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# Ambivalent Endings

## Sexual Violence in the Italian Memory of World War II

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The popular memory of Italy's defeat in the Second World War is dominated by the metaphor of racial and sexual defilement, with the city of Naples frequently depicted as the epicenter of national humiliation (Escolar; De Paola, "Sexual Violence, Interracial Relations and Racism"; Glynn).[1] The Italian fascist writer Curzio Malaparte's auto-fictional account of the occupation of Naples by US and French forces, published in 1949 as *La Pelle*, was one of the first works to portray the city in these terms. In scenes both hyper-real and patently absurd, the book describes the plight of Italian women forced to sell their young children into sexual slavery; the

[1] The travel writer and intelligence officer Norman Lewis, whose "first-hand account" of the war was published in 1978, did much to publicize this image in the Anglophone world (123). See Lewis.

boys are purchased by ominous-looking Moroccans, while the girls take up residence in brothels frequented by the occupation forces. Gesturing at this social breakdown, one local tells a US Army officer that "women have lost the war, too." But the American disagrees: "Only the men have lost the war," he insists. "Only men" (Malaparte 58-59).

Malaparte's narration reserves roughly equal disdain for the destitute mothers who – in his view – have enabled their own degradation, the skulking colonial soldiers who take advantage of their immiseration, and the hapless Americans who have entered a world they barely understand. His observation that "all conquerors need to see these things to convince themselves they have won the war" suggests that military victory is ambivalent: it needs to be realized through the transformation of women into spoils of war (36-37). The insight is a compelling one, capturing something about the way both victors and vanquished alike experience the moment of war's end – and perhaps something about how it is remembered, too.

Indeed, Italy's defeat *was* ambivalent. The sudden ouster of Mussolini in July, 1943, deprived the Allied forces of striking the decisive blow themselves, while the subsequent German invasion and occupation forced them into a year-long slog from Salerno to Rome. A popular insurrection in Naples in September, followed by a wave of "red" protests across the rural South, showed that securing the peace might be harder than winning the war (Gribaudi; Forlenza). For Italians, the Allies' decision to hand the reins of military government to Pietro Badoglio – Mussolini's commander-in-chief – in February 1944 must have seemed like a strange continuity rather than the abrupt break that the transition from war to post-war is often thought to entail.[2]

As a result, there are multiple ways to tell the story of the end of Italy's war, including whether it should properly be marked by the capitulation of 1943, the formal end of the world war in 1945, or perhaps even 1948, the

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[2] On Badoglio's role as a "genocidaire" of Italian imperialism, see Alexander De Grand, esp. 131-32. Scholars writing across different contexts have increasingly begun to trouble the boundary between war and peace in the "shatter zones" of empire. See Martin Thomas; Nick Baron and Peter Gatrell.

year when elections for the new Italian republic showcased the fruits of US and Soviet policy to partition the European continent, with Stalin agreeing to "rein in popular insurrectionary sentiment" (Buchanan 8) in Rome and elsewhere in exchange for a free hand in Eastern Europe (Buchanan; Pons).

When it comes to gendered narratives of defeat, however, there is less variation: allegations of mass rape by Alphonse Juin's *Corps Expeditionnaire Français* in the aftermath of the Battle of Monte Cassino in the summer of 1944 – known colloquially as the *Marocchinate* – loom disproportionately large. Most controversial in such accounts is the question of whether French commanders of North African troops gave these soldiers a "blank cheque" to rape in exchange for their service in the colonial army (Baris 54-7).

The story of the *Marocchinate* was made internationally famous by Alberto Moravia, whose 1957 novel *La ciociara* (*Two Women*) was adapted into an acclaimed film in 1960. Highly melodramatic, the tale has had a long afterlife: in 2015, on the 70th anniversary of the Second World War's formal end, the composer Marco Tutino adapted it for an opera which premiered in San Francisco that summer. Despite the politically-charged nature of the story, reviewers accepted the opera's claim to depict "war's horror at high pitch," understood as savage violence meted out by *indigènes.* Indeed, although a *New York Times* critic panned the opera's lack of subtlety in comparison to the film, he urged those interested in understanding the "true costs of war" to see Hector Berlioz's *The Trojans* instead; the mass suicide of the women of Troy depicted in that production seemed to him to offer a more plausible expression of the "tension and horror" of war (Wolfe). Clearly, whether in Ancient Greek mythology or twentieth century Europe, Malaparte's conviction that military defeat should be understood as the conquest of women remains persuasive to many audiences.

The opera also suffered from the addition of a "good war" re-framing (not evident in the film) in which an American officer appears at the last minute to redeem the Allies – who have done little to stop the portrayed rampage of the Moroccans thus far – by calling for a halt to the violence even as French officers remain indifferent to the carnage. There are real-life examples like this in the historical record, evidence of metropolitan soldiers' understanding of rape as uniquely uncivilized violence. For example, in January 1945, in the Vosges, American GIs Darl F. Barton

and Lester Campbell were convicted of the murder of Moroccan soldier Ali Ben Mohmoud, which they carried out at the head of a crowd "look[ing] for the Arab" who was said to have raped a local barmaid the night before. The woman brought the Americans to Mohmoud's living quarters, where Campbell shot him in the stomach and Barton fired at his head (*United States v. Technician Fourth Grade Darl F. Barton*, 212; *United States v. Private Lester Campbell*) – a lynching in all but name. The French Army would later carry out similar extra-judicial executions of North Africans held responsible for sexual violence during the advance into Germany (Lawlor, "The Stuttgart Incident").

It was not the first time that such atrocity stories were foregrounded during major anniversaries. During the 60th anniversary commemoration in 2005, the writer and journalist Romano Bracalini similarly invoked the memory of the *Marocchinate* – this time for explicitly political rather than ostensibly artistic ends. He penned a virulent essay about the failure of political authorities to acknowledge Allied atrocities during the invasion and occupation of Italy, writing that "[t]he sexual violence of Moroccans against white European women, as well as the bestial instinct of illiterate peasants enlisted for pay in the villages of the Sahara and Atlas, was a kind of 'promotion' that elevated them to the rank of 'dominators,' of absolute masters of the lives of the defeated." Their violence, Bracalini claimed, constituted "an elementary testimony of 'possession' that rescued them from the condition of pariahs [who had been] colonized by whites." Not content to confine his racist tirade to historical matters, Bracalini drew a straight line between the occupation of Italy by colonial soldiers and the migration of North Africans to the country in the present, which he similarly saw as a form of invasion. "In the popular fantasy 'Moroccan' became synonymous – and remains so today – with bestial ferocity," he claimed, and were viewed as "recidivist[s] and habitual rapist[s]." Indeed, he insisted, "[t]he exploits of Moroccan immigrants in our country have not erased the bad reputation of [these] rapists and slackers" (my translation).

Bracalini's comments – especially his claim that permission to rape the white enemy was a psychic payment awarded by metropolitan officials to downtrodden colonial subjects *in lieu* of real civic freedoms – mirrored recent political debates. In 1996, Senators Bruno Magliocchetti and Michele

Bonatesta had appealed to the Italian parliament to consider women who had been raped as victims of war entitled to compensation. As in Germany, the Italian government (like the US military) did not treat sexual violence as a war injury, and the Senators' petition was an effort to rectify this injustice (Dr Kitz; Saadeh). Yet their appeal was surprisingly narrow, given that Italy had been occupied by British, American, French and German forces; rather than demand compensation for all the victims, however, it drew attention solely to those who suffered at the hands of Moroccan "soldiers of fortune, in search of prey to subdue" ("Disegno di Legge n. 1081" 2). The appeal repeated several tropes common to descriptions of racialized sexual violence almost everywhere: according to the senators, the colonial troops had been "brought to Italy with the promise that in this way they would obtain the independence of their country" (2); they were said to have raped some 2000 women and 600 men including a parish priest, "impaled alive" any relatives who tried to defend the women, raped some young girls upwards of 200 times, gave syphilis to 20 percent of the victims and gonorrhea to 80 percent (2).[3] The desecration of innocents (religious figures, the elderly, children), the mutilation of bodies, and the contagion of tropical diseases – like "incurable (African) syphilis", in the words of one American correspondent – are the mainstays of such accounts (Devers).

Both Magliocchetti and Bonatesta were members of the National Alliance (NA), the successor political party to the Italian Social Movement (MSI), founded in 1946 by leaders of the Republic of Salò, the German-backed puppet state established in Northern Italy after Mussolini's ouster. Bonatesta had previously been a member of MSI, elected to the Senate in 1992 before joining NA when it replaced MSI in 1995. As scholars of post-war politics in other former Axis countries have shown, the unredressed legacy of wartime sexual violence remains an active rallying point for politicians on the right (Roebuck), but they serve a strange function because they allow the crimes of all the Allied armies to be displaced onto colonial soldiers (and, in the US Army, Black soldiers) specifically and often exclusively, thus eliding a series of contradictions that are otherwise

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[3] Similar descriptions of disease and defilement can be found in accounts of the Rape of Berlin as well, especially when attributed to "Oriental" soldiers. See Grossman.

unmanageable in postwar politics. These include the inconsistency of liberation narratives – which frame nearly all public commemorations of World War II – with the violence that accompanied military occupation and political reconstruction, raising uncomfortable questions about the ultimate purpose for which the war itself was fought.

As such, while the uses to which polemics like these are put vary across national contexts, in Europe they are generally inflected by a claim to uphold the mantle of Christian civilization in the face of new onslaughts from abroad – the "oriental hordes" of 1944 and 1945 repurposed for the present day in what scholar Stephanie de Paola has termed the "usable pasts" spun from potted histories of Allied sexual violence (Bartov 85; Eastland; de Paola, "Between Past and Present"). Indeed, Bracalini went so far as to claim the Moroccans in Italy behaved more cruelly than the Nazis. Lest this rhetoric seem uniquely fascist, however, we should remind ourselves that such sentiments were also central to the liberal consensus which framed the notion of 'Western' civility in contrast to Soviet 'barbarism' during the Cold War (Thorne) – though to say so in national commemorations was very difficult until quite recently. Indeed, there remains a confluence of interests between national elites across the political spectrum who are interested in women's legal status as victims of wartime sexual violence only insofar as it advances an agenda directed towards the continued subordination of women and former colonial subjects alike (Giardino; Buchanan and Lawlor).

Historical incidences of sexual violence – and mass rape especially – are difficult for both victors and vanquished to incorporate into popular memories of the Second World War. Such violence is sordid precisely because it betrays a total lack of distinction between combatant and civilian and targets all members of a population as irredeemable fifth columnists, with particular ferocity reserved for women. Not only have post-war states not dealt adequately with the suffering caused by these acts of violence – neither did the Allied War Crimes tribunals or the Geneva Conventions – but even the history of the *Marocchinate* itself remains shrouded in mythology, lacking the archival research that has helped us to better understand similar allegations of mass rape in places like Stuttgart, Berlin

and Nanking (Gershovich; Maghraoui, "The Moroccan 'Effort de Guerre'"; Maghraoui, "Moroccan Colonial Soldiers"; Maghraoui, 'The Goumiers").[4]

At the same time, such exaggerated accounts of mass rape are obviously also a convenient fiction. When sexual violence is treated as exceptional – was it more indiscriminate or brutal than the bombing unleashed upon European and Japanese factory workers, many women (including enslaved Jews and Koreans) among them? – it can take on mythical qualities which function to further a clear set of (usually regressive) political goals. For the Allies themselves, it was useful to displace the blame for war crimes onto black and colonial soldiers because it reinforced the rationale for continuing segregation and colonial rule. For the former Axis powers, doing so helped to fashion a mythic foundation upon which the modern post-fascist state could be built and made compatible with the source of their ultimate defeat: the mighty force of US imperialism and the world order brought into being as a direct result of Washington's intervention into the war. For both, most importantly, this historical sleight of hand avoided any reckoning with what fascism and liberalism shared in common – or, as Trinidadian Marxist George Padmore put it, the "indistinguishable" nature of "aggressive fascist imperialism" and "old-established democratic 'peace-loving' imperialism" (Padmore).

In a very real sense, then, difficult memories of an ambivalent end to a hard-fought war are actually resolved by the story of the *Marocchinate,* which is why it retains such utility for commentators today. Malaparte was surely right when he said that such sensational accounts of atrocity act as an anesthetic, masking uncomfortable truths about the meaning of war – in both victory and defeat.

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[4] The best recent work that exists on the subject remains incomplete, as Moshe Gershovich acknowledged in his effort to interview some of the Moroccan soldiers who had fought at Monte Cassino. A recent paper on the *Marocchinate* by Matthew Chippin concludes that current "historical writing on this subject is both incomplete and in need of reassessment" (2). On the treatment of sexual violence in the Geneva Conventions, see Van Dijk.

## AUTHOR'S BIONOTE

Ruth Lawlor teaches diplomatic, military and global history at Cornell. She has published widely on law, gender and imperialism in the Second World War, and her book on sexual violence and the US military justice system is forthcoming with Oxford University Press.

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