal Air Force in Italy, 17 February 1941; TNA, FO 371/33228, 1942, Italy, File n. 122, Bombing of Genoa, 17 March 1941.

⁷⁵ ACS, MI, DGPS, DAGR, SCP, 1940-1943, b. 1, Genova, Stato d’animo della popolazione, relazione settimanale, 18 febbraio 1941, Report of 18 February 1941.

‘death to the British!’’, as one would have expected in such a predicament.⁷⁶ News from Tuscany told that ‘anti-Fascist, anti-war and subversive slogans’ had been written in various places. In Leghorn, where the ANIC oil refinery was bombed on the same day as the attack against Genoa, the gigantic map of military operations displayed in the city *piazza* was defaced. The postal circulation of anti-Fascist texts and leaflets from Florence and other centres had increased too, according to police reports.⁷⁷ From Genoa fear spread all over the country and most people felt vulnerable in the face of enemy action. In Rome residents were convinced that the war ‘was entering a stage of greater violence which might be the final stage’.⁷⁸ From Taranto a police informant recorded ‘citizens voluntarily evacuating’ as a result of their fear that a bombardment from the sea might target the city, as had happened the previous November when the British fleet shelled Italian warships at navy bases.⁷⁹ The Palermo chief of police wrote to Rome on 17 February 1941 that,

Sicilians are disheartened, as they fear what their situation will be as the British are strengthening their presence in Sicily. They say that we are unable to watch over the sea in order to ward off a naval attack and neither can we intervene afterwards, barring the way to enemy ships and punishing them harshly.⁸⁰

Another informant from Sicily conceded that the enemy had respected built-up areas, but people in Messina people were worried nonetheless because ‘the civil engineers were slow in making ready shelters in public buildings’.⁸¹ In Sardinia civilians dreaded a British landing.⁸² In Venice sarcastic remarks were recorded about the ‘proclaimed’ Italian ‘mastery of the Mediterranean’.⁸³ Uncertainty and

⁷⁶ Ceccarelli De Grada, *Giornale del tempo di guerra*, p. 70 (entry for 11 February 1941).

⁷⁷ ACS, MI, DGPS, DAGR, SCP, 1940-1943, b. 1, Firenze, relazione settimanale sullo spirito pubblico, Report of 11 February 1941

⁷⁸ ACS, MI, DGPS, DAGR, SCP, 1940-1943, b. 1, Roma, Rapporto settimanale sulle condizioni dello spirito pubblico, Report of 12 February 1941.

⁷⁹ ACS, MI, DGPS, DAGR, SCP, 1940-1943, b. 1, Bari, Condizioni dello spirito pubblico in relazione agli avvenimenti in corso, Puglia e provincia di Matera, Report of 18 February 1941.

⁸⁰ ACS, MI, DGPS, DAGR, SCP, 1940-1943, b. 1, Palermo, Condizioni dello spirito pubblico, relazione settimanale, Report of 17 February 1941.

⁸¹ ACS, MI, DGPS, DAGR, SCP, 1940-1943, b. 1, Catania, Rapporto settimanale sulle condizioni dello spirito pubblico 12-18 febbraio 1941, Report of 18 February 1941.

⁸² ACS, MI, DGPS, DAGR, SCP, 1940-1943, b. 1, Cagliari, Relazione settimanale spirito pubblico n. 90, Report of 17 February 1941.

⁸³ ACS, MI, DGPS, DAGR, SCP, 1940-1943, b. 1, Venezia, Report of 13 febbraio 1941.

fear lent fuel to conjecture and rumours. In Leghorn the oil plant had been hit while it contained 20,000 tons of fuel so people said there must have been an American spy, as Americans had started the building of the factory and ‘American engineers are still allowed to access it’.⁸⁴ People coming from Genoa in the wake of the British attack were overheard saying that, ‘the enemy ships were able to fire for almost two hours’. People looked for an explanation for the navy’s immobility beyond that provided by the reticent official version: when the implausible explanation began to circulate that aircraft based in Lombardy were unable to leave for Genoa because runways were covered in snow, Magda Ceccarelli noted in her diaries that, ‘football stadiums are being regularly swept’.⁸⁵

Scepticism also spread to those social classes traditionally sympathetic with Fascism. On February 1941, for example, an informant from Sardinia reported that while in a café in Iglesias a group ‘of gentlemen, all with their leather cases in hand’ commented on the war’s developments and one of them said, ‘the arrival of German anti-aircraft units means it is true that in Italy we are badly defended’.⁸⁶ The subject of inadequate preparation was particularly embarrassing for the Italian and Genoese authorities because in November 1940 the city had hosted the much-trumpeted exhibition on anti-aircraft protection organised by UNPA in Sampierdarena, which had shown model villages well provided with shelters and defences in which people, cars, public transport and factories were all unaffected by the danger of incoming raids. These were futuristic and unrealisable projects the implausibility of which was magnified by the fact that several Italian cities were already at the mercy of the enemy.⁸⁷ An additional factor began to appear in civilians’ reaction. From Bologna, for instance, the bureaucratic language of official reports tried to hide the fact that

⁸⁴ ACS, MI, DGPS, DAGR, SCP, 1940-1943, b. 1, Firenze, Relazione settimanale sullo spirito pubblico, Report of 19 February 1941.

⁸⁵ ACS, MI, DGPS, DAGR, SCP, 1940-1943, b. 1, Avezzano, Spirito pubblico, Relazione settimanale, Report of 18 February 1941; b. 1, Avezzano, Spirito pubblico, Relazione settimanale, Report of 26 February 1941; Ceccarelli De Grada, *Giornale del tempo di guerra*, p. 71 (entry for 16 February 1941).

⁸⁶ Vacca, *La tela del ragno*, p. 248

⁸⁷ ‘La mostra di protezione antiaerea’, *Il Lavoro*, 30 November 1940; ‘Il Prefetto inaugura a Sampierdarena la mostra di protezione antiaerea’, *Il Lavoro*, 1 December 1940.

suspicious about the honesty of Fascist officials was spreading among the population: 'The inaction of the defence system is being imputed to the leaders' inadequacy and to the lack of war preparation caused by the illicit diversion of public money appropriated for that purpose' and moreover, 'any unsuccessful military operation is being deemed a consequence of the dishonesty of the not-so-few *gerarchi* suddenly enriched by funds allocated to armament'⁸⁸

4.4 Media Credibility and the Fight Against Rumour and News-Mongers

The question of what (and how much) information should be given to the public about enemy attacks, casualties and damage was a controversial one in all belligerent countries. In Britain, where the matter was always at the centre of public discussion, targeted towns, streets and buildings were not usually precisely identified in the press for weeks for security reasons. A consequence of the lack of reliable information was that, besides the spreading of other rumours, the numbers of dead and injured were reported, and very often inflated, by word of mouth.⁸⁹ In Summer 1940, as the government became increasingly concerned about the level of rumour and gossip among the population, the Minister of Information initiated an extensive campaign on 'careless talk', aimed at advising discretion and silence to avoid foreign spies becoming aware of sensitive information.⁹⁰ Later in the war, 'emergency information officers' were appointed in every town with over 5,000 inhabitants, tasked with countering rumours and disseminating information after heavy raids.⁹¹ In Germany the desire to prevent panic among the population meant that the press was allowed to provide information only about selected raids, and the city authorities were instructed not to publish damage reports or lists of the dead and to abstain from appeals to citizens for clearance work, since this could supply the enemy with useful information. This strategy was supposed to work

⁸⁸ ACS, MI, DGPS, DAGR, SCP, 1940-1943, b. 1, Relazioni settimanali degli ispettori delle zone OVRA, 21-24 December 1940.

⁸⁹ Juliet Gardiner, 'The Blitz Experience in British Society 1940-1941' in *Bombing, States and Peoples*, ed. Baldoli, Knapp and Overy, p. 179.

⁹⁰ Jo Fox, 'Careless Talk: Tensions within British Domestic Propaganda during the Second World War', *The Journal of British Studies* 4 (2012), pp. 941-949.

⁹¹ Hansard, HC Deb. 7 July 1942, Vol. 381, cc 652-742.

against demoralisation, while at the same time stirring up hatred against the enemy, highlighting British attacks against churches, monuments and museums. Yet the SD security service confirmed that concern in the press over damaged or destroyed cultural buildings was ‘mostly not shared’ by those who read the papers with sympathy directed more towards human casualties and people’s homes.⁹²

The Italian authorities persisted in proudly asserting that they were keen to tell the truth about war, but what ordinary Italians actually read in newspapers or listened to on the wireless was always the unforthcoming version of official bulletins along with thunderous comments that were often scripted to the word by the MCP’s strict directions. Since the beginning of the war the press had been losing trust among people, as Italians’ condition as ‘victim-witnesses’ of wartime life and enemy attacks led them to ascertain the facts based on what they saw and no longer by scrutinising the doped prose of press and radio.⁹³ Critics of the way the Italian press dealt with the reality of war were also to be found in the Fascist upper echelons. On 1 November 1940, an issue of *Primato*, the journal founded by Giuseppe Bottai, published an unsigned editorial that praised the press of the Fascist youth because GUF papers were carrying ‘the first sensible protest against certain types of anti-British propaganda’; they had dropped ‘the facile invectives against the internal and external enemies’ and were looking for ‘a serious, honest, time-resistant judgment’.⁹⁴ Post-war memoirs also reported on how the ‘colossal pieces of foolery’ from the MCP produced sometimes tragicomic results. Silvio Maurano, then editor of *Corriere Emiliano*, recalled the atmosphere in the newsroom when, after a series of dramatic events including the invasion of Greece, Graziani’s defeat at Sidi Barrani and the catastrophic naval bombardment of Genoa, an order from Rome enjoined them ‘to give special emphasis on the front page and under a four-column headline, to news of the river Maritza breaking its bank’.⁹⁵

⁹² Stephan Glienke, ‘The Allied Air War and German Society’ in *Bombing, States and Peoples*, ed. Baldoli, Knapp and Overy, p. 193.

⁹³ Balestreri, *Stampa e opinione pubblica a Genova*, p. 58.

⁹⁴ ‘Confessioni’, *Primato*, 1 November 1940, n. 17.

⁹⁵ Silvio Maurano, *Ricordi di un giornalista fascista* (Milan: Ceschina, 1973), p. 267.

When the authorities prohibited the import of Swiss newspapers to Italy at the end of 1940, a Fascist Party informer warned that the middle and upper classes in Genoa criticised the decision because they were convinced that ‘substantial truths could be learnt’ from those newspapers. As a matter of fact, before the prohibition, 6,000 copies of French or Swiss newspapers were being sold in Genoa alone and the circulation of *L’Osservatore Romano* in the working-class quarter of Voltri went from two to 250.⁹⁶ An informant from Milan wrote that,

people avidly read newspapers in order to find the reasons or explanations of our defeats, but they feel bitterly disappointed: they do not find anything but big words, groundless or obsolete predictions, superlatives to describe German power, childish arguments, inconsistency between commentators and war reporters, often in the same newspaper issue and even on the same page. And so they end up not trusting our press.⁹⁷

In Sardinia, according to reports sent to Rome, by the end of 1940 people were already critical of the propaganda conveyed through leaflets and newspapers because ‘it exaggerated in undervaluing the British war power’.⁹⁸ Those feelings were widespread in the wake of dramatic events. Two days after the naval attack on Genoa, for instance, the Rome *questura* recorded annoyance towards propaganda about depreciation of the enemy.⁹⁹

In order to form a realistic view of what was going on, Italians had to supplement the official version with a confused mixture of reality and imagination coming from heterogeneous sources, such as foreign radio broadcasts, smuggled foreign newspapers, letters gone unnoticed by postal censorship, and rumours in public places. Listening to *Radio Londra*, in particular, began to have political implications when it turned from an individual act to a social choice about counter-information. Throughout the war anti-Fascists in Bari, for example, gave one of their number, Michele Cifarelli – who was to become the voice of *Radio*

⁹⁶ ACS, PNF, Situazione politica e economica delle province, b. 1, Genova, report of 7 November 1940; Balestreri, *Stampa e opinione pubblica a Genova*, p. 14-15.

⁹⁷ ACS, MI, DGPS, DAGR, SCP, 1940-1943, b. 1, Relazioni settimanali sullo spirito pubblico, 1941 febbraio 9-14, Milano, Report of 10 February 1941.

⁹⁸ Vacca, *La tela del ragno*, p. 245-246.

⁹⁹ ACS, MI, DGPS, DAGR, SCP, 1940-1943, b. 1, Questura di Roma, Rapporto settimanale sulle condizioni dello spirito pubblico, Report of 12 February 1941.

Bari after the regime's fall – the task of reporting to the group every day at 5pm the news he had heard on the BBC.¹⁰⁰

Rather than being recognised as a consequence of censorship and strict media control, rumours were feared by the Italian authorities, which developed a real obsession with *vociferatori* (rumour-mongers). The latter were sanctioned or interned and even beaten by Fascists – a practice that appealed to hard-liners, but was soon criticised by the general public and even by some Fascist authorities. As a police note of 21 January 1941 summarised, the enforcement

of action squads' methods against alleged rumour-mongers, who are forced to confess to wrongs they have not committed and take the consequences, causes a great deal of apprehension in some cities, such as Genoa and Florence. In Milan, even among the old Fascists, news about the order to make ample use of cudgels and castor oil was given a cool reception.¹⁰¹

Police were not alone in detecting rumours. Informants were always on full alert, even when alarms and bombs caused frightened or indignant people in shelters to let loose streams of abuse against Mussolini and his decision to enter the war. On those occasions, not everyone was the champion of generosity and altruism praised by Fascist propaganda; instead, there were episodes of meanness and opportunism. For example in Asti, a small city near Turin, a whole family (father, mother and a 12-year-old daughter) told the Fascist authorities that on 8 November 1940 in the basement of a council house during an alarm they had an argument with Paolo Barberis, a train engine-driver, who according to them sided with the enemy and predicted defeat for the Axis saying that, 'the British have always ruled and always will'. When the police questioned him, Barberis denied the accusation, but the fact that he was not a Fascist Party member made the words of the 'spies' more valuable than his, and he was punished with one year of internment.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Michele Campione, 'La voce dell'Italia libera', *Quaderno di Comunicazione* 1 (2001-2002), p. 29.

¹⁰¹ ACS, MI, DGPS, DAGR, SCP, 1940-1943, b. 1, Relazioni settimanali degli ispettori delle zone OVRA, Reports of 21-24 December 1940.

¹⁰² Mimmo Franzinelli, *Delatori. Spie e confidenti anonimi: l'arma segreta del regime fascista* (Milan: Mondadori, 2001), pp. 107-108

‘The regime’s line of always divulging the truth also has the benefit of nipping in the bud any defeatist or exaggerated rumour’, *Corriere della Sera* had written on 16 June 1940. That course was not fated to last: it was easy to tell the truth when Italy entered the war harassing French troops that the Germans had already brought to their knees. Only a few months later, even from within the regime the official version was put in doubt. On 24 December 1940, for example, an OVRA informant from Bologna wrote to the chief of police that, ‘people continue to listen extensively to foreign radio because of an acute, widespread need of knowing facts and episodes our press is silent upon’. That, he added, caused ‘the spreading of often tendentious rumours and conjectures’.¹⁰³

Police and party informants frequently reported rumours. One of these, from Genoa, suggested the inclusion in propaganda material of some basic geographical facts explaining the difficulties Italian aircraft faced, because he frequently heard people ‘who appreciate and even admire the deeds of RAF bombers who must make the trip from England in order to hit Italy, while the actions of the Italian airforce are being ignored or undervalued’. His addition in the same report showed that the MCP’s insistence on highlighting the ruthlessness of enemy attacks on Italian civilians had proved to be ineffective:

I have heard the most ignorant peasants, unworthy of being Italians, justifying the fact that the British bombs never fall on military targets, but always hit women and children in their homes and in the open countryside, with the reason that our anti-aircraft guns force the planes to fly at considerable altitude, and that causes their shots to be quite inaccurate! So they parrot the stupid and wicked justifications Churchill set out in the House of Commons.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ ACS, MI, DGPS, DAGR, SCP, 1940-1943, b. 1, Relazioni settimanali degli ispettori delle zone OVRA, Report of 21-24 December 1940.

¹⁰⁴ ACS, PNF, Situazione politica e economica delle province, b. 1, Report of 28 August 1940. The informant probably referred to the British prime minister’s speech in the Commons on 20 August 1940 about the war situation. However, in that famous speech - in which Churchill singled out the impact of total war as one of the main differences from 1914 (‘The whole of the warring nations are engaged, not only soldiers, but the entire populations, men, women, children’) and praised the RAF for their bravery in the Battle of Britain (‘Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few’) – the prime minister actually said that, ‘our bomber squadrons travel far into Germany, find their targets in the darkness by the highest navigational skill, aim their attacks, often under the heaviest fire, often with serious loss, with deliberate careful discrimination, and inflict shattering blows upon the whole of the technical and war-making structure of the Nazi power’ (Hansard, HC Deb. 20 August 1940, Vol. 364, cc1132-274).

Pavolini admonished editors on 12 November 1940 against the danger that newsrooms and journalists could themselves become the sources of rumour.¹⁰⁵ Having learned the lesson, newspapers wrote that the enemy had ‘the absurd, stupid, insulting hope that our people will not endure a prolonged war’ and was spreading rumours for that reason. But Italians allegedly knew not to take them seriously and not to pay attention ‘to any optimistic or pessimistic gossip’ because ‘the truth is written in the military bulletin’.¹⁰⁶ These warnings were partly the practical outcome of the programmatic aversion to defeatism typical of any country at war, democracies included, but were mainly a facet of Mussolini’s obsession with the character that new Italians had to embody: the unshakeable, daring, martial, industriously silent man. That fictional image was to be preserved in every aspect of civilian life and, most of all, in the ways it was represented, from news reporting and journalism to literature and even popular culture.

4.5 Discipline on the Home Front: Reporting the Regime’s Security Policies

By the first weeks of June 1940 the Italian authorities had to face unprecedented challenges from civilians to rules and regulations, mostly connected with extraordinary conditions such as the blackout, food rationing and evacuation. The turn for the worse Italy’s military situation took in autumn 1940 was reflected in the media’s hypersensitivity towards breaches of the prescriptions aimed at preserving order and discipline on the home front. A high degree of press attention on criminal deeds and famous trials since unification in 1861 had led to commercial progress in terms of circulation, but despite this, crime news was usually concealed in Fascist Italy, due to Mussolini’s resolve to convey the image of a disciplined and ordered national community. At the beginning of the 1930s, instructions to newspapers on this issue became frequent and detailed. Killings, robberies, thefts and rapes had to be played down, and the construction of stories was meticulously prescribed to reporters and editors: articles had to be no more than 30 lines long, with headlines that were ‘not flashy’. ‘Alarming, pessimistic,

¹⁰⁵ ACS, MCP, b. 49, Rapporto Giornalisti, settembre 1939-dicembre 1940, Conference of 12 November 1940.

¹⁰⁶ ‘Non raccogliere le voci’, *Il Giornale d’Italia*, 18 December 1940; ‘Le voci’, *Il Telegrafo*, 18 December 1940.

catastrophic and depressing' news was banned, while newspapers were requested to show 'optimism, confidence and certainty about the future'.¹⁰⁷

Yet after the outbreak of the European war in 1939, and even more so after June 1940, news of transgressions and subsequent exemplary punishments began to spread in the press, as a constant deterrent to potential criminals who were admonished to maintain attitudes consonant with the hard times, also as reassurance for the majority of law-abiding civilians. A law passed on 16 June 1940 attached aggravating circumstance to criminal offences committed in wartime, which were heard by the Special Tribunal for the Defence of the State, an extraordinary court established in 1926 and composed of a president chosen from army generals, a prosecutor picked from the military judiciary and five judges from among the officers of the Fascist Militia.¹⁰⁸ A few members of the *Camera dei fasci e delle corporazioni* criticised the bill in the parliamentary debate. Alfredo De Marsico, a well-known lawyer who was a member of the Fascist Grand Council, claimed that the authority to decide on these kinds of crimes should be left to ordinary courts which were more qualified and impartial than the Special Tribunal, against the verdicts of which no appeal was allowed. Giovanni Battista Madia, also a prominent barrister, said that the list of crimes punishable by the death penalty under the new law was too long and included offences that were usually punished with 8-12 years imprisonment. Yet the president of the Committee dismissed those objections, saying that there was no reason for being concerned because the work of the Special Tribunal was 'supervised by the Duce, a big-hearted and generous man'.¹⁰⁹

The Special Tribunal usually dealt with political crimes and was renowned for its harsh sentences on anti-Fascists. Even in wartime its attention to ordinary

¹⁰⁷ *La stampa del regime*, ed. Tranfaglia with Maida, p. 107-108; Cannistraro, *La fabbrica del consenso*, p. 420. According to Giovanni Ansaldo, Mussolini insisted on minimising crime news in newspapers because it was too parochial and distracted the reader's attention from political news (Ansaldo, *Il giornalista di Ciano*, pp. 33-34).

¹⁰⁸ Law of 16 June 1940-XVIII, n. 582, "Norme per l'aggravamento delle pene riguardo ai delitti commessi profittando delle circostanze dipendenti dallo stato di guerra", *Gazzetta Ufficiale del Regno d'Italia*, 18 June 1940-XVIII

¹⁰⁹ Claudio Longhitano, *Il Tribunale di Mussolini (Storia del Tribunale Speciale 1926-1943, Quaderni dell'Associazione nazionale perseguitati politici italiani*, Vol. 20, 1995, pp. 175-177.

crimes was limited to a very few cases. The most stubborn anti-Fascists were sentenced to prison or confinement at the end of farcical trials which were intended to legitimize the unending retribution against Mussolini's opponents.¹¹⁰ Extending the jurisdiction of the Special Tribunal transformed infringement of emergency rules into an offence against the State and therefore into a political crime. This was an institutional change specifically designed to stabilise the home front, sending a reassuring message to people angered by looters and profiteers.¹¹¹

During summer 1940 there were few trials, with sentences of several years of imprisonment for minor offences.¹¹² But in the autumn the Special Tribunal was called on to deal with the first important case in which the strict new rules could be applied. It was a story of petty crime on the face of it, but it turned out to have significant social, if not political, repercussions. A series of armed robberies and thefts were committed in Genoa between 8 and 17 October, taking advantage of the blackout, and caused a great sensation in the press. The major perpetrators were Alberto Pavese, a baker, and Clemente Grisanti, a driver, who together with four accomplices had stolen a dress, two hats and three bags containing respectively 523, 30 and 78 lire. At the end of the month, after only two weeks of an exceptionally swift investigation led by the *questore* himself and widely praised in the press, six people were arrested. They all confessed and paid full compensation for the damage inflicted on the victims. In two weeks a spectacular trial was set up. The Special Tribunal, which was based in Rome and presided over by Antonino Tringali Casanuova, a general of the Fascist Militia, moved to Genoa.¹¹³

¹¹⁰ Alberto Aquarone, *L'organizzazione dello Stato totalitario* (Turin: Einaudi, 1995, first publ. 1965) p. 103.

¹¹¹ Romano Canosa, *I servizi segreti del duce. I persecutori e le vittime* (Milan: Mondadori, 2000), pp. 401-403.

¹¹² 'La prima applicazione a Roma delle leggi di guerra', *Stampa Sera*, 4 July 1940.

¹¹³ *Tribunale speciale per la difesa dello stato. Decisioni emesse nel 1940* (Rome: Stato maggiore dell'esercito-Ufficio storico, 1994), pp. 623- 633; 'La pericolosa attività di una banda di delinquenti prontamente stroncata dalla Squadra Mobile', *Il Secolo XIX*, 25 October 1940; 'La banda dei malfattori arrestata dalla Squadra Mobile deferita al Tribunale Speciale', *Il Secolo XIX*, 31 October 1940; 'Il Tribunale Speciale si trasferisce a Genova per giudicare la banda dei rapinatori', *Il Secolo XIX*, 13 November 1940

The city, which had been a target of enemy air raids and naval attacks since the beginning of the war, was a focal point of the home front. It was also one of the Italian areas least sensible to the Fascist mobilisation: a large number of workers in the docks and in the shipping industry, traditionally the lynchpin of the local economy, had left-wing sympathies. A few months after Mussolini's decision to enter the war, police informants from Genoa reported that the high level of unemployment and the hardships imposed by emergency regulations were stoking disaffection for the regime among workers. They also noticed that a dangerous stream of anti-Fascist feeling was gaining momentum. Even reports sent to the party headquarters in Rome by Fascist local leaders and inspectors contained veiled admissions about the fragility of consent and political discipline in the city. In September 1940 it was confidentially made known to the authorities in Rome that anti-Fascist writings and hammer and sickle symbols were appearing on walls. Fascist workers reported that in the factories in Sampierdarena, a densely populated industrial area, most of their colleagues were 'Reds' and it was possible to hear 'significant expressions' such as: 'When will the English decide to bomb Rome very hard?' People's 'murmuring' focused on the danger of enemy air raids. Other reports told that there was in Genoa 'an absolute lack of enthusiasm about the war and its aims'. Informants also noted some loosening of discipline among party members. Interestingly, they stressed that they inferred such feelings from the observations people made when commenting on and criticising what the official sources – war bulletins, radio reports and press articles – said about the military situation.¹¹⁴

The trials held by the Special Tribunal at the end of 1940 and during 1941 in some Italian cities against transgressors of the exceptional law need to be framed in that context. Indeed, the trial in Genoa against Pavese and Grisanti was not the only one dealing with ordinary offences. Giovanni Guerriero, who had wounded Vincenzo De Meglio, a shopkeeper, attempting to rob him on the night of 31 August in Naples was sentenced to 26 years and 8 months in prison;

¹¹⁴ ACS, PNF, Situazione politica e economica delle provincie, b. 1, fasc. situazione Genova, reports of 26 September and 8 November 1940.

Giovanni Monte and Ludovico Casagrande, who on 22 August in Genoa had beaten Davide Perasso, a farmer and robbed him of 500 lire. The two culprits were sentenced to 26 years in prison. Both trials dealt with offences committed during the blackout and were bound to have an exemplary meaning for the Italian people.

The judges were more indulgent with people taking advantage of the blackout who were accused of rape. For instance, they acquitted Gaetano Lauria, a Sicilian tax collector accused of having assaulted a young woman at her home in the town of Piazza Armerina on the night of 8 July, sentencing him to one year in prison for the minor offence of housebreaking. Police reported to the judges that the victim was of ‘dubious morality’, while the defendant had no criminal record, was ‘inexperienced and an easy prey to other people’s cunning’.¹¹⁵

Yet no trial received the same attention as the hearings in Genoa in autumn 1940. Almost all Italian newspapers published the Stefani agency’s dispatches. The articles were not particularly prominent, but the decision to report almost verbatim the prosecutor’s closing speech and the desperate attempts of the defence counsel to obtain a reasonable punishment for the defendants was a huge contrast with the understated and cautious approach to crime reporting in pre-war Fascist Italy. This created the perception that the press was pushing a degree of admonishment around the trial that had symbolic value for the regime.

The Turin daily *La Stampa*, widely read in the Genoa area, sent its legal affairs correspondent Francesco Argenta, an indication that the trial deserved to be followed with particular attention. Despite the mandatory tone of complacency, it was possible from Argenta’s articles to see the disproportionate nature of the authorities’ reaction given the actual importance of the crimes.¹¹⁶ On the first day of the trial the local daily *Il Secolo XIX* called for an exemplary sentence, commenting that Genoese people ‘today feel highly protected’ and ‘are certain

¹¹⁵ *Tribunale speciale per la difesa dello stato. Decisioni emesse nel 1940*, pp. 637-640; ‘Altre esemplari condanne inflitte a rapinatori dal Tribunale Speciale’, *Il Lavoro*, 1 December 1940.

¹¹⁶ ‘La fucilazione per i due maggiori colpevoli e tre anni di reclusione per altri tre chiesti dal P.G.’, *La Stampa*, 15 November 1940; ‘Pavese e Grisanti condannati a morte e gli altri tre complici a trent’anni di reclusione’, *La Stampa*, 16 November 1940. See Francesco Argenta, *Vita di giornalista*, ed. Ernesto Caballo (Turin: Aiace, 1966).

that they can look at the future with full confidence and absolute tranquility'.¹¹⁷ Indeed, the prosecutor requested the death penalty for Pavese and Grisanti. Umberto Ferraris, Pavese's counsel, questioned in his final address whether the facts that led to the trial 'really provoked among Genoa's population such waves of fear as to justify the harshness of the punishment being requested'. The lawyer explained, trying to put into perspective the impact of the crime on people's everyday lives, that Genoa 'is at work everywhere' and it was one of the few Italian cities which still 'offers a nightlife'. People there had not been touched by 'the cold shiver of fear'.¹¹⁸

Ferraris' arguments did not persuade the judges. The Tribunal passed the death sentence on Pavese and Grisanti in a room crowded with local and national authorities, lawyers and the Genoese bar. The prefect and the *podestà* sat in the first row.¹¹⁹ The mob thronging around the courtroom welcomed the verdict, 'plainly nodding assent'. After the ruling, newspapers claimed that, 'the Genoese people feel a calm assurance that nobody will dare to violate the sanctity of the law'.¹²⁰ The written sentence explained that, as a consequence

of a turbid and sudden germination sprouting from the slums, Genoa – a peaceful and industrious city which has seldom been reported in the national news for notable crimes – has been in the early days of October 1940 the scene of criminal deeds the recurrence of which in so short a time caused extensive legitimate alarm. It seemed as though the streets at night were barred to the free transit of those citizens who, mostly for work, must move about the city. The blackout, which is due to the utmost needs of anti-aircraft defence, had given criminals the chance to carry out their deeds. They spread the terror of assault, often with the threat of a revolver, into the hearts of defenceless women and men.¹²¹

The verdict was printed on 16,000 posters that were put up in the Genoa area.¹²²

No Italian law scholar had the courage to comment that the punishment was disproportionate to the crimes. In peacetime, the Special Tribunal had passed only 15 death sentences, all carried out, five of which were passed against Slavic

¹¹⁷ 'Il Tribunale Speciale giudica la banda dei rapinatori', *Il Secolo XIX*, 15 November 1940.

¹¹⁸ Francesco Argenta, 'Pavese e Grisanti condannati a morte e gli altri tre complici a trent'anni di reclusione', *La Stampa*, 16 November 1940.

¹¹⁹ 'I due accusati principali condannati a morte', *Il Lavoro*, 16 November 1940.

¹²⁰ 'La sentenza del Tribunale Speciale nel processo ai rapinatori', *Il Secolo XIX*, 16 November, 1940.

¹²¹ *Tribunale speciale per la difesa dello stato. Decisioni emesse nel 1940*, p. 626

¹²² ACS, TSDS, Fascicoli processuali, 1940, fasc. 7224, b. 676.

nationalists convicted of acts of terrorism in the Northern border region of Venezia Giulia. The enforcement of the June 1940 law added to the iniquity of that system and led to ‘aberrant decisions, at odds with any principle of justice and lacking the most basic humanitarian feeling’.¹²³

According to the biographies kept in the court records, Pavese had been previously sentenced for desertion in the First War. Returning to civilian life, he was soon made bankrupt. In the 1930s he volunteered with the Blackshirts and joined troops in East Africa, where he worked for four years as a baker and whence he was expelled in 1939, to arrive in Genoa. The local Fascist union in the city helped him find a job. Grisanti, who had been convicted of running an unlicensed lodging house, was a member of the Fascist Party. His estranged wife worked as a prostitute in Milan and he had to pay expensive fees for the Catholic boarding school their eight-year old daughter attended.¹²⁴ On the one hand, the details of the complex lives of these men sentenced to death were not included in press reports, probably because both biographies were scattered with wrongdoing and misfortune. On the other hand, the men had complied with the fundamental requirements of survival in Fascist Italy such as party membership and military engagement. It was convenient for the media to present them as petty criminals, indifferent to the nation’s values and needs and capable of taking advantage of others in adversity.

Italian newspapers were avid for morbid details when the impact on morale of particularly hateful crimes on the enemy home front was concerned. Articles and comments contrasted the ways in which Britain and Italy dealt with deviant attitudes among civilians. According to the Italian press version, in Fascist Italy, the very few who dared to break the discipline observed by the overwhelming majority of law-abiding citizens were exemplarily and unmercifully chastised, whereas democratic Britain struggled to punish heinous crimes, giving defendants a fair trial and applying only mild sanctions. When the first trials for looting from people killed by German bombs started to be reported

¹²³ Giovanni Tessitore, *Fascismo e pena di morte. Consenso e informazione* (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2000), p. 381.

¹²⁴ ACS, TSDS, Fascicoli processuali, 1940, fasc. 7224, b. 676.

in the British press, the Italian papers were keen to single out the stories. One of them was particularly emphasised: in January 1941, George Alfred Hobbs, a mortuary assistant in Kensington, was sentenced at the Old Bailey to three years of ‘penal servitude’ for stealing rings from the bodies of four persons killed in air raids.¹²⁵ The Italian newspapers published all the particulars of the trial, even the evidence given to the court by the victims’ relatives concerning mutilation of the corpses, which was not attributable to the raid but to the desecrating thefts. The articles insinuated that British judges were concerned that this kind of story might have a negative effect on the public and therefore quickly closed the trial, passing a light sentence for crimes which ‘would have been sanctioned with capital punishment in any other country in the world’.¹²⁶

This was the usual rhetoric of Fascist propaganda. However, after the Genoa trial the regime’s determination to show force and full rigour seemed to weaken. Crimes like those which earned Pavese and Grisanti the firing squad began to be punished less harshly. When serious crimes were committed and the Special Tribunal imposed capital punishment, the press reported the news concisely without adding details or comments: in Sicily on 26 January 1941 Filippo Messina was executed for the ordered killing of a rich elderly woman during the blackout; one month later in Belluno a labourer, Antonio Mesotina, was executed for having beaten and robbed a railway worker walking along the track in the dark on his way home; in Avellino on 11 June 1941 two peasants, Angiolino Roberto and Antonio Porcelli, were put to death for the murder of two *carabinieri*, Luigi Formisano and Luigi Posillipo, during a robbery attempt.¹²⁷ In none of these cases was the style, tone and layout of press articles comparable to the vast

¹²⁵ ‘Serious charge against mortuary assistant’, *The Times*, 23 November 1940; ‘Looting cases at Old Bailey’, *The Observer*, 5 January 1941; ‘The Dead Robbed’, *The Times*, 8 January 1941.

¹²⁶ ‘La piaga degli spogliatori di salme rivelata a Londra da un clamoroso processo’, *La Stampa*, 28 January 1941.

¹²⁷ *Tribunale speciale per la difesa dello stato. Decisioni emesse nel 1943* (Rome: Stato maggiore dell’esercito-Ufficio storico, 1999), pp. 844-854; 901-910.

publicity given to the Genoa case. Even the crimes and the investigations leading to the arrest of the culprits were largely neglected.¹²⁸

One explanation could be the authorities' intention to show that an initial, steady and resolute display of strength had been sufficient to make violations of blackout regulations increasingly rare. Since the first death sentence for ordinary crimes that profited from emergency war regulations, the Ministry of Interior had ordered that every town hall in the country must post a notice reproducing the Special Tribunal verdicts.¹²⁹ On 12 April 1941, following instructions from the MCP urging newspapers to stress the government communiqué regarding 'the scarcity of crimes dependent on the state of war', *La Stampa* commented that in the first ten months of war there had been few offences and trials: transgressions were not alarming, and 'even in the course of such a hard war the moral standard of the Italian people proved to be so high that it did not endure shocks or deviations despite circumstances propitious to anti-social leanings'.¹³⁰

Even when the government passed a decree at the end of 1942 increasing the number of offences punishable with the death penalty, the press kept a low profile.¹³¹ And in the last critical months of the Fascist war, with the regime more anxious than ever to build a contained and disciplined home front, the press was told not to indulge in the kind of stories that had been extensively reported at the outset of war. In March 1943, when the Special Tribunal judges moved to Turin to try some men charged with looting after air raids, official instruction stated that their presence was not to be made known to the public. Authorities were concerned that a court that usually dealt with political crimes would ascribe the

¹²⁸ 'La pena capitale a un uomo e una donna per omicidio durante l'oscuramento', *Stampa Sera*, 26 January 1941; 'Rapinatore condannato a morte', *La Stampa*, 24 February 1941; 'L'esecuzione capitale degli uccisori dei due carabinieri', *La Stampa*, 13 June 1941.

¹²⁹ Adolfo Mignemi, 'La macchina della propaganda e la guerra fascista', in *1940-43. L'Italia in guerra. Immagini e temi della propaganda fascista* (Brescia: Fondazione Luigi Micheletti, 1989), pp. 34-35.

¹³⁰ *La stampa del regime*, ed. Tranfaglia with Maida, p. 393 (instructions of 11 April 1941); 'La delinquenza e la guerra', *La Stampa*, 12 April 1941.

¹³¹ Law of 30 November 1942-XXI, n. 1746, 'Conversione in legge del regio decreto legge 30 novembre 1942-XXI, n. 1365, concernente modificazioni dell'articolo 1 della legge 16 giugno 1940-XVIII, n. 582, recante norme per l'aggravamento delle pene riguardo ai delitti commessi profittando delle circostanze dipendenti dallo stato di guerra', *Gazzetta Ufficiale del Regno d'Italia*, 9 February 1943-XXI.

strikes that had been under way in Turin factories since the beginning of the month to anti-Fascist feeling. Thus, on 18 March, readers knew from the front pages that five ‘vultures’ had been sentenced to death, without having heard from the media about the culprits’ deeds or the trial.¹³²

4.6 Soul of the Home and Steadfast Warrior: Women on the Domestic Front

Reproof of villains coexisted with the a pedagogical reiteration and praise of virtuous models in press efforts to sway and motivate civilians. Women were the natural recipients of the actions of persuasion, as they were regarded as playing a crucial role in holding together Italian families deprived of male presence for years. As Elsa Goss, a writer and lecturer, told the audience of a war talk in Genoa in August 1940: ‘Every fireplace is a trench’.¹³³ The press, tuning in to the Fascist authorities’ campaign among civilians against rumour-mongering about the military situation, urged women not to indulge in gossip with friends, shopkeepers and caretakers. Camilla Bisi, a writer and editor at *Il Lavoro*, wrote that some women were becoming ‘sowers of bad germs which infect the family, whence they spread to even larger circles’. At such a critical moment, women should not spread pessimism but a true, healthy optimism – as Italian women had done in the Great War when they ‘committed themselves and others to silence about things that could undermine the strength of their men’, creating ‘a single front of serenity against the threat’.¹³⁴ During the First World War Italian women had an opportunity to change their lives for few years. For instance, they could experience new work roles in offices and factories or leave their families and

¹³² On 6 July 1943, the MCP had instructed the press to minimize news about trials before the Special Tribunal because ‘it is not matter of a revival of antifascism’. See *La stampa del regime*, pp. 148; 425 (instructions of 15 March 1943); ‘Cinque esecuzioni capitali per furti in case sinistrate e abbandonate’, *La Stampa*, 18 March 1943; Baldoli, ‘Bombing the Fiat: Allied Raids, Workers’ Strikes, and the Italian Resistance’, *Labour History Review* 1(2013), pp. 77-80.

¹³³ Cited in Massa, *Vita da guerra*, p. 29.

¹³⁴ Camilla Bisi, ‘Il gazzettino vivente’, *Il Lavoro*, 19 December 1940. Camilla Bisi was born in Milan in 1893 and started her writing and journalistic career in 1914 at *La Nostra Rivista*, a magazine ‘for Italian women’ published in Milan. From 1921 to 1930 she was the editor of *Ragazze*, a ‘magazine for young women’, published in Genoa. She also wrote the novels *Il mio principe* and *Occhibelli*. See *Annuario della stampa italiana 1931-1932*, ed. Sindacato Nazionale Fascista dei giornalisti (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1932), pp. IX-X; Umberto V. Cavassa, *Ombre amiche* (Genoa: Di Stefano, 1960), pp. 66-97; *Periodici italiani 1886-1957* (Rome: Istituto centrale per il catalogo unico delle biblioteche italiane e per le informazioni bibliografiche, 1980), pp. 560; 689.

serve as Red Cross nurses on the battlefield. Yet these were to be temporary changes that did not emancipate women in post-war Italy, since the end of the war marked a return to traditional gender roles.¹³⁵

In 1940, the need to guide women and once again ensure their support on the home front was supposed to benefit from 18 years of mobilisation in female party organisations. The regime's propagandists were convinced that dictatorship had made it possible to frame women's contribution both in 'traditional' terms (in their unalterable role in a male-dominated society) and in a 'modern' sense (in their acquired abilities as substitutes for men).¹³⁶ Yet, in fact, that ambiguity led to an incoherent message simultaneously on the persistence of the usual reassuring stereotypes of family life and the inflated language of war propaganda. Getting this message across proved to be a juggling exercise that, especially in the first year of the war, sometimes had surreal implications, as when editors and writers, melding frivolous and serious topics, gave advice to women about the dress code for shelters. The newspaper *Il Lavoro*, for instance, went so far as to print a photograph showing the right way for women to carry torches during blackouts and giving detailed instructions in the caption:

Not like a flower in your buttonhole, dear women walking at night-time in the blackout: not in line with your waist, like a shining belt-buckle, but almost at the border of the skirt (especially as nowadays they are so short) in order to light up your journey without blinding those who come towards you. If the legs are nice and the shoes are original, all the better.¹³⁷

Camilla Bisi was an assertor and practitioner of a form of journalism aimed at involving women in the patriotic atmosphere of the first year of war. She had been a feminist and had opposed a beauty contest for secretaries organised by the Milan weekly *La Piccola* in 1929, the first such event in Italy, and suggested that prizes

¹³⁵ Perry Willson, *Women in Twentieth-Century Italy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 43-60.

¹³⁶ Victoria De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy, 1922-1945* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993, first publ. 1992), p. 14; De Grazia and Chantal Testa, 'Fascisme et féminisme latin. Italia, 1922-1945', *Genèses* 5(1991), pp. 129-131; De Grazia, 'The Nazionalization of Women', in *Fascism, Anti-Fascism, and Resistance in Italy*, ed. Stanislao G. Pugliese (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004) pp. 183-188; Luisa Passerini, 'Costruzione del femminile e del maschile', in *Il regime fascista. Storia e storiografia*, ed. Angelo Del Boca, Massimo Legnani and Mario G. Rossi (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1995), pp. 498-506.

¹³⁷ 'Come si porta la lampadina', *Il Lavoro*, 5 December 1940.

ought to be given to hard-working and courageous girls.¹³⁸ Her support for the regime's propaganda in wartime led to an eclectic vision in which every aspect of women's lives – aesthetic, practical and ethical – must be put at the service of the country. In the first summer of the Italian war, when Genoa was within reach of French bombers and authorities adopted the first evacuation plans, Bisi started a column entitled 'Journal of an Evacuee', aimed at framing in a reassuring atmosphere the narration of an experience which had been unsettling the lives and habits of Italian families since the outset of war. Her writings set out to convey a model of a woman who continued to lead a simple and well-organised life despite adverse circumstances. Often she insisted on the socially levelling effect of alarms and blackout, sketching exemplary characters and situations: a young maid sheltering in a small hotel who had followed her mistress did not fear the air raids and was always smiling, but cried her heart out when seeing a spider; a small village where everyone resolutely did their duty – from the people who manned the anti-aircraft guns to the priest who offered his room to evacuees; the scorn heaped on some elegant ladies who fled to the fashionable places of the Riviera and therefore lost the small pleasures of provincial life like improvised film showings with friends in a welcoming house.¹³⁹

The images of British women under the Blitz were mockingly compared with Italian women, helping convey the message that even under bombing Italian women would not cast off their femininity, while old habits and the destructive power of enemy attacks forced their counterparts in the opposing camp to look increasingly like men:

English women adopt garments for air raid alarms, overalls fitted with zips, at least four huge pockets to carry a torch, a first-aid kit, cookies and chocolate. Lots of women wear men's trousers and a hood to hide ruffled hair. The indispensable gas-mask pouch is in matching colours and hangs from the belt.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸ De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*, p. 149.

¹³⁹ 'Zona di sicurezza', *Il Lavoro*, 23 June 1940; 'Adrianuccia e i "ragnoli"', *Il Lavoro*, 29 June 1940; 'Cinema a domicilio', *Il Lavoro*, 3 July 1940

¹⁴⁰ Cited in Miriam Mafai, *Pane nero. Donne e vita quotidiana nella seconda guerra mondiale* (Milan: Mondadori, 1987), p. 29.

Illustrated with a picture of a contented girl, the magazine *Grazia* commended the manufacturer of a 'new model' of gas mask for 'being very conscious of the aesthetic', as the object had lost 'its monstrous shape' and was reminiscent 'more of an odd beauty care device than of its tragic function'.¹⁴¹ For mobilised women, who in the summer of 1940 were not yet fully involved in emergency duties, Camilla Bisi prescribed detailed rules regarding keeping up the appearances of an unscathed femininity. Italians' acquaintance with the first lethal air raids in autumn did not change the substance or style of the material directed at women by the media, but hints at the military situation and the urgent needs of the home front became more frequent. The usual tenets of fashion, household management and family life were increasingly war-oriented. Calls for sobriety in entertainments and pastimes – though not the halting of them, because such 'complete sacrifice would mean the stagnation of countless branches of the national economy and consequently the paralysis of jobs' – compensated for frivolous stories.¹⁴²

Mothers were urged to acclimatise their children to the blackout by telling them 'deeds of heroic children'. Children would then 'fall asleep dreaming exciting adventures'. They had to be quieted by the strength of the familiar example: 'Tell them that, as their dad or their older brother are at war fighting real dangers, the little Italians must not tremble'.¹⁴³ In this respect as in others, the papers compared the virtues of the Italian people to the failings of enemy civilians. Quoting a report by the London correspondent of a Swedish newspaper, for instance, they criticised the wicked behaviour of British women, saying that 'mothers who abandon their children during air raids will be severely punished', since such a crime 'seems to be a recurrent one in Britain'. In Manchester, the paper explained, two women who had left their sons unattended during an air raid had stood trial and were sentenced to several months in prison.¹⁴⁴ *La Stampa* reported a *Daily Mirror* article that claimed the rising crime rate among women

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 118.

¹⁴² Bisi, 'Serate di guerra', *Il Lavoro*, 14 November 1940.

¹⁴³ Jalà, 'I piccoli e l'oscuramento', *Il Lavoro*, 21 November 1940.

¹⁴⁴ 'Le madri londinesi abbandonano i figli durante gli allarmi aerei', *Il Mattino*, 3 November 1940.

worried the British public: ‘A moral devastation has gone with the material devastation that bombing brought about in England’. Italian mothers, who had ‘a sublime cult of motherhood’ looked ‘with a shiver of horror’ at the increasing number of British women punished ‘for neglecting their children’.¹⁴⁵

In contrast, the authorities instructed the press to emphasise the exemplary and heroic acts of Italian women, as in the case of Giovanna Deiana. A 14-year-old member of the Verona branch of the youth organisation *Gioventù Italiana del Littorio*, Giovanna got a special mention, a silver medal, and a promotion to the rank of *capomanipolo* because during the British air raid of 21 October 1940 on her city, despite being hit in the face and completely blinded by shrapnel, she had carried her two little brothers to safety. That portrait went beyond the exaltation of a private virtue, since it was mostly the patriotic value of the girl that was commended. She was quoted as saying bravely that she was happy with the fate that had been chosen for her, sparing a soldier or a military objective. According to the press, even after that terrible experience, Giovanna only had thoughts for Mussolini: ‘I want it made known to the *Duce* that I will not cry and I will bear my pain for his own and the Country’s sake’. The cover of the weekly *La Domenica del Corriere*, drawn by Achille Beltrame, one the most popular illustrators of the time, brought the episode into Italian homes, showing a girl covering her face in her hands while shielding two children with her body. A few months later, Giovanna met Mussolini and her story was once again richly mined by the newspapers.¹⁴⁶

The attention devoted to women in wartime even by the heavyweights of Fascist propaganda signalled how vital their cooperation was deemed to be for the cohesion of the home front with civilians increasingly becoming involved in the

¹⁴⁵ F. dal Padulo, ‘Accuse di giornali inglesi contro l’incuria del governo’, *Stampa Sera*, 14 February 1941.

¹⁴⁶ ‘Un’eroica giovane italiana citata all’o.d.g. della Gil dal Comando generale’, *Il Lavoro*, 4 December 1940; *La Domenica del Corriere*, 15 December 1940; ‘Il Duce visita i giovani dei corsi annuali della G.I.L.’, *La Stampa*, 28 July 1941; Carlotti, ‘La memorialistica della RSI: il caso delle Ausiliarie’, in *Italia 1939-1945*, ed. Carlotti, p. 344. The Italian war bulletin recorded that during an air raid against northern areas on 21 October 1940, the British bombs ‘damaged one house and a charity institution housing 60 orphans and 150 poor’ in Verona (Quartier Generale delle Forze Armate, *Bollettino n. 136*, 21 October 1940).

war. Also, women had to be addressed because they were specifically targeted by enemy propaganda: for instance, leaflets urged mothers and wives to save their men's lives by opposing the Fascist war.¹⁴⁷ Mario Appelius applied a tested polemical scheme to the purpose of attracting women's attention. Exalting his country's past, he claimed that, 'Italian women through the ages have solved the problem of fusing all the regal attributes of the most complete femininity with firm moral, spiritual and civic qualities'. Moreover, making reference to patriotic and bellicose imperatives, Appelius asserted that, 'in this total war' Italian women 'are valiant fighters', and 'are enlisted to serve their fatherland under arms'.¹⁴⁸ Women's work also began to be emphasised, as long as it was clear that the extraordinary situation the country was in required their involvement in a field traditionally reserved for men. A huge propaganda effort had been directed at women during the two-year autarky campaign following the sanctions imposed on Italy by the League of Nations after the aggression on Ethiopia in October 1935, but at that time only their contribution to war as good mothers and shrewd consumers was encouraged and praised.¹⁴⁹ The mobilisation of women in the Second World War provided them with new roles and opportunities. In September 1940 newspapers underlined enthusiastically that UNPA was allowed to recruit women as *capifabbricato*. 'This significant recognition', *La Stampa* commented, testified 'not only to the trust the Fascist Regime puts in the female element, but also to the social maturity women proved they have attained, by means of exacting trials, showing their peculiar virtues of abnegation, unselfishness, industry in a full light'.¹⁵⁰

Yet despite the effort of the Fascist propaganda machine, the real lives of Italian women since the start of the war was – as diaries, memoirs, and official reports testify – poles apart from the media's fictional account. Rationing, air raids, evacuation all transformed the role that tradition, authority and Fascism had imposed on women. In their efforts to find food, places where to escape from

¹⁴⁷ Baldoli and Knapp, *Forgotten Blitzes*, p. 132.

¹⁴⁸ Appelius, *Parole dure e chiare*, pp. 74-76.

¹⁴⁹ Willson, 'Empire, Gender and the "Home Front" in Fascist Italy', *Women's History Review* 4 (2007), pp. 488-489.

¹⁵⁰ E.D., 'Le donne capi-fabbricato', *La Stampa*, 29 September 1940.

bombed cities, and words to reassure relatives at the front, there was perhaps not a conscious evolution towards ‘modernity’, but it is undeniable that total war forced women to venture into territories that had been precluded to their sex until then. It is not by chance that in the summer of 1941 the first episodes of open reaction to the dictatorship, mainly in the poorest areas of Southern Italy, had as their protagonists women demonstrating against food shortages.¹⁵¹ Yet only in the last year of the *Duce*’s war did Italian anti-Fascist groups focus their counter-propaganda on messages challenging the role that the regime’s ideology imposed on women.¹⁵²

4.7 Representations of the Home Front in Popular Culture

On the eve of Italy’s entry into war, Adriano Nisco, an engineer from Naples, presented a plan for a monumental underground theatre to be built below Piazza Plebiscito, an area in the old city centre close to the harbour. The structure, which according to Nisco was instrumental in adapting Mussolini’s ‘theatre of the masses’ to the necessities of war, was meant to accommodate an audience of 7,000 and, if need be, around 30,000 people sheltering from bombs. The project was a dead letter, although it would have been a godsend for a metropolis heavily hit by the Anglo-American air raids.¹⁵³ The rallies that had been a linchpin of the Fascist ideology of never-ending mobilisation were no longer feasible after June 1940 for obvious security reasons. They had been, as Emilio Gentile put it, not only instruments to manipulate public opinion, enforce obedience and obtain consent, but also ‘spectacles of power’ to project an image of unity, solidarity and

¹⁵¹ Patrizia Gabrielli, *Scenari di guerra, parole di donne* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2007), p. 110; Bravo and Bruzzone, *In guerra senz’armi*, p. 43; Colarizi, ‘L’opinione pubblica italiana durante la seconda guerra mondiale 1940-43’, in *L’Italia in guerra 1940-43*, ed. Micheletti and Poggio, p. 662.

¹⁵² Paola Carucci, Fabrizio Dolci and Mario Missori (eds), *Volantini antifascisti nelle carte di pubblica sicurezza 1926-1943* (Rome, Ministero per i Beni Culturali e Ambientali-Ufficio Centrale per i Beni Archivistici, 1995), p. 194.

¹⁵³ Adriano Nisco, *Progetto per la costruzione di un grande teatro in Napoli nel sottosuolo di Piazza del Plebiscito da servire anche per ricovero antiaereo* (Naples: Stabilimento Tipografico Editoriale, 1939); Pasquale Iaccio, ‘Ribalte tempestose. Teatro e fascismo nella seconda guerra mondiale’, in *La guerra immaginata: teatro, canzone e fotografia 1940-1943*, ed. Aurelio Lepre (Napoli, Liguori, 1989), p. 43; Cannistraro, *La fabbrica del consenso*, pp. 113-115.

force.¹⁵⁴ War became a litmus test of Mussolini's ambition to mould the 'new man', and the home front was the ideal environment to realise that aspiration, to show that civilians were as ready and resilient as soldiers supposedly were. Even pastimes had to be consistent and equal to the challenge.

Notwithstanding the increasing success of popular music in Italy since the Belle Epoque, the outburst of patriotic tunes during the Great War and, above all, the role of anthems in Fascist mobilisation, there was no great surge of war songs in 1940 and thereafter.¹⁵⁵ Even a press usually not prone to openly expressing contentious opinion, unless required to do so by their political masters, directed criticism at what seemed a fatal flaw in the national pride. Federico Petriccione, a journalist and playwright, noticed that songwriters dealt with war in a slovenly and superficial way. He said that their texts were 'awkward improvisations' with terrible taste and no poetic content.¹⁵⁶

Indeed, the great majority of Italians did not return a martial response to the Duce's call to arms. Since 1935 the 40-hour working week (*sabato fascista*) had been designed to allow people to engage in Party organisations and in edifying activities like visiting exhibitions, acting in amateur theatrical clubs (*filodrammatiche*) promoted by the *Opera nazionale dopolavoro*, or watching drama and plays. Yet, as Doug Thompson observed, 'it still tended to be the lighter, intellectually less-demanding forms of music-hall entertainments which appealed to the masses'.¹⁵⁷ So, when the war came, people wanted escape from reality. Spectators at popular theatre trebled between 1939 to 1942, mostly in northern cities, while the serious genres stagnated. That was a problem for censorship, because in shows like revue (*rivista*) and music-hall (*varietà*),

¹⁵⁴ Gentile, *The Struggle for Modernity. Nationalism, Futurism and Fascism* (Westport: Praeger, 2003) p. 123.

¹⁵⁵ Stefano Pivato, 'Canzoni', in *Dizionario del fascismo*, Vol. 1, ed. Victoria De Grazia and Sergio Luzzatto (Turin: Einaudi, 2005, first publ. 2002), pp. 231-233.

¹⁵⁶ Federico Petriccione, 'Canzoni al tempo di guerra: patriottismo in pillole', *L'Illustrazione Italiana*, 1 September 1940 n. 35; Pasquale Iaccio, *L'intellettuale intransigente: il fascismo e Roberto Bracco* (Naples: Guida, 1992), p. 217; Rossella Aprea, *Mezzogiorno 1943: la scelta, la lotta, la speranza* (Naples: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1996), p. 317.

¹⁵⁷ Doug Thompson, 'The Organisation, Fascistisation and Management of Theatre in Italy, 1925-1943', in *Fascism and the Theatre. Comparative Studies on the Aesthetics and Politics of Performance in Europe 1925-1945*, ed. Günter Berghaus (Providence-Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1996), pp. 106-107.

performers sometimes spoke lines that were not in the approved script, referring with jokes or witticisms to war news and to the domestic situation.¹⁵⁸ Besides, mimicry, gesticulation and intonation had the power to radically change the meaning of the most innocent sentence approved on paper.¹⁵⁹

However the press continued to praise highbrow theatre, which unlike *rivista* and *varietà*, was subsidised by the government and openly promoted by the regime, which claimed that the fact that people still filled the stalls in most Italian cities was manifest proof that the country was carrying on as usual. Four months of war, *L'Illustrazione Italiana* wrote,

have not changed the face and spirit of Italy. The war, which Italians deeply and calmly felt and desired, neither stopped nor substantially altered the rhythm of national life and has in no sector caused worries, disorder, disorientation. Not even in the theatre, where companies have continued to play and audiences continue to hasten quietly as before, or almost as before. In Turin even during and after air raids; in Milan even after the bombs (real and metaphorical) of the British; in Genoa, Naples and Palermo, also visited by enemy incursions; and in Rome, in spite of the alarms.¹⁶⁰

Unlike control over the press, which was maintained by means of general and detailed instructions followed by subsequent sanctions against non-compliant newspapers, a centralised preventive censorship – headed since 1932 by Leopoldo Zurlo, a Ministry of Interior official who had direct access to both Pavolini and Mussolini – forced writers and managers to submit songs and theatrical and cinematographic scripts for approval. Works could not flout norms of decency and morality and, especially, had to conform to Fascist political orthodoxy.¹⁶¹ In the first months of the war, authorities allowed shows to deal with topics that would become much more sensitive later on such as alarms, blackouts and rationing. Works showing people bearing sacrifices with composure were

¹⁵⁸ *Varietà* and *rivista* were rather similar, as they were both shows consisting in a succession of songs, dances, jokes and sketches. The former sometimes had a plot.

¹⁵⁹ David Forgacs, 'Spettacolo: teatro e cinema', in *Guida all'Italia contemporanea 1861-1997*, Vol. 4, *Comportamenti sociali e cultura*, ed. Massimo Firpo, Nicola Tranfaglia and Pier Giorgio Zunino (Milan: Garzanti, 1998), p. 222-223; Marie-Anne Matard-Bonucci, 'Rire sans éclats. Esquisse d'une histoire politique et sociale du rire en régime fasciste', *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* (1)1998, p. 189.

¹⁶⁰ 'Teatro dell'anno XIX', *L'Illustrazione Italiana*, 20 October 1940, n. 42, p. 553.

¹⁶¹ Patrizia Ferrara (ed.), *Censura teatrale e fascismo (1931-1944): la storia, l'archivio, l'inventario*, Vol. 1 (Rome: Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali-Direzione Generale per gli Archivi, 2004), pp. 19-81.

favoured, but the green light was also given to scripts that provided entertainment and played down crucial aspects of wartime life. For instance, *L'oscuramento* (The blackout) e *L'allarme aereo* (The air-raid warning), two works by Aldo Fabrizi – a playwright and performer who was one of the most censored authors during Fascism and who was to become a star of post-war Italian cinema – were accepted, staged, recorded and broadcast, reaching millions of Italian households. They were two monologues describing surreal and comic situations, like the story of a married couple reacting to an air-raid siren with the husband eager to run into the shelter ('I want to hurry, or else someone will take the best places beside the main wall') and the wife accusing him of longing 'to see the lady from the third floor wearing a vented dressing-gown'. Or the farcical tale of a man who, after getting lost in the blacked-out streets of Rome, ends up after exhilarating vicissitudes at Milan station.¹⁶²

Those monologues were a big success and many fans wrote to Fabrizi. One of them, in a letter sent years later when the war was over, told him that a whole block of flats had whiled away the fearful hours spent in an air-raid shelter reading the small book containing the script of *L'allarme aereo*.¹⁶³ That kind of representation did conceal apprehension and insecurity beneath a layer of humour, but it did not refrain from ridiculing rules and figures of authority who were deemed essential in home front organisation. While newspapers were hammering away illustrating prescriptions and civilians' duties in great detail, comedians mocked figures like *capifabbricato* and UNPA wardens who shouted abstruse and vexing orders in the streets.

¹⁶² Aldo Fabrizi, *L'allarme aereo* (Milan: La Voce del Padrone-Columbia-Marconiphone, 1940); Fabrizi, *L'oscuramento* (Milan: La Voce del Padrone-Columbia-Marconiphone, 1940); Fabrizi, *Monologhi e macchiette*, ed. M. Cielo Pessione (Rome-Naples: Theoria, 1994); Nicola Fano, *Tessere o non tessere. I comici e la censura fascista* (Florence: LiberalLibri, 1999), pp. 69-71; 147-148; Goffredo Fofi, *Alberto Sordi. L'Italia in bianco e nero* (Milan: Mondadori, 2004), p. 51. According to Fano, 'from his point of view' Zurlo was right to censor Fabrizi, because his 'popular sketches focused on the contradiction between the assumed Fascist order and the natural complexity (and ambiguity) of human relations in those years'.

¹⁶³ Pessione, 'Fellini e Fabrizi. Il fondo Aldo Fabrizi', in *Federico Fellini autore di testi: dal Marc Aurelio a Luci del Varietà 1939-1950*, ed. Massimiliano Filippini and Vittorio Ferorelli (Bologna: Istituto per i beni artistici culturali e naturali della Regione Emilia-Romagna, 1999) p. 85.

A revue written by Armando Curcio with Eduardo De Filippo, another playwright and actor whom Zurlo and the Fascist leaders kept an eye on, surprisingly gained the censor's approval despite some cuts which did not change the substance of the text. As its title suggests, *Basta il succo di limone!* alluded to the trick of writing words or sentences to be concealed from the postal censorship in lemon juice, De Filippo's work implied the need to read between the lines of newspapers and official bulletins, in particular considering war emergency measures like blackout and curfew as the régime's chance to limit what was left of people's freedom. As was often the case in Mussolini's Italy, officialdom was subverted on the ground. For example, on 25 November 1940 at the revue's first night at the Quattro Fontane theatre in Rome, the show had to be stopped after the first act when a group of fascists in the audience started to boo actors off the stage.¹⁶⁴

In May 1942 Eduardo De Filippo and his brother Peppino, himself also an actor and playwright, again troubled the Fascist authorities. During the performance at the Quirino theatre in Rome of their comedy *La fortuna con la effe maiuscola* (Luck With a Capital L), which had duly obtained the censor's permission, they improvised a dialogue that poked fun at the UNPA and *capifabbricato*. Two members of the UNPA who were eavesdropping wondered whether to denounce the play to the *questore* or to settle the matter in person by going to the theatre to beat up the actors on stage. The phone tap was taken to Mussolini, who decided to drop the matter. In his memoirs Zurlo recalled that he advised the Duce against taking the incident seriously and conceded that the UNPA people, 'because of their age and the way they dressed hold themselves up to ridicule'.¹⁶⁵

Zurlo's work with authors who were sympathetic to the regime's needs was less demanding. In the first year of the war the majority of scripts submitted

¹⁶⁴ Maurizio Giammusso, 'Eduardo De Filippo e il potere politico', in *Eduardo De Filippo: atti del convegno di studi sulla drammaturgia civile e sull'impegno sociale di Eduardo De Filippo senatore a vita*, ed. Elio Testoni (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2005), pp. 20-21; Fiorenza Di Franco, *Eduardo* (Rome: Gremese, 2000), pp. 7; 121.

¹⁶⁵ Leopoldo Zurlo, *Memorie inutili. La censura teatrale nel ventennio* (Rome: Edizioni dell'Ateneo, 1952), p. 86; Di Franco, *Eduardo*, p. 131; Luigi De Filippo, 'I fratelli De Filippo', *La Repubblica*, 26 July 2009.

for approval conveyed an idyllic image of the home front. Ordinary people were represented as coping easily and almost exhilarated by war regulations. Light comedies took their cues from restrictions on food choice and precautionary measures. In a 1940 revue by Concettina Vecchio, *Il suon delle sirene* (The Sounds of Sirens), for instance, blackout provided the occasion for two lovers, Rosita and Piero, to meet. Other shows were similarly set in an atmosphere of calm and optimism.¹⁶⁶

Zurlo also had to examine hundreds of scripts submitted by amateurs dealing with war-related topics. As Pietro Cavallo observed, most of them produced a ‘celebratory’ theatre that sketched ‘exemplary figures’ who acted as ‘role models’ presenting ‘the correct form of behaviour to Italians’. But when it became clear that the war was getting worse for Italy, the scripts started to show the ‘wretched condition’ of soldiers and civilians. They were increasingly based more on real-life experiences like bombing, lack of food and restrictions rather than on echoing propaganda’s old stories and therefore the censors deemed these plays to be ‘counter-productive’ from the Fascist point of view. When Sergio Motroni submitted for authorisation a play (*Vento del Nord*) that, in his words, was meant to show the ‘Italians are they really are’, devoid of any ‘vain rhetoric’, Zurlo accompanied his letter of rejection with a question mark:

Should I, in my role of censor, pretend not to recognise the depressing effect your script produces on the audience? Your play is undoubtedly full of noble and impartial sentiments, but it also presents all the dark nuances of the war.¹⁶⁷

An anti-British stance was present in all forms of theatre. Besides the typical xenophobic invective so prevalent in the press and in radio programmes, a coarse comic register was also heard. *Radiopanzane* (Radio Yarns), a revue written by Michele Galdieri, submitted to the censors in 1940 and played by Paola Borboni and Riccardo Billi, parodied the BBC Italian Service and British war bulletins: in a letter to his nanny, a British war correspondent reports that, on landing in Sicily,

¹⁶⁶ Iaccio, ‘Ribalte tempestose. Teatro e fascismo nella seconda guerra mondiale’, p. 64-65.

¹⁶⁷ Cavallo, ‘Theatre Politics of the Mussolini Regime’, pp. 115-127. Zurlo’s letter, quoted by Cavallo on page 131, is in ACS, MCP, Censura teatrale, fasc. 2693, b. 108, letter of 18 agosto 1942.

Her Majesty's troops have been greeted by locals – a sketch intended to be amusing, but which in fact turned out to foreshadow what took place three years later.¹⁶⁸

Blaming barbaric acts on the enemy was another common propagandistic tool. In two works submitted to the censor in 1941 – *Un eccezionale paracadutista* (An Exceptional Paratrooper) by Giovanni Cassese and *Il fuoruscito* (The Expatriate) by Mariano Marraffa – British soldiers were represented as waging a cowardly war that was based on bombing defenceless civilians, hospitals and churches. In a play by Antonio Zecchini, *Piccola guardia* (Little Guards), submitted to Zurlo in 1943, a schoolmaster tell his pupils that the British 'invented a new form of war: men fighting against women, children, old people'. He enters into a spirited dialogue with them:

SCHOOLMASTER: You all certainly know of the latest crimes that the British perpetrated upon our cities.

THE PUPILS: Yes, sir! The bombing of Genoa ... and Milan!

PAOLO: It isn't true! Not Milan!

MARIO: The surrounding area! It's the same, isn't it? What matters is that they always attack civilians: is that true, sir?

SOME PUPILS: Churches, hospital and monuments as well. These are the only RAF exploits.¹⁶⁹

After the first year of war, it was no longer possible to propose a light-hearted, cheerful and optimistic representation of the internal situation based on the illusion of a short war.¹⁷⁰ While the propaganda machine insisted on the imperative of a national, collective and disciplined attitude towards war, authors privileged individual experiences in the real life of an increasingly anxious country.¹⁷¹ Thus, since autumn 1941, when air raids against Italian cities became more frequent and effective, censors decided that no hint of the domestic situation

¹⁶⁸ Iaccio, 'Ribalte tempestose. Teatro e fascismo nella seconda guerra mondiale', p. 66; Lepre, *L'occhio del duce*, p. 175.

¹⁶⁹ *Censura teatrale e fascismo*, ed. Ferrara, Vol. 1, p. 279; Vol. 2, p. 573, 835; Cavallo, 'Sangue contro oro. Le immagini dei paesi nemici nel teatro fascista di propaganda', in *La guerra immaginata: teatro, canzone e fotografia (1940-1943)*, p. 134;164; Cavallo, *Immaginario e rappresentazione. Il teatro fascista di propaganda* (Rome: Bonacci, 1990).

¹⁷⁰ Iaccio, 'La guerra tra propaganda e industria culturale di massa', in *L'Italia in guerra 1940-43*, ed. Micheletti and Poggio, p. 755.

¹⁷¹ Cavallo, 'Theatre and Politics of the Mussolini Regime and their Influence on Fascist Drama', in *Theatre and War, 1933-1945: Performance in Extremis*, ed. Michael Balfour (Providence-Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2001), pp. 27-29.

must appear in works of fiction. At the end of 1942, Zurlo wrote to Pavolini that he was in favour of ‘the exaltation of war’s values’ but he deemed ‘a realistic representation of war’ to be inappropriate. The minister replied that Zurlo’s observation was correct, ‘especially for bombing’.¹⁷²

Indeed, the show *Non c’è niente di male* (There Is Nothing Wrong), written by Marcello Marchesi and Angelo Frattini, was approved for the 1941-1942 season and staged at the Mediolanum Theatre in Milan, but on 30 October 1941 its mentions of the home front were cut and passages about the blackout were obliterated. In January 1942, Zurlo rejected *Senza tetto* (Homeless), a work about shelters that, although praising government and charity efforts for evacuees, ended as ‘a painful and useless exhibition of misery’.¹⁷³ *Famiglie eroiche* (Heroic Families), a script submitted to Zurlo in 1943 by Gabriele Mario Giuliani – which opened with a portrayal of popular enthusiasm in June 1940 and ended by depicting the suffering of civilians confronting food rationing and bombing – came to summarise the course of Fascist propaganda theatre in the three years of war.¹⁷⁴

Conclusion

The spread of rumours, hardly curbed by police repression, was the direct consequence of reticence and lies in the media. Shaped by two decades of gendered social framing, Fascist war propaganda targeted women as ‘traditional recipients’ of gossip, and employed female journalists for the task of prescribing orthodox codes of conducts. The attempt at working out for the public an optical illusion of order, discipline and social cohesion relied also on entertainment: among the scripts dealing with war-related topics submitted to the MCP in 1940-1943, works of clumsy propaganda coexisted with stories that gave glimpses of the real lives of Italians, of their fears and hopes. Censors were particularly diligent at removing passages that they feared might cause public demoralisation

¹⁷² Cavallo, ‘La guerra rappresentata. L’immagine del conflitto nel teatro fascista di propaganda’, in *L’Italia in guerra 1940-43*, ed. Micheletti and Poggio, p. 784.

¹⁷³ Iaccio, ‘Ribalte tempestose. Teatro e fascismo nella seconda guerra mondiale’, p. 76.

¹⁷⁴ Cavallo, ‘La guerra rappresentata. L’immagine del conflitto nel teatro fascista di propaganda’, p. 775

or that contained veiled criticism of the authorities, but improvised or off-script performances sometimes gave small audiences some narrow spaces of freedom – albeit promptly repressed and sanctioned.

Before the first catastrophic air raids on Italy, the regime focused on creating a smokescreen for its failures through a combination of domesticated information (the exaggeration of which began to cause open dissent even amongst Fascists) and the specific targeting of issues or social groups. Yet the policy of minimisation proved ineffective, as widespread popular reaction to the British naval bombardment of Genoa showed. In addition, the emphasis on the regime's determination to punish mercilessly criminal behaviour in wartime and the press campaign aimed at women were two exemplary aspects of a propagandistic pattern that became increasingly unappealing in the following months, as living conditions deteriorated everywhere, and the sense of insecurity expanded across the whole country.

Chapter 5. Area Bombing and the Definitive Breakup of the Home Front

With the worsening situation on the home front in 1942, mostly at the hands of the enemy air raids, the weakness of Italian propaganda appeared ever more to be part of the broader failure of Fascism. Even in 1943, when the Allies were aware that by killing thousands of civilians they exposed themselves to condemnation, the MCP persevered in fabricating stories and hiding facts instead of creating a plausible and coherent narrative. It was unable to orchestrate effective campaigns and it did not manage to stir up waves of hatred against the enemy, instead producing propaganda that was often instrumental in arousing disillusion and anger against the Duce. The purpose of this chapter is to detail MCP activities in the final phase of the Fascist war, analysing the work of the Ministry's apparatus, the output of the different media branches, the reaction of the public, and the political and institutional factors that hindered its work.

5.1 The Home Front and the Failure of Totalitarian Mobilisation

An Italian trying to stay informed about the internal situation in the third year of war solely through the media of his own country, would have been under the impression that the PNF was in the front line of the battle against defeatism and demoralisation on the home front. The press and radio were called on to convey this perception, screening out shortcomings and feuds. As a journalist by training and trade, Pavolini was familiar with Italian newsrooms. Knowing that his colleagues, who were often the recipients of rumours, liked to speculate on the highs and lows of leading Fascists or to muse on divergences between career officials and the party's hierarchy, he wanted to ensure that none of that gossip leaked out. Mussolini and the regime could not afford to bring to public attention how ineffective 20 years of mobilisation had been in forging the 'new Italian' and as early as the last months of 1941 Pavolini had thus instructed the press not to hint at disputes or rivalries inside the state and party machines, fearing that enemy propaganda would exploit a situation in which prefects and *federali* struggled, in their respective spheres of influence, to obscure their failures in preventing and

alleviating people's suffering. Editors had to allocate space carefully between competing powers, always referring to them in flattering terms. As a consequence, increasingly more rhetorical material appeared in papers and newsreels.¹

When he met representatives of the press in November 1941, the Minister turned his attention to the unavoidable hardships of the home front, asking journalists for stories capable of selling the public the idea that endurance and discipline were still powerful weapons in winning the war. Pavolini called to his audience's attention the fact that in many parts of Italy the civilian death toll was 'even greater than that of some fronts in our Great War', explaining that Mussolini's war was different from that of 1915-1918 in that Fascist rule had filled 'the gap between the trench and the home front', imposing discipline and austerity on non-combatants as well as soldiers. Knowing the wide extent of the hatred of the wartime fortunes and lifestyles of many prominent Fascists, the Minister conceded that 'individual cases had to be targeted on a case-by-case basis'. Yet the press seldom managed to convey Pavolini's professed realism to its readers, since often inconsistent instructions from above enjoined the adoption of more reassuring and optimistic tones. Besides, the media never dealt with massive cases of incompetence or dishonesty in the PNF and in government, only reporting the occasional punishment of peripheral bureaucrats.²

Propagandistic efforts did not convince the great number of Italians who blamed their predicament more on their rulers than on the enemy offensive, though still falling short of any form of open or organised dissent. In November 1941, for instance, an anonymous letter sent from Modena to London, evidently intending its interception by the Italian postal censors, begged the British military command to throw bombs 'on the head of Mussolini and all his satellites' instead of hitting 'poor people who are not at fault if their government are all a bunch of scoundrels and crooks'.³ That perceived weakness in faith and discipline among

¹ *Ministri e giornalisti*, ed. Tranfaglia, p. 187 (conference of 27 September 1941); Philip Morgan, 'The prefects and party-state relations in Fascist Italy', in *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 3 (1998), pp. 267-268.

² *Ministri e giornalisti*, ed. Tranfaglia, pp. 200-201 (conference of 23 November 1941).

³ Elena Cortesi, *Reti dentro la Guerra. Corrispondenza postale e strategie di sopravvivenza* (Rome: Carocci, 2008), p. 144.

civilians – despite the government’s effort to show an image of power and organisation – was exploited not only by the enemy, but also by anti-Fascist groups seeking to spread their propaganda at home. Between 1940-1941 the authorities had indexed very few anti-Fascist leaflets but in the following years appeals against the war, Fascism and the Axis multiplied. At the beginning of 1942 the police came into possession of leaflets blaming ‘hunger, cold and blood’ on the Fascist regime. That material also personally targeted the Duce: ‘Leave power, Mussolini, the man responsible for the bombing of our cities’.⁴ In the same period, *Radio Londra* rhetorically asked why

in Fascist Italy, so virile, so confident in victory, so united around the *Duce*, morale on the home front needs such a propaganda to nourish it. Newspapers and the radio are working night and day to exhort people to keep their morale high, whereas in fact it falls lower and lower. People grumble and are not animated by a strong and unshakeable will to carry on with the war.⁵

In June 1942 Pavolini singled out for criticism the press of the Fascist youth organisations, which sometimes hinted at cases of dishonesty and greed in the regime, implying that a moral crisis was at the root of the bad turn the war had taken. Such insinuations were a pernicious breach in the standing of Fascism, as Mussolini himself was very diligent in projecting a personal image of rigorous honesty as an integral part of his reputation. Accordingly, the minister laid the blame in particular on *Vent’anni* and *Acciaio*, respectively the papers of the Turin and Terni GUF, and briefed journalists that such topics played into the hands of enemy propaganda and had a depressing effect on people’s morale.⁶ Because he wanted the party praised for its assumed merits (but also because his *camerati* courted him in order to secure better press), he invited the media to magnify the

⁴ *Volantini antifascisti nelle carte della pubblica sicurezza*, ed. Carucci, Dolci and Missori, pp. 13; 183.

⁵ ‘Una parola magica’, 20 February 1942, in Candidus, *Parla Candidus. Discorsi dal 13 aprile 1941 al 3 dicembre 1944* (Milan: Mondadori, 1945), p. 43.

⁶ *Ministri e giornalisti*, ed. Tranfaglia, p. 275-276 (conference of 21 July 1942). Commenting in his diaries about the MCP’s orders to punish the youth press of the party, Carlo Ravasio, then deputy secretary of the PNF, observed that he was used to postponing or attenuating them because, ‘many times journalists are right’ and ‘when things are not going well, attempting to make people believe the contrary is useless’. Cited in Guerri, *Rapporto al Duce. L’agonia di una nazione nei colloqui tra Mussolini e i federali nel 1942* (Milan: Mondadori, 2002), pp. 408-409 (entries for 22 July and 3 August 1942).

regime's achievements in all fields. 'We should show off what we are doing for once, instead of letting those anti-Fascists disgrace us', he said – as though up until then the Italian press had been an example of understatement and self-restraint that needed rebuking for not taking a partisan stance.⁷

In Autumn 1942 the shortcomings of the whole Fascist apparatus in motivating the home front was evident to Mussolini, however he was not willing to acknowledge the causes of that failure, preferring to seek comfort in pseudo-anthropological explanations. Bottai recorded in his diary that when he told the Duce on 4 November of his recent trip to Milan and Genoa in the wake of the heavy air raids, uttering some appreciation of the moral resistance of those cities, Mussolini seemed dubious and replied: 'One day I will say things as they stand. I will say, for instance, that Naples, lucky to be a miserable city, conducted itself better than the wealthy northern cities'.⁸

Non-Fascist observers were prone to point to the party's faults. Crown prince Umberto, for instance, lamented with Bottai the foolishness of some orders coming from the PNF which dispatched 'youngsters to write long live Mussolini on the same walls enemy bombs had just wrecked' or commanded a football match be played as usual while there were people 'still groaning under the ruins'.⁹ Carlo Chevallard, a manager at a Turin metal firm converted to war production, noted that in the days following the two most recent raids 'the most impressive thing' he had witnessed was 'the lack of authority'. As there were no directives, everybody made their own decisions or tried to follow inconsistent orders. The explosion of hatred against the regime and Mussolini in particular struck Chevallard, who wrote that 'almost nobody' inveighed against the British, whereas everybody railed against those 'who drove us into this predicament'.¹⁰

⁷ Giuseppe Talamo, *Il Messaggero un giornale durante il fascismo 1919-1946* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1984), p. 319; Marina Addis Saba, *Gioventù Italiana del Littorio. La stampa dei giovani nella guerra fascista* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1973), pp. 98-99; Luca Rovere, *Storia dei Guf. Organizzazione, politica e miti della gioventù universitaria fascista 1919-1943* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2003), pp. 350-353.

⁸ Bottai, *Diario 1935-1944*, p. 332 (entry for 4 November 1942).

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 340 (entry for 27 November 1942).

¹⁰ Carlo Chevallard, *Diario 1942-1945. Cronache del tempo di guerra*, ed. Riccardo Marchis (Turin: Blu Edizioni, 2005, first publ. 1974), p. 27 (entry for 27 November 1942).

5.2 An Uncertain Conversion to Realism

In 1942 air raids intensified as part of the Allied strategy to impair Italy's military and industrial infrastructure while simultaneously increasing pressure on public morale. A LUCE newsreel about the fire brigades' war effort during the second year of war, showed the hitherto unknown level of violence endured by many Italian cities since the spring. In previous years the media had refrained from showing explicit scenes of death and destruction, yet this time the film's anonymous authors were intent on displaying images to make manifest to the public that the enemy deliberately targeted civilian objectives: a cemetery in Palermo, the Duomo in Messina, churches in the Naples area, schools in Genoa, hospitals in Turin.¹¹ However, not only was this kind of propaganda ineffective in arousing execration against the enemy but it also depressed morale. The mood was gloomy even among soldiers and Fascists. In May 1942 Livio Faloppa – a captain of the *alpini* on leave at Chiavari, near Genoa – wrote to a friend serving at Italian command in Tripoli that 'everybody was in a blue funk' and Genoa did not deserve 'to have combatants as valiant as our soldiers'. In his opinion, Fascists were inferior to other Italians and the *squadristi* were 'the worst' of all.¹² Signs of disheartenment among civilians were so widespread that in June the Italian troop command in Slovenia asked the general staff in Rome to urge the Fascist party to counter the 'demoralising campaign' they were sure was under way in Italy. Officers who read the mail sent to soldiers abroad found letters that 'in their absolute majority were depressing and pessimistic', describing (with 'evident exaggeration', the readers suggested), a country plagued by hunger, illness and deaths.¹³

In the first months of 1942, Italian propaganda seemed to abandon the bombast of previous years, when air force missions and the German raids on

¹¹ 'Secondo documentario di guerra', Istituto Nazionale LUCE (not dated); Baldoli and Knapp, *Forgotten Blitzes*, p. 119.

¹² Antonini, *Catene al pensiero e anelli ai polsi. Censura di guerra in Liguria 1940-1944* (Genoa: De Ferrari, 1999), pp. 74-75 (letter 12 May 1942). After Mussolini's fall, Faloppa fought for the RSI leading the Genoese *Brigate Nere*.

¹³ Nicola Gallerano, 'Il fronte interno attraverso i rapporti delle autorità (1942-1943)', *Il movimento di liberazione in Italia*, 109 (1972), pp. 15-16.

British soil were described in triumphal tones. Even articles about civilian conditions in the areas targeted by German bombers, previously imbued with a sense of complacency, contempt and derision, almost disappeared from newspapers and screens. Pavolini himself recommended to journalists in January that the internal economic conditions in Britain had merely to be 'recorded' to show that 'even if our predicament is difficult, so is our enemy's condition'.¹⁴ Despite that timid appeal to realism, Pavolini often showed an appalling incapacity to grasp people's real feelings. In March, for instance, he said that Italians listened to the enemy wireless because the EIAR's programmes 'were lacking in light music'. He explained that the narrow choice was temporary and was due to the technical necessity of reserving three radio channels for the communication needs of anti-aircraft defence, promising that one channel would return to normal in a month's time.¹⁵ Yet, when Italians regained the ability to choose between two channels, they continued to prefer foreign transmissions to Italian radio. The musical tastes of Italian listeners had a – presumably involuntary – echo in the House of Commons, where Russell Thomas, a Liberal National MP for Southampton, asked the government to make the BBC refrain from putting on 'the usual jazz records' in its broadcasts to Italy, because programmes 'for the Italian peasants should invariably include grand opera'. The response from Minister of Information Brendan Bracken ('I personally would give them more bombs') was a brutal synthesis of British priorities at the time.¹⁶

Despite some concessions to realism, the Italian censors sought to ensure that the media continue to ignore feelings, impressions and the human aspects of war in general, because they thought that any hint at such elements would inevitably give a bad impression. In March, for example, the prefect of Cremona enjoined the editors of parochial bulletins not to publish articles 'inspired with false piety or likely to have deleterious effects on the public spirit'. Local authorities had been disturbed by some articles about the hardship of those made homeless by air raids or left bereaved after relatives were killed. Since the

¹⁴ *Ministri e giornalisti*, ed. Tranfaglia, p. 222 (conference of 14 January 1942).

¹⁵ ACS, MCP, GAB, b. 50, sottofascicolo 314, Rapporto giornalisti, Conference of 9 March 1942.

¹⁶ Hansard, HC Deb. 17 February 1942, Vol. 377, cc1688-759.

religious press had a wide local circulation and was also sent to soldiers, censors feared their influence. Similar instructions were issued by the *questura* in Milan, which in June observed in the press ‘an accentuated pious tendency to include even the enemy in mourning trouble and sorrow’.¹⁷

The MCP was especially shaken whenever a major propagandistic event took place on the British side, on which occasions it lost any residual sense of proportion. For example, following a radio speech Churchill gave on 11 May 1942 on the second anniversary of his appointment as prime minister, the Italian media was ordered to comment extensively, and to single out his ‘forewarning of poison gas attacks’ as ‘the last flick of a monster who is struggling, unable to avert its end’.¹⁸ Newspapers, as usual, obliged. *La Stampa* reproduced almost verbatim the formula the MCP dictated, stating that the British prime minister had threatened to use poison gas against civilians, as if he had targeted Italy directly.¹⁹ Yet Churchill’s address was actually to announce that the Allied bombing offensive against Germany would be one of the principal features of war in 1942. He only mentioned Italy to say that Mussolini, ‘the Italian miscalculator’, had ‘struck at the back of a dying France’ and that Britain had conquered the Italian empire, destroying or capturing almost all of Mussolini’s African Army. The main British target was Hitler, against whom the threat was explicitly addressed. As for the unconventional weapons (the Soviet government had expressed to Churchill the view that the Germans, ‘in the desperation of their assault’, might use poison gas against Russian soldiers and civilians), the British Prime Minister said, ‘We are ourselves firmly resolved not to use this odious weapon unless it is used first by the Germans’. The passage was intended to reassure the Russians while sending a clear warning to Hitler. ‘Knowing our Hun’, Churchill said,

We have not neglected to make preparations, on a formidable scale. I wish now to make it plain that we shall treat the unprovoked use of poison gas against our Russian ally exactly as if it were used against ourselves, and if we are satisfied that this new outrage has been committed by Hitler,

¹⁷ Giorgio Vecchio, *Lombardia 1940-1945: vescovi, preti e società alla prova della guerra* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2005), pp 153; 165.

¹⁸ *La stampa del regime*, ed. Tranfaglia with Maida, p. 363 (instructions of 11 May 1942).

¹⁹ ‘Sinistre parole di Churchill’, *La Stampa*, 12 May 1942.

we will use our great and growing air superiority in the west to carry gas warfare on the largest possible scale far and wide against military objectives in Germany.²⁰

Within a few weeks the MCP must have realised that bringing the threat of poison gas to people's attention might be counterproductive and it issued orders aimed at preventing newspapers from dealing 'with chemical warfare and whatever threat' Churchill was employing in order to impress his own home front.²¹ In June, Pavolini returned mingling realism with an appeal to patriotism, ordering the press to emphasise the casualty lists from the air raids on Italy. He explained that, 'their sacrifice looks like that of those fallen in war and their names deserve to be reported in a respectfully'. When many papers did not comply, he insisted that those who fell under enemy bombs were akin to soldiers and 'deserved to be remembered and respected'.²² The regime could still expect the most diligent compliance with such instructions in the first half of 1942, when the casualty figures on the home front remained relatively low.

5.3 The Enemy Offensive in Autumn 1942

Civilians in Italy may have been living in an atmosphere of depression with a sense of imminent danger since the first months of 1942, but many in Britain were asking why Italy had not yet been heavily targeted by the RAF. During a debate in the Commons in August 1942, for example, Commander Archibald Southby, a Conservative MP from Epsom, questioned whether the government was aware,

that the public in this country, and certainly the public in Malta, are unable to understand why Italy is treated with such tenderness, particular in view of the fact that Italy is the base from which Rommel gets supplies of men and material for his forces in north Africa.

In answering, Deputy Prime Minister Clement Attlee sought to be reassuring without providing details and replied that there was no policy of 'treating Italy with tenderness'.²³ The British were monitoring Italian morale, looking for factors that could precipitate a crisis in the Fascist regime. Intelligence sources had been

²⁰ 'Mr. Churchill's on Growing Air Offensive', *The Times*, 11 May 1942.

²¹ *La stampa del regime*, ed. Tranfaglia with Maida, p. 364 (instructions of 6 June 1942).

²² ACS, MCP, GAB, b. 51, fasc. 315, Rapporto giornalisti, maggio '42-Marzo '43, sottofascicolo 3.3.43 (16.2.43-27.3.43), Conference of 17 June 1942.

²³ Hansard, HC Deb. 6 August 1942, Vol. 382, c1187.

noting a 'very low level' of morale since the winter of 1940-1941 and now reported on strikes and riots mainly connected with low wages and food shortages. They observed that 'latent factors' such as 'the corruption and favouritism of the system' could undermine the 'apathy' of the Italian, who 'can adapt himself to a very low standard of living' and 'accepts cold and even hunger with resignation'. Foreign Office analysts predicted that the unpopularity of the Fascist regime, coupled with an almost universal dislike of the Germans, might be capable of provoking 'an explosion', but only if living conditions deteriorated. The conclusion was that, 'widespread and continuous bombing of Italian towns would probably produce such conditions of increased discontent and tendencies to revolt as to force the Germans considerably to reinforce their grip on Italy, with a consequent increased drain on German resources'.²⁴

Italian morale was dealt a powerful blow from the unintended consequences of a British raid on Genoa on 23 October 1942 which caused heavy damage to the city and indirectly resulted in huge casualties. As the enemy aircraft approached and sirens sounded, hundreds of people were killed in a stampede that broke out as they were trying to escape into a tunnel, known as *Galleria delle Grazie*, which could be accessed only down a long, narrow and steep stairway. The local authorities said that they had advised against this, as the tunnel was believed to be unsafe, but people were accustomed to using it as a shelter. Genoese residents soon became aware of what had happened. In a letter to his soldier son, one father wrote that, 'many people died even while standing, pressed against each other and suffocating'.²⁵ Newspaper readers outside the Genoa area only managed to grasp fragments of that tragic episode from the usual sequence of reticent articles. In the wake of the tragedy they read that Mussolini had donated three million lire to the 'victims of the raid' ('Three million lire and not one spoken word', Colonel Stevens quipped from *Radio Londra*) and that the king and the queen made an unplanned visit to the bombed-out city. Subsequently, the military bulletin made readers aware that the enemy raid on Genoa had not

²⁴ TNA CAB 66/29/49, War Cabinet, 'Morale in Italy. Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs', 14 October 1942.

²⁵ Antonini, *Catene al pensiero e anelli ai polsi*, p. 93 (letter of 28 October 1942).

claimed any victims but numerous casualties had resulted from ‘the excessive crowding at a shelter’s gate’. The death toll was not reported until 27 October, without details of the exact cause of the massacre, while a great deal of space was given to condemnations of ‘the satisfaction’ expressed in the British press about the new wave of attacks on Italy and the carnage in Genoa.²⁶

The Fascist authorities commended the Italian artillery for repelling enemy aircraft and the press were instructed to sing their praises. A cockpit and wheel allegedly belonging to a British plane were displayed as war trophies in the entrance hall of the *Universale*, a popular cinema in Genoa, alongside a reproduction of a military bulletin alleging that six RAF planes had been shot down during the raids on the city. However, it was rumoured that only one enemy aircraft had fallen, and not as a result of Italian air defence but because it had crashed into another British plane. Such attempts at showing power and effectiveness in protecting civilians from the threat of bombing sounded hardly credible when set against the reality of life for Italian civilians. On 27 October, for instance, the local branch of UNPA had to issue a communiqué warning the public that in case alarm sirens were inaudible, approaching enemy aircraft would be signalled by military bugle call. Many Genoese wondered about how this would be achieved in one of Italy’s largest cities, and about the implications of military vehicles driving at full speed in the narrow alleys where most people lived.²⁷

Pavolini’s press conference on 26 October gives a clear example of how far Fascist leaders were from reality. The Minister said that the press should avoid thundering against the barbarity of the enemy because Italian planes had also gone to bomb Britain in 1940 – apparently reversing MCP’s previous pattern. He suggested describing the air raids as an expression of Anglo-American hatred towards Italy, explaining (rather optimistically) that such a representation would

²⁶ ‘Tre milioni per le vittime del bombardamento di Genova’, *La Stampa*, 24 October 1942; ‘Il Re e la Regina visitano Genova’, *La Stampa*, 24 October 1942; ‘Bollettino n. 881’, *La Stampa*, 25 October 1942; ‘354 vittime nella galleria-rifugio di Genova’, *La Stampa*, 27 October 1942; ‘La stampa inglese gioisce per le vittime di Genova’, *La Stampa*, 28 October 1942; ‘Three Million Lire and Not One Spoken Word’, Italian News Comment 585, 26 October 1942, in *Radio Londra 1940/1945*, ed. Piccialuti Caprioli, Vol. 1, pp. 260-261.

²⁷ Carlo Brizzolari, *Genova nella seconda guerra mondiale*, Vol. 1, *Una città in guerra 1938-1943* (Genoa: Valenti, 1977), p. 242.

reinforce ‘the spontaneous reaction’ of the Italian people, and recommending that the number of enemy casualties due to effective anti-aircraft defence always be reported. Then he embarked on a long and detailed set of instructions and ‘technical advice’, even requesting that newspapers print detailed maps of shelters.²⁸ The press tried to translate that kind of directive as best they could. The majority of the Italian newspapers reported, for instance, that the royal visit to Genoa was greeted with spontaneous and moving feelings of affection, and the MCP criticised four newspapers for relegating the visit to ‘the last page without adequate prominence, among the lesser news’. Yet three journalists present remembered the visit as almost four hours of awkward silence, the king and the queen passing along rows of suffering people and waving hands in a vain attempt to attract some warmth.²⁹ British intelligence went so far as to report that ‘demonstrations for peace’ were said to have taken place in Genoa.³⁰ In a fit of sincerity, Giovanni Ansaldo, normally a cynical propagandist, noted in his diary that the illusion that ‘the Anglo-Saxons would discriminate, in carrying out their air raids, between the Italians and the Germans, was fading away’.³¹ As a matter of fact, the British were seeking to exploit people’s feelings in Genoa, making clear their stance on bombing Italy. The police found a number of British leaflets explaining that the air raids against Italian cities were caused by Mussolini’s decision to support Hitler: ‘Everyone is serving the German enemy and for that reason they will be attacked with all means available to us’.³²

Despite the press downplaying the role of inefficient air defence in Genoa, at the end of October Aldo Vidussoni, the secretary of the PNF, removed the city’s

²⁸ ACS, MCP, GAB, b. 51, fasc. 315, Conference of 26 October 1942; Fincardi, ‘Anglo-American Air Attacks and the Rebirth of Public Opinion in Fascist Italy’, in *Bombing, States and Peoples*, ed. Baldoli, Knapp and Overy, pp. 248-249.

²⁹ The sanctioned newspapers were *Il Mattino*, *Il Corriere di Napoli*, *Il Corriere Padano* e *Il Regime Fascista*: see *La stampa del regime*, ed. Tranfaglia with Maida, p. 82 (instructions of 28 October 1942); Brizzolari, *Genova nella seconda guerra mondiale*, Vol. 1, p. 205. The witnesses were Giuliano Crisalli, Mauro Montarese and Arnaldo Lanz.

³⁰ TNA, FO 371/24963, Southern, Italy, 1943, File n. 362, ‘Italy: October-December 1942’, 23 January 1943.

³¹ Ansaldo, *Il giornalista di Ciano*, p. 310.

³² Antonini, *Sestri Levante 1940-1945: gli anni della guerra*, p. 91; Leonida Balestreri, *Stampa e opinione pubblica a Genova tra il 1939 e il 1943* (Genoa: Istituto storico della resistenza in Liguria, 1965), p. 92.

federale, Luigi San Germano. This action provoked a harsh reaction from Roberto Farinacci, who wrote to Mussolini protesting that the ousting of the federal secretary effectively blamed the party for ineffective defensive organisation.³³ San Germano's sacking notwithstanding, local authorities continued to face the enemy offensive by underplaying the danger. On 4 November, for instance, the prefect of Genoa ordered the press not to report incidents in tunnels and thefts in bombed-out buildings so as not 'to cause a state of excitement and concern among the public'.³⁴ Such an approach ignored the fact that a lack of reliable information led to word of mouth conjecture, which in turn depressed morale.

The start of the new British offensive against Italian cities coincided with the celebration of the *Ventennale* in October 1942, the twentieth anniversary of the Fascist seizure of power, which Mussolini had imagined as an occasion to galvanise both party and public opinion. The commemoration was used as a smokescreen to divert attention from what was happening in Italian cities at the hands of the RAF. At the 26 October press conference, Pavolini instructed editors to devote the bulk of their papers' space to the anniversary for three days, enthusiastically stressing that the date was being celebrated for two consecutive days on front pages by the German press. He emphasised that comments should underline 'the work done in 20 years of the regime', the same work, he added apparently without irony that 'revealed itself at its best over the last two years of war'. He also argued that articles must insist on the significance of the ceremonies held in the cities, especially 'those put to test by enemy raids' – as if people in the most damaged Italian areas could be distracted, or have their morale boosted, by local dignitaries parading in pompous uniforms.

The effect of these recommendations was surreal. While people in Genoa, Turin and Milan were facing the unprecedented violence of the RAF bombers, news readers found a few lines about the raids lost among emphatic headlines and long articles on Mussolini's achievements and his generosity towards Italians, as

³³ 'Il cambio della guardia in sette federazioni fasciste', *La Stampa*, 30 October 1942; De Felice, *Mussolini l'alleato 1940-1945, L'Italia in guerra 1940-1943*, Vol. 2, *Crisi e agonia del regime* (Turin: Einaudi, 1990), p. 1024.

³⁴ Balestreri, *Stampa e opinione pubblica a Genova tra il 1939 e il 1943*, p. 21.

the Duce had decided to celebrate his 20 years in power with the adoption of social provisions to compensate those impoverished by war.³⁵ Bottai's speech, broadcast on the evening of 28 October, that should have solemnly sealed a full day of celebration, contrasted with the atmosphere of grief and fear in Italian homes.³⁶ British intelligence overrated the psychological effects of the *Ventennale* campaign, reporting that, 'the announcement in the press of social measures to celebrate the anniversary coincided opportunely with, and effectively swamped, the news of the first British raids on Genoa and Turin'.³⁷ But the Germans did not make the same mistake and Goebbels prohibited the German press from drawing attention in their material on the anniversary to the fact 'that the 20,000 lire made available in Italy by the Fascist regime for social purpose over the past twenty years could not even equal the result of one single German Winter Relief Campaign'.³⁸ Goebbels' smug realism did not contaminate the Italian press. Genoa, a city stunned by the tragedy at the *Galleria delle Grazie*, was described in the papers as busying itself with writing grateful congratulatory messages to Mussolini, a reminder to the British of their

stupid illusion that by bombing our cities they will bend the heart of a people that in the course of a millenary history has showed intrepid virility and tenacious steadfastness in the most awkward situations, in the hardest trials.³⁹

In Milan, local authorities confirmed the March on Rome celebrations despite the enormous damage British bombs were inflicting on working-class neighbourhoods lacking in defence and public shelters. Informants heard people

³⁵ 'Le nuove provvidenze disposte dal Duce segnano nel Ventennale un evento di portata storica', *Il Messaggero*, 24 October 1942.

³⁶ Antonio Papa, *Storia politica della radio in Italia*, Vol. 2, *Dalla Guerra d'Etiopia al crollo del fascismo 1935-1943* (Naples: Guida, 1978), pp. 98-99.

³⁷ TNA, FO 371/24963, Southern, Italy, 1943, File n. 362, Italy: October-December 1942, 23 January 1943.

³⁸ *The Secret Conferences of Dr Goebbels*, p. 291.

³⁹ 'L'indomito spirito delle popolazioni nei messaggi al Duce dalle città bombardate', *La Stampa*, 27 ottobre 1942. Even after he was ousted from power, the *Duce* seemed not to realise the impact of the enemy raids on people's morale and on the regime's credibility in autumn 1942. 'Bombardments disturbed the celebration of the *Ventennale*', he wrote in his diary while detained in Sardinia on Maddalena island in the summer of 1943 (*Pensieri pontini e sardi*, in *Opera Omnia di Benito Mussolini*, Vol. 35, p. 289).

commenting that the Fascist militia members the party had sent to parade in Piazza della Scala should have been working on the outskirts of Milan where fires were burning, people still lay buried under the ruins of bombed buildings, young and unexperienced *avanguardisti* guarded unexploded devices, and victims' relatives 'cursed the enemy less than those responsible for that chaos'.⁴⁰ Andrea Damiano, a journalist working on *Corriere della Sera*, considered in his diary that Milan had been hit in the daylight for the first time since June 1940. 'The remote war', he wrote, 'the African war, or Russian, or Balkan, is here now, and it is blowing its red-hot breath'.⁴¹ Manlio Cancogni, a writer who fought in Greece and Albania, recalled that during five days of continual bombing,

News from newspapers and on the wireless was partial, inconsistent and more alarming precisely for this reason. It was clear to everybody that we had no defence against the air raids. Entire populations were at the mercy of the enemy. It was rumoured that hundreds of people were killed and thousands were wounded and made homeless.⁴²

Again, the lack of timely and reliable news led to the spread of rumours, increasing bewilderment and anxiety among the public.⁴³ The confusion in the press and the ineffectiveness of their political masters was perceived in Fascist circles. Bottai wrote in his diary on 8 November 1942 that the 'newspapers, compelled to regurgitate the usual themes, do not realise that any argument is usually reversed in people's memory'.⁴⁴

In the last months of 1942 the British government continued to receive urgent demands from both press and politicians to increase military pressure on Mussolini. During a parliamentary debate in the wake of the definitive success of the Egyptian campaign, the Labour MP for Seaham tackled the issue with harsh words:

⁴⁰ Ganapini, *Una città, la guerra*, p. 17 (report of 24 October 1942).

⁴¹ Andrea Damiano, *Rosso e grigio* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2000, first publ. 1947), p. 27 (entry for 15 November 1942).

⁴² Manlio Cancogni, *Gli scervellati. La seconda guerra mondiale nei ricordi di uno di loro* (Reggio Emilia: Diabasis, 2003), p. 141.

⁴³ On bombing, rumours and legends see Baldoli and Knapp, *Forgotten Blitzes*, pp. 207-210.

⁴⁴ Bottai, *Diario 1935-1944*, p. 333 (entry for 8 November 1942)

Some day we shall have to attack Italy. I hope it comes soon. I have welcomed the bombing attacks. It has been said that we ought to be careful in our propaganda in relation to Italy, that the Italians are a very nice people and, if only we treat them kindly in our propaganda, they will throw Mussolini overboard. I am not sure about that. It is much better to treat them as they try to treat us – ruthlessly. Nothing could be better than attacking Genoa and destroying it utterly. That it is the best form of propaganda, and to the extent that our bombing operations can teach the Italians a lesson, all the sooner the war will be ended'.⁴⁵

Despite the Italian authorities' attempts to screen civilians from the truth about enemy attacks, the fear of imminent air raids spread to areas which had been hitherto relatively spared by the RAF. A police informant working in Cagliari, for instance, wrote on 17 November that people were convinced that Sardinia would soon be bombed and that the government, after two and a half years of war, had done nothing to protect them. Mistrust in the Fascist authorities, depression and weariness had political consequences, according to the informant: the conviction was spreading that the war would never be won and approval of 'any attempt at political change' was emerging.⁴⁶

The first large-scale air raid on Turin, which the British had been targeting since the first days of the war, hit on 18 November 1942 and changed people's experience of bombing: ruins and destruction were no longer restricted to industrial areas but apparent throughout the city. The MCP gave the order not to print details that 'might give the enemy any hint of the results of their raids', but this was a pointless instruction as the destruction was so widespread. People were fleeing Turin *en masse*, cycling or even walking. Emanuele Artom, a young Jewish intellectual, remembered in his diary that immediately after the enemy planes had gone, he saw looters taking advantage of the smashed windows and soldiers running to guard the shops. He observed that during alarms the crowd seemed torn between contradictory feelings: they were scared, but they also hoped for a 'huge blow'. The *questore* of Turin wrote in his weekly report to Rome on 2 December that some of the city's most important factories had been hit and that, 'the few workers who turned up did not produce even half of the usual output'. He

⁴⁵ Hansard, HC Deb. 17 November 1942, Vol. 385, cc205-310. For an analysis of the Labour Party's stance on bombing civilians during the Second World War see Martin Farr, 'The Labour Party and Strategic Bombing in the Second World War', *Labour History Review* 1 (2012), pp. 133-153.

⁴⁶ Cited in Vacca, *La tela del ragno*, p. 297 (report of 16 June 1943).

summarised the damage, noting that the enemy had almost completely achieved its aim of paralysing war production.⁴⁷

Mussolini was aware of the blows that the enemy was inflicting on economic infrastructure and morale by increasing its bombing attacks on major Italian cities. He reacted as usual by blaming the Italians, who were guilty of not being the fiery race he had dreamt of for 20 years. Bottai recalled that on 21 November the Duce entered the council of ministers with an ashen face and lambasted 'those who confronted with any difficulty blathered that there was nothing to be done'. Mussolini drew a despairing comparison between his compatriots and the enemy: 'If the Russians had shared this opinion, instead of defending their city street by street, house by house, latrine by latrine, Stalingrad would have never resisted'. Apart from the increasingly recurrent pseudo-anthropological tirade, the Duce told his ministers that serious damage had been inflicted to factories and admitted to having asked Hitler for anti-aircraft guns.⁴⁸ In December British bombs hit Milan heavily. Again, confidential sources noticed that people did not curse the enemy airmen but directed their anger against Fascism, which was considered 'solely responsible for this situation'. It was also reported that militia members did not react when they heard offensive remarks against Mussolini in the streets, perhaps because they feared 'explosions of anger among the public'.⁴⁹ Writing from Milan on 5 December, a police informant noted that people wondered why the Duce had not come to visit Milan and, echoing the rumours about the cold reception given to the royal couple in Genoa, speculated that the authorities feared 'hostile demonstrations'.⁵⁰ Moreover, there were reports of breaches of discipline in factories during alarms. In November the

⁴⁷ *La stampa del regime*, ed. Tranfaglia with Maida, p. 405 (instructions of 23 November 1942); Bravo and Bruzzone, *In guerra senz'armi*, p. 35; Emanuele Artom, *Diari gennaio 1940-febbraio 1944* (Milan: Centro di documentazione ebraica contemporanea, 1966), pp. 48-49 (entry for 19 November 1942); Gallerano, 'Il fronte interno attraverso i rapporti delle autorità', p. 13 (Report of 2 December 1942).

⁴⁸ Bottai, *Diario 1935-1944*, pp. 335-336 (entry for 21 November 1942).

⁴⁹ Cavallo, 'La rappresentazione della seconda guerra mondiale nell'immaginario collettivo', pp. 119-120 (Report of 3 December 1942).

⁵⁰ ACS, MI, Polizia politica, Materia, b. 225 (Discorsi del Duce), report from Milan, 5 December 1942, cited in Fincardi, 'Gli italiani e l'attesa di un bombardamento della capitale (1940-1943)' in *I bombardamenti aerei sull'Italia*, ed. Labanca, p. 230.

questura informed Rome that at the Breda plant in Sesto San Giovanni around 400 workers (out of 2,000) deserted the workplace when they heard the sirens. Six weeks later, groups of workers at the Breda, Alfa Romeo, Marelli and Isotta Fraschini plants briefly downed tools to protest at delayed payment of their wages.⁵¹

In Southern Italy, especially in Naples, American aircraft had superseded the RAF in people's memories. On 4 December the US air force struck, hitting the port and industrial areas in Naples, whose closeness to the city centre caused hundreds of civilian casualties. Taking off from Egyptian bases, 27 bombers escaped radar and look-out points, unassailed by Italian fighters or artillery. Inadequate defence again caused heavy casualties, as overcrowding and suffocation killed 286 people at the *Porta San Gennaro* shelter. People began to think of the Americans as a worse enemy than the British and to foresee more damage and death.⁵²

At the end of the year, following the new turn the war had taken, the MCP sought to develop a more articulate strategy – which was, nonetheless, destined to have negligible effect on Italians. Pavolini again asked newspapers to abandon the usual pattern of restricting themselves to accusing the enemy of barbarity, moving instead to a 'general critique' of responsibility for the air war. 'Always remember', he told the press representatives on 11 December,

the history of bombing in this war, that is that the British were the first to bomb towns and civilians and the German attack on London was a large-scale retaliation. It is historically established that the first air raids were the RAF attacks on the German cities and people. Then the German bombing followed. So, without indulging in pious and lamenting tones, one must always bear in mind that the first initiative and the first responsibility are those of the British.⁵³

Yet despite Pavolini's exhortation, propaganda did not stop its usual rigmarole about the barbarous enemy. Andrea Damiano, on seeing walls in Milan covered

⁵¹ Gallerano, 'Il fronte interno attraverso i rapporti delle autorità', p. 14 (reports of 11 November 1942 and 23 December 1942).

⁵² Gribaudi, 'The True Cause of the "Moral Collapse"', p. 223; Baldoli and Knapp, *Forgotten Blitzes*, p. 189; Gioannini and Massobrio, *Bombardate l'Italia*, p. 268-270.

⁵³ *Ministri e giornalisti*, ed. Tranfaglia, p. 304 (conference of 2 December 1942); p. 315-316 (conference of 11 December 1942).

with posters of an enemy bomber leaving a trail of blood-red smoke and a caption reading, 'Why we must hate the enemy', noted in his diary:

They want to rouse hatred taking the enemy bombing as its starting point. This is a huge psychological mistake, as enjoining hatred by means of posters on street corners is tantamount to conceding that, in fact, there is no hatred. Actually, any falling British bomb does not cause revulsion against those who drop it so much as against those who led us to suffer the blows.⁵⁴

In the last few months of 1942 even satirical magazines, which struggled to preserve an autonomous style for portraying the enemy, could not refrain from falling in with the prescribed rhetorical stereotype, turning to particularly trite or coarse jokes. The Roman magazine *Marc 'Aurelio*, for example, carried verses about the 'British heroes': 'Cynical and cruel deeds/Are their pride/They stifle women and toddlers/While lecturing the world on civilisation'.⁵⁵ Gioacchino Polizzi, a popular illustrator working under the pseudonym 'Attalo', drew a scene depicting an English lady meeting Winston Churchill in a park and asking him whether he preferred fair- or dark-haired children. 'I prefer them dead', is the British prime minister's response.⁵⁶ When not focused on searching for new adjectives to describe the ruthlessness of the enemy, even the mainstream newspapers sought to enliven their pages with lighter, but self-defeating, material. For example, *La Stampa* published a poem on life in the shelters on 11 November:

'Long live the shelter/Long live a gathering/Distinctive of new times/These dynamic modern wars,/Which make us mourn caverns and caves/They make people less demanding:/Long live the shelter/A cosy place'.⁵⁷

One constant theme in Italian propaganda became the reproduction of foreign (and generally pro-Axis) media reports on the supposed firmness of morale in Italy. Pavolini seemed to have a penchant for the Scandinavian press: on 8

⁵⁴ Damiano, *Rosso e grigio*, p. 38-39 (entry for 9 December 1942).

⁵⁵ 'Eroi britannici', *Marc 'Aurelio*, 31 October 1942.

⁵⁶ 'Cuore di premier', *Marc 'Aurelio*, 16 December 1942.

⁵⁷ Alberto Cavaliere, 'Il ritrovo del tempo', *La Stampa*, 11 November 1942. Cavaliere was a poet who contributed verses to *Il Becco Giallo*, *Bertoldo*, *Marc 'Aurelio*, *L'Illustrazione Italiana* and *La Domenica del Corriere*. In his youth he was first an anarchist and then a communist, fleeing to Paris in 1933. Two years later he returned to Italy, where he managed to work regularly for the press. After the war he joined the Socialist Party and became an MP in 1953. See Stefano Giornetti, 'Cavaliere, Alberto', in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, Vol. 22, p. 651-653.

December, for instance, he referred to an article in *Aftonbladet*, a Swedish pro-German tabloid, devoted to the Italian internal situation that stated there was no sign of the country giving in. Editors were told to report that such ‘truthful voices’ should be set against Anglo-American propaganda, which based its ‘ridiculous rumours’ on ‘apocryphal hints fabricated hundreds of kilometres away’.⁵⁸ Similarly, *Stampa Sera* reported the correspondence of another Swedish daily, *Svenska Dagbladet*, two weeks later, which claimed that in spite of the Allied landing in Africa, the home front in Italy was strengthened, the PNF was crucial in helping civilians and evacuation from big cities was not an indication of fear but a collective display of solidarity.⁵⁹ Another ploy was to single out specific speeches by British politicians or pundits, generally those who argued for the pressure on Italy to be intensified or those who were considered to be cautious in assessing Italy’s collapse of morale. On 10 December 1942, for instance, the Italian press was instructed to emphasise a recent statement by Lord Cranborne, the British war secretary, who had said there was no breach in Italian morale. According to Pavolini, that statement was ‘an official admission of Churchill’s glaring blunder and of the idiocies of enemy propaganda’. Newspapers complied, commenting that Cranborne’s words made conspicuous Churchill’s failure to bring about a crisis in Italian morale.⁶⁰

British analysis of the Italian situation did not foresee Mussolini’s internal collapse. According to a new intelligence report received by the war cabinet, the only way to break down morale in Italy was by frightening people ‘more than the Fascist police did’. The heavy raids on the northern towns had caused great material destruction; large-scale evacuation and ‘general dissatisfaction’, resulting in ‘some anti-Fascist demonstrations’, had been caused by inadequate defence and ARP measures. Also morale in the Italian air force was said to be weakened by events on the home front and the realisation that Italy’s defences had been neglected. All these factors were seriously affecting morale in Italy, war

⁵⁸ *La stampa del regime*, ed. Tranfaglia with Maida, p. 406 (instructions of 8 December 1942).

⁵⁹ ‘Il fronte interno italiano nel giudizio di un giornale svedese’, *Stampa Sera*, 30-31 December 1942.

⁶⁰ *La stampa del regime*, ed. Tranfaglia with Maida, p. 378 (instructions of 10 December 1942); ‘Giorno per giorno’, *La Stampa*, 11 December 1942.

weariness had increased and the desire for peace was ‘stronger than ever’. But there had been ‘no large-scale disorders, and so long as fears of repression is stronger of fear of the RAF and of the extension of military operations to Italy, it is unlikely that the people will be ripe for seditious movements’.⁶¹

5.4 The Debacle of Evacuation

Mussolini decided to go public with the war situation after a long silence at the end of 1942, while many Italian cities were taking stock of damage and rumours were spreading about his health. On 2 December he made a speech to the *Camera dei fasci e delle corporazioni* which was intended to answer British propaganda (Churchill had given a powerful radio address the previous Sunday), to reassure the Germans that he was still in control and most of all to arouse the country, in particular those elements in the regime who were demotivated in his view, and resigned to losing the war. He gave some figures and details about the consequences of the recent enemy bombing, mainly to show that the British had damaged areas with no military or industrial objectives. Referring openly to the need of fighting a war in which there was no longer a division between the front and civilians, Mussolini pretended that he retained confidence in the character of his people. While in private or in closed circles he was given to inveighing against the weakness of his compatriots, he stated before the members of the House that he refused to believe the Italian people were ‘of a frailer temper than the British or the Russians’. With one eye on the enemy’s ambition of hastening Italy’s internal collapse, the Duce conceded that it was not feasible ‘to ask for unending displays of enthusiasm’, but he boasted that no act of sabotage or demonstration against the war had been carried out.⁶²

From the Duce’s words and the echo they received in the Italian press, London observed with satisfaction that ‘the elaborate refutation’ of British assertions suggested that ‘views obtained from British sources – especially

⁶¹ TNA, CAB 66/32/15, War Cabinet, ‘Italian Morale. Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs’, 15 December 1942.

⁶² *Opera Omnia di Benito Mussolini*, Vol. 31, *Dal discorso al direttorio nazionale del PNF del 3 gennaio 1942 alla liberazione di Mussolini (4 gennaio 1942-12 settembre 1943)*, pp. 118-133.

through the radio – have been circulating very widely in Italy'.⁶³ The speech was massively inflated by the Italian media, but police reports of public reactions revealed almost immediately that the propaganda effort was fruitless in terms of boosting civilians' morale. The statistical section of the address was disbelieved, primarily in the worst damaged cities where people had a first-hand knowledge of the facts. Carlo Chevallard, for instance, in his diary contrasted the official version with what he was witnessing in Turin, where for 20 days the registry office had been issuing 'endless lists' of dead, 'whole families had disappeared' and 'groups of people were still buried in three shelters'.⁶⁴ From Mantua a police informant reported that the 'rough realism' of the Duce's speech, far from being a boost for morale, had increased pessimism and despair among citizens.⁶⁵

Mussolini had boasted about alerting Italians early in the war that it was necessary to leave cities exposed to the threat of enemy air raids. In response, people were reported as complaining that since the first warning the regime had done almost nothing to promote and organise evacuation, that Italian provinces had not enough space to house evacuees and that public transport was not sufficient for workers to commute. Many were particularly enraged at Mussolini's statement that 'hundreds of millions' were being spent building anti-aircraft shelters, they suspected that officials and profiteers had made large gains. It was rumoured, for instance, that in Rome the authorities had strangely contracted out the shelters' construction not to builders but to a trader in glassware. Informants also reported sharp criticism of Mussolini's assertion that it was impossible to wage war without hating the enemy: 'Only now do they realise that, despite the night talks of Ansaldo, Appellius and Alessi, the Italian people do not hate the British?' The OVRA agent who gathered this information summarised by writing, 'the hatred for the regime has replaced the hatred for the enemy'.⁶⁶

⁶³TNA, FO 371/24963, Southern, Italy, 1943, File n. 362, 'Italy: October-December 1942', 23 January 1943.

⁶⁴Chevallard, *Diario 1942-1945*, p. 28 (entry for 9 December 1942).

⁶⁵ACS, MI, DGPS, Div. Agr, K1 B-15, fasc. Mantova, Report of 31 December 1942, cited in Cavazzoli, *Guerra e resistenza*, p. 366-367.

⁶⁶Rapporto della Polizia politica sulle reazioni suscitate dal discorso di Mussolini del 2 dicembre 1942 alla Camera dei fasci e delle corporazioni, Echi e commenti al discorso del Duce, Report of 8

Dealing with evacuation was complicated for the MCP and the press, since they had to keep people calm and give the impression that the situation was under control, although public awareness of the government's and party's organisational faults was by now ubiquitous. Newspapers were given a few directives, which illustrated the habitual intent of avoiding the uncontrolled diffusion of information and conveying the illusion of a righteous and supportive society: in order to publish any material that did not come from the Ministry or the Party, they had to obtain the prefect's approval. They were forbidden from discussing profiteering at the expense of evacuees looking for housing, transportation or help in repairs, with the excuse that the high prices requested by landlords or transporters was due 'to unconsidered offers from wealthy people'. Moreover, they must not mention compulsory evacuation.⁶⁷

Sometimes readers, though aware that their letters would never be published, wrote to newspapers hoping that the problems they raised might be brought to the authorities' attention. For example, the editor of *Il Messaggero*, Fausto Boninsegni, informed Pavolini's chief of staff that the paper had received many letters from Rome dealing with a report it had published a few days earlier about evacuation. At this stage of war the capital and the surrounding areas were deemed relatively immune from the enemy air threat, and Italians from dangerous northern and southern cities sought shelter there. Yet Boninsegni forwarded one of them that he considered particularly telling, as it summarised all the aspects of the evacuation problems that the public were experiencing. The anonymous correspondent agreed with the government's intention to favour departure to the neighbouring countryside, but he suggested that at least five problems must be dealt with immediately: the number of commuter trains was insufficient; restrictions on bus and trolleybus traffic were a major hindrance to displacement; weekly and monthly tickets for public transport were too expensive; ration cards were only valid in a person's place of residence; and villages where people sought

December 1942, cited in De Felice, *Mussolini l'alleato 1940-1945, L'Italia in guerra 1940-1943*, Vol. 2, *Crisi e agonia del regime*, p. 1457.

⁶⁷ *La stampa del regime*, ed. Tranfaglia with Maida, pp. 405-406 (instructions of 22 November, 23 November and 8 December 1942); *Il Popolo d'Italia*, 26 November 1942.

refuge levied a tax on visitors as if they were tourists. None of these suggestions – apart from the visitor’s tax, on which the government tried to persuade local authorities – was taken into consideration.⁶⁸

Mussolini was aware that the Fascist hierarchy, which ought to have been the cornerstone of mobilisation, was busier fighting internal feuds than working for the party’s contribution to the war effort.⁶⁹ After his speech to the *Camera dei Fasci* he addressed the Fascist directorate in the afternoon of 2 December explaining that the party had ‘to bet on people’s morale in order to prevent it from being poisoned’ and that ‘this mixing of regions, provinces, classes will be beneficial to our unity’. The Duce observed that evacuees ought to be regarded in the same way as refugees during the Great War and should ‘be supported with total, open, fraternal solidarity’. The best way to help them, he added, was ‘to keep red tape to the minimum’.⁷⁰ On 10 December the Party sent Mussolini an account of its efforts on the home front, asking the MCP to emphasise its activities in the press.⁷¹ Actually, newspapers routinely reported this, always finding pretexts to praise the militia members maintaining discipline during alarms, *gruppi rionali* giving shelter to homeless people and branches of the *Gioventù italiana del littorio* distributing ‘hot and hearty meals’ to bombed-out families. By requesting greater attention from newspapers, the Party hierarchies wanted to substantiate the view that their efforts were being underrated and sought to avoid rebuke from the *Duce*. Yet the replacement of the *federali* of Genoa, Milan and Taranto in the wake of the British raids in October showed that Mussolini did not consider the Party structures to be beyond reproach.⁷²

⁶⁸ ACS, MCP, GAB, b. 117, Letter from Fausto Boninsegni to Celso Luciano, 3 December 1942. On 17 December 1942 the MCP reported that the Finance Ministry was issuing a directive exempting evacuees from paying the visitor’s tax. According to the MCP, evacuees staying at expensive hotels should continue to pay the tax (ACS, MCP, GAB, b. 117, Visitor’s tax on evacuees, 17 December 1942).

⁶⁹ Gentile, *La via italiana al totalitarismo. Il partito e lo Stato nel regime fascista* (Rome: Carocci, 2002, first publ. 1995), pp. 232-242.

⁷⁰ Bottai, *Diario 1935-1944*, pp. 340-341 (entry for 2 December 1942).

⁷¹ ACS, MCP, GAB, b. 117, PNF, Note to the Duce, 10 December 1942.

⁷² On the replacement of the three *federali*, British intelligence noted that in the two latter cases the official reason was that ‘they were called to the front’, but it suspected that, ‘the real ground for their dismissal was inefficiency of A.R.P. and other organisations’ (TNA, FO 371/24963, Southern, Italy, 1943, File n. 362, Italy: October-December 1942, 23 January 1943).

Pavolini immediately fulfilled the Party's wish by briefing editors to illustrate in detail the work of Fascist organisations in order 'to give our *camerati* legitimate satisfaction'. While Mussolini had suggested drawing a pedagogic analogy with the contribution of Italian civilians in the Great War, the Minister of Propaganda told journalists that they could compare 'the atmosphere of vivid national solidarity' apparent in bombed cities and among evacuees with the generous and patriotic mood of the Ethiopian war, when Italian women offered their wedding rings to the fatherland. Pavolini reiterated his earlier instruction that editors must agree any news on evacuation with prefects and party authorities.⁷³ Yet the members of the press were at their wits' end as a result of the lack of clear and precise direction to civilians about evacuation from the top, while police related that huge, startled crowds were spontaneously leaving their cities. Some reports attributed the exodus to the *Radio Londra* announcement of imminent air raids, or to deliberate rumours spread by unscrupulous profiteers. According to other information, it was the Duce's speech to the Chamber of Corporations that scared people. All sources unanimously reported that people were leaving in disorderly and unruly fashion.⁷⁴

In spite of the propaganda insistence of an atmosphere of generosity and unselfishness on the home front, panic and greed ruled everywhere. In Milan, 'sharks came out and transport prices went sky-high', Andrea Damiano commented in his diary, adding three weeks later that, 'people crammed onto buses and tramcars show an obtuse and viperish wickedness'.⁷⁵ Police related that people who did not have enough money were forced to stay behind because, as had happened in the first wave of spontaneous evacuation in June 1940, only wealthy people could afford transport and inflated accommodation costs.⁷⁶ Even the satirical press adopted paternalistic tones, portraying an idyllic image of a

⁷³ *Ministri e giornalisti*, ed. Tranfaglia, p. 316 (conference of 11 December 1942).

⁷⁴ Report of 29 November 1942 from Milan, cited in Cavallo, 'La rappresentazione della seconda guerra mondiale nell'immaginario collettivo', p. 111; Relazione trimestrale questura di Bari and Relazione settimanale questura di Genova, 31 December 1942, cited in Gallerano, 'Il fronte interno attraverso i rapporti delle autorità', p. 13.

⁷⁵ Damiano, *Rosso e grigio*, p. 32 (entries for 25 November and 15 December 1942).

⁷⁶ Vacca, *La tela del ragno*, p. 299 (report of 15 December 1942).

country where the war effort was transcending the social divide.⁷⁷ At the end of 1942 the government had to issue a directive underlining that employees were not allowed to desert the workplace and preventing public officers from leaving the most damaged cities. The MCP was told to circulate this warning widely, emphasising that transgressors would be punished under the harsh rules on civil mobilisation that came into force when Italy entered the war.⁷⁸

5.5 Radio, Cinema and Relics from the Past

The harder the Allies hit Italy, the more the media was trapped in the paralysing consequences of an internal struggle in the regime's hierarchy. In November 1942 Pavolini submitted to Mussolini a list of broadcasters for the programme *Commento ai fatti del giorno*, primarily to get the Duce's approval for his intention to retain Mario Appellius, whose thundering speeches were deeply controversial even in Italy. According to the minister, the journalist was 'one of the most effective commentators, especially for common people' and the criticism he received 'came from defeatists who would be happy to reduce us to silence or to hesitant and anodyne tones'.⁷⁹ Pavolini got his way with Mussolini, but his decision to stand by Appellius quickly led to open disapproval even from friendly quarters – for example, the MCP had to punish the magazine *Bertoldo* for carrying an attack on the EIAR's most infamous speaker. The editor of the satirical magazine, Giovanni Mosca wrote in response to a letter from the theatre critic Gilberto Loverso, that what was needed was

a propaganda setting forth the plain facts, even commenting on them, though not with the aim of gilding or inflating them, but in order to make clear their meaning and importance to all, to steer ideas, to strengthen feelings, to put misfits and doubters back in their place.

Mosca took the chance to outline an agenda for the younger and less compromised sections of the Italian press:

⁷⁷ *Bertoldo*, 11 December 1942.

⁷⁸ ACS, MCP, GAB, b. 117, PCM, Divieto di trasferimenti degli uffici pubblici dalle città colpite da incursioni nemiche, Memorandum of 20 December 1942.

⁷⁹ ACS, MCP, GAB, b. 117, Note for the Duce, 17 November 1942.

Even if as recently as yesterday we managed to endure rhetoric, today we cannot stand it anymore. And if yesterday we thought we could fight it by humorously mocking it, now we no longer have hope and we deem it necessary to speak seriously, without lecturing, shouting, waving arms.⁸⁰

Pavolini ordered the seizure of the issue of *Bertoldo* that dared to call for a change in war propaganda. The reason he gave was the umpteenth example of the authoritarian routine: *Bertoldo*'s journalists were showing 'a limited sense of political opportuneness', giving the enemy 'a dreadful weapon' to present Italy as 'a country in crisis, under threat from internal division and differences in public opinion'.⁸¹ The Minister's censure echoed the reproval of the Fascist youth organizations' press, which denounced the bureaucratisation of the regime and shared with Bottai's cultural newspaper *Primato* a criticism of the rhetoric and the pompous tones still adopted by the Italian media during that phase of the war.⁸²

New instructions often contradicted previous ones from MCP. In January 1943 the Ministry dressed down some newspapers which had on their own initiative written in flattering language about the fighters and the anti-aircraft artillery engaged in defending Naples. Censors explained that such deeds could be talked about only when the Ministry issued reports or unofficial notes through the Stefani agency. That line seemed devoid of any logic and could be explained only through MCP's anxiety that any autonomous press decisions might cause unmanageable consequences in the public domain. For that reason, as a rule newspapers were prevented from making unauthorised reports and from publishing readers' letters. For example, some dailies calling for an increase in

⁸⁰ 'Lettere tra noi', *Bertoldo*, 26 February 1943.

⁸¹ ACS, MCP, GAB, b. 51, Instructions of 27 February 1943. An unsigned special correspondence from Italy described Appellius' broadcasts to readers of *The Times* in 1942: 'Appellius barks like a machine-gun, delivering at uniform top speed, without modulations, an unparalleled rush of sentences loaded equally with place names and statistics, with moralisations and with invective. His malignant exuberance conjures up pictures that undoubtedly give the weak-minded a sense that Mussolini's war fits into a general scheme of triumphant ascendancy for a race of military heroes' ('Voices of Fascist Italy. The War Explained to Southern Sceptics', *The Times*, 2 April 1942). In February 1943, when confidential reports convinced Mussolini that the descriptions Appellius made of the suffering and sacrifices of Italians were too realistic and upset listeners, the Duce dismissed him. See Cannistraro, 'The Radio in Fascist Italy', *Journal of European Studies* 2(1972), p. 151.

⁸² Gentile, *La via italiana al totalitarismo. Il partito e lo Stato nel regime fascista*, pp. 269-281; Murialdi, *La stampa del regime fascista*, pp. 190-191.

food rations for people living in bombed areas earned a stern rebuke.⁸³ Articles reporting signs of normality in the ordinary life of civilians were instead welcome. When the Minister for National Education asked the press to cover the reopening of schools in the cities targeted by the enemy raids on 16 February 1943, Celso Luciano, Pavolini's chief of staff, was happy to oblige.⁸⁴ But when Roman dailies observed that cinemas were dangerously overcrowded, the MCP ordered them to stop.⁸⁵ Critics were told not to talk of a cinema crisis, because in one year theatre revenues had risen 3 percent, notwithstanding the increased enemy attacks against inhabited areas.⁸⁶ In this particular case, Pavolini had some reason for wishing people to continue to visit the cinema: in this phase of the Fascist war some films had a greater impact on the public than any other form of propaganda, though never achieving the enormous popularity of German films like *Die grosse Liebe* (The Great Love), which was seen by 27 millions people. The romantic plot - a love story between a young pilot fighter and a singer who meet during an air raid warning - presented a realistic account of everyday life on the home front explicitly portraying air raids as a test for civilians.⁸⁷

Nothing similar was attempted by filmmakers in Italy, but since the second half of 1942, when the reality of total war worried almost all Italians, feature films began to include scenes of the ongoing air war and of life under bombing. In *Gente dell'aria*, for instance, the *Regia Aeronautica* airmen were portrayed as good, humane and valiant soldiers. The film - directed by Esodo Pratelli and cowritten by Bruno Mussolini, the Duce's son who had been captain in the *Regia Aeronautica* and died in 1941 in the crash of his plane near Pisa - was first shown on 24 March 1942 and in three months made more than 5 million lire at the box office.⁸⁸ The film *Bengasi*, directed by Augusto Genina and set in Tripolitania

⁸³ *La stampa del regime*, ed. Tranfaglia with Maida, pp. 407-408 (instructions of 13 and 28 January 1943).

⁸⁴ ACS, MCP, GAB, b. 19, Correspondence between Renato Mucci and Celso Luciano, 22-24 January 1943.

⁸⁵ ACS, MCP, GAB, b. 19, Direzione Generale per la Cinematografia, Note to the Minister's chief of staff, 27 January 1943.

⁸⁶ ACS, MCP, GAB, b. 51, fasc. 315, maggio '42 - marzo '43, Conference of 27 December 1942.

⁸⁷ Dietmar Süß, *Death from the Skies. How the British and Germans Survived Bombing in World War II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 82-83.

⁸⁸ 'Gente dell'aria', *La Stampa*, 2 April 1943.

during the British siege and occupation of the African-Italian city in early 1941, showed instead people in shelters inveighing against the British for their cowardice in targeting civilians and deliberately causing the death of children. *Bengasi* came out on 5 September 1942, when Italy no longer had colonies, and in the same month won the *Coppa Mussolini* at the Venice cinema festival. It earned more than 16 million lire in three months, and Pavolini exhorted the critics to emphasise its ‘most powerful political value’, explaining that ‘the greatest prominence must be given to this film’, which should be considered not only as a work of art, but ‘as a real act of politics and propaganda’. *Il Giornale d’Italia*’s critic, Fabrizio Sarazani, complied enthusiastically with the Minister’s will, writing that *Bengasi* was ‘a vivid testimony’ showing the Italian people (though obviously not the inferior Africans, who were in the same predicament as their rulers) bearing ‘their martyrdom with the most fiery nobility’ and ‘the blind and sterile anger of the enemy mob, carried away by a gratuitous and reckless hatred’. However, the propagandistic content of most film reviews could not hamper the immediacy and identification that the visual medium offered viewers.⁸⁹

Less appealing in balancing art and propaganda were the performances of Futurist artists during the last phase of the Fascist war. Indeed *aeropittura* and *aeropoesia* – which in the years before and immediately after the Great War were powerful artistic vehicles for the myth of Italian air power – began to lose their

⁸⁹ *Bengasi* was one of the most expensive productions of Fascist cinema: as newspapers wrote, duly commending the extraordinary effort, the Army provided 5,000 soldiers to act as extras and 150 trucks, 50 tanks and 12 planes were employed. It was reedited in 1955 as *Bengasi Anno ‘41*, with new sequences and purged of its most obvious Fascist references. See Mario Gromo, ‘Il vivo successo di Bengasi’, *La Stampa*, 6 September 1942; Francesco Pasinetti, ‘I film della mostra di Venezia’, *Cinema*, 25 September 1942; *Ministri e giornalisti*, p. 300-301 (conference of 28 September 1942); M.G., ‘Bengasi’, *La Stampa*, 24 October 1942; Fabrizio Sarazani, ‘Bengasi’, *Il Giornale d’Italia*, 25 October 1942, cited in Roberto Chiti and Enrico Lancia, *I film. Tutti i film italiani dal 1930 al 1944* (Rome: Gremese, 2005), p. 48; *Antologia di Bianco e Nero 1937-1943*, Vol. 4, *Sceneggiature*, ed. Leonardo Autera, (Rome: Edizioni di Bianco e Nero, 1964), pp. 227-233; Cavallo, *La storia attraverso i media: immagini, propaganda e cultura in Italia dal Fascismo alla Repubblica* (Naples: Liguori, 2002), pp. 86-87; Carabba, *Il cinema del ventennio nero*, pp. 85-86; Marla Stone ‘The Last Film Festival. The Venice Biennale Goes to War’, in *Re-Viewing Fascism. Italian Cinema, 1922-1943*, ed. Jacqueline Reich and Piero Garofalo (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002), pp. 299-305; Daniela Baratieri, ‘Bengasi-Bengasi Anno ‘41: The Evidence of Silences in the Transmission of Memory’, in *Italian Colonialism: Legacy and Memory*, ed. Jacqueline Andall and Derek Duncan (Bern: Peter Lang, 2005), pp. 75-91; Ernesto G. Laura and Alfredo Baldi (eds), *Storia del cinema italiano*, Vol. 6, 1940-1944 (Venice-Rome, Marsilio, 2010), pp. 672-675; Baldoli and Knapp, *Forgotten Blitzes*, p. 123.

grip on the public following the first Fascist imperialist ventures in Africa, Spain and Albania. Paintings and poems concentrated on the exaltation of war, military heroism and ultimately on the Duce's leadership virtues.⁹⁰ When the war became a concrete experience in their lives, most Italians became more susceptible to magniloquent propaganda and intolerance of such bombast increased even among Fascist ranks. Rosario Bentivegna, then a student in Rome who was to become one of the leaders of the anti-Fascist movement in the capital, remembered in his memoirs that in 1941 the GUF to which he belonged demonstrated against a group of Futurist poets who met in Piazza Venezia, near Mussolini's office. 'Because of our uniforms they did not dare to react and begged us to leave them in peace', he wrote.⁹¹

For two years the EIAR's executives Raoul Chiodelli and Ettore Bernabei begged the MCP to end programmes in which Marinetti and his favourites declaimed the 'aero-poetic beauty of mechanised war', explaining that incensed listeners phoned to protest, verbally abusing the innocent girls on the switchboard. Pavolini tried in vain to contain Marinetti, but the poet was under Mussolini's direct protection.⁹² Even Piero Bellanova, Marinetti's personal doctor, wrote Futurist poems, a collection of which, *Bombardata Napoli canta* ('Naples sings while it is bombed'), came out in 1943 when the city was suffering terribly under enemy air raids.⁹³ Yet, the Duce was unfailingly supportive of Marinetti and his movement, even during the most difficult months of the war. In August 1942, for example, he endorsed the establishment in Rome of a 'Galleria nazionale di arte futurista e aeropittura di guerra' which was to show 600 works.⁹⁴

⁹⁰ Günter Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics. Between Anarchist Rebellion and Fascist Reaction* (Oxford: Berghan Books, 1996), p. 248; Lehmann, *Le ali del potere*, pp. 225-230.

⁹¹ Rosario Bentivegna, *Senza fare di necessità virtù. Memoria di un antifascista*, ed. Michela Ponziani (Turin: Einaudi, 2011), p. 75.

⁹² ACS, MCP, GAB, b. 53, fasc. F.T. Marinetti, Correspondence between EIAR and Alessandro Pavolini, 2 October 1941, cited in Fincardi, 'Gli italiani e l'attesa di un bombardamento della capitale', pp. 227-228; Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *Cento eroi e macchina della guerra mussoliniana. Aeropoema simultaneo* (Milan: Mondadori, 1942).

⁹³ Piero Bellanova, *Bombardata Napoli canta: aeropoema futurista* (Rome: Edizioni Futuriste di "Poesia", 1943); Mario Verdone, *Drammaturgia e arte totale. L'avanguardia internazionale. Autori, teorie, opere*, ed. Rocco Mario Morano (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2005), p. 75.

⁹⁴ 'A Palazzo Venezia', *La Stampa*, 14 August 1942.

5.6 *Exit Pavolini*

On 5 February 1943 Mussolini reorganised his government, dismissing nine out of 12 ministers including political heavyweights like Bottai, Ciano and Grandi.⁹⁵ Pavolini was replaced as Minister of Popular Culture by Gaetano Polverelli, a journalist turned politician who had briefly led Mussolini's press office at the beginning of the 1930s.⁹⁶ Polverelli continued the practice of secret press conferences and the prescription of keeping to a minimum reports on crimes, accidents and violent deaths. On 3 March he opened his first meeting with newspaper editors by paying his respects to the *camerati* who 'were keeping their posts in spite of the risks and damage of air attacks' in bombed-out cities.⁹⁷ Polverelli had to contend with an enemy propaganda that spared no effort in targeting the Italians. In the first eight months of the year the US, which had been bombing Italy from North African bases since December 1942, dropped 64 million leaflets, which its Psychological Warfare Branch believed would complement bombs in increasing opposition to Mussolini, Germany and the war. The MCP tried to counter this challenge in the spring by exploiting rumours recorded a few months earlier, when authorities had preferred to suppress them for fear that they would increase apprehension among civilians.⁹⁸ In June 1942, for instance, the postal censors intercepted a letter directed to a member of the blackshirts telling him about wounds sustained by a child he knew:

⁹⁵ 'Modificazioni alla compagine del governo', *Il Messaggero*, 6 February 1943. Mussolini's decision was part of a wider reorganisation of both the regime and the PNF in view of the war situation and the critical condition of the home front. *Radio Londra* presented it as the first real crisis in the Fascist government, arguing that it showed the Duce feared the dissent of 'a group of fairly homogeneous *gerarchi*' (De Felice, *Mussolini l'alleato 1940-1945, L'Italia in guerra 1940-1943*, Vol. 2, *Crisi e agonia del regime*, pp. 1040-1052; 'Off with their heads, said the ... Duce', Italian News Comment 643, 6 February 1943, in *Radio Londra 1940/1945*, Vol. 1, ed. Piccialuti Caprioli, p. 303).

⁹⁶ On 10 February 1943 Pavolini became editor of *Il Messaggero*. Almost immediately he reported to Mussolini that the environment of the Roman daily 'was tainted by slander, defamation and the most miserable gossiping' (Talamo, *Il Messaggero un giornale durante il fascismo*, p. 322-328).

⁹⁷ ACS, MCP, GAB, b. 51, Rapporto giornalisti, sottofascicolo 3.3.43 (16.2.43-27.3.43), Conference of Minister Polverelli, 3 March 1943.

⁹⁸ Baldoli and Knapp, *Forgotten Blitzes*, p. 126; Overy, *The Bombing War*, p. 522.

Those damned British were not satisfied with bombing our cities, but what's more they used poisoned bombs. As it happened, because of intervening gangrene, they had to amputate his leg. Otherwise he would have suffered just a small injury.⁹⁹

As incidents provoked by unexploded devices occurred frequently in wartime (often Italian boys looked for bomb splinters to sell), it is plausible to infer that the censored letter contained a partial truth and that rumours transforming accidents into attacks from treacherous and insidious weapons were spread as part of a propaganda effort to stain the image of the enemy's air power.¹⁰⁰ At the end of 1942 stories began to circulate about American planes dropping explosive pens as a lethal lure for children, but the deluge of such news in the press started only some months later. *La Stampa* wrote that, 'this new form of barbarous snare' showed once more 'the evil of the enemy who aims at civilians, and in particular at young people and children'. When *Il Messaggero* reported that two children in Campania had been wounded after picking up an explosive fountain pen, the Vatican's undersecretary of state, Domenico Tardini, wrote to the archbishop of Naples asking for information. Cardinal Alessio Ascalesi made inquiries and replied that the children had been wounded not by pens that fell from the sky but by handling a machine-gun bullet their father had found in the countryside.¹⁰¹

In February, the MCP still recommended that editors pay attention to the wider psychological consequences of printing 'certain photographs', but in May, for the first time since June 1940, pictures of injured Italian children began to appear in newspapers. The *Corriere della Sera* put on its front page an image of six children sitting on a hospital bed after being wounded in an enemy raid on Grosseto and crudely described the effects of an attack on Reggio Calabria. The

⁹⁹ Antonini, *Catene al pensiero e anelli ai polsi*, p. 88 (letter of 19 June 1942). The prefect ordered the letter to be seized because it reported 'unfounded news, which might cause alarm in the public'.

¹⁰⁰ Gibelli, *Il popolo bambino*, p. 362. In Britain, the MP for Croydon South, Herbert Williams, asked the Secretary of State for War to impress on the authorities, 'the great importance of not leaving about dangerous explosive' that caused accidents to children. The government promised to do its best, adding that, 'in the more realistic military training a certain amount of that becomes inevitable' (Hansard, HC Deb. 25 May 1943, Vol. 389, cc1391-2).

¹⁰¹ 'Penne e matite esplosive lanciate dagli aerei nemici', *La Stampa*, 17 April 1943; 'Barbarie anglo-americana. Due ragazzi feriti da una penna stilografica esplosiva', *Il Messaggero*, 24 April 1943; *Actes et documents du Saint Siège relatifs à la seconde guerre mondiale*, Vol. 9, *Le Saint Siège et les victimes de la guerre*, ed. Pierre Blet, Angelo Martini, Robert A. Graham and Burkhart Schneider (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1975), p. 264 (note of 24 April 1943).

latter resulted in nuns praying in the church of a nursery school that had been ‘torn to pieces’, while 33 ‘innocent children’ living in an orphanage ‘had been ‘ripped apart’.¹⁰² On 2 May, *La Stampa* carried on its front page two photographs of Francesco Romeo, a five-year-old child from Sant’Alessio in Aspromonte in Calabria, whose hand, according to the captions, ‘had been horribly mutilated by an explosive pencil dropped by American planes’. The previous day the MCP had required editors ‘to develop very vividly’ the story of the explosive devices, ‘by avoiding pious tones and pointing to the barbarity and cowardice of the aggressors’. Publication of the photograph showing the injured child over two consecutive days was ‘obligatory’. *L’Illustrazione Italiana* carried a cover showing the mutilated hand of a child with a caption blaming the United States, describing their history as ‘a story of barbarity’ and observing that, ‘all targets are alike for the cynical killers sent by Roosevelt’.¹⁰³ Some newspapers went beyond ministerial instructions. The daily *Il Tevere*, for instance, demanded retaliation in the shape of the execution of some American airmen who had parachuted after their four-engined aircraft was shot down, and argued that prisoners of war be used to dispose of unexploded bombs or act as human shields in the bombed-out cities.¹⁰⁴

On 6 May the Italian Service of the BBC reported RAF command’s refutation of the Italian allegations. A senior RAF officer was quoted as saying that, ‘every effort had been made to trace any possible cause of such suggestions, but without success’ and that, ‘the RAF’s object in their bombing raids was to

¹⁰² Angelo Schwarz, ‘Fotografia del duce possibilmente con l’elmetto’, in *Propaganda politica e mezzi di comunicazione di massa tra fascismo e democrazia*, ed. Adolfo Mignemi (Novara: Edizioni Gruppo Abele, 1995), p. 73 (directives of 12 February 1942); ‘Nessun Italiano dimenticherà i bimbi straziati dai gangster’, *Corriere della Sera*, 5 May 1943; Giovanni Romei, ‘Di fronte alla mitraglia nemica il popolo della Calabria non si piega’, *Corriere della Sera*, 26 May 1943.

¹⁰³ *L’Illustrazione Italiana*, 9 May 1943.

¹⁰⁴ ‘Non soldati ma delinquenti comuni’, *La Stampa*, 4 May 1943; *La stampa del regime*, p. 411 (instructions of 2 May 1943); Schwarz, ‘Fotografia del Duce possibilmente con l’elmetto’, p. 73 (instructions of 2 and 3 May 1943); ‘Prigionieri di guerra o assassini a piede libero?’, *Il Tevere*, 29-30 April 1943; ‘Guerra totale?’, *Il Tevere*, 3-4 May 1943. *Il Tevere* was founded by Mussolini in December 1924 and edited by the racist journalist Telesio Interlandi, ceasing publication with the fall of the Duce in July 1943. See Meir Michaelis, ‘Mussolini’s unofficial mouthpiece: Telesio Interlandi. *Il Tevere* and the evolution of Mussolini’s anti-Semitism’, *Modern Italy* 3 (1998), pp. 217-240.

smash factories, not maim children'. *The Times*, giving perhaps the Italian reports too much credit, went so far as to look for rational explanations, reporting on an announcement from Danish radio that a number of pencils believed to have been dropped by RAF aircraft passing over Denmark had been found on the east coast of Jutland and were being examined at an army laboratory in Copenhagen. The London daily concluded by quoting a Danish news report that, 'the objects found had been proved by examination to be ordinary pencils containing no explosives'.¹⁰⁵

The Italian propaganda expedient received mixed reactions among the public. On 3 May, for example, Alba Bedogni, a teacher at the primary school in Castelnovo ne' Monti in the northern Emilia region, recorded in her class register that after showing her pupils the picture of Francesco Romeo, they felt 'horror and indignation against the barbarous enemy aviators'. Three days later she stressed the episode, warning the children that enemy planes carried new devices 'against which they had to defend themselves: incendiary badges, explosive balloons, pencils and fountain pens'. As other entries in her papers show, Alba Bedogni was a committed Fascist who was very diligent in repeating the official mantra to her class, but in the registers of her colleagues who were less governed by Fascist discipline, there was no hint of the Francesco Romeo story.¹⁰⁶

In some cases the news fed the public imagination. Postal censors blocked a letter from Rome claiming that the Americans had dropped 'an unbelievable amount of fountain pens, pencils, lip liners, small tins and lots of other knick-knacks containing explosive in order to kill children'. According to the author, the enemy had also dropped 'poisoned hams' on Ostia, near Rome.¹⁰⁷ Enrico Castelli, an academic in Rome, recorded in his diary that his father-in-law had found an

¹⁰⁵ 'Asterischi londinesi', *BBC Italian Service*, 319, 6 May 1943 in *Radio Londra 1940/1945*, Vol. 1, ed. Piccialuti Caprioli, p. 340; 'Explosive Pencils-RAF Denial of Axis Report', *The Times*, 6 May 1943; 'Pencils, but not explosive', *The Times*, 8 May 1943.

¹⁰⁶ Cleonice Pignedoli, 'Ecco i miei scolaretti. I registri scolastici degli anni 1942-43 e 1943-44', in *Ricerche storiche* 108 (2009), p. 101. On the impact of Fascist propaganda on Italian schoolchildren see Davide Montino, 'Libro, quaderno e moschetto. Pedagogia della guerra nelle letture e nelle scritture scolastiche durante il regime fascista', *History of Education & Children* 2 (2007), pp. 193-215.

¹⁰⁷ Lepre, *L'occhio del duce*, p. 140 (letter of 9 May 1943).

explosive fountain pen at the zoo, adding two days later that it was rumoured that, 'the explosive pens and poisoned sweets found after the last raids have been spread by the Germans and the Fascists in order to foment hatred against the British'.¹⁰⁸ Others insinuated that subversive and anti-Fascist activists were the true perpetrators.¹⁰⁹ Such creative rumours must have fueled the propaganda activities; over subsequent days the press reported that, 'liberators' had widened the range of their booby traps, dropping cigars, torches, penknives, brilliantine boxes and cough drops. 'As you can see', *La Stampa* commented, 'no category of citizens, no class of people has been neglected by the gangsters of the air'.¹¹⁰

Meanwhile, a new U-turn appalled the newsrooms when the MCP abruptly instructed the media on 17 May that the furore about the use of explosive devices must stop. Nevertheless, the articles continued to be published; *La Stampa* went as far as to reprint the story of Francesco Romeo as if it were fresh news. Satirical magazines joined in, depicting the Statue of Liberty holding explosive fountain pens.¹¹¹ Over the course of a few weeks the story ran out of steam, although leading personalities such as Bottai and the industrialist Alberto Pirelli recorded in their diaries that the Vatican was still taking steps to ascertain the facts about the issue.¹¹²

As the surreal propaganda continued, the Italian authorities were facing serious challenges. The evacuation which in Mussolini's expectation should have worked miraculously despite the government's delays and indecision was turning out to be one of the major failures of the Fascist regime. The media reflected this uncertainty - focusing its attention on what the party boasted it was doing for evacuees - at least until the end of March 1943, when the Ministry of Interior told

¹⁰⁸ Enrico Castelli, *Pensieri e giornate: diario intimo* (Padova: Cedam, 1963), pp. 123-124 (entries of 17 May 1943 and 20 May 1943).

¹⁰⁹ Mariano Di Sandro, *Mine e passioni. Memorie di un 'ingenuo ufficialetto'* (Naples: Edizioni dell'Istituto Italiano di Cultura di Napoli, 1995), p. 15.

¹¹⁰ 'Una matita esplosiva rinvenuta al Testaccio', *La Stampa*, 18 May 1943.

¹¹¹ *La stampa del regime*, ed. Tranfaglia with Maida, p. 411 (instructions of 17 May 1943); 'Altre vittime in Calabria per le penne esplosive', *La Stampa*, 23 May 1943; 'America', *Bertoldo*, 28 May 1943. On satirical magazines see Renata Giannella and Daniela Middioni (eds), *Matite appuntite. Giornali satirici per disegnare l'Italia* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2013).

¹¹² Bottai, *Diario 1935-1944*, p. 380 (entry for 1 June 1943); Pirelli, *Taccuini 1922-1943*, p. 434 (entry for 27 May 1943).

prefects in the provinces that lack of transport and food, increased health risks, overcrowding and workers forced to stay behind made further evacuation unfeasible. Prefects were told to persuade people to stay put and, since the ongoing propaganda was based on calls for sacrifice and civic responsibility, to make this credible by providing people with material help.¹¹³

In the first months of 1943 Italy was rocked by increased air raids, mostly conducted by the Americans, who flew higher than the British and bombed less accurately. By March 122,000 buildings had been destroyed.¹¹⁴ Nevertheless, the press insisted on treading its well-worn route, praising episodes and selected people to exemplify Fascist virtues. The MCP persevered in pointing to the need for underlining the cowardly, barbarous and criminal behaviour of the Anglo-American bombers and lamented that the press ‘lacked spirit’.¹¹⁵ Yet in May newspapers began to carry articles showing unprecedented human interest in stories from bombed areas. As ever, enemies were evil and victims were innocent, but suffering became more real, with unrestrained descriptions (and images) of harrowing scenes.¹¹⁶ In an effort to represent victims’ misfortune, photography and cinematography were used to an extent unknown thus far in the war: in Palermo, the *figlio della lupa* (young Fascist) Antonino Calì, seeing one of his ten brothers killed by British machine-gun fire, asked for a gun to shoot at the enemy aircraft; another bandaged child, Gino Carli, badly injured by American planes in Grosseto on Easter Monday; a brave nun in Livorno putting herself at risk to secure the sacrament after taking the children in her nursery class to a safe shelter.¹¹⁷

¹¹³ ACS, MCP, GAB, b. 117, Directives of the Ministry of Interior on evacuation, 20 March 1943.

¹¹⁴ Overy, *The Bombing War*, p. 525-526.

¹¹⁵ *La stampa del regime*, ed. Tranfaglia with Maida, p. 131; 386-387; 411 (instructions of 17 March, 23 March, 29 April, 2 May, and 3 May 1943).

¹¹⁶ Stefanutto, ‘La morte celata. Miti e immagini della morte in guerra’, pp. 940-942.

¹¹⁷ ‘Per volere del Duce il prode figlio della Lupa Calì sarà accolto in un collegio della GIL’, *La Stampa*, 23 April 1943. Mussolini himself asked the story be published, with a photograph and the news that the boy has been received by the Duce: Schwarz, ‘Fotografia del duce possibilmente con l’elmetto’, p. 73 (directives of 22 April 1943); ‘La ferocia dei massacratori di bimbi nei racconti di un testimone oculare’, *La Stampa*, 5 May 1943; ‘Testimonianze delle proditorie imprese dei terroristi nord-americani’, *Giornale LUCE C0347*, 10 May 1943; *La Domenica del Corriere*, 11 July 1943.

The authorities feared that discipline and commitment were fading in the newsrooms and that many journalists were already looking for ways to preserve their jobs in case of changes in government or military defeat. Polverelli expected the press to hold firm and required both editors and senior writers to be committed to this task to the extent of signing their articles.¹¹⁸ The order that editorial comments and political articles be signed ‘primarily for moral reasons’ was repeated four times in June and July. The last instructions, on 6 July, specified that they were also directed at journalists and contributors who were not members of the PNF.¹¹⁹ War reports from the European, African and Russian fronts were always signed by special correspondents unless they were the result of an editorial assemblage of news agencies’ reports. The increase of signed reports in the press about the enemy attacks on Italian cities in the last three months before Mussolini’s removal from power made newspapers’ representation of the home front slightly more direct than the bureaucratic and scrupulous transcription of repetitive MCP instruction. *La Stampa* sent Attilio Crepas to Naples, Mario Bassi to Livorno, Pier Angelo Soldini to Sicily¹²⁰. The *Corriere della Sera* fielded Virgilio Lilli and Anselmo Bucci.¹²¹ Dino Buzzati, who covered the *Regia Marina* during the war, was detailed to report on ‘unlawful’ British behaviour towards

¹¹⁸ Signoretti, *La Stampa in camicia nera*, p. 245.

¹¹⁹ Murialdi, *La stampa del regime fascista*, p. 212.

¹²⁰ Attilio Crepas, ‘Il cuore di Napoli sotto il fuoco dei “liberatori”’, *La Stampa*, 18 May 1943; Mario Bassi, ‘Serena fermezza dei livornesi di fronte alla furia distruttrice’, *La Stampa*, 3 July 1943; Pierangelo Soldini, ‘I tesori d’arte di Palermo distrutti dalle bombe americane’, *La Stampa*, 6 June 1943; Soldini, ‘Ogni pietra crollata è un soldato di più per la vendetta’, *La Stampa*, 17 June 1943; Soldini, ‘Come se nulla fosse accaduto’, *La Stampa*, 19 June 1943. Crepas, special correspondent and war reporter for *La Stampa*, left journalism after the Second World War and went to work with Marshal Giovanni Messe in founding and leading *Alleanza Tricolore*, a right-wing political movement (r.s., ‘La morte di Attilio Crepas’, *La Stampa*, 31 January 1966; Patrizia Laurano, *Consenso e politica di massa: l’uso del mito garibaldino nella costruzione della nazione* (Acireale: Bonanno, 2009), p. 182. After the war Soldini became editor of the magazine *Tempo* and published successful novels (‘È morto a 64 anni lo scrittore Soldini’, *La Stampa*, 13 July 1974). Bassi left his job as war correspondent after the armistice of September 1943 and fought for the Repubblica Sociale Italiana. He had served in the Great War and in 1929, for *La Stampa*, went on an expedition to Himalaya and Karakorum (‘È morto Mario Bassi’, *La Stampa*, 15 February 1945).

¹²¹ Anselmo Bucci, ‘Intrepidità dei napoletani’, *Corriere della Sera*, 20 May 1943; Virgilio Lilli, ‘Impavida la Sardegna resiste’, *Corriere della Sera*, 2 June 1943. Virgilio Lilli had been special correspondent and war reporter for *Corriere della Sera* since 1935. Having left the newspaper in 1943, he returned in 1951 (Licata, *Storia del Corriere della Sera*, p. 603).

Italian hospital ships.¹²² These articles, which showed varying levels of personal identification with the Fascist war, were not particularly original and very rarely truthful, but they did reveal the belated intention to humanise reporting from the home front.

5.7 Bombing Rome

The American air raid on Rome on the night of 19 July was the last chapter of a story in the war of words between Britain and Italy that had begun at least two years before. At the time of Mussolini's invasion of Greece, journalists and politicians in London argued that if the Fascists ever violated Athens, reprisal should be directed against Rome. The same argument was put forward when the *Regia Aeronautica* bombed Malta and when the Italians reached Egypt, threatening Cairo. In the wake of Mussolini's declaration of war, the Vatican enquired about British intentions; London made assurances that the Vatican would be respected, but retained freedom of action regarding the city of Rome. During 1940 the Pope and his aides feared that a British retaliation against Italy in reaction to Mussolini's boast of helping the *Luftwaffe* during the Blitz could accidentally hit the Vatican area, and requested that Rome be spared on account of its 'very special situation'.¹²³

Both public opinion and politicians in Britain urged the authorities not to give assurances of Rome's immunity. On 7 November 1940 the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Richard Austen Butler, when asked in parliament if the government intended to treat Rome as an open city free from aerial bombardment, replied that note had been taken of Italy's statement on its participation in the bombing of London and that the latter 'must accordingly

¹²² Dino Buzzati, 'Il lungo e crudele calvario di due nostre navi-ospedale', *Corriere della Sera*, 8 May 1943; Buzzati, 'Il fermo a due navi crociate', *Corriere della Sera*, 21 May 1943. Buzzati had been working at *Corriere* since 1928 and when Italy entered the Second World War he had published three successful novels (*Barnabo delle montagne*, *Il segreto del bosco vecchio* and *Il deserto dei tartari*) behind him. See Nella Giannetto, Patrizia Dalla Rosa, Maria Angela Polesana and Erika Bertoldi (eds), *Buzzati giornalista* (Milan: Mondadori, 2000).

¹²³ *Actes et documents du Saint Siège relatifs à la seconde guerre mondiale*, Vol. 4, *Le Saint Siège et la guerre en Europe*, Juin 1940-Juin 1941, pp. 68; 150; 179.

reserve full liberty of action in regard to Rome'.¹²⁴ Newspaper readers also joined in demands for a firm stance against Mussolini.¹²⁵ Once it was clear that the Italian expedition in British skies was no more than a pathetic, unsuccessful publicity stunt, threats against the Italian capital began to be used in response to the Italian raids on Malta (where slogans reading 'bomb Rome' appeared on the walls of wrecked buildings) and as a deterrent to protect Athens and Cairo from the Axis. While making clear that 'the greatest care' would be taken not to bomb the Vatican City, Churchill's government also wanted to pre-empt the enemy, warning that it was aware of 'an Italian squadron' being held ready in Rome 'to drop captured British bombs upon the Vatican City should a British raid take place'.¹²⁶

It was thus clear from the first year of war that the bombing of Rome was to become a major propaganda battle. The MCP ordered newspapers to reply to Churchill's warning, commenting that it was 'the alibi of a specialist in nefarious schemes'.¹²⁷ Mussolini had a complex relationship with Rome and always wanted to portray himself as an outsider in the capital city. He was interested in Rome's historical role as an imperial centre irradiating geopolitical and cultural power, but was less keen on Rome as a provincial capital, the seat of the petty bourgeois backbone of an eternal bureaucracy. During wartime, the fact that Romans kept living as normal got on the Duce's nerves and he ordered that anytime there was an alarm in Naples, sirens must also be sounded and artillery guns fired in Rome.¹²⁸

Mussolini was nonetheless prepared to take advantage of the city's special status when it became clear at the end of 1942 that as the British intended to increase pressure on the regime, the battle of words was no longer effective and that Rome had entered the bombers' sights. Calls intensified in the British parliament for a lethal blow against Italy that targeted its political centre and

¹²⁴ Hansard, HC Deb. 7 November 1940, Vol. 365, c1477W.

¹²⁵ 'If Athens is bombed', *The Times*, 4 November 1940.

¹²⁶ 'Raid Damage in Malta', *The Times*, 1 March 1941; 'Britain Answers Nazi Threat – An Italian Trick Exposed', *The Times*, 19 April 1941.

¹²⁷ *La stampa del regime*, ed. Tranfaglia with Maida, p. 350 (instructions of 19 April 1941).

¹²⁸ Paolo Monelli, *Mussolini piccolo borghese* (Milan: Vallardi, 1983, first publ. 1950), p. 225.

Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden had to state that there was no agreement ‘as to the avoidance of bombing certain towns and cities’.¹²⁹ The MCP decided that the Italian press should play down statements from both British MPs and President Roosevelt. It also ordered that no hint be made about the possibility of evacuating Rome as a result of the Vatican’s diplomatic activity.¹³⁰

The British officially denied making any approach, yet it was said that they would spare Rome if Italian government and military commands left and arms production based in the capital was shut down. Mussolini never considered such an option.¹³¹ In spring 1943, the Duce’s resolve in continuing to resist enemy pressure reached its peak, as did the hostility of the Italian public against Rome: people all over the country lamented that politicians in Rome were safe and had plenty of food and comfortable accommodation while in the rest of the country whole days and nights were spent in the dark of improvised and dangerous shelters.¹³² The only city where life went on as before, Carlo Chevallard noted in his diary, was Rome. Friends returning from a trip to the city told him of ongoing glamorous night parties. ‘It is hardly surprising’, he concluded, ‘that all Italians wish a bombardment on the Romans’.¹³³ Curiously, material emerged in the press that was intended to spread reassurance but in fact gave fuel to such feelings, describing with amused levity the atmosphere of alarms in Rome, comparing the anti-aircraft fire to ‘a show of old-fashioned, peaceful entertainments’ and delighting in people rushing out to stroll in the streets even before the all-clears were given.¹³⁴

On 11 July Arthur Harris, Commander-in-Chief of Bomber Command, suggested that a plan he had prepared in 1942 to bomb Mussolini’s office be

¹²⁹ Hansard, HC Deb. 21 October 1942, Vol. 383, c1942.

¹³⁰ *La stampa del regime*, ed. Tranfaglia with Maida, p. 378 (instructions of 11 December 1942 and 13 December 1942).

¹³¹ Hansard, HC Deb. 30 June 1943, Vol. 390, cc1597-9; Bottai, *Diario 1935-1944*, p. 348 (entry for 25 December 1942); Pirelli, *Taccuini 1922-1943*, pp. 383-384 (entries for 17 and 18 December 1942); Tullio Cianetti, *Memorie dal carcere di Verona*, ed. De Felice (Milan: Rizzoli, 1983), p. XI.

¹³² Cavallo, ‘La rappresentazione della seconda guerra mondiale nell’immaginario collettivo’, p.122.

¹³³ Chevallard, *Diario 1942-1945*, p. 57.

¹³⁴ ‘Una pagina su un allarme a Roma’, *Il Travaso*, 6 June 1943.

resurrected; it involved RAF squadrons being routed across France under cover of darkness, attacking 30 minutes after Mussolini's usual time of arrival at work and then continuing to North Africa. The chief of the air staff, Charles Portal, supported the plan, but Foreign Secretary Eden turned it down with Churchill's endorsement.¹³⁵ A week later the Americans carried out the mission that had been discussed for almost three years: four waves of planes dropped 9,125 bombs on Rome in daylight, hitting San Lorenzo and Littorio freight yards, Tiburtina rail station and Ciampino and Tiburtino airports, and killing thousands of civilians trapped in buildings. When German ambassador von Mackensen went to see Mussolini after the air raid, he listened with dismay to the Duce's assessment that, 'the ruins of the San Lorenzo *basilica* will be fatal to our enemies and from this fact their defeat will start'.¹³⁶

Mussolini's reaction meant that even under such circumstances the MCP's conduct was erratic. 'So the myth of papal Rome fell apart', the Duce commented when he heard of the attack as he was meeting Hitler in Feltre, whereas what was actually in tatters, as Emilio Gentile has put it, was Mussolini's myth of the 'new imperial Rome'.¹³⁷ The media were told to emphasise 'destruction, not visits', as Pope Pius XII arrived unannounced at the ruins and made an impact that obscured all other official reactions.¹³⁸ Newspapers published pictures of buildings taken before and after the raid, as they were explicitly told to do. Two special radio programmes were broadcast. The LUCE institute filmed scenes that were later to become a crucial part of the *Repubblica Sociale Italiana* (RSI) propaganda. The media imbued the image of destruction in San Lorenzo with an emblematic value which may have appeared disproportionate in relation to heavy damage inflicted on monuments and works of art (in addition to death and wide destruction)

¹³⁵ Henry Probert, *Bomber Harris. His Life and Times* (London: Greenhill Books, 2006, first publ. 2001), p. 256.

¹³⁶ Gioannini and Massobrio, *Bombardate l'Italia*, p. 335; Bastianini, *Volevo fermare Mussolini*, p. 141.

¹³⁷ Pirelli, *Taccuini 1922-1943*, p. 457 (entry of 23 July 1943); Gentile, *Fascismo di pietra* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2007), p. 252.

¹³⁸ *La stampa del regime*, ed. Tranfaglia with Maida, p. 200 (instructions of 20 July 1943); Schwarz, 'Fotografia del Duce possibilmente con l'elmetto', p. 74 (instructions of 20 July 1943).

elsewhere in Italy but which reflected the symbolic impact of the propaganda battle over the bombing of Rome.¹³⁹

Apart from people in the affected areas of Rome, the end of the Italian capital's invulnerability was greeted in the rest of Italy with contented relief if not open delight. The editor of *La Stampa*, Alfredo Signoretti, remembered that in Turin on the same evening, 19 July, the bombing of Rome was toasted in working class neighbourhoods.¹⁴⁰ A few days later an OVRA informant from Milan provided a particularly vivid account of such feelings, reporting that the bombing of Rome caused in the masses from all social spheres 'a monstrous sense of satisfaction'. He explained that 'a Neronian perversion' seemed to have invaded 'the soul of a great deal of our compatriots' as a consequence of their belief that, 'the greatest number of people in Rome exploited wherever they could, both in peacetime and in war, the hard work, the sacrifices and the losses of the entire Italian people, not even giving in exchange the advantage of a good administration'.¹⁴¹ Not only did the American bombing of Rome give Italians a sense of vengeance, but it also represented a misleading portent that the war and Fascism were approaching their ends.¹⁴²

Conclusion

The epilogue of the Fascist war was precipitated by the Allied decision to intensify air raids on Italy as part of a strategy to paralyse the country's economic and military structure and break people's morale. In the last phase of the war, when the collapse of the home front added to catastrophic defeats in the Mediterranean, Russia, North Africa and on Italian soil itself, not only was the role of the Italian propaganda machine largely irrelevant in countering enemy psychological warfare, but it also caused widespread resentment among the

¹³⁹ Baldoli and Knapp, *Forgotten Blitzes*, pp. 37-41; 168-170; Nezzo, 'La protezione delle città d'arte', in *I bombardamenti aerei sull'Italia*, ed. Labanca, p. 203.

¹⁴⁰ Signoretti, *La Stampa in camicia nera*, pp. 252-253.

¹⁴¹ ACS, MI, DGPS, Polizia politica, b. 238, rel. inf. 553, Milan, report 23 July 1943, cited in Cavallo, 'La rappresentazione della seconda guerra mondiale nell'immaginario collettivo', p. 120.

¹⁴² Fincardi, 'Gli italiani e l'attesa di un bombardamento della capitale (1940-1943)', p. 235.

public, which increasingly turned to foreign sources to stay informed about the war's developments.

The shortcomings of the MCP reflected a wider defeat for the regime and the PNF. As shown by the campaign around the assumed Allied use of explosive devices against Italian civilians, the imposition of awkward techniques, topics and trends on the Italian media in the last phase of war – when civilians were plagued by lack of food, danger and death, and increasingly blamed their predicament on their rulers – confirmed that Fascist efforts to maintain public faith and belief was doomed to fail. Also, the development of the propaganda theme of the bombing of Rome made clear that previous insistence on the Italian bombing of England had been an ineffective and self-defeating campaign. In addition, changes in newsrooms during the first half of 1943 – when many editors and journalists began to detach themselves from the regime to preserve their future careers – reflected a pattern that was occurring within the regime as a whole.

Conclusion

The media played a crucial role in the construction of the regime's image from the onset of Fascism in 1919. The press primarily targeted the small, but influential, minority of literate Italians as well as foreign observers while radio and newsreels made Mussolini ubiquitous, his voice and persona reaching even to peasants in the remotest villages. Propagandistic campaigns had always had a martial cast and were imbued with a sense of conquest, even those trumpeting peacetime undertakings like the drainage and urbanisation of marshes or the large-scale building enterprises like the provision of social housing.¹ The MCP, under the Duce's strict supervision, was in charge of constructing that narrative by maintaining control not only over the press, but also over cinema, theatre, the arts and all forms of popular culture. When this construction was confronted by the sense of vulnerability among civilians that total war brought following the first enemy air raids in June 1940, it fell apart like a house of cards. Literature on Italian Fascism has generally tended to provide an un-nuanced representation of the determining contribution that propaganda made to its fortunes. Instead, this work has analysed the crisis of the regime's image in the years from 1938 to 1943 in order to argue that propaganda's failure to continue to bolster Fascist myths was due both to the catastrophic impact of the European crisis on civilians' lives and to institutional and political flaws.²

As Chapters 1 and 2 have illustrated, when Italy entered the war the crisis of the traditional communication policies was already conspicuous and the atmosphere of self-assurance that had pervaded drills and parades began to dissolve into widespread concern. The start of the enemy air raids on Italian cities increased fear and insecurity among civilians, while the first military setbacks on the battlefield showed that, even before the end of 1940, Mussolini's hopes of joining in a rapid Axis victory were unfounded, as was his expectation of standing equal with Hitler. In particular, the ruinous participation in the Blitz of the *Regia*

¹ See, for example, Federico Caprotti, *Mussolini's Cities. Internal Colonialism in Italy 1930-1939* (Youngstown: Cambria Press, 2007).

² See note 5 of Introduction. In particular, a typical instance of such approach is Cannistraro's *La fabbrica del consenso*, a pioneering study on the apparatus of Fascist propaganda that gives insufficient attention to the last years of the regime.

Aeronautica made it clear that not only was the much-vaunted Italian air power a groundless myth, but also that the regime's propagandistic aspirations had to make way for German priorities. As Chapter 3 has shown, inconsistent and surreal press campaigns, such as that recasting wartime nights as occasions for enjoying aesthetic experiences, added to the dispiriting effect that lies and bombast had on people's feelings.

The contradictions in propaganda emerged from the beginning and reflected a profound crisis in direction of the war. Following a conference with Hitler, Italy's ambassador to Berlin, Dino Alfieri, reported to Foreign Secretary Ciano on 1 July 1940 that Mussolini's offer of men and planes to take part in an attack on England remained unanswered and that the primary propagandistic concern of the Goebbels' machine was to blame the enemy for starting the air-raids on civilians. As far as the air war was concerned, the Germans were determined to give their people the impression that every effort was being made to avoid it and its calamitous consequences. In order to boost morale, air raids were presented as a last resort and, on all occasions, bombing attacks against France and Britain had to be characterised as legitimate acts of reprisal.³ Such a scheme implied a defensive posture, a 'passive' vision of air power that did not fit with decades of rhetoric about the all-powerful *Ala Fascista*. Nevertheless, the Duce's propaganda was content to comply with the German will and from the outbreak of war it spun a story in which the first shot was unfailingly fired by Allied aircraft. As Chapter 3 has pointed out, the most popular war correspondents were enlisted to sustain this argument as early as summer 1940, presenting the Italian bombing missions on Malta and in the Middle East as a legitimate retaliation against the criminal English air raids on open cities.

This work has argued that uneven and often inconsistent directives from propaganda controllers reflected similar attitudes within the regime as a whole. On the contrary, the enemy proved increasingly more effective at conveying, through use of leaflets and *Radio Londra* broadcasting, simple and direct arguments: that there was no aggression against Italy and Italians were paying an

³ *Documenti diplomatici italiani, serie nona*, Vol. 5, pp. 147-148 (report of 1 July 1940).

increasing high price for the bad choice made by one man only.⁴ In comparison, the Fascist message in nationalist propaganda lent on anachronistic Anglophobic stereotypes, portraying Britons as the ‘five-meals people’ – a nation of greedy, arrogant, snooty, patronising and rapacious pirates.⁵ As Chapters 4 and 5 have illustrated in particular, when these remarks were exhumed from 1940 onward, typically by propagandists like Appellius, they had lost any residual appeal for most Italians. Deprivation, food shortages and bombs had unsettled their lives and such empty words were useless at providing a rationale for their suffering. The same was true of the declared war aims: in 1915 the presentation of alliance with Britain and France as the last stage of the *Risorgimento* had provided a patriotic and moral basis for participation in the Great War; the campaigns of the 1930s had provided the public with motivation, presenting the Fascist empire’s subjugation of Ethiopia and Albania as a symbol of national prestige and widespread economic prosperity, and the support of Franco in Spain as a new stage in the anti-communist struggle.⁶ However, Mussolini consorting with Hitler in 1940 lacked any ideal substance to feed Italians’ souls and elicit their will to face obstacles and sorrow.

As this work has showed, one fundamental flaw of Fascist propaganda during the war was its relentless, monotonous uniformity. There was no substantial effort to adapt the output to heterogenous audiences. Even when the apparatus targeted specific sections of society (as it happened typically with women, or when later in the war scepticism contaminated circles, groups and classes traditionally sympathetic with the regime), it did so reiterating few, mostly obsolete, clichés. Journalist Giovanni Ansaldo, with his usual disenchanted cynicism, hit the mark when he wondered in his diary what the press

⁴ Comparison between Rome and London propaganda towards civilians in the Second World War calls for new research on organisation, ideas, themes and outcomes of British activities to target the Italian home front.

⁵ Edoardo Scarfoglio, *Il popolo dai cinque pasti. Brindisi a mr. Asquith* (Milan: Mondadori, 1923); Emilio Settimelli, *Antinglese* (Rome: Pinciana, 1936).

⁶ A police report from Genoa on 29 May 1940 remarked that this was particularly clear in comparison with the atmosphere in 1915, observing that, ‘at that time the war of liberation was in Italians’ consciences, in their souls, and unfortunately it is not possible to argue the same in relation to the participation in the present war’ (Cavallo, ‘L’immaginario collettivo nella II guerra mondiale’, p. 88; 93).

could do ‘against facts, bursting like bombs’.⁷ Yet the shortcomings of the MCP and its officials reflected a wider defeat for the regime and the Fascist party, which in wartime progressively confined its role to that of welfare provider, pulled apart by greed, corruption and feuds - abandoning in this way two decades of totalitarian mobilisation.⁸ Before Mussolini’s dismissal very few – mainly the GUF papers and Bottai’s circles, as this work has shown – had dared to voice their doubts about the effectiveness of campaigns that obstinately refused to see, or report, the facts. Some realism did appear to obtrude on Pavolini’s mind at the beginning of 1942, and to cause (as Chapter 5 has explained) the Italian press to abstain for a few weeks from describing in morbid details the consequences of German raids on British cities. However, old habits resurfaced the following autumn as the enemy offensive drove out all rational explanations from the regime apparatus.

Open criticism about the flaws in Fascist propaganda only spread after the Duce’s fall. On 25 July 1943, the day of Mussolini’s removal from power, Dino Grandi observed in the Grand Council meeting that, if the war was proving unpopular, the MCP was particularly at fault because, ‘it was only our propaganda which reduced it to a party war, restraining it and somehow stifling it under the Fascist label’.⁹ Two months later, the newspaper *Fronte Unico* remarked that the MCP’s control over the press and the habit of only reporting bulletins and Stefani dispatches ‘had taken all responsibility away from those who compiled the newspapers’.¹⁰ Readers, accustomed to mailing anonymous protests in previous years, began to sign the letters of rebuke sent to newspapers. In August, for example, a group of evacuees wrote to the new editor of *Corriere della Sera*, Ettore Janni, asking him to fire Dino Buzzati, who had written some articles

⁷ Ansaldo, *Il giornalista di Ciano*, p. 333 (entry for 8 June 1943).

⁸ Salvatore Lupo, *Il fascismo. La politica in un regime totalitario* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2013, first publ. 2000), pp. 430-438.

⁹ Bottai, *Diario 1935-1944*, pp. 414-415 (entry for 24 July 1943).

¹⁰ Mario Cassiano, ‘Raccomandazioni alla stampa’, *Fronte Unico*, 4 September 1943. The newspaper *Fronte Unico* was founded in 1937 to promote ‘universal Fascism’ among foreign students in Italy. In September 1943 it was revamped, carrying articles attacking Badoglio, the royal family and the Americans. See Zangrandi, *Il lungo viaggio attraverso il fascismo*, Vol. 1, p. 85; Baldoli with Brendan Fleming (eds), *A British Fascist in the Second World War. The Italian War Diary of James Strachey Barnes 1943-1945* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 96-97; 211.

earlier in June praising the ‘special and cheerful impassibility of Naples under the bombs’ and arguing that nobody had fled the city, not even the rich. As Chapter 5 has shown, such stories appeared frequently in newspapers during the first half of 1943 but their impact on the public turned out to be the counterproductive:

Please prevent Dino Buzzati from continuing to write, as before, such guff and bullshit about Naples, the bombardments, the caves and the spirit of the Neapolitans. He could write this nonsense before, because Fascism commanded it and, unfortunately, that was the fashion. But now, when you, rather than Borelli, edit *Corriere*, do not let Buzzati continue to write such things or even to write in *Corriere* at all.¹¹

A rare, candid, admission came from the anonymous compiler of a comment piece that greeted the end of the regime in the first issue of *Corriere della Sera* published after 25 July. ‘For us it is difficult’, he wrote, ‘to put together a newspaper on our own, when for 20 years a Ministry dictated it’.¹² Yet this was not the beginning of a course of self-examination among journalists. The majority remained in their jobs, working under the supervision of the Badoglio government and, later, under Allied guardianship or at those newspapers (the big titles in Northern Italy, like *Corriere della Sera* and *La Stampa*) controlled by Nazi propaganda through the RSI’s new MCP. After the end of the war, the media was also sheltered by the overall failure of the process by which individual responsibility for connivance with the regime should have been ascertained. There was no substantial change in media ownership. Journalists and those who had worked for the MCP were not called to account.¹³ Indeed, the only people expelled from the professional register in April 1945 were those who had been prominent members of the regime or propaganda stars, like Bottai, Grandi, Appelius, Polverelli, Interlandi and Vittorio Mussolini. Pavolini followed Mussolini into the RSI as secretary of the new Fascist Republican Party, and was executed by partisans on 28 April 1945, the same afternoon as the Duce was shot on the orders of the Italian resistance general command. Another influential journalist, Manlio

¹¹ Buzzati, ‘Fisionomia di Napoli guerriera’, *Corriere della Sera*, 6 June 1943. The letter is quoted in Allotti, *Giornalisti di regime*, pp. 163-164.

¹² ‘Il patriottismo di Milano - Dimostrazioni di entusiasmo’, *Corriere della Sera*, 26-27 July 1943

¹³ Mimmo Franzinelli, *L’ammnistia Togliatti. 22 giugno 1946: colpo di spugna sui crimini fascisti* (Milan: Mondadori, 2006), pp. 159-187.

Morgagni, owner and editor of the official news agency Stefani and particularly close to Mussolini, killed himself on 25 July 1943 when he heard that his boss and friend had been ousted from power. His suicide, Franco Contorbia observed, was ‘an eccentric episode’ in comparison with ‘the strategy of adaptation’ of almost all Italian journalists.¹⁴ Only those who had actively cooperated with the Germans after September 1943 and were charged by the *epurazione* (the process of purging the most implicated layers of Italian society and administration) were sentenced to short prison terms. The majority survived and, in some cases after hiding out for a while, returned to their jobs and careers.¹⁵ The most popular among them - Monelli, Vergani, Lilli, Montanelli - did not pay for their fundamental responsibility: as brilliant writers, empowered from above to sound unprejudiced and daring, they had made Fascist propaganda seem less boring, so attracting a large number of readers who would previously have snubbed the press.¹⁶ Moreover, owing to their persistent and unflagging popularity in post-war Italy, they supplied material that conveyed an indulgent image of Fascism, such as articles and books focusing on anecdotes or biographical sketches that caricatured and humanised the Duce and his hierarchs.¹⁷

Very little changed during the transition from dictatorship to democracy in post-war Italy as far as government policies towards media and culture were concerned. The new managers of the state-owned radio, rechristened RAI in 1944, kept rigid control over the journalistic content of programmes. As late as 1945, the writer Corrado Alvaro resigned a few days after his appointment as the first

¹⁴ Romano Canosa, *La voce del duce. L'agenzia Stefani: l'arma segreta di Mussolini* (Milan: Mondadori, 2002), p. 223-224; Franco Contorbia, ‘Introduzione’, in *Giornalismo italiano*, ed. Contorbia, Vol. 3, 1939-1968, p. XVII.

¹⁵ To name just a few whose work has been mentioned in the previous chapters: Marco Ramperti was sentenced to 15 months in prison for having accepted the job of commentator for RSI radio, while Rino Alessi, Mussolini’s schoolmate and one of Pavolini’s favourite radio broadcasters, managed to keep the controlling stake in the Trieste daily, which he had bought in 1938 for a small price from the owner Teodoro Mayer who was prevented by the racial laws from keeping his assets. See *Giornalismo italiano*, Vol. 2, 1901-1939, ed. Contorbia, pp. 1747-1748; 1754; Ilaria Pavan, *Tra indifferenza e oblio. Le conseguenze economiche delle leggi razziali in Italia 1938-1970* (Milan: Mondadori, 2004), p. 131.

¹⁶ Zangrandi, *Il lungo viaggio attraverso il fascismo*, Vol. 2, pp. 413-414.

¹⁷ Allotti, *Giornalisti di regime*, pp. 224-226. As examples of this trivialising tendency, see Paolo Monelli’s biography of Mussolini or the memoirs of the Duce’s valet dictated to Indro Montanelli: Quinto Navarra, *Memorie del cameriere di Mussolini* (Milan: Longanesi, 1946).

editor of radio news in liberated Italy, writing to the provisional administrator Luigi Rusca in protest against the ‘inopportune interventions’ he had received, ‘aimed at limiting or annulling the independence of information’.¹⁸ The same was the case in the film industry, which inherited the legal framework that had established heavy censorship in 1923, and a control apparatus crammed with bureaucrats coming straight from the MCP ranks, while the government continued to seduce authors and producers with generous grants and loans. *Shoeshine*, the 1946 film in which Vittorio De Sica portrayed the life of two boys after the liberation of Rome, was not given approval to be distributed abroad. Giulio Andreotti, then an under-secretary in the Ministry of Culture, commented in 1952 on *Umberto D.* (when again De Sica was targeted for his work that showed an old man living in poverty and solitude) and rebuked the authors for presenting a negative image of Italy during the delicate phase of reconstruction.¹⁹ The works of *Neorealismo*, according to Italy’s new rulers, were slandering the country before the whole world as a place of misery, meanness, social conflict and unemployment. The process of victimisation, used in previous years to blame the enemy for the catastrophic conditions the war had forced on Italians, was no longer a useful instrument of propaganda and had to be transformed into a eulogy of the new times. Censorship, self-censorship, government influence and party meddling remained as an entrenched burden on the evolution of culture, politics and institutions in post-war Italy.

¹⁸ Monteleone, *Storia della radio e della televisione in Italia*, pp. 198-199.

¹⁹ Argentieri, *La censura nel cinema italiano*, pp. 68-71; 83-84.

APPENDIX ON THE ITALIAN PRESS

Quoted newspapers, magazines ad Journals

Il becco giallo

Illustrated satirical magazine first published on 20 January 1924. Owing to its anti-Fascist line, it was repeatedly suppressed and finally shut down in January 1926. The title was revived in Paris by Italian political refugees in the same year and was published intermittently until 1931 when it folded due to lack of funds.

Bertoldo

Illustrated satirical magazine founded in Milan in 1936 by the publisher Rizzoli. During the Second World War it produced a great number of cartoons mocking Churchill and Britain under the German air raids. The last issue of the paper was published on 10 September 1943.

Corriere della Sera

First published in Milan on 5 March 1876. Edited from 1900 by Luigi Albertini, it soon became the most reputable Italian daily. It led the conservative opposition to Giovanni Giolitti, the politician who, as prime minister through most of the first two decades of the twentieth century, tried to adapt classical liberalism to the social and economic conditions of Italy. The paper supported the Libyan campaign and Italy's entry into the Great War against the Central Powers. After Mussolini's rise to power, its editor attempted to keep the paper independent from the regime's influence, but in 1925 the Crespi family dismissed Albertini who only held a minority stake in the publishing company. Aldo Borelli was editor from 1929 to July 1943. The illustrated weekly magazine *La Domenica del Corriere* (from 1899) and the monthly literary review *La Lettura* (from 1901) were issued by the daily.

Critica fascista

Fortnightly review founded, edited and owned by Giuseppe Bottai, Minister of National Education from 1936 to 1943. It was first published on 15 June 1923 with the aim of increasing support for Fascism among Italian intellectuals, especially those of the younger generations.

Cronache della guerra

Weekly publication with wide circulation promoted in autumn 1939 by the MCP. It specialised in reporting on war operations and in the analysis of military topics. The magazine made ample use of photographs and tried to maintain an informed and technical tone, with articles commissioned from expert writers and generally compiled in a style combining specialisation with popularisation. From 1940 the press office of the supreme command also provided material for publication and in February of that year a new column on the home front in the belligerent countries was initiated.

Il Giornale d'Italia

First published in Rome on 16 November 1901. The daily was the voice of the conservative line, led by Sidney Sonnino, that opposed Giovanni Giolitti. It achieved prestige and wide circulation, mostly in central and southern Italy. On 30 March 1926, a board under full control of the regime appointed Virginio Gayda as editor, a position he held until the fall of Mussolini.

L'illustrazione Italiana

Weekly illustrated magazine first published in Milan by Treves on 14 December 1873. During the Great War it conveyed a patriotic vision of Italy's participation in the conflict, praising the heroism of soldiers. In the 1920s the magazine attenuated its initial wariness towards Fascism, and contributed to a representation of Mussolini and the regime that reassured its middle-class readership. In 1938 the racial laws forced Treves to give up ownership and the magazine was taken over by Garzanti.

Il Lavoro

Local socialist daily first published in Genoa on 7 June 1903. It advocated Italy's intervention in the Great War against Austria and later opposed the rise of Mussolini. In 1922 its editorial office was repeatedly attacked by Fascists. In 1940 its owner, Giuseppe Canepa, was forced to sell the title and Gianni Granzotto was appointed editor.

Marc'Aurelio

Illustrated satirical magazine founded in Rome in March 1931. It achieved huge success in a short time, hitting sales of 100,000 copies. The paper reinterpreted from a propaganda viewpoint the Fascist exaltation of the Roman past. It was at the forefront of the campaign against the sanctions imposed on Italy for its invasion of Ethiopia in 1935. In the late 1930s it published cartoons portraying Anthony Eden, British Foreign Secretary on the eve of the Munich crisis, as a jinx. During the Second World War, the magazine targeted Churchill and the British monarchy, in particular deriding the stammer of King George VI.

Il Mattino

Regional daily first published in Naples on 16 March 1892. Founded by Edoardo Scarfoglio and Matilde Serao, it was the daily most supportive of Giovanni Giolitti in Southern Italy. The newspaper backed the campaign against the Ottoman Empire in 1911 to acquire control of Libya and supported the intervention in the Great War alongside the Central Powers. By 1928 it was under the full control of the regime.

Il Messaggero

First published in Rome on 16 December 1878. A regional daily, it supported Italy's attack on Libya in 1911 and the alliance with the Allied Powers in the Great War. In 1921 the paper relinquished its traditional liberal and democratic line, siding with the Fascists. Francesco Malgeri was editor from 1933 to

February 1943 then succeeded by Alessandro Pavolini, who remained at the helm until 25 July 1943.

L'Osservatore Romano

Daily newspaper first published on 1 July 1861 in Rome. In 1885 it came under the direct administration of the Holy See. From the beginning of the twentieth century it fiercely opposed both liberalism and socialism and on the eve of the Great War it supported the line of neutrality advocated by Pope Benedict XV. Following the 1929 Lateran Pacts between the Italian government and the Catholic Church, the daily translated the Vatican's increasing support for Fascism. From 1938, owing to its independence from MCP supervision, *L'Osservatore Romano* became the most reliable source of information about the international situation for Italians and, for that reason, its circulation was hindered by the regime.

Il Popolo d'Italia

First published on 15 November 1914 in Milan. It was founded by Benito Mussolini, who had been forced to resign as editor of the Socialist organ *Avanti!* for advocating Italy's military intervention alongside Britain and France in the Great War in contradiction with the party's neutralist line. After the March on Rome, the Duce kept ownership of the daily, while his brother Arnaldo managed it. The newspaper had an average daily circulation of around 200,000 copies, which increased consistently when it carried Mussolini's articles.

Il Regime Fascista

Founded in Cremona in 1926 by Roberto Farinacci, head of the Fascist party in 1925-1926, it gained national circulation as the organ of Fascist hardliners who opposed the normalisation of the regime. The paper crusaded for the adoption of the racial laws in 1938, was consistently pro-Nazi and carried violent attacks against the Catholic Church and *L'Osservatore Romano*.

Il Secolo XIX

Founded in Genoa in 1886, it quickly became the best-selling daily in Liguria. In 1897 it was bought by the Perrone family who owned the Ansaldo industries, one of the companies that most benefited from war production in the Great War and which, together with Fiat, contributed to Mussolini's army and air force during the Second World War.

La Stampa

First published on 9 February 1867 in Turin, the daily was, among Italian newspapers, the main supporter of Giolitti's policies. It campaigned in 1911 in favour of the military campaign in Libya, but advocated neutrality in the Great War. At the beginning of the 1920s, the paper championed constitutional rights and freedoms against the violent actions of the Fascists. Its owner and editor, Alfredo Frassati, left in 1925, after the authorities had repeatedly suspended publication. In 1926 the senator Giovanni Agnelli, owner of the Fiat company, acquired and normalised the paper, which was edited from 1932 to 1943 by Alfredo Signoretto. From July 1945 to December 1958 the newspaper was rechristened as *La Nuova Stampa*.

Il Telegrafo

Regional daily founded in April 1877 in Leghorn by Giuseppe Bandi, a writer and journalist who had fought with Garibaldi. In 1925 the paper passed into the control of the Ciano family. From 1936 until 1943 it was edited by Giovanni Ansaldo, who was considered to be the unofficial mouthpiece of Italian foreign policy due to his close relationship with Foreign Minister Galeazzo Ciano.

Il Tevere

First published on 27 December 1924 in Rome, the daily was founded and edited by Telesio Interlandi, a Fascist hardliner who played a leading role in the anti-Semitic campaign championing racial theories from 1934. Despite its small

circulation, the paper was particularly influential in promoting the political and military alliance with Nazi Germany.

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